

Grace-Filled Community

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[0 : 00] It's always a blessing, isn't it? To come and worship the Lord together, to be encouraged in the music that we sing.

! It's so Christ-centered and so biblical.! Reminds us what's really important. And just such a blessing. Thank you, John. Appreciate also your vulnerability.

Especially this morning when we talk about grace-filled community. And particularly in kind of preparation for our small groups that we'll be starting up beginning next week.

And working through the little epistle of Thessalonians together. And looking really at what does a grace-filled community look like.

And we're going to begin on that this morning not from 1 Thessalonians, but we're going to take a look at what does a grace-filled community look like in the book of Acts.

[1 : 03] We could go to Acts chapter 2, of course. And that's very familiar. Kind of the beginnings of the church and how it all takes place. But I thought it might be beneficial, especially for us in our context, to take it out of the Jewish element and put it into the Gentile element.

Maybe we can begin to relate a little bit to see that grace-filled communities can happen even outside of the apostleship of Peter and John and James and all of those gifted men who were commissioned in Jerusalem by Christ to do this work.

And we actually will see this morning this splinter group, this fractured group of individuals broken and scattered because of the persecution happening there in Jerusalem.

Some of them making their way to this little place of Antioch and this church beginning to grow right there in Antioch. A grace-filled community, I would say.

But I think it would be important for us to begin with this question. What does it take to be a grace-filled community?

[2 : 18] Well, you've got to have grace. But where does grace come from? How do you get grace? And what does grace look like?

What does grace do? We're going to look at that a little bit more in our passage today. But I think the beginnings of grace starts with an understanding of your desperate need for grace.

Grace does not arrive from you. It does not originate with you. Grace comes to you because of the God of grace who gives His grace to you and not so that you can hold on to that grace for yourself, but so that grace can be communicated and dispensed to the world around you.

But how do you begin to really appreciate, really begin to recognize your desperation for grace?

Well, it's a work of God on your heart, of course.

But as I began to think a little bit about the significance of small groups and I began to think about how did God work grace into my own heart?

[3 : 36] How did He give me a deeper appreciation and recognition for my need for grace? Well, if I were to be really honest, it happened through the context of relationship.

It happened because of people that I love and respect who were willing to be vulnerable, willing to be transparent with me about their own struggles. And were willing to be a little candid with me about the flaws and the blind spots that I had in my own life.

It helped me understand my desperation for grace. And as I watched grace show up in their lives, their grace for me, their compassion for me, their interest in my own spiritual life, it began to help me understand the significance of grace and my need for grace so that I could also be a person, a conduit of grace to others.

I'm reminded of when I was a high schooler and Dr. Dixon, who was the president of Cedarville University at the time, had a small group of high school students, about 20 of us in all, who he invited to his house for like a six-week series on what it means to study the Bible and why that is so

significant.

I still have those notes because it was so impactful. That small, intimate setting with this prominent feature, this important guy who was willing to invest in some no-name high schoolers who he had no idea what was going to happen in their future.

[5 : 18] But that didn't matter because he wanted to invest in us as individuals. I think of my experience as an employee at Boeing Satellite Systems and for the first time being part of a Bible study at work and being with a group of individuals who had a pretty diverse theology, but to see the continuity of lives that believe in the essential things of the gospel.

And regardless of the differences in theology, there was this laser-like passion for Jesus Christ. And it was the first time I got to know that there are other people outside of Baptist circles that are actually Christians.

I had no idea. And, you know, there were some people you're like, there's no way if they believe that they can be a Christian.

But those are the people that actually helped me see Jesus in a new way for the first time. I think of a little junior high, seventh and eighth grade class that I was helping to lead.

And this group of five kids, I still remember most of their names, and they had such a hunger for the scriptures, this infectious desire to know more, insatiable desire to know more about the word.

[7 : 00] It was compelling, and it helped to identify and expose in my own heart this complacency about me, this apathy about the scriptures.

They had this hunger that I just didn't have, and it was so refreshing to see the seventh and eighth grade group of boys out in California who just loved the Bible and pushed me into deeper love for the scriptures myself.

And then as we moved to Illinois, this community of pastors that I got to spend time with and to hear and to know their heart for the gospel and to see it show up in various ways, it was refreshing and also inspirational to me.

These small, intimate, fellowshiping groups. Now, let's be honest. There may be a handful of sermons that you remember over the decades of time that you've spent in the church.

