

BRENTWOOD BAPTIST CHURCH

ACTS 4:32-37

FEBRUARY 9, 2014

TEACHING PLAN

PREPARATION

- › Spend the week reading through and studying Acts 4:32-37. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools (such as a concordance or Bible dictionary) to enhance your preparation.
- › Determine which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.
- › Pray for our pastors, the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the lesson.

HIGHLIGHTS

BIBLICAL EMPHASIS: In Acts 4 we see the unity, power, and grace that fueled the early days of the church. Another key mark was their bold giving, exemplified by Barnabas who sold property and gave the money to the apostles. God has already given all of the resources He needs to fulfill the vision of His church. Like Barnabas, we need to boldly consider what we are called to deploy from what He has entrusted to us for this mission.

TEACHING AIM: As a result of today's study, we will be challenged as a church body to be (1) united (Acts 4:32-33), (2) selfless (Acts 4:34-45), and (3) bold in our giving (Acts 4:36-37).

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

Notes:

To begin today's discussion, have group members think about what is involved in being a part of a group or community. Consider the following questions:

- 1 Have you ever been a part of a community or a group other than the church?
- 2 What was special about these groups? What characteristics defined them? What were their weaknesses or faults?
- 3 What strengths should the church community have that can't be found anywhere else?

Throughout the Book of Acts, we see that belief in Jesus drives people's commitment first to the gospel and then to each other. The early church gives us an example of a community living out the greatest commandment in Scripture—love God and love people. In today's study, we'll discover how the gospel shapes our commitment to each other and ultimately to God's mission for the church.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> Have a volunteer read Acts 4:32-33.

Acts 4:32-33 emphasizes characteristics of the early church similar to those mentioned in 2:43-44. A common bond existed among those early believers. That bond is seen in their unity (4:32a), sharing (32b), witnessing (33a), and the manifestation of God's grace (33b).

- What was the environment of the early church in Jerusalem?

Notes:

- How did the believers live out their commitment to God? How did this affect their commitment to one another?

From these few verses, we get a good sense of the attitude of early church members. People believed in Christ, committed their lives to one another, and were unified in beliefs and purpose. The church functioned with a clear teaching and a powerful witness about Jesus Christ and the salvation available through Him. Furthermore, God's grace was moving in their lives and their actions. As a result, the people looked for ways to give what they had to meet the needs of others. They also trusted their leaders and supported their ministry.

- How does sharing with people in need help a church to witness for Jesus Christ?
- Why is it worth noting that the believers were "of one heart and mind" (v. 32)? What are the common hindrances to sharing one heart and mind?
- From these verses, what do we learn about the source and acts of generosity among believers?

The church was not only meeting the physical needs of members, but they were of "one heart and mind," which meant they addressed spiritual and emotional needs as well. They likely had differences of opinion, but they were united on the essential matters of faith (v. 32). This unity of beliefs and commitment made generous living possible. Generosity starts with understanding that our possessions, our time, and our talents aren't ours, they're God's. He intends for us to use them to glorify Him (v. 32).

> Have a volunteer read Acts 4:34-35.

Not only were they united; they were unselfish. This passage shows us a distinctly Christian view of possessions that focuses not on ownership, but stewardship; not on creed, but need; not on fad, but family. Notice the result: there were no needy persons among them.

Notes:

- What is required for the church to be generous?
- What would it look like if Brentwood Baptist was as generous as the Jerusalem church in Acts 4?

When we live as stewards of everything we have, our generosity benefits others, especially the church and the people it's trying to reach (v. 34). The generosity and unity modeled in these verses attracted other people to them, which enhanced their witness to the world.

- What is more difficult for you: letting people know that you have a need or meeting the needs of others? Why?
- Why is it equally important to be vulnerable with needs you have and to help meet the needs of others?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 2:8. How did Paul express his love for the Philippian believers in this verse? What does it mean to share your own self?

Sacrificial generosity was a practice of the church established at its very conception. Unity within the church is built through deep, meaningful, and spiritual friendships with other believers. These friendships are built on openness and vulnerability by the ones in need, as well as generosity by the ones meeting needs.

> Have a volunteer read Acts 4:36-37.

At this point Luke introduced Joseph, who was a member of the priestly tribe of the Levites.

Notes:

Barnabas's given name was Joseph, but the way he treated other people earned him the nickname Barnabas, meaning "Son of Encouragement." The root Greek word for "encouragement" literally means "called along beside someone" to offer assistance and support. It is directly related to the word Jesus used when He promised to send the Holy Spirit to His followers (John 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7). The apostles had already recognized this trait in Barnabas and began calling him that on a regular basis.

