

The Beginning of Church Life - Part 3

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[0 : 00] So please turn in your Bible to Acts chapter 2, and this morning our attention will be directed to verses 42 through 47.

! For those of you who are joining us this morning for the first time, we've been working our way from Acts chapter 1, and this is where we have come to this morning. Acts chapter 2, starting at verse 42.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

And all came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.

[1 : 13] Praising God and having favor with all the people, the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you this morning for your word. We thank you that it is an expression of your care for us.

And I pray, Lord, that we will receive it as such. I pray that our hearts would truly be open and postured to receive your word and to grow thereby.

Lord, I ask that you would grant me grace and cause me to stay within the text of Scripture. Pray that you would help me to guard against excess.

And to be faithful to bring your word to your people this morning. Lord, as I do, I pray that you would use your word to build this church.

[2 : 23] I pray that you would watch over your word and you would cause it to perform that which you have ordained it to perform.

Father, we thank you for all that you are doing in this moment and that you will do in the days ahead because of your word that you use to build your church.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. In this passage that we've just read, we have the first description recorded in Scripture that gives us a picture of what church life was like in the early church or in particular the church of Jerusalem.

We get a picture of the New Testament people of God. And this description comes immediately after we are told about the Lord adding some 3,000 souls to the initial company of 120 disciples.

And in these six verses that we are considering this morning, Luke, the theologian and the historian, describes various aspects of the community life of the early church.

[3 : 40] And I think you would agree with me that it is a compelling description. And I pray that your heart, like my heart, is asking the Lord to let this picture of the early church be an increasing reality in this church.

I pray that is your heart. And if not, I pray that by the end of this sermon, that would be your heart. As I consider these six verses, Here's how I would describe or how I would summarize the description that we are given of these early disciples.

This is how I would describe early church life that we see in these six verses. True church life is truly shared life.

True church life is truly shared life. This is very simple. But I really believe that it is also very profound.

And I think it's especially profound for us today because we live, I think by nature we are independent and selfish people.

[5 : 04] But we live, I believe, at a time when that independence and that selfishness is being fueled by many things in our culture to cause this to define us more so than anything else, including those of us who are in the church.

But I think that this description that we have just read challenges that view of individualism and independence that is so pervasive in both the world and in the church.

And this morning I want us to consider how these verses challenge that view. Now when we consider the six verses, to a large extent, I want you to see this because this is the way I'm going to approach it.

And if you see it this way, I think it would benefit us all. When we consider these six verses, verses 43 through 47 largely are an outworking of the community commitments that are described in verse 42.

To say it another way, what we see in verse 42 is elaborated upon or is expressed in particular experiences of this congregation that we're reading about in the remaining verses.

[6 : 44] So verse 42 really is the primary reference verse for us this morning, though we will interact with verses 43 through 47. But primarily what I want to do is I want to take a closer look at the four aspects of church life that are stated in verse 42 and then elaborated upon in verses 43 through 47.

And the first is this, learning God's word together. This is the first thing that we see that marked these early believers. We can call this community around God's word.

In verse 42 we are told that the early church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. And I believe that it is by divine design that this particular attribute is mentioned first in order to show the primary place that the word of God should have in the church of God.

And this devotion is the foundational devotion because it is the word of God that informs the whole of church life. It is the word of God that helps us to understand what God has called us to do and to be as a local church.

So it is fitting that what they were devoted to first is the word of God. Now you got to remember that Luke is not just writing as some independent historian but Luke is writing these words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and he observes the life of this church.

[8 : 26] And the first thing that he says they were devoted to is they were devoted to the apostles' teaching. In other words they were devoted to learning God's word together.

And what that would have entailed for them was to be attentive to the apostles as they shared the words of Christ as they taught those words of Christ to them and also as they opened the Old Testament scriptures and taught them in light of the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

Because when Jesus came Jesus fulfilled much of the Old Covenant and now these new disciples had to understand how all that fit together.

Well for us today we have our whole Bibles for us today we have both the Old and the New Covenant and we have the New Testament that sheds light on the Old Testament to help us to understand how we are to understand it in light of the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

Now there is no doubt that what Luke is describing here is the corporate learning of the church. It is the corporate devotion to the word of God by the church.

[9 : 45] he was seeing them as a whole. Brothers and sisters what is being described in verse 1 as corporate devotion to the word of God needs to also be a personal devotion to the word of God.

Each one of us needs to take God's word seriously and make it a priority in our lives. It is not good enough to have a visual of what it looks like when we come together as we sit as we are doing this morning under the instruction of the word of God.

