

Where There Is Brotherly Love, There Is a Willingness To Sacrifice

Acts 4:32-37

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It is not necessarily **the amount of money** you give to the Lord or give to help a brother/sister in need that God considers most important. Jesus said that the poor widow who only gave two mites (or about a penny) into the temple treasury gave more than the wealthy because she gave out of her poverty rather than out of her surplus (Mark 12:41-44). It is your love for Christ and for the brethren that fragrances the gift that God considers most important (for it proves “the sincerity of your love” 2 Corinthians 8:8). That is what really what our text is about today. It is ultimately not about giving money or selling property to give to the church; it is about your love for Christ and for one another.

It seems that Christians are less likely to mind a minister spiritually probing in areas of the heart, in matters related to the family, in issues that address their work, than they are for a minister to begin spiritually sifting through duties related to financial gifts and offerings to the church and to brethren who are in need. I assure you, I do not address this area because I want to become rich off of you, or because I want to build a cathedral.

I address this subject, **first**, because the Holy Spirit raises this very matter before our eyes in His Word and does so repeatedly (whether more directly or less directly), and therefore it must be an important area of our life to the Lord Jesus Christ. I address this subject, **secondly**, because I earnestly desire your submission in love to Christ—and submission to Christ begins with believing and then leads to living out the words of Jesus in Luke 14:33. This is the degree of sacrifice Jesus calls us to if we profess to be a Christian (this is not a super-Christian, it is simply a Christian). Following Jesus Christ means you must be willing to forsake all that you have—He is Lord and it is not you who has forsaken most, but rather Jesus that has forsaken most to purchase you unto Himself out of the slave-market of sin, to bathe you, clothe you in His perfect righteousness, and make you the child of God.

Let us hear the Holy Spirit today as He speaks to us through His Word. The main points from our text are these: (1) The Two Branches of Visible Unity (Acts 4:32-35); (2) Barnabas—an Example of Visible Unity (Acts 4:36-37).

I. The Two Branches of Visible Unity (Acts 4:32-35).

A. We have seen in our study of the Book of Acts how the Church of Jerusalem grew and multiplied under the power of the Holy Spirit as the apostles proclaimed the faithful testimony of the resurrected Christ in their preaching and in their mighty works/miracles. This, however, brought persecution upon the apostles, who were arrested, imprisoned, examined, and threatened by the Jewish Supreme Court (the Sanhedrin). This persecution from outside the church did not faze the apostles in the least—they continued to proclaim the resurrected Christ with boldness. But over the next couple Lord’s Days, we shall see how the enemy then alters his tactics by seeking to bring trouble from within the church (as members of the church suffered needs and privation). This difficulty could either lead to disruption as those who were blessed with enough of this world’s goods refused to sacrifice for those who were deficient or it could lead to unity as those who had this world’s goods saw this as an opportunity to demonstrate to one another their love for Jesus and their love for one another. What we see here in Acts 4:32-37 is that the needs of fellow brethren did not divide, but united them in the love of Christ.

B. The two branches of visible unity are the following: (1) unity in doctrine; (2) unity in love and care for one another. Dear ones, unity in doctrine that does not lead to earnest love and care for one another is a dead orthodoxy (like that of the Church of Sardis in Revelation 3:1—“thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead”); it is a mere nominal faith without works, which is a dead faith (James 2:26). You demonstrate that your doctrine is real to you by your willingness to love and serve one another. Anything less is hypocrisy (like that of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5).

1. **Unity in doctrine (Acts 4:33).**

a. That which bound the church together was a trust in the fact that Jesus Christ was bodily raised from the dead. All of Jerusalem (and the Sanhedrin) knew that Jesus had been crucified with their approval. No one doubted His death. However, the apostles proclaimed He was no longer in the grave (which also could be verified). His body was not stolen with trained soldiers keeping watch through the night. Jesus had conquered death! Thus, proving that He was all that He claimed to be in His ministry—the Son of God and the Messiah whom God raised from the dead (you crucified Him, but God raised Him up). The bodily (not spiritual) resurrection of Jesus was a doctrinal fact that must be believed in order to enjoy visible unity with the Church of Jerusalem. Anyone denying this truth would not be admitted into the fellowship of the church. Just as the greater majority of the Church of Jerusalem had not personally witnessed the resurrected Christ, but had believed that doctrinal truth upon the verbal testimony of the apostles, so we believe that same doctrinal truth upon the written testimony of the apostles in the New Testament Scriptures.

