

Unity and Generosity

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[0 : 00] Bow our heads for prayer. Our Heavenly Father, as we turn to your word now, we pray that your Holy Spirit would breathe on us and encourage us, strengthen us and comfort us so that we may be an encouragement to others.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well now if you were to open your Bibles to Acts chapter 4 on page 116 near the back and when you do that if you put your hand in Acts chapter 4 and turn back to Deuteronomy chapter 6 which is on page 161.

Neal's children's focus reminded me of the story of the guy who woke up on Sunday morning, didn't want to go to church and his mother came and knocked on his bedroom door and said get up, it's time to go to church and he said I'm not going this morning.

And she said well all your friends are there and he said nobody there likes me. And she said well it'll be encouraging to you and he said it's deadly dull. Give me one good reason why I should go.

She said you're the rector. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[1 : 27] Thank you. Okay. Let's turn to Deuteronomy chapter 6. Let's read together shall we?

Verses 4 and 5 of Deuteronomy 6.

Hear O Israel. Thank you.

Thank you. Here at the heart of the revelation of God in the Bible is the fact that the Lord is one. It's not an add-on. It's not an interesting extra about the biblical faith.

It is at the core. And to say that God is one means that he alone is good. He alone is glorious. He alone is Lord.

That he's not one thing today and a different thing tomorrow. That he's entirely consistent and reliable. And that this world has only one Lord. And the way we are to respond to that is in verse 5.

[2 : 31] Because of who he is and because he is one, we are to love him with all our heart. Which literally means in every decision. And we are to love him with all our soul.

All our life force. All our creativity and energy and imagination. And when it says all our strength, the word strength is the word for very or much.

We are to love God with our very muchness. Which means whatever you've got a lot of, you are to love God with that. Which brings us to Acts chapter 4.

You remember last week, if you turn back to page 115, opposition and persecution has broken out. It's driven the Christians to be more prayerful, more bold.

And at the end of their prayer in verse 31 we read, And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

[3 : 39] Verse 32. And now for the second time in Acts, Luke the author steps back and he paints a picture of what the church is meant to be like when it is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Again, it's not just one isolated episode. In the original, the tenses change. And it makes clear that Luke is talking here about the normal, ongoing reality of the early Christians.

The enduring pattern, if you like, of God's people. And he finishes, you notice, with an illustration in 36 and 37. But these last verses, this section of chapter 4, indicate the pattern and model of the church when it's functioning biblically.

Did you notice that when the Spirit fills the church, it is not seen so much in elevated spiritual experiences, nor so much in spiritual feelings, but in specific actions.

Verse 32. The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul. No one said that any of the things that he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.

[4 : 58] Here it is. The filling of the Holy Spirit has dangerously practical results. They're not just bold in what they say, they are bold in what they do, and what they do with their money.

I had the impression as we were going through this in the earlier service, that I was speaking heresy. The early Christians, they're not just loving in their witness, but they're loving in their service to one another.

They're not just loving the truth of the apostles' teaching, they're seeking to obey it. And here is a community with a completely unnatural attitude to money and possessions.

You may be interested to know, in the Greek and Roman world, there are illustrations and examples of generosity and large gifts, but they always involved reciprocity, and they always involved people of the same social standing.

What's different here is those who are able extend costly generosity to the needy within the church community without any hope of return, without reciprocity.

[6 : 15] And it deepens the picture that we read about a couple of weeks ago in Acts chapter 2, where the church is pictured as a family and a fellowship, as a koinonia.

You remember we used that Greek word. In fact, the last word in verse 32 is the word koina, which is translated common. Look at the activity in verse 34. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold, laid it at the apostles' feet, and distribution was made to each as any had need.

It's very important to understand what it's saying here. It's not saying that every person who owned a house and land sold it, nor that every person who owned houses and lands sold them all.

What's happening is that some of the well-to-do believers sold their property, some of their property, and brought the proceeds to the apostles, so that the apostles could use the money for those who didn't have food or shelter or clothing.