Now, we understand the significance of the morning corporate instruction time. We recognize that, but when it really comes down to it, the moments where grace pours into our life the most, the moments where we spend time with people on an intimate level, beginning to understand the scriptures together, sharpening one another in those smaller, intimate settings.

[8 : 37] And that's why small groups for us as a church are so significant. And why we encourage you to be part of a small group in some way or the other.

We're going to have a small group setting here on Sunday morning beginning next week for those of you who are not part of a small group. And so those of you who might be new to Maranatha, I would encourage you.

We're going to be meeting right down the hallway. We're going to be going through this study together so we can just encourage one another with that. But those of you who are part of a small group, my heart's desire is we're going to be able to look into the scriptures, to dig a little deeper, to apply it to our lives, to work out some of those nuances that seem unfamiliar and inaccessible and we're going to grow.

My heart and prayer is that we grow in our relationship and love for Jesus like we have never grown before. Even this morning as Pastor David and I were interacting today, our prayer for this church is that there would be such an awakening in our hearts that we see Jesus in new ways and we get the privilege and joy of seeing new people come to faith in Jesus Christ.

What could be better than that? What could be better than that? So this morning I want to encourage you if you would please to turn to Acts chapter 11. Acts chapter 11.

[10 : 08] There is this founding of a church, the church of Antioch. And I want to point out a few things about this church and I want you to understand that yes, we're going to be talking about the founding of a church and the development of a church as a body, but as a function of that body and a way to begin to express and work out the things that we see in that body, it has to come to a smaller, more intimate setting.

It can't just happen on a corporate level. It has to happen as we're interacting with and rubbing shoulders on a consistent and intimate basis.

I want to just read the first several verses for you by way of context and then we'll jump into this passage together. Acts chapter 11. If you're a guest with us, it's on page 920 in the Pew Bible in front of you.

Here's what it says. Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except the Jews.

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

[11 : 43] This morning, I want to begin, I want us to walk through three kind of headings, major headings through our study together. My desire is to begin with the beginning of the process and then show you the end of the process and then focus some more of our time on the middle of the process to help you recognize how we can be this kind of church.

How can we be a grace-filled community? And why should we be a grace-filled community to begin with? What's the significance?

What does it do? So first, I want to point our attention to the foundation of a grace-filled community. The foundation of a grace-filled community.

Now, I don't know about you, but this is so encouraging to me. As we walk through these verses briefly, and I point out what's taking place here, my hope is that all of you will come to the point where you say, I can do that!

God can use me! I can be a significant participant and member of this body to help make this happen for Maranatha.

[13 : 02] What is the foundation of a grace-filled community? We see the starts of it there in verses 19 and 20, and it is gospel preaching. Gospel preaching.

Now, notice these first two groups. We see them in verses 19 and 20. What stands out to you about these two groups?

What do you notice? Do you notice? Do you notice any names listed? Do you notice any specific positions who were listed?

Do you see any particular gifts of these individuals that are described? Those who were scattered?

Now, that's not a huge selling point.

That's not something you put on your resume. That's not a credential that qualifies you to be a church planter. But isn't it amazing what God can do through faithful, scattered people?

[14 : 09] Wow! It's awesome to see what God will do through faithful people. And notice how it describes these faithful individuals.

We don't even know who they are. We don't know how many there were. But there was something that was compelling about them. Something that unified them as a bunch.

And it is that although they were scattered because of the persecution that happened in Jerusalem, they came to Antioch speaking the word. Speaking the word.

Now, what word did they speak? Well, the Greek, maybe a little unlike the English, uses this definite article, the word, so that we understand that it is a specific word.

And when it's talking about the word or the message, it's referring, of course, to the message of the power of God in working in the hearts of people to accomplish his work in their lives.

[15 : 14] It is the message of grace, you might say. It is the message about the Messiah. Now, how can we say that? Well, it's because they're speaking the word to no one except for who?

The Jews. Now, at this point in the story, Peter hasn't yet gone to Cornelius. At least, they're not familiar with that because they've been scattered from the persecution that happened at the end of Acts chapter 7 and the beginning of Acts chapter 8.

And as soon as that persecution began to happen, they were out of Jerusalem. And then after they had left Jerusalem, then Peter in chapter 10 goes to Cornelius. Then he has this vision that says, no, the door is open to Jews and Gentiles.

