

Together in Fellowship

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Preacher: Nigel Anderson

[0 : 0 0] chapter 2 which will be coming up on the screen shortly. Acts chapter 2 we're going to read from verse 42 to 47. This is from the book of Acts concerning the church, the early church, just after the Holy Spirit has come upon the church at Pentecost. And they, that's the believers, the Christians in Jerusalem, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe 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, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. Amen.

Last week, a letter was sent to all in the congregation about the setting up of a relief fund to help any in the congregation who are in particular need at this time, in these difficult days when income for so many has been reduced as a result of all the various restrictions in place. And as was mentioned in that letter, we're living in a new normal. These times that are a challenge to our faith and practice.

One aspect of that practice is how we show Christ's love and compassion to one another. Now, this is no sort of new idea, no sort of novelty that all of a sudden has come into the church. Not at all. The early church, as we've been reading the early church that met so soon after the Holy Spirit came upon believers at Pentecost. The early church practiced that principle of fellowship in giving. And it's really that principle that we're going to explore this morning, particularly verses 44 and 45 that we read.

Let's read them again. 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 I pray that we'll learn from the example of these early believers what it means to be a church and fellowship in these particular times of need. These times that we're experiencing at the moment. But we know that we are to continue and develop and strengthen that practice of fellowship. And to know that, of course, it's not just for these times, times such as these, but it's an ongoing responsibility in the church of God to love God and to love our neighbour and to show the love of Christ to all who are in need. So three things I want to consider with you this morning. First of all, the fellowship of believers and then the voluntary giving of believers. And then thirdly, the needy within the fellowship. So let's look first of all at the fellowship of believers. This is one of the great characteristics of these believers in Jerusalem.

[3 : 49] A great characteristic of fellowship, the spiritual fellowship that they enjoyed and the material fellowship that followed on from that and included within that spiritual fellowship. These believers, they've been converted, they've received the Holy Spirit, they've become separate from the world, they've left the world, as it were. They come in communion one with another. Before their conversion, they were of the world. Now they're of the church. Yes, they were still in the world, but they weren't of the world. But they had a new affection. They had a new allegiance. They were believers who did things together. They learned together. They learned the truth of the gospel together. They learned what had been handed down from the Lord to the apostles. They were devoted to that teaching. They were devoted one to another. And they showed their devotion and how they shared in fellowship one with another, how they ate together. They celebrated the Lord's Supper together. They prayed together. And that fellowship that we read there of that early church that speaks of sharing, that speaks of partnership, whether that sharing was in material blessings or otherwise. And that sharing, that partnership, it's a real blessing. It's a real blessing that the Lord's people have in faith in the Lord Jesus. And we do so knowing through the power of the Holy Spirit. And it's this particular focus on that material sharing and fellowship. Of course, it has a spiritual foundation as what we read there in Acts 2, 44 to 45. Let's just slow down a little and let's look at that unity that the believers enjoyed. These words, all who believed were together.

All who believed were together. But that being together stemmed from the fact that they were believers.

Literally, they were the believing ones. Those who had faith in the Lord Jesus and who exercised their faith in practical ways, practical day-to-day aspects of their fellowship one with another. Their being together showed their unity in Christ. So together they looked out for one another. They cared for one another.

Every single person in the fellowship was cared for. Every single person in that community of believers in Jerusalem cared for one with another. No one was outside that fellowship. Everyone mattered. They were all together.

You know, it's quite fascinating. In the present time, this concept of together, being together is just resonating right through society, whether nationally or internationally. Many examples. Just the other day, I received a communication from Tesco of all places and the heading in my inbox were these words, together we can do this. This whole aspect of the shared commitment, you know, business and customers working together so that, you know, what's necessary and provision is given to all. Or the celebrity, the current celebrity of the moment, Captain Tom, Captain Tom Moore, as he said a few days ago, will get through this and come out of it stronger, more united and ready to face any challenge together.

[7 : 36] Peter Robinson, of course, what he's done in raising these millions is for NHS charities together. Even the First Minister, Nicholas Sturgeon, saying these words, we're all in this together.

And whether it's to do with individuals or politicians or institutions, that emphasis in facing the current crisis, the emphasis of being together. And if that's the case, as it were in the world, well, how much more the church, how much more truly the church is to be seen and to act together as one.