It was not compulsory. You will be pleased to know. It was voluntary. There was no requirement placed on anyone to do this. Nor is it the ascetic ideal.

[7 : 37] I think this ascetic ideal has gained ascendancy somehow in the West, so we simplify our lives by disposing of the assets that complicate us.

But there's no biblical basis for asceticism, as though matter is inherently evil. This is not an attempt to create a community where we all have exactly the same income level and the same property and the same RRSPs.

What is happening is that those who have some wealth take steps to provide for those in the fellowship who are in need. This is very important for us because we are wealthy.

If you're in this building today and you live in Vancouver, you are wealthy, whether you like it or not.

What's important to see is that the early Christians did not give what was left over.

They're not giving what they can easily afford. They're not giving the expendable part of their annual profits. They cut into their capital.

[8 : 45] They take house and land that they possess, sell it and give the money away. I don't want us to miss this. It is deep, heartfelt, practical, sacrificial, genuine generosity.

Something entirely unnatural has happened to the people in this community which has brought them to the place where they're actually taking, they're taking action that demonstrates they value people more than possessions.

And while it is true that they do not in the first place put themselves in poverty, they look at their lives and they look at their possessions and they say, actually we don't need that piece of land, we don't need that revenue stream, we belong to a community that is more important than our comfort or our standard of living.

Did you know sometimes when people become Christians, they deliberately choose a lower standard of living? Now if Hollywood is to be believed and the movies that have been produced about early Christianity over the past quarter decade, you get the impression that every Christian in the early church was poor.

That is not the impression you get from the Gospels or the Book of Acts. And I say this to you for your encouragement. A number of disciples right from the start have high social standing, titles, status, Joseph of Arimathea, the great man from Arimathea, Nicodemus, the member of the Sanhedrin.

[10 : 12] And while it is true that the apostles had no formal theological education, they spoke three or four languages, they each ran successful small businesses and they managed to write the

New Testament, which I think is quite a good effort.

And we can be very thankful for Luke's careful historical detail from time to time. Luke takes pains to mention the women disciples that were there not only during Jesus' ministry and at the Easter events, but there on the day of Pentecost as well.

And Luke indicates that these women likely have higher education and social standing. For example, in chapter 8 of the Gospel, Luke mentions Joanna, the wife of Chusa, who is the steward in Herod's house.

And it is true that the early church in Jerusalem depended upon the hospitality of those who had large houses. The fact that they met in homes and the homes of those who belonged to the fellowship demonstrates there were believers and a number of believers who had houses large enough to have a significant size group together.

More than that, in this chapter it's clear that a number of the believers in the early church had disposable property, more than one piece of land and more than one house and they were able to sell and give their proceeds without making themselves indigent.

[11 : 45] And it's interesting in verse 34 that those who were wealthy were well able to provide for the poor in that early community because, we read, there were no needy among them.

There was no one who lacked food, shelter or clothing. This changes, of course, later in Acts when the famine comes down the pipe and then Christians from other countries contribute, which is very challenging for us.

However, if I step back, the wonderful thing about the book of Acts is there's no interest whatsoever in anyone's social or economic status. If you were part of the early church in Jerusalem, you would be welcomed.

It didn't matter how wealthy you were or how poor you were because Christianity has never been the movement of one class. It's never been a proletarian movement.

It's never been a movement just of the wealthy, but of the wealthy and the poor. Because when the gospel comes into a place, takes root in a city, the new community reflects the city around about it.

[12 : 50] That is why Luke gives us a concrete illustration in Barnabas in verse 36 and 37. Joseph, who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field which belonged to him, brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Now, if you look at chapter 5, it begins with the word but. And we are going to be introduced to Ananias and Sapphira soon enough. But what Luke is doing here is not just introducing us by contrast with Ananias and Sapphira.

He's telling us that the generosity in the community is not a general principle, but there are real names associated with this, real people.

And he's indicating to us that this new faith is making deep inroads to the city and culture of Jerusalem. You couldn't have a bigger insider than Barnabas.

He's from the priestly tribe of Levi. He is a man of wealth and social standing, who probably owned property on the island of Cyprus as well as in Jerusalem.