- In what ways does Barnabas's nickname indicate that people were drawn to him? What foreshadowing does this name give us into the example Barnabas is for us as believers?
- Why was Barnabas's example of giving singled out? Why was his gift valuable?

Luke introduced Barnabas, the encourager, as an outstanding example of those who cared enough to give of their means to help others. He sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. Luke probably mentioned Barnabas because of the unusual generosity of his gift and his reputation as an encourager. He was an example of people who give their resources because they have first given their hearts and lives to Jesus. With gratitude and love, they give to meet others' needs.

- Barnabas not only gave, he gave *boldly*. What sets bold giving apart, and why is it something God values?
- What makes bold giving particularly difficult for you?

- How could Barnabas's gift have been an encouragement to others?

Notes:

Barnabas's gift served as a practical example and encouragement for other people. Those who had needs were encouraged by knowing he really cared about them. Those who had resources were encouraged to follow his example and give of their resources to meet others' needs. We also can be inspired and motivated by Barnabas's example as we understand that one way we can encourage others is to be generous to support the Lord's work of meeting people's needs with our finances.

- What must we believe about God and His plans for us to live with the same boldness in giving that Barnabas exemplified?
- What is one way we can remind ourselves that everything we have is from God and is given to us so that we will use it to serve Him?

We will find it easier to be generous with our possessions when we understand that all we have belongs to the Lord. When we think of generosity, we keep in mind Jesus' declaration that a poor widow's "two tiny coins" (Mark 12:42) were more in God's sight than all the money the others gave because of the attitudes involved. Our attitudes and our degree of sacrifice count more than the monetary value of the gifts. Barnabas had the right attitude and action, and he will continue to be a model for the way each of us can support the vision of kingdom growth of the Middle Tennessee Initiative.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

God has already given all of the resources He needs to fulfill the vision of His church. Like Barnabas, we need to boldly consider what we are called to deploy from what He has entrusted to us for this mission.

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- 1 Why are unity, selflessness, and bold giving important characteristics of God's church? How does each one of those characteristics advance God's mission for the church?

Notes:

- 2 Of the characteristics we discussed today—unity, selflessness, and bold giving—which do you struggle with the most in your involvement at Brentwood Baptist, and why? What will be your prayer for that area of your life during our Next campaign?
- 3 What attitudes or circumstances prevent you from living generously? What can you do about them?
- 4 Does anyone in our small group or our church have a physical need that we are aware of today? What specifically can each of us give up in order to meet that need?

PRAY

Together as a group, begin praying about and brainstorming what our collective involvement will be in the Middle Tennessee Initiative. Do the same with your family or your close friends. As you consider what God has entrusted to you and how you can use it to advance His mission, pray that He will give you the courage and strength to act boldly for Him in the coming year.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following information:

- > Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - What monetary or physical needs have you noticed in others this week? How do you plan to respond to them?
 - What do people in your group need that you can help provide? What does the church need now that you can help provide?
 - Do you have a need that our small group can help you meet? If so, let me know so we can take care of it.
- > A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.
- > The challenge to memorize 1 Thessalonians 2:8.

1. UNITED (ACTS 4:32-33)

4:32-33. The opening two verses are almost identical with 2:43-44, only in reverse order. Together they characterize the community life as marked by four things: their unity in mind and heart (v. 32a), their sharing of their possessions (v. 32b), the power and witness of the apostles (v. 33a), and the grace of God, which rested upon them (v. 33b). The overarching concept was their unity, their being “one in heart and mind,” their fellowship in the Spirit. This served as the basis of their sharing of their possessions. The latter is described in two ways. First, “no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own.” The picture is one of unqualified sharing, of not claiming owner’s rights, of saying “what’s mine is yours.” The second expression is “they shared everything they had.” The Greek literally reads “everything was in common with them.” Taken by itself, this could refer to shared ownership; but in conjunction with the first expression, it also refers to a practice of freely sharing one’s goods with another.

Notes:

Many interpreters have seen Luke’s description of the Christian practice here as reflecting Greek ideals, particularly in such phrases as “one mind” and “all in common.” The Greeks shared a common myth that in primitive times people lived in an ideal state in which there was no ownership but everything was held in common. Some attributed such a practice to the Pythagoreans, and Plato envisioned his ideal republic as one devoid of all private ownership. It is doubtful such a utopian ideal was ever realized among the Greeks, but for some Greeks communal ownership was a major part of their dream of a “Golden Age.”