He comes back at the beginning of chapter 11, reports that to the church. They say, wow, what an amazing story. But these individuals hadn't yet heard that message.

So, they're being faithful to the word and consistently sharing that word to the Jews wherever they go. Not really, not really a great strategy for church planting, would you say?

[16:34] It's not the kind of people we would probably put on our missions team and send to other places. We wouldn't really say, well, hey, you've been persecuted, you don't really have any credentials, but you're willing, so why don't you go?

But that's what these people did. And because of their faithfulness to go and to share the word, what does God do? God allows many to come to faith.

There is this second group. The second group that kind of fits within the same sphere. Those who preach to the Jews, but then the second group in verse 20, it says, some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, also preaching the Lord Jesus. Now, this preaching is a little different. It's the word for explanation. It's the word for defending the message, the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

Because those who were Hellenists, those who were Greek, outside of the Jewish community, wouldn't have had any context for who this Messiah was going to be. So they needed a little bit more information.

[17:59] And those who were from Cyprus and Cyrene had this burden on their heart to speak to those who were Hellenists, those who were outside of the Jewish community, and to speak to them about the message of the gospel.

What I find truly amazing about this is, again, in the providence of God, these men who had come from Cyprus, this mixed community of individuals, perhaps many of their own family members in different parts of their branches of their family were also Gentiles.

So God using this sensitivity to those who were outside of the Jewish context, using them and their hearts for those people to then begin to share this same message to them as well.

And as a result of their bold teaching of the Lord, many come to faith in Christ. Antioch would have been a natural setting for the Gentile mission to begin.

It's thought that there may have been as many as 500 to 800,000 people that lived in this city. It would have been the third largest city in the Roman Empire, exceeded only by Rome in Alexandria.

[19:28] They came and preached, proclaimed the good news, and as a result God gave deliverance. God brought salvation to the hearts of the people.

Now I don't know about you but I find some comfort in that. I find comfort in knowing that people who aren't named, who have no credentials, who are scattered because of persecution, show up and preach the gospel and God shows up.

because God's word does its work. That's why the apostle Paul can say, for I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God to everyone who believes.

Do you believe in the power of God to accomplish its work? Take heart. Notice the significance of what God did through these willing vessels to begin to plant this church here in Antioch.

Well, we transition now to the second part of the story. Not only is there gospel preaching but there is also faithful living. Faithful living that we see in the next couple of verses.

[20:52] Beginning in verse 22. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God he was glad and exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose for he was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith and a great many people were added to the Lord.

So reports of what was happening in Antioch reached the ears of the leaders in Jerusalem some 300 miles away and by the way in ancient times that was a significant distance but what was taking place there was so amazing that the people the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem hear about it and they say what are we going to do about this?

How are we going to help this church not only survive but how are we going to help this church to flourish? So what do they do? They send a faithful man they send Barnabas to this church and he shows up and we're going to look at this a bit later here but he says when he came he saw the grace of God we're going to look at that in just a moment but when he comes he exhorts them to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose he exhorts them exhorts them and encourages them in the Lord we had the speaking ministry of those who were scattered we had the teaching ministry of those from Cyprus and we have the exhorting ministry of Barnabas who comes and exhorts and encourages these people the word of God had grown they had been faithful to teach one another the things that they knew the hand of God continued to bless and then Barnabas comes now certainly there were things that were wrong about this church certainly there was immaturity clearly there was no leadership probably not organized in their gathering with no

real strategy for development probably some cliques had begun to form those who were of the Jews and those who were of the Hellenists but when Barnabas shows up he sees what God is doing in their lives and he was encouraged and he begins to encourage the things that he can commend they were together they were growing they were sharing the word and they were multiplying as a church he commends them to continued faithful living there was a sensitivity to the scriptures Barnabas saw that but he understands they need more and that's what he does next not only is there gospel preaching and not only is there faithful living but there's also in-depth teaching we see that here in verse 25 and 26 so Barnabas went to

Tarsus to look for Saul when he had found him he brought him to Antioch for a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people and in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians so Paul excuse me Barnabas recognizes there's a deficiency even though Barnabas was a Levite even though he was instructed in the things that the apostles had shared in Jerusalem he recognizes his own deficiency he begins to think how in the world can I take this church to the next level well the only way for that to happen is to teach them in depth the scriptures now who would be best qualified for that who's available for that all the apostles are busy in Jerusalem but I know I know there's a guy in Tarsus he was sent away 10 years ago by the apostles in Jerusalem because he was creating a little controversy there in Jerusalem and for 10 years

