

Gospel Triumph: Together for the Gospel – Acts 4:23-37

In his book on the different types of love, C.S. Lewis devotes an entire chapter to friendship. He says that there is a difference between having a companion and having a friend and he describes the moment when companionship turns into friendship. Here's what he says, *"Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, 'What? You too? I thought I was the only one.'"* – C.S. Lewis

Considering this it's fascinating that Luke describes the Apostles leaving their interrogation in front of the religious leaders in Acts 4 and going to find their friends. Look at Acts 4:23. In Greek this word "friends" could be translated as "their own", but either way the point remains. The early Christians were bound together because they shared a common love and common goal. They certainly weren't all the same economic status or ethnic background, but they were able to look at each other and go "You too?". This shared commitment to Christ brought them together in great unity that empowered them to face difficulty and see the gospel move forward.

Things happened in the early church and a huge reason for this is because of the unity that they had around the gospel. I want us to be a church that God works through to see people saved and discipled and togetherness and unity provide an important foundation for this work to take place. But unity doesn't happen by saying "Let's be unified". People come together when they are each individually aimed at the same goal and then they look to the right and left and go, "You too?" So, what are the signs of unity that we need to cultivate as a church? **2 Signs of Gospel Unity that Promote Gospel Growth**

1. Praying Yourself into the Same Story (vv. 23-31)

Look with me again at verse 23. In some ways we are jumping into the middle of a story that began in chapter 3 of Acts. Back in chapter 3 Peter and John went to the temple to pray. They saw a lame man begging for money sitting by the gate. Peter healed him in the name of Jesus and this obviously created quite a stir. Look at Acts 3:11-12. Peter speaks to the gathered crowd and explains the truth about

Jesus and calls them to repentance. While still speaking the temple leaders and religious leaders come rushing up and arrest them for proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. Look at 4:1-3. But many of the people respond to Peter's message in faith in Jesus Christ. Look at 4:4.

The Apostles are held in prison overnight and then there's a trial held the next day before the Sanhedrin, which included all the most important religious leaders in Jerusalem. Look at 4:5-6. The religious leaders really can't say anything because of the obvious miracle that has taken place, so they try to just order the Apostles to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. Look at 4:17-18. Peter and John tell them, "No way" and the religious leaders are forced to let them go.

And this is where we find ourselves in verse 23. The Apostles go directly to the other Christians and report on what has happened. Notice the response of the gathered group in verse 24. They immediately go to the Lord in prayer as they are all gathered together. Now, I want to read the first part of their prayer up through verse 28 and then I want to draw your attention to two truths that they articulate.

First, make sure you see how they acknowledge at the beginning and end of these verses how God is absolutely sovereign. This has been a theme in Acts so far. Remember 2:23? They have experienced persecution for their faith, but they immediately remind themselves of the reality of God's sovereignty. God is in complete control and is the master and Lord of all.

Second, they interpret the events happening to them through the biblical story. This is where our first sign of unity comes in. They are praying themselves into God's story of redemption. Look again at verses 25-26. This is a quote from Psalm 2. Let's look at Psalm 2 for a moment. The Psalm is about God's response to the rebellion of the nations and the rulers of the world against Him. What does God do? Psalm 2:4-6. God puts His King in Zion and promises that His king will break the nations in judgment. The nations are then responsible to submit to God's king. Look at Psalm 2:10-12.

This group of gathered believers then interpret what has happened using the biblical story. Look at verse 27. The religious leaders are continuing the long history of rejecting God's anointed King even as they reject the Apostles continued ministry of Jesus.

The early believers immediately interpreted their circumstances in light of God's story. They did not put themselves at the center of what was happening. It wasn't about them at all. Many of us do not primarily live in God's story, we live in a different story. It may be a story where making money and being successful is the main thing. It may be a story dominated by the American political machine. But understanding how we fit into God's story is vital.

"If we forget that the newspapers are footnotes to Scripture and not the other way around, we will finally be afraid to get out of bed in the morning. Too many of us spend far too much time with the editorial page and not nearly enough with the prophetic vision. We get our interpretation of politics and economics and morals from journalists when we should be getting only information; the meaning of the world is most accurately given to us by God's Word." - Eugene Peterson

So, let me ask you, what story are you immersing yourself in? An easy way to answer that question is by what you give your time to. I'll be honest with you, there's no way that 40 minutes of Bible teaching on Sunday can compete with hours of podcasts, social media, television, and internet browsing. You will be shaped by a different story. You might be thinking, "Oh come on Pastor, don't be legalistic. There's nothing wrong with TV, podcasts, and social media." There's not, but it's incredibly naïve to think that you won't be shaped and formed by what you give your time and mental energy to and the prophetic vision of the world found in Scripture must be what shapes us. Gospel unity won't come unless we individually immerse ourselves in God's story and then come together around that story.