b. Now that is only one doctrine that brought visible unity to the church, but that is representative of all the doctrines in Scripture that Jesus commanded to be taught and received (Matthew 28:19-20; Romans 16:17). Dear ones, the visible unity of Christ’s Church is blurred and distorted whenever there are those who depart from faithful Confessions of Faith (which accurately summarize the teaching of Scripture, like the Westminster Confession of Faith), and whenever new denominations spring up (further dividing the Church) rather than following in the faithful steps of the Church of Scotland in her most pure times.

c. As we learned back in Acts 2:42: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship.” There was only visible fellowship and unity as they continued steadfastly in the doctrine taught by the apostles and received from Jesus Christ—the Head of the Church. Beloved, let not the doctrine, worship, government, and discipline which we profess in our confessional standards become little to you, embarrassing to you, even if it becomes that which is reproached by the whole world—it is the first branch of our visible unity in the Church of Jesus Christ.

2. **Unity in love and care for one another (Acts 4:32,34,35).**

a. Our visible unity is not complete and will even seem like a contradiction if it is not manifested in tokens of love and care for one another. Jesus said that all men would know that we are His disciples by our love for one another (John 13:35). This brotherly love is self-sacrificing, not self-serving (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). This *agape* love does not seek its own. It is not easily provoked. It rejoices not in sin and error, but rejoices in the truth. It bears the burdens of others. It endures forever and ever. Why? Because *agape* love is the love of Christ that is implanted in every believer at the time of his/her regeneration—it is the DNA of Jesus. This is the first fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) and represents all of the other fruit of the Spirit Jesus has purchased for us.

b. There is something terribly wrong in our hearts and lives if we profess to be a Christian and yet do not reach out to help a fellow brother or sister that we know has a real need (1 John 3:16-18), or simply make an outward display and pretense of doing so (but our heart and prayers are not really with that needy brother/sister). We ought not to help one another because of what others will think of us by way of approval or because of what others will think of us by way of disapproval if we do not give (Matthew 6:3-4). Our motive in giving and helping within the Church of Christ is because of Christ’s unsurpassing love to such

undeserving sinners like you and me.

c. Because the Church of Jerusalem was of one heart and one soul together in a blessed visible unity, those in the Church did not hold so tightly to that which they owned when other believers were in dire need (Acts 4:32). Those with property were willing to sell some of it in order to feed, clothe, and house the poor in their midst.

(1) When we read that “they had all things common”, it doesn’t mean that they forsook the idea of private ownership, liquidated any and all assets, and put it all into a common pot. As I said in an earlier sermon in commenting on similar verses in Acts 2:44-45, this was not an experiment in **socialism** (where private property is seized at the whim of the government and redistributed to others) or an experiment in **communism** (where there is no private ownership of property, but it all allegedly belongs to the people, which means none of it belongs to the people, but all of it belongs to the deified state).

(2) This giving by members was **spontaneous** (“and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need” Acts 4:35) and it was **voluntary** (“for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold” Acts 4:34). Consider what Peter told Ananias, a member of the Church in Jerusalem, who wanted the approval of man more than the approval of God (Acts 5:4). Moreover, if everyone sold his/her home, how is it that there were homes in which the thousands of members of the Church of Jerusalem met (“breaking bread from house to house” Acts 2:46)?

(3) This giving was a voluntary movement of love, benevolence, and charity to meet the needs of brethren who were suffering (not the result of their unwillingness to work, 2 Thessalonians 3:10), but were suffering due to their poverty (perhaps some or many of those from various countries who were converted on the Day of Pentecost remained in Jerusalem to be taught at the feet of the apostles for the time being—in Acts 6:1 there were many “Grecians” in the Church of Jerusalem i.e. Greek speaking Jews from various foreign countries).

(4) This bountiful heart and charity is attributed to the “great grace” of the Lord that was upon them all (Acts 4:33). This was not a mere humanitarian project of providing for the bodily needs of a group of people, but was the work of God’s grace in their lives producing the fruit of salvation. When we understand that it was God’s grace that brought forth such a willingness to part with their own possessions, it was nothing about which any of them could stand back and boast, or pat themselves on the back. The Lord would reward them for their self-sacrificial love in ministering to and in serving their needy brethren, but even the reward is a gracious reward and crown which they will cast at the feet of Christ on that final day. God receives all glory when it is of grace! To God be the glory!

d. What I find so encouraging about this display of self-sacrificial love in selling property for the needs of others is that we do not read here that the apostles demanded this of anyone. The apostles did not use gimmicks; they did not weep and beg for money; they did not promise the people a hundred-fold increase on their seed-faith offering. It was simply the work of grace in the heart of God’s people. There was a need, and those with the means said, “I can help to meet that need.” You can always tell one’s depth of love for Christ by what he is willing to sacrifice for Christ (whether property, house, reputation, goals, family, or friends). This matter reveals the sincerity of our faith and love (cp. the rich young ruler in Luke 18:22).

e. Principles of biblical giving to Christ’s Church (whether the need is the ongoing ministry of the church or whether it is a particular needy individual family).