[25 : 17] Saul who would later be called the apostle Paul was shelved in Tarsus until God began to begin this process of using him in Antioch and then as we know later on sending him to the mission field Saul comes he and Barnabas for an entire year are meeting with the people and you get the sense that this is more than just a once in a while or once in a week kind of thing this is the kind of training that is taking place on a consistent and daily basis the desire of the people to know the word this insatiable appetite to be fed and to grow in their relationship with God and for an entire year we see this church digging into the scriptures being taught by Paul and Barnabas and growing in their faith finally we see this is a faith filled loving church a church that has faith filled loving this final group we find in verses 27 to 30 in the days or in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world this took place in the days of Claudius so that the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea and they did so sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul here's another group of people from Jerusalem they're not actually sent from Jerusalem but they hear what's taking place there too

I think maybe want to be part of the action they want to encourage this church as well they hear the significance of what God is working in the hearts of people and they say how can we contribute to this story what is really fascinating to me about the church of Antioch is a willingness to receive a new group of individuals there was not this spirit of competition but a willingness to welcome in people of different gifts people who could continue to contribute the word of God into the lives and the life of this church body and then to listen carefully and to do what these prophets encouraged them to do now I want us to think really seriously about this okay here's a prophet he comes to a church he is telling them that there's going to be a great famine that's going to be coming in the next couple of years and it's going to affect the whole world so tell me what is then our strategy as a church it is okay

I guess we need to begin to stockpile I guess we need to begin to think about the needs of our people we understand there's going to be something taking place in a couple years from now what can we do to minister to ourselves right and I think that's appropriate but do you find it truly amazing what this church did instead what did they do they didn't stockpile they said our fellow brothers and sisters in Jerusalem and in Judea are going to really need some help what can we do to take the burden off of our brothers and sisters who are living there this faith filled loving that was willing to receive a measure of personal discomfort for the sake of benefiting others and again now a fifth group of gifted individuals speaking from the

Lord into this church and the church continuing to grow and respond to the word that they received the first group shows up and speaks the word and there is receptivity and there's a response to that the next group comes and they preach the Lord Jesus Barnabas comes and he exhorts them in the Lord and now Saul and Barnabas then teach for an entire year and this final group comes and they tell about what God is asking them to do as a church and at every point along the way there is a willingness to hear the word of God and a desire to obey and put it to work in their life that's what a

grace filled community looks like a grace filled community is a community that not only knows the word but desires to receive the word and put the word to work so it was a church that was founded on grace the foundation of a grace filled community that is founded on the ministry of the word itself now briefly let's look at the fruit of a grace filled community the fruit of a grace filled community I want you to notice that there is new life in Christ because of a grace filled community a grace filled community is marked by new life because grace doesn't come from us it comes to us by the hand of God we are recipients of grace and truly this is a church that was recipients of grace notice on three occasions we see the significance of this new life that is taking place in this church we see it as a result of the ministry of the first two groups right there at the end of at the beginning of verse 21 and the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number who believed turned to the Lord grace filled communities have life because of the hand of the Lord grace filled communities recognize their need for grace and there is new life that comes as a result they are not the same as they were before

[32 : 22] Barnabas comes and he encourages their faithfulness and we see at the end of verse 24 and a great many people were added to the Lord this continuing ministry of encouragement continues to grow through the faithfulness of the people who are there their purposefulness about living consistently and the church continues to experience the benefits of that in God adding to the church more individuals and as they continue to go deeper and to love more we see that more people are enjoying the benefits of the ministry of this church we see in verse 26 for a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people new life continues through the ministry of this church and by the way when Paul and Barnabas are sent they're sent to encourage the church in Jerusalem notice in chapter 12 at the end of verse 24 but the word of God increased and multiplied and Barnabas and Saul returned from

Jerusalem when they had completed their service this propagation of life that is now coming from Antioch to Jerusalem the center of gravity in the spiritual world is now shifted to Antioch and now the church of Antioch begins to be the launch pad for encouragement it's unbelievable to see God do this in the life of this body new life in Christ there's also new impact in the community new impact in the community their lives were so distinctive look at what happens their lives were so distinctive they came to know Christ so intimately that at the end of verse 26 what do we see and in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians a phrase that was intended to be a criticism a phrase that was intended to be kind of a rebuke and kind of a sarcasm to belittle them as a people becomes for this church the greatest commendation we're like