[14 : 07] Now, Cyprus is just a ferry ride from the mainland of Israel. I thought I'd get that in there, even though there weren't ferries in those days.

And the reason I say that is because something has happened to Barnabas so that he sells a piece of land, a piece of land, either on Cyprus or on the mainland for the sake of the gospel. Owning property and assets does not interfere with his serving Christ.

It doesn't distract him from his commitment to the community and to the fellowship, just the opposite. He sees what God has given him as a means of blessing others.

And one of the ways that he does this is he sells one property, gives the money to the church, and he has the great freedom and joy of seeing his gift deepen the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

John Calvin, one of the Bible commentators, says this, We must have hearts that are harder than iron if we are not moved by the reading of this narrative.

[15 : 16] In those days, the believers gave abundantly of what was their own. We, in our day, are content not just jealously to retain what we possess, but callously to rob others.

They sold their own possessions in those days, In our day, it is the lust to purchase that reigns supreme. At that time, love made each man's own possessions common property for those in need.

In our day, such is the inhumanity of many that they begrudge to the poor a common dwelling upon earth, common use of water, air, and sky. That was written 450 years ago.

Now, where does this generosity come from? What is it that so can take hold of someone that they happily accept a lower standard of living for the sake of others?

And the answer is in verse 33. As the passage is shaped like a target, and right at the center of the target is the apostolic proclamation of the resurrection.

[16:23] And with great power, the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

Not just a temporary mood swing of a new community and a new movement. Not just a temporary sensitivity to the pain of others. Here are people who have been turned upside down by the resurrection.

Now, I want to give you an illustration of this. If you keep your finger in Acts 4 and turn right to the book of 1 Corinthians chapter 7 for just a moment. Page 160.

1 Corinthians 7 verse 29.

The apostle Paul writes here, I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown very short because of the resurrection. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none.

[17:35] Those who mourn as though they were not mourning. Those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing. Those who buy as though they had no goods.

And those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away. The apostle is saying that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead changes our relationship with the world.

The fact that Christ has been raised from the dead means the present form of this world with all its structures and economics and politics is passing away. And that the future life, the resurrection life, has now entered our world in the resurrection.

and that when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see the salvation of God in Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, the old compass that binds us to the structures of this world is replaced with a new one.

That is why on the day of Pentecost the apostle Peter said, the last days have begun. We live in the present, we deal with this world, but we do so because through Christ's resurrection we belong to the future.

[18:55] So a Christian believer is someone who is not controlled and not determined by this world and by its values, but by the Holy Spirit and the living Jesus Christ through God our Father.

And because we're so familiar with this, it's difficult to say it, to explain how radical it is. It's not just a new perspective, it's a new life.

We live, as the apostle says, as though not. We buy as though we had no goods. We deal with the world as though we don't deal with the world.

This is not detachment. Buddhism has had a huge influence on the West Coast and detachment has become the primary technique for serenity.

that this is not detachment. Just like everyone else, the New Testament expectation is that we do marry or remain single, that we do sorrow, we do rejoice, we do buy, but our lives are not determined by those things.

[20:08] That is what the resurrection means. Although we engage with this world and seek to engage deeply with this world, we are not controlled by anything in it. So if you belong to Jesus Christ, who you are and your life is not determined by your marital status or your social status or your financial status, but by the living Lord Jesus Christ, who was raised by the power of God and has taken possession of us by his Holy Spirit.

So it is with money. It's only the resurrection that can free us from our natural greed and our love of self-indulgence.

It's only the resurrection that can demote self from being that idol that I want to indulge and I want to coddle and I want to pamper. Because when we look at our lives through the reality of the resurrection, we realise that all the wealth in this world is simply passing away.

and therefore we live as though we possess everything even though we possess nothing. We know that to be obsessed and absorbed in this world is a kind of slavery, but to make use of this world for Christ and his kingdom is freedom.

That is why the new community created by the resurrection of Jesus Christ has such an unnatural attitude to possessions and wealth because the resurrection changes our relationship with the world.