This devotion to God's word needs to be personal. It needs to be on an individual basis. And the truth is for this to happen, for this to really lay a hold of us, our eyes need to be open to the value and for the importance of the word of God.

If our eyes aren't open to that, then we will not be devoted to the word of God. God was the, really is the one who causes us to be able to see the importance of his word.

And therefore, he is the one to whom we must look this morning. If you would acknowledge that this personal devotion to God's word is not a reality in your life, then he is the one to whom you must look and cry out this morning for the necessary change to take place.

[11 : 23] And I want to caution you this morning that although discipline, personal discipline, and having a plan are important, they're not enough. They're not enough.

It is when God opens our eyes to see how precious his word is, to be able to be convinced of the words of Jesus that man should not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God, and that part of our daily existence will be to look to God's word, and to receive from God's word, to draw from God's word for the good and the strength of our souls.

That's the way we'll be devoted to learning God's word together. If it begins to happen on an individual level, and fundamentally, if our eyes are opened to the wonder and to the beauty of the word of God, and for its necessity for our spiritual well-being.

And so, as we consider this community commitment to learning the word of God together, the question that each of us needs to soberly consider is this, am I devoted to the word of God as it is taught in the life of the church?

And in answering that question, I think there's some other questions that we should consider. How important is it for you to gather together corporately, to hear God's word taught, and to learn together with fellow believers as we're doing this morning?

[13 : 23] how important is that to you? And here I may be preaching to the choir in the sense that you are here expressing in this moment its importance to you.

But also, what is it like when you miss gatherings, when you, for whatever reason, aren't present? Do you try to listen to recordings or do you try to engage another brother or sister who was present to try to hear what God may have said to us, trusting that he is providentially bringing to us that which we need, and that we want to hear what did God say to us today, maybe through singing, through a word of prophecy that may have come, and certainly through the word of God that would have been preached.

See, God will bring our provision to us that he wants to feed us with on a corporate level when we gather in times like this to be instructed from his word.

We should also consider this other aspect of being devoted to God's word and learning together, being instructed from God's word, this other aspect of the memorization of God's word together, the memorization of scripture.

Is that something that you are embracing? Learning God's word together, hiding God's word in our hearts together, trusting his providential plan for us as we week by week, taking those scriptures and believing that God knows what we need and he somehow is able to feed us his word in this particular way.

[15 : 27] Brothers and sisters, if we will grow as a church in learning together and enjoying community around God's word, then we all need to be personally devoted to God's word.

fellowship. That's where it starts. It starts with each of us. Well, not only do we see the early church learning God's word together, but we also see them sharing their lives together.

Or to put it another way, we see them experiencing community around their lives. We read in verse 1 that the early believers were devoted to the fellowship.

they were devoted to the fellowship. Now, I know that when we think of fellowship, perhaps most of us, we tend to think about getting together with others, spending time and interacting with them over food.

And certainly that's a great way to get together. And while getting together over food can facilitate fellowship, it is not necessarily in and of itself fellowship.

[16 : 37] fellowship. At least not the fellowship that Luke describes in the early church. The book of Acts, like the rest of the New Testament, was written in Greek.

And the word for fellowship in the Greek language is this word koinonia. Koinonia. and it is a word that is sometimes referred to to talk about the sharing that takes place in marriage.

It is a very kind of intimate sharing of life. So it's not talking about some kind of a surface, distant, aloof interaction, but it is talking about something that is closely connected, something that is opened in a mutual kind of sharing.

It is talking about substantial sharing of life. Practically speaking, it's almost speaking about if you want to see a picture of it, it means like to break off parts of oneself and to share it with another.

It means to open the doors of your life and to let others in so that they may truly know you and vice versa. That's the depth of the fellowship that is being described here in this passage.

[18 : 09] And the basis for it is that it is rooted in the conviction that God has joined the community together. It is rooted in the conviction that the Lord is the one who was added to this church.

That it was a divine addition. That God has caused the lot of these people to be together and therefore they embrace the providence of the Lord with these lives that they share.

And they open themselves to this koinonia, to this fellowship that is being described. We see the sharing of life in this intimate way through the attitude that the early disciples had towards their possessions.

Look at verse 44. It says, And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as they had need.

This spoke about an attitude. This was not communism. This was not where they brought all their goods and they just said, you know, we own everything together, we get rid of titles and we all have one common title.

[19 : 23] They didn't do that. It's obvious they didn't do that because they were selling property. It's obvious they didn't do that. We see it with Ananias and Sapphira. They had property. It was theirs. They could sell it.