More common than this myth was the Greek ideal of friendship according to which true friends held everything in common and were of “one mind.” Aristotle is reputed to have defined a friend as “one soul dwelling in two bodies.” Such expressions became commonplace and are found in Roman writers such as Cicero as well as the Hellenistic Jew Philo. Luke’s description would have evoked an immediate response in his Gentile readers. What they esteemed as an ideal had become a reality in the young Christian community. They were of one mind, for they shared freely with one another, truly common both in soul and in means. The main business of the community was, of course, the witness for Jesus; and this the apostles continued to do “with great power.” This

power likely refers to their continuing performance of miracles, a further testimony to God's answering their prayer (v. 30; cf. 5:12-16). "Much grace was upon them all," primarily in God's blessing on their lives and witness. On this note Luke's general summary of the Christian life together ends. He then turned to a more thorough discussion of one particular aspect of their common life—their sharing of goods.

Notes:

2. SELFLESS (ACTS 4:34-45)

4:34-35. If verse 32 depicted the Christian sharing in terms of Greek ideals, verse 34a sets forth the Old Testament ideal: "There were no needy persons among them." This is the ideal God established for Israel. According to Deut 15:4f., Israel was to keep God's commands; and God would bless them; there would be no poor among them. There is evidence that in New Testament times the text of Deut 15:4 was seen as a reference to the ideal final times when Israel would be fully faithful to the law and there would be no poverty in the land. The Christians saw themselves as the people of God of the final times (cf. 2:17), they were experiencing God's blessing (4:33), and they were striving to realize the ideal of a people of God with no poor among them.

Verses 34b-35 depict the means by which they sought to realize this ideal. Those who had lands or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds, and lay them at the apostles' feet. The proceeds were then distributed to the needy among them. But what of the practice of laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet? The gesture was one of submission to another. At this point the Twelve were the representatives appointed by Christ as the foundation of the true people of God. The submission was not to them but to the one they represented. To lay one's gift at their feet was to offer it to Christ. The apostles certainly did not consider this an enviable role. They were all too glad to turn the responsibility over to others (cf. 6:2).

3. BOLD IN GIVING (ACTS 4:36-37)

4:36-37. Luke concluded his treatment of the early Christian sharing with two specific examples—one to be followed (Barnabas) and one to be avoided (Ananias and Sapphira). Barnabas sold

a field and placed all the receipts at the apostles' feet. Of more interest to us are the little details told about Barnabas here.

Luke had a way of taking characters who played a major role later in the book and introducing them early, but only briefly and in passing, as is the case with Barnabas here. His name was Joseph, and he was given the nickname Barnabas by the apostles. This was not insignificant in itself because the granting of a nickname was often seen as a sign of respect. (Compare Jesus giving Simon the nickname of Peter/Rock.) He was the encourager, the advocate, the paraklete par excellence of all the characters in Acts. When the Christians in Jerusalem shied away from Paul after his conversion, Barnabas interceded and introduced him to them (9:26f.). When Paul refused to take Mark on his second missionary journey, Barnabas took up for Mark (15:36-39). When the Christians of Jerusalem became concerned over the orthodoxy of the Antiochene Christians in their witness to Greeks, Barnabas again served as intercessor, saw the gracious work of the Antiochene Christians, and encouraged them (11:20-23). Indeed, 11:24 well sums up the portrait of this "Son of Encouragement": "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith."

Notes:

We also learn that Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus. Levites were officials in the temple cultus, subordinate in rank to the priests. Prohibited from offering sacrifices and barred entrance to the holy place, they served in such capacities as policing the temple grounds, keeping the gates, and providing the music at sacrifices and on ceremonial occasions. According to ancient provisions (Deut 10:9; Num 18:20, 24), Levites were not supposed to own land, but that no longer seemed to apply in Barnabas's day.

We are not told where the field was located, whether in Judea or his native Cyprus. Nothing was made of Barnabas's Levitical status in Acts. He may never have served as a Levite. Such service was in no way compulsory for one of Levitical lineage. Just how strong were Barnabas's Cypriot roots we also are not told. Luke simply said here that he was a Cypriot by birth. His family may have moved to Jerusalem when he was quite young, and it is in and around Jerusalem where we find Barnabas active in the early chapters of Acts. On the other hand, it is probably not by chance that Paul and Barnabas's mission work together began on the island of Cyprus.