Notice the rest of their prayer. They let Scripture shape their perspective and then they ask God to enable them to respond to God's work in the right way. Look at verses 29-30. The most important thing to them is that the gospel continues to move forward and so they pray for boldness to speak while God continues to work. And God answers. Look at verse 31.

I don't think we should expect God to physically shake our building if we come together in unity around God's story and Gospel. But God promises to answer and work. These believers at this stage in the church needed clarity that God would continue to work among them, and they got it. Let's move on to our second sign of unity.

2. Pursuing Generosity because of Grace (vv. 32-37)

Verses 23-31 have brought the story of the Apostles and the religious leaders to a close and now the remaining verses of chapter 4 are a summary statement of the status of the early church. We've seen one of these summary descriptions already in Acts 2:42-47 and we will see them throughout Acts. This particular statement is focused on the generosity of the early church that flowed from their unity around the gospel of grace. Look at verse 32.

This isn't saying that all the believers sold everything they had and dumped it into a giant pot where it was redistributed. But it is saying that they were together and acutely aware of needs in the community. And they were willing to sell material goods in order to meet those needs. They were generous. Look at verses 34-35.

The first words of verse 34 are quite amazing. "There was not a needy person among them". This is a shocking display of generosity. And we see an example of this. Look at verses 36-37. This is the same Barnabas who accompanies Paul on later missionary journeys. He was clearly a landowner and is given here as a clear example of the generosity at work.

Now, we must ask ourselves, what brought about this level of giving? Look back to verse 33. They honestly believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and they talked about to outsiders, and they were experiencing God's grace. They were very aware of the grace that they had received from God and this grace changed them from the inside out.

This picture of a community where no one was needy is exactly what God wanted for the nation of Israel in the OT. But their sinful hearts never allowed them to live it out. Instead, they were unjust and self-centered. But now the church has experienced the grace of God and the indwelling of the Spirit, and their hearts are fundamentally changed.

The crystal clear message of the NT is that the grace of God brought through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the indwelling of the Spirit makes you a different person. Your desires change. Your actions change. Your generosity changes. 2 Corinthians 5:17.

These believers evidenced the change here through financial giving. But generosity can include giving of time, attention, and service. At the end of the day, an encounter with the grace of God through Jesus turns you from self-centeredness to others centeredness. The resurrection of Jesus means that my life is not my own. I live for the future, for the new creation and I have entered the experience of that new creation life now.

Passages like this are meant to shake us out of our normal, worldly way of living. They are meant to show us the stark difference between a life lived for self and a life lived for God because of grace.

So, here's what I would say to you this morning. Let the dramatic nature of this passage and of the early church's response to grace sit on your heart for a minute. Don't so quickly and easily dismiss the radical generosity and sacrifice they showed because of their encounter with grace. What in your life currently demonstrates that God's grace has a serious hold on you? What in your life reflects the deep and intense change that has come because of the Spirit?

And finally, do you sense your connection to the church because of a shared purpose and goal? It's there so turn your eyes toward God's Word and God's grace and join into the pursuit of the mission He's given us. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 11/17/24

- How would you describe friendship? What does friendship have to do with unity?
- What do you think would happen if a group's unity was focused on loyalty to the group and the idea of unity and not on a common goal?
- Explain what it means to “pray yourself into the same story”.
- How do the events of Acts 4:23-31 relate to Acts 3 and 4?
- Why do you think the prayer ties God's sovereignty to the fact that He is the Creator (v. 24)?
- Explain the message of Psalm 2 and the reason the Christians quote it in their prayer.
- How do we fit into God's story in our time?
- Do you think it's necessary to spend as much or more time in God's Word and listening to Bible teaching as you do to other media?
- What are some of the other “stories” we are told we inhabit by the culture around us? Which of these are you most prone to believe?
- What is the main motive behind the generosity described in verses 32-37?

- Do you think a radical action like the way Barnabas sold his property (vv. 36-37) will always happen in the life of a believer?
- What would you say to a friend who shows no clear evidence of a change in his or her life but believes they are a Christian?
- What's one principle or truth from this passage that you can use to encourage a fellow believer this week?