Peter said to them, was it not yours? So this was not that kind of communistic, socialistic, owning things together.

but it was an attitude that they had towards what they possessed. And we see this sharing of life together.

We see this mutual concern for one another in that they would be concerned about these needs and they would centralize their resources and the manner in which they met, the needs that were among them.

this is an expression of this true community, this true intercourse of lives that was taking place among these disciples.

[20 : 30] To see needs and ignore needs is an indication that we are not in true fellowship as we are seeing expressed among the early disciples.

Now the question is how were these needs made known? How did they come to know them? Or if they were made known through the normal sharing of life, through the normal opening of their lives to one another?

I don't think they were because people discerned that there was a need. No, it was because they were involved in one another's lives enough to be able to see and know these needs and to have these needs shared.

And then out of this community that they enjoyed together, this intercourse of lives that they had, they were prompted to do this.

We read later on in the account in Acts that Barnabas was one of the first to do this, to sell property and then to bring it, the proceeds of it, to the apostles and others followed suit and they did likewise.

[21 : 46] But I mention this this morning because for some of us, and maybe for good reasons, we are reluctant to pursue this kind of community, this depth of knowing that we see that was obviously expressed among these early disciples.

disciples. And sometimes we can have needs in our lives where the provision for that need is right in your midst whether in a care group or whether in a local church and we put up a wall and we hardly ever would disclose and make it known that we have particular needs.

I know some people would think, boy, I'd love to be a part of church like that, get all my needs met. Well, that kind of thinking is not the attitude of koinonia.

The true attitude of koinonia, the true attitude of this intimate sharing of life, this interest in the lives of others, the true attitude of koinonia is not focused primarily on getting as much as it is on giving.

It is not primarily focusing on benefiting as much as it is on benefiting others or being benefited ourselves, but to benefit others.

[23 : 17] And it doesn't mean that we will not at times be on the receiving end. Yes, we are, but that's not the primary motivation. The primary motivation is not to receive.

it is instead to give. Remember, the Lord said it is more blessed to give than to receive, and that should be our motivation. But in addition to sharing our goods, we need to share ourselves.

We need to open our lives to one another. That is koinonia. And sharing life together includes things like confessing sin to one another.

It includes requesting prayer of one another. It includes seeking counsel of one another. It includes sharing and encouraging one another from God's word.

It sometimes includes correction. It includes serving one another. This is the way we share life together. together.

[24 : 26] This is the way that we experience what God has ordained for us in the community of the saints. Not being a group of individuals who are together, but being a group of individuals who are together, joining their lives together, and experiencing this intimacy that God has called us to.

And it doesn't mean that we will experience this with everyone on the same level. It would vary from relationship to relationship and context to context by all kinds of different variables.

And largely in our context, the most logical place for this kind of intimacy to take place is primarily in the context of care groups. We have this depth of sharing our lives together and be cultivated.

it. Well, next in verse 42, we are told that the early church was committed to breaking bread together.

That's my third point. They were devoted to eating their meals together. This speaks about community around our tables.

[25 : 43] We notice two times in this passage that we are told that the early believers broke bread together. We see it in verse 42 and then we see it in verse 46.

Now, theologians debate what this breaking of bread really means. Some say that it was the Lord's Supper.

Some say that it was a larger meal in the context of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper was really a part of it. And I really don't think that we necessarily need to fight over exactly what it means because what we see in the passage is very clear.

They were in an ongoing way around the table together. They were sharing some kind of meal together. I would say in the broader context it seems to be a larger fellowship meal that at times may have included the Lord's Supper, may not have included the Lord's Supper.

They were doing this from house to house we see in verse 46. But the key point again is that they were sharing this time of community around their tables.

[27 : 03] And when you think about this in that particular context this is one of the highest ways that you could honor a person. To invite that person into your home and to share a meal with them. And this is why when Christians or when professing Christians were excommunicated from the church for not living a life consistent with their profession, one of the disciplines that was enforced was you don't eat with them.

You don't share a table with them. And so this is not just having a meal but it is the community and the sharing that happens as we are eating together.

And I think you all know this requires intentionality. and I know that in our context we have some meal in the care group setting in an ongoing way.

But I wonder this morning outside of care group, when was the last time you ate with others in this church? Other than care group, when was the last time you ate with others in this church?

When was the last time you were on the giving end of it? You took the initiative to bring others together in sharing fellowship around the table, around food.

[28 : 45] When was the last time perhaps you won the receiving end of that, the recipient of that? If you can't remember, then I believe that this is an excellent way to consider how we might live out in a very practical way and apply this particular point in the sermon.