When Jesus prayed just before his arrest, he prayed that his people, those who believe in him, that they might be as one, as Jesus and the Father are one. And as Jesus said, so that the world might believe that the Father has sent Jesus, his son. And it's that unity in Christ, that unity that we enjoy one with another in Christ. That's something that we strive for. Something that, you know, that we seek to have as that expression of our faith in the Lord Jesus. It's that unity that the Apostle Paul emphasised in his letter when he wrote to the church in Corinth, when he spoke to the church there, and spoke of the church generally, as being the body of Christ. When you think of all that applies and the the connectedness that every believer has one with another, that being united in Christ, as we're united one with another. Some of you hope, many of you hope, are receiving the daily devotionals from Bill Graham. Well, just on Thursday, just a few days ago, he focused on that particular truth when he wrote of believers as the body of Christ. And again, the fact of believers being together, listen to these words. Fellowship is the lifeblood of the church. As Christians, each one is united to

Christ and together we share in a love for Christ and for one another. So if the early church in Jerusalem could be together, if they could be as one united in Christ as they shared in fellowship with him and with one another, then surely it's going to be the case with ourselves and with every other congregation of the Lord's people that we are and that we be together and seen to be together. And you know, that's so crucial, whether it's ourselves or any other community of the Lord's people, we're going to be being built up as a church committed to our Savior, then every single person within the fellowship to be included. There can't be any kind of lead table of Christians or no preferential treatment of one over another. We are in this together. And that's only possible when we love one another in the Lord. And when you do that in fellowship, one with another, well, the consequences are apparent. The material, as well as the spiritual needs of every person in the church are going to be seen to matter and will concern every one of us in the fellowship, just as was the case there in Jerusalem. We're told that they had all things in common and the consequence of that we read there in verses, again, verses 44 and 45, if any believer was in need, whatever that need was, those who were able to help did so, selling their goods to help the needy brother or sister in Christ. In any fellowship, there's got to be that desire to help one another. And we see that in practice. Let's take all the different, as it were, the different categories, if you like, within a church. There's the work of the preacher, the pastor preacher, who seeks to help to build a congregation up in the true faith through the preaching of the word and through pastoral love and care and praying for the congregation. There's the work of the leadership who seek to, the eldership, who seek to give that spiritual oversight, whether it be visiting or communicating within the fellowship.

There are the deacons who help in managing the material and financial resources of the churches, as well as giving personal care and compassion to others within the church. There's the help of the members, members supporting one another and coming alongside one another in prayer support and practical support and fellowship. There's the help that the adherents give in so many ways and using gifts, one's gifts, giving us the resources, giving support to minister and the body of the church.

[12 : 49] We are in it together. We are truly together, one with another. Especially at this time, when needs are being highlighted, particularly in terms of limited resources, limited funds for so many, limited support. Surely it's for the church to show true fellowship in supporting one another in whatever needs we have, one towards another. You know, in the case in the Jerusalem church, through the Berenia in Acts 2, it was material support that was given on the basis that believers held all things in common. As we read in the passage, they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had a need. And that really takes us on to this whole aspect of voluntary giving, the voluntary giving of believers. And let's be under no illusion, this wasn't any kind of you know, early communist experiment that was being practiced. The giving was on a voluntary basis.

If you read on in Acts, in the book of Acts, Acts chapter 3, Acts chapter 5, for example, you see that confirmed that voluntary giving. People had private property, but they didn't regard that as it were for themselves. There was that aspect of voluntary giving. People weren't forced to give. They weren't pressurized into doing something and certainly not looking for anything back in return. The giving was voluntary. You know, when we think of volunteers, even at the present time, volunteers who, you know, signed up to help in so many different ways during this current crisis. Delivering medicines to the vulnerable people, driving patients to hospital, checking on the safety of family and neighbours, buying food for those who can't get out for themselves. Volunteers giving off their time and expertise and seeking nothing in return. So many leaving their comfort zones and of their own free decision, giving off themselves and even for many at great cost to themselves. You know, that principle, that principle of voluntary giving of self, we see that in the fellowship of believers there in Jerusalem.

There was no pressure to give for the sake of giving. There was no pressure to, you know, being forced to sell their possessions to help those in need. There was no seeking anything in return.

No, they were following the example of the Lord Jesus who gave himself for us voluntarily. When we think of the Lord Jesus, when he declared that to do the will of his Father was his great delight.

And that self-giving of Jesus, we seek, certainly in terms of the principle of that self-giving, we seek to imitate. Your giving, my giving of self, doing it on that voluntary basis, seeking nothing in return.

[16 : 02] Just as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.

Truly, I say to you, they've received the reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be done in secret. Your giving and my giving to alleviate the needs of others.

It's to be done without any desire for earthly reward or earthly praise of others. It's that giving, first and foremost, to the Lord, to the one who's met and continues to meet all your needs.

The one who's given to you that most precious gift of all, the Son, the Lord Jesus. We've mentioned this whole aspect of the needy, but let's think particularly there in Jerusalem of the needy there within the fellowship.

We read in verse 45, they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. Evidently, there were believers there in Jerusalem who had particular needs that were very obvious to them all.