(1) **Give knowing that all that you possess belongs ultimately to God, for He is the one who has given it to you (Psalm 24:1).** Why is it so painful to give of what we have to others? Because we view it as ours and not God’s to be used for His glory. When we see that what we have is loaned to us, and that God can give or take as pleases Him, you will begin to have a different perspective on giving (Job 1:21).

(2) **Give as God has given to you—freely, not begrudgingly but cheerfully,**

out of love for Jesus, who is the greatest gift ever given (Matthew 10:8; 2 Corinthians 9:7). We are burden-bearers because Jesus bore our burden of sin, and bears all of our burdens and afflictions continuously. God was not stingy in holding back His love from you, and we are called to follow His example.

(3) **Do unto others as you would have others do unto you in the same circumstances (Luke 6:31).** How would you want your brothers and sisters to minister to you in the same circumstance?

(4) **Give knowing that Christ is your life (not the fading possessions of this world) and that your treasure is in heaven, not here upon earth (Philippians 1:21; Matthew 6:21).** The tighter we squeeze the things of this life, the more painful it is to lose them. The tighter we squeeze the Lord, the more peace we have when we lose them.

II. Barnabas—an Example of Visible Unity (Acts 4:36-37).

A. Barnabas is presented here as a specific example of one who exemplified both visible unity in doctrine and visible unity in love and care for needy brethren. Barnabas appears here as a contrast with a married couple in the Church of Jerusalem, Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, who did not follow the biblical principles of giving just mentioned, but rather gave out of pretense and lied about what they had given in order to have the approval of men.

B. Barnabas was not his birth name (it was Joses or Joseph), but Barnabas was a name given to him by the church. Literally, Barnabas means “son of prophecy”, but a prophet is one who exhorts, encourages, comforts, and consoles. He owned a tract of land which he voluntarily sold and brought to the apostles in order that it might be dispersed to those needy brethren in the Church of Jerusalem.

C. Here is a Christian brother who was characterized by helping, encouraging, and comforting (even at the expense of his own reputation).

1. Barnabas was the one who brought the persecutor Saul (whose name became Paul) into the fellowship of the saints when the Church of Jerusalem was afraid to receive him (Acts 9:26-27).

2. Barnabas was the one who went to Saul when he heard of the work of God in Antioch (Acts 11:19-26).

3. Barnabas was called along with Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles in the first missionary journey into Asia Minor (Acts 13).

4. Barnabas appears with Paul at the Synod of Jerusalem (Acts 15) to argue the case that Gentiles were justified by faith alone without any works of the law.

5. Finally, Barnabas and Paul go their separate ways in their missionary endeavors when Barnabas wants Mark (his cousin) to rejoin them, but Paul disagrees because Mark forsook them in the first missionary journey. Even in this case, it might be argued that Barnabas was the son of consolation to Mark (perhaps to a fault, but that was the nature of this “good man” who was “full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” according to Acts 11:24).

6. Here in Acts 4 Barnabas was an example of the kind of visible unity in love that existed in the Church of Jerusalem in willingly forsaking what he owned in this life to show the love of Christ to his fellow brethren.

It reminds me of what Jim Elliot (the slain missionary to the native Indians in Ecuador) wrote in his diary:

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

We seriously have misplaced our priorities when our family is in need of help (spiritual, material, a project, help due to illness, help with the children, or simply needs our time), and yet we are far more willing to help others outside the home than we are to help those within our home. When there is no time left in the day, week, or month because we have been helping everyone else, we need to understand that love begins at home and then extends from home to those outside the home. Otherwise, we will seem like saints to those outside our home, but like complete hypocrites to those inside our home (who know us best).

We clearly demonstrate that we truly believe the gospel of Jesus Christ when we freely give to needy brethren expecting nothing in return out love for Christ and His gift of salvation that we can never repay for all eternity. Does your desire and willingness to help the needy (in prayer, in encouragement, in consolation, in work, in meals, in phone calls, in financial gifts) reveal you understand the gospel, or does your unwillingness and lack of concern reveal that you have not yet grasped the most glorious gift of justification, sanctification, and glorification (2 Corinthians 8:9)?

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