It doesn't have to be anything extravagant. It doesn't have to be the kind of meal that Clarence talked about that the guy could not pay for. It would be something that we just do very, very simply.

It is such a blessing to see it in many different ways. I could remember a number of years ago, and I hope that I don't betray this individual because I would not want to do that at all, but I remember one of the most meaningful expressions of hospitality that I ever received was a lady who was a part of our church a number of years ago, and didn't have a whole lot, but I remember her inviting me and Alexa into her home and saying to us, I'm an island girl, I don't have a whole lot, but I want to invite you and just to have a meal with you.

It was a simple meal, but one of the most memorable and enjoyable times that I've ever had. And I want to encourage us to let us be intentional to do this.

I know we have busy lives, I know we have crowded lives, and I know how easily they can cloud our vision, I know it so well. But I pray that God would in this moment so convict our hearts about this, that he has called us to this.

[30 : 51] We see Luke takes the time to note this about that early community of believers. There's no accident.

And brothers and sisters, we have to be marked by hospitality, not just hospitality, the strangers, we need to do that, but we need to be marked by hospitality to one another as well.

So in this passage, we see the early church learning God's word together, we see them sharing their lives together, we see them eating their meals together, and fourth and finally, we see them praying to God together.

prayer. We can call this community around God's throne. No doubt the reference is to prayers being prayed in different contexts and situations because it says that they were devoted to the prayers.

But the key point is that they were devoted to praying. They're devoted to this. this was an aspect of community that brought them together for the common purpose of calling on the name of the Lord, for the common purpose of praying together to God.

[32 : 14] We see in Acts chapter 3 verse 1 that there was something called the hour of prayer. There was a specific time where they went to the temple and they prayed. It was at 3 p.m. in the afternoon. And they would pray together and they were devoted to it. You see, when we pray together, we have the opportunity to join our voices to God and to pray for our corporate and personal needs.

And how meaningful it is to hear brothers and sisters lift their voices and pray, sometimes praying concerns, burdens for others. prayers.

And we get to know them in ways that we ordinarily would not get to know them. Sometimes when we pray together on Monday nights, there are particular people who have a particular burden to pray in a particular way over particular things.

It's a joy just to see how the Lord would use them to cause them to lift their voices to pray. And we get to know some of the things that are near and dear to their hearts. We get to know, brothers and sisters, as we have community around the throne of God.

[33 : 30] James 5, 16 says that we are to confess our sins to one another. And we are to pray for one another that we are healed.

And all this involves spending time. Spending time before the Lord. And it provides us enormous opportunities that we would not otherwise get to know one another.

So as we think about this particular aspect of church life, I want to ask you, when was the last time that you opened your life and asked others to pray?

to pray in specific ways. And sometimes we don't do that. And there are all kinds of reasons, but you know, one of the reasons is pride.

the enemy works in our heads and gets us to think in distorted ways and in ways that make no sense.

[34 : 39] And there we are in a context and in a situation where we are able to receive prayer from brothers and sisters and we deny ourselves that opportunity.

We deny ourselves that benefit. because of pride. So when was the last time you humbled yourself and said to a brother or a sister in this congregation, not your prayer partner over the phone, but in this congregation, say, would you pray for me?

Would you pray for me in this particular way? When was the last time you did that for others? Perhaps something you saw, perhaps something that was told to you by that person, but it was a sufficient burden that you needed to remember it.

I'm all for writing these prayer needs down, but one of the things I've come to learn is this. The prayers that are important to me, I don't need to write down. I just somehow remember them.

On Monday past, we gathered to pray a final corporate prayer for the year. It was one of the best attendances that we have had for the year, and for that I am very grateful.

[36 : 12] But here's what I'm pretty sure of. Well, I know that some were not there because they could not be there. They were unable to be there. I'm pretty sure that's not the case of most.

Pretty sure that there were some who weren't there because they just chose not to be there. And in so doing, you missed an opportunity for community around God's throne with brothers and sisters.

You know, it's interesting that Jesus said to his disciples, he said, pray that you enter not into temptation. Those words were spoken in a corporate context.

Certainly, we can apply them personally, and we can ensure that we are indeed praying, but Jesus said it to his disciples, pray that you enter not into temptation, temptation.

Here again, the power and the benefit of prayer is a side issue. If I said to everyone in this room who understands the value of money, come in the morning and there's going to be a thousand dollars waiting for you and you really believe my word is credible, everybody knows the value of a thousand dollars, we would be here, no doubt, to gain a thousand dollars.