Christ wow what could be said of us that we better than that we are little Christs it's exactly what we want hallelujah we'll embrace that term and from that point on through this very day we are called Christians because of the church of Antioch amazing what God worked in this church the distinctiveness of this body the impact in their community that was so obvious and so visible that that phrase that term begins in that city and then a new passion for the world a new passion for the world we have to turn to chapter 13 for that the first several verses says this now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers Barnabas Simon who was called Niger Lucius of Cyrene Menean a lifelong friend of Herod the Tetrarch and Saul while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting the Holy Spirit said set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off one commentator puts it this way he says the spirit of Christ is the spirit of mission the spirit of Christ is the spirit of mission and the nearer we get to him the more intensely missionary we become I love that phrase the spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions and the nearer we get to him the more intensely missionary we become oh how true that is and oh how true it was for this church this church of Antioch a group of individuals who had committed themselves to worship God and to say what do you have for us next what is the next step for the church of Antioch Lord what would you have us do you say it will do it and five names are mentioned and the only reason why we know two really is because what God does as a result of this church's faith filled passion for the world in sending these two men out now to be the church planters for the world now from a human perspective this was not supposed to happen in Antioch it was supposed to happen in Jerusalem and Jerusalem did play a part so don't get me wrong but can you imagine this Gentile church now being the platform the ground zero for worldwide missions and if my guess if all of us were to trace our spiritual ancestry back to a place it would probably be back to the place of Antioch and the spiritual vision and strategy that the

[38 : 26] Holy Spirit placed on the hearts the burden he placed on the hearts of these men to do something great for God another step in the direction of obedience because of the previous obedience and faithfulness to live according to the word now they were ready to do something even more they had been faithful with the little things and now they could be faithful with much finally the features of a grace filled ministry the features of a grace filled ministry as we have worked through this we have seen these things show up already I want to just point them out to you and we'll just kind of summarize them together first is we see the power of God at work the power of God at work now notice we see that of course in the beginning verses but especially when Barnabas shows up he points something out about this church he says in verse 23 when he came and he saw the grace of God he was glad what is the grace of God of course it's undeserved favor it's the unmerited blessing of God on our lives but what does the grace of God accomplish what does the grace of God accomplish for you and how was it visible how did

Barnabas come to this church and he saw the grace of God I mean what is that all about how does that take place well something very similar happens in Acts chapter 4 in verse 32 it says the full member of those who believed were of one heart and soul and no one said that anything of the things that belonged to him was his own but they had everything in common and with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all Paul in speaking about the grace of God he says in Ephesians chapter 4 but to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift therefore he says when he ascended on high he led captivity captive he gave gifts to men and he himself gave some to be apostles some prophets some evangelists and some pastors and teachers a little later on in chapter 4 he says let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth but what is good for necessary edification that it may impart grace to the hearers and then to

Timothy he says but by the grace of God I am what I am in his grace towards me did not prove in vain but I labored even more than all of them yet not I but the grace of God within me what in the world is the grace of God and what does Barnabas see what he sees is the evidence of the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit showing up in their life to totally transform them as a people they were not the same God's grace was so clear and evident it had transformed them from the people that they were and the fruit of the Spirit was showing up and the power of God was pouring out of their life the gifts in serving one another the courage to proclaim the gospel to their communities it was the evident power of God's grace on their life that was so visible and Barnabas saw it and when he saw it he says nothing else really matters at this point all I need to do is celebrate this grace that I see

I'm going to just be encouraged that however much dysfunction I see in this church I can celebrate that God is here and if God is here he will not only continue but he will complete the work that he started I can just take some confidence in that he saw the power of God we see secondly the presence of godly leaders we see that all the way through the necessity of sending leaders to Antioch to help encourage and strengthen their faith we see the practice of discipleship not only as Barnabas brings Paul along but now as the two of them begin to work with the people there in Antioch to build into their lives and to equip them for ministry and then we see the provision for the saints we looked at this a bit already but by now this truth should be inescapable those who truly love

God will love others it so dominates a life that is so filled with God that it pours out in echoing the heart of God for the people that are around us the love that God has given to us is a love then that we communicate and dispense to others as