[17 : 21] And these needs that were to be remedied by those who were better off in the congregation. And of course, that in itself spoke of a church that was of a mixed background.

There were some who were blessed with sufficient property and material goods so that they could be used in the service of the Lord. There were others who were more destitute through various circumstances that caused them to be needy.

So there were different groups of people within the body of the church. Because no church is a monotony of one section of society.

The church surely has to be, has to consist of all from whatever background or circumstance, for all to be welcomed into the body. But, you know, there comes additional responsibilities from those whom God has blessed materially, just as we've seen in this passage.

And by the grace of God, God moved the hearts of those who were the better off to give as the Lord had given them, to give us, to alleviate the suffering of others within the congregation.

[18 : 30] And the results were seen in immediate, near immediate effect. You go to just a couple of chapters later in Acts chapter 4, and you read of the consequence of that giving to the needy within the church.

In Acts chapter 4, verses 34 to 35, we're told these words, we're given these words. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and was distributed to each as any had need.

The needy had become satisfied in their earthly needs, and that through the grace of giving, that giving that had alleviated that great want through self-giving love, the love of brother and sister to Christ, one to another, and done so through the grace of kindness.

No believer in that fellowship of believers was left destitute. No one was left without sufficient resources to keep body and mind, as it were, alive together.

And those who gave in that fellowship to alleviate the poverty of the needy, as we said, they did so voluntary. They did it out of love, out of brotherly love.

[19 : 56] It was as if their possessions weren't their own. As if what they had was the property of all. Yes, there were believers there who had their own homes, they had their own property, but they used their possessions for God's glory.

We read there in the passage, or we read in Acts chapter 2, their homes were opened up to the fellowship, to share meals with, to even the fellowship meal of the Lord's Supper.

Their wealth was used not just for their own exclusive use, but for the sake of others, as well as for their own needs. And, of course, we've talked about principle, and that practice of giving, even financial giving, again, driven by principle.

Paul wrote in Romans 12, verse 13, contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. And so there's that great principle to be followed in a spirit-filled church.

We're not our own. God has blessed each one of us in so many ways. We thank him for our daily bread. We thank him for the resources that he's given to us.

[21 : 08] Even the very material goods that we enjoy. Even in the context of a church family. And we pray that we'll use the resources that God has given us for the glory of his name.

After all, God has blessed all who are his with every resource necessary to maintain gospel witness, to maintain families, individuals within the body of Christ.

And the last thing we do then is to seek for sale what's not ours to keep if we wish to build the body of Christ. And to build that body in every aspect, physical and spiritual.

And to avoid any kind of greed that denies the love that we ought to show one to another in so many practical ways. John Calvin said this of the early church in Acts.

The early church we read of in Acts. They sold their possessions in those days. In our days, the lust to purchase that reigns supreme. At that time, love made each man's own possessions common property for those in need.

[22 : 19] In our day, we begrudge to the poor a common dwelling on earth. As a congregation in these strange days, it's for each one of us to come before the Lord and ask him, Lord, how can I use the gifts that you've given me?

How can I use the resources that you've given me? How can I use them for the wider work of the church? How can I use them even to help those who are struggling in these days of restriction and days of financial loss?

Jesus said, to whom much is given, much shall be required. And so it's the responsibility within the church that we do practice the grace of giving.

Doing it voluntarily. Doing it cheerfully. Giving in response to the one who gave himself for us. who gave himself fully, utterly, and completely.

So let's strive to be a church that is one. A church where we know that unity in Christ. To know that fellowship in the Lord and to demonstrate that fellowship in active love one for another.

[23 : 32] We are, we pray, that body of believers. And we pray that we will continue to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. And be devoted, yes, devoted to the word and devoted one to another.

And to practice the love of Christ as a congregation and showing that one to another and beyond even our fellowship. You know, it was said of the early church, with this we finish, it was said of the early church as a testimony of the grace of God within that church.

It was said of that church, behold how they love one another. And I pray that's going to be said of every congregation of the Lord's people, not just ourselves here in Livingston, but elsewhere to the glory of God, that it's seen by those who look on, behold how they love one another.

Amen. Let us pray. Lord our God, our loving Heavenly Father, you who share with us that fellowship with your people.

And we pray, Lord, that we will know that fellowship that we enjoy with you, that we will truly know that communion with you and truly know that the love that we must share one with another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

[24 : 54] So Lord, we pray that you will bless us each one. Give to us, Lord, that spirit of sacrifice as we serve you and as we serve one another.

Continue with us, Lord, as we sing from your word. And bless, Lord, we pray even the fellowship that we have enjoyed in this time of service and beyond. Hear us as we call upon your name.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Now let's close in prayer.

And now may grace, mercy and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with you both now and forevermore.

Amen.