[37 : 45] We do that with things that we believe are beneficial. For all kinds of reasons, we don't see prayer to be what scripture describes it to be, that we can commune with the God of the universe, that we can know great peace when we pray.

See, that's the first effect of prayer on our hearts. The primary reason for us to pray is that we may know the peace of God that is above and beyond human understanding.

That's the primary effect of prayer. That's the effect of prayer on our souls even before we know how God would answer, that we have the peace of God to rule our hearts and guard our minds in Jesus Christ because we have made our petitions known to him.

the brothers and sisters, unless and until the Lord opens our eyes to see the privilege to pray and what is available to us, we will not pray.

And therefore, if you would acknowledge this morning that this is an area that is void in your life, that when you hear prayer being announced or being printed in the bulletin that you dismiss it and you don't even give a thought as to whether you will come, I would say to you that it is a sight issue, it is a sight issue that you need to bring before the Lord and say, God, would you open my eyes to see that this is a privilege, not just a duty, not just something I need to grit my teeth and do and go through, but God, help me to see prayer as you have described it in your word.

[39 : 35] And brothers and sisters, when our eyes are open to that truth, we want to pray and we want to pray with one another. As I think of these four aspects of church life in the context of our local church, I don't know how this message lands on your ears this morning, I pray that you don't hear disgruntlement or complaining because that's not the motive of my heart at all this morning.

As I thought about these four areas in our local church, these core areas, learning God's word together and sharing life together, eating our meals together, praying together, there are reasons that I am very encouraged and some of you are those reasons because you do these things well.

I say that with sincerity, you do these things well and I'm encouraged. As I see that seed in our church, as I see the evidence of these things which I recognize really is the grace of God at work in our midst.

But as an eldership team, Brother David and I are concerned for some of you. We are concerned because you view aspects of church life that are essential to your well-being as being optional.

And friend, they're not optional. Our spiritual life is very much like our physical life. How in our physical lives we can be missing important things.

[41 : 39] We can be diminished in nutrients and nourishment in our bodies and just not be conscious of it.

It's affecting us. And the same is true with our spiritual lives. And so we must not draw the conclusion that because we don't see the effect in our lives, we're not aware of the effect in our lives, or sometimes we are aware and we simply dismiss it and think that it would go away.

These are essential things. And one of the concerns behind these messages is to help us to see the normal church life that we are called to.

I consider it in light of the subnormal church life that so many of us sadly experience and settle for. But we recognize that we can't change hearts.

We recognize that we can stand here and scream to the top of our voices and point these things out, but it will never bring change. Only God can change our hearts.

[42 : 54] And so we have prayed and we continue to pray to God to bring these changes into fruition in this local church.

As I close this morning, I pray that God will help us, that he will so work among us, that what we have read this morning would become an increasing reality more and more over the span of time in this local church.

That should God, in his wise providence, whatever the circumstances, for whatever reason, separate us from this community, that there would be a true sense of loss, giving evidence that there was something precious that we received, something that God ordained for us in the midst of community.

Now I recognize that there are difficult partings in all kinds of situations, on jobs, and in college, and in other experiences that we have.

And so we're not just talking about this treasured fellowship, this treasured community in a vacuum, but we're talking about it in the context of the one who has made it all possible, and that's the Lord Jesus Christ.

[44 : 38] These things that we enjoy together, these things that we share together, they are not in and of themselves precious, but they are precious because of the one who has made them possible for us.

In a way that we could never experience without him. Without him in our lives, and without him in our midst. And it's the Lord Jesus Christ that makes all these things precious because he is the focus of our learning.

He really is the focus of us sharing our lives together. He ought to be. He should be the focus when we gather around food, when we open our lives to one another, we acknowledge that all the good gifts that we have, they come from God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he is the one in whose name we pray. We can't approach God except by him and through him. We can only go to God because Jesus made the way open through his shed blood and his broken body.

That's the only way that we can go to God. And so we don't hold these commitments up in a vacuum. They're held up by the person, the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[46 : 00] And that's why they become meaningful. We get to share this life that Jesus Christ has made possible for us.

For men and women, boys and girls who otherwise would have nothing in common through the Lord Jesus Christ. We have these things in common. And it is just fitting, it is just proper that we devote ourselves to it.

I'm going to close this morning and I'm going to pray for us. But even as I pray for us, I'm going to ask you to just pray for yourself. And where you need to ask God, God, would you open my eyes to see these commitments, to see the benefit of them, to see the value of them.

Let them not be a task, let them not be a chore for me to pursue. But let me see them for what they are and I will delight in them. Let's pray.