[21 : 38] But it does something more. It changes our relationship with one another. Let's turn back to Acts 4. One more verse. Do you know that last Tuesday was National Philanthropy Day?

Some of you do. In the National Post there was a special section highlighting the work of the Association of Fundraising Professionals. There's a lot of very good work going on.

Do you know the average Canadian gives \$1,700 a year to charity? But the basic philosophy that promotes philanthropy and charity in Canada goes something like this.

If you give to a good cause, give you a really good feeling about yourself. And probably that is the best way to promote charity amongst those who don't belong to Christ.

So there's now a Donor's Bill of Rights. There are awards for those who give most. But it is a very different thing from living in the light of the resurrection.

[22 : 50] Look at verse 32. Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul. You hear the echo of Deuteronomy?

And no one said that any of the things that he possessed was his own but they had everything in common. This is a very special word, company. Church is a company. It's from the word fulfillment. And not that the church is there for my fulfillment but the church is the fulfillment of what God wants to do in the world. Because from the beginning the church understood itself not to be a collection of individuals with a variety of spiritual motivations but an organic community, company and communion that is bound together because we've tasted the life to come.

the generosity and the actions of the church in Jerusalem don't arise from philanthropy. These are not people who are wanting to feel good about themselves or being recognized but from hearts that have been radically changed by the Holy Spirit.

Why Luke says they who believed were of one heart and soul. It's not a matter of external convictions. It's not a matter of common ideas up here.

[24 : 07] This kind of generosity comes from the knowledge of God's saving grace. It's a knowledge that has changed heart and soul. It comes from the fact that the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

The fact that salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ. Generosity that we see here in Acts 4 is founded on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It's only in the resurrection that we begin to see that Jesus is supremely precious and it's only through the resurrection that he teaches us and we learn from him to value people over things, others over self, the gospel above money, faithfulness above comfort and Christ above all.

You cannot force or coerce this kind of generosity any more than you can force or coerce this kind of unity. It comes from the Holy Spirit.

So here is the second picture of the church in the book of Acts and it stands as a permanent encouragement and rebuke to us. It's interesting to me that they demonstrate the same three priorities that we saw there in Acts chapter 2 devoted to the apostles' teaching, devoted to the fellowship and devoted to witness.

[25 : 30] They are devoted to Christ through the apostles' teaching and even the shape of the passage bears witness to the centrality of the apostolic word because the gospel of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead creates the Christian community.

It sustains the Christian community. It reforms and transforms. It's the engine room of transformation. And they were devoted to the fellowship not just in feeling or intent, not just as a matter of externals but in the most practical way possible in costly and generous love and care. They were devoted to the witness because there is a deep sense of purpose here of belonging to the body, a body that has been created by this new risen life of Jesus Christ whose purpose exists not for itself but to spread that good news to all the ends of the earth.

And to be honest with you, I didn't really know how I should finish the sermon today. I wonder if I could do it this way. Perhaps I should ask if there are any here who will be a son or a daughter of encouragement, will act as a Barnabas to us.

Now, I need to say this. I've been here for ten years and there is genuine generosity in this congregation. We don't make a big fuss of it.

[27 : 01] We don't have in the foyer names on, you know, platinum givers on this wall and gold givers and silver givers with photographs. We don't do that for a number of reasons.

One is you've already lost your reward if that happens. Another is that what matters to God is not really the size of the gift but the spirit in which it's given.

Yet I do want to say to you, I have to say to you from this passage, I wonder if God is calling on any of us to a new commitment in this area. And I think the only thing we can do is ask God to have mercy on us.

And so as we finish, before we sing our next hymn, I wonder if you'd take out the yellow sheet and turn to the front. You see the summary of the law?

Not just that God is one. Not just the implication that we should love him. We should also love one another. So I will read the summary if you would answer with our usual reply.

[28 : 14] Our Lord Jesus Christ said, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength.

The first and great commandment and the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Stop io and go again.

Why do you ever love Jakob? J weil in son is sh to door Ou or schnell gas m equip as medic in om tus him remove your admit even with