

A Community in Unity

Acts 4:32-37

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While there was much to be thankful for on Thanksgiving, Monday was also a momentous day for me. I had the joy of spending all day with Beth and then for dinner we met a friend of mine from college named Tom. Tom was one of the guys who prayed for me to be saved when I was at Madison. It was a delight to hear how he is growing and how God is using him. Even though we don't see each other very often, because we're united in Christ, we're united with each other.

Shortly after we arrived home, I received a phone call from another faithful friend named Mike who lives in central Illinois. He has been calling me every week for over 10 years and leaving a prayer on my voicemail. When he calls, I normally don't answer and just let it go to voicemail. I then listen to this prayer before preaching each weekend. I'm glad I answered on Monday because he called to encourage me and then prayed for me "live" over the phone. Our common unity in Christ has made us quite close.

One of the things I most appreciate about Tom and Mike is that they are all in for Christ and His kingdom.

Last weekend we were challenged to *be bold and not fold when hard times come* by being proactive, prayerful and prepared. Today we're finishing Acts 4 and will learn *we win when we're all in*.

Let's stand and read Acts 4:32-37. This brief paragraph is a snapshot summary of how the early church functioned: ***"Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any 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. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet."***

These first followers demonstrated three traits that have direct application to each of us – we’re called to exhibit oneness, extend ourselves, and encourage others.

Exhibit Oneness

Look at verse 32: ***“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.”*** The **“full number”** means a great multitude. The word **“believed”** reminds us that the oneness we have is because we have believed. To **“believe”** means to ***“be firmly persuaded, to rely on, and to trust in.”*** If you have not yet believed in Christ through the new birth, then you don’t yet belong to His church. If you are born again, you belong to the universal church, and we’d love for you to belong here.

Notice all those who were born again were bound to each other in ***“one heart and one soul.”*** The heart represents our desires and the soul is the immaterial part of our being. This has the idea of having harmony in thought and affection, head and heart. Since they shared a common love, they shared a common life. Because they believed in one Lord and had one Spirit indwelling each of them, they were one with each other.

The Puritan preacher Thomas Brooks was spot on when he wrote: ***“Discord and division become no Christian. For wolves to worry the lamb is no wonder, but for one lamb to worry another, that is unnatural and monstrous.”***

The early church exhibited oneness from the very beginning. Acts 1:14 says, ***“all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer...”*** Acts 2:1 tells us on the Day of Pentecost ***“they were all together in one place...”*** Acts 2:44 says: ***“And all who believed were together...”*** This is in the imperfect tense, meaning they made it a practice of gathering together all the time. This goes along with what we learned last week about the importance of being with ***“your people.”***

It’s difficult for us to exhibit oneness when we think we’re better than others. Max Lucado tells of the time his wife bought a monkey and brought it home. He didn’t like the idea, so he strongly objected, ***“Where is he going to eat?”*** His wife replied, ***“At our table.”*** ***“Where’s he going to sleep?”*** ***“In our bed.”*** Lucado complained, ***“What about the odor?”*** To which his wife responded, ***“I got used to you; I guess the monkey can, too!”*** Unity doesn’t begin in examining others but in owning our own smelly sins.

God's heart has always been for harmony. 2 Chronicles 30:12 says, ***“The hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of the LORD.”*** Jeremiah 32:39: ***“I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.”***

Here's a powerful thought. When you operate in unity of heart and soul with other believers, you are an answer to the prayer of Jesus found in John 17:21: ***“That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”***

Are you exhibiting oneness with other believers? Are you in *one accord* or are you *spreading discord*? Is there anyone you need to forgive or ask forgiveness from? Psalm 133:1 says, ***“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!”***

We win when we're all in.

Extend Ourselves

We're called to exhibit oneness and secondly, we're challenged to live outside of ourselves in order to serve others. We're to extend ourselves in two directions – to the lost and to the found.

1. Give the gospel to the lost. We see this in verse 33: ***“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”*** The word **“great”** is used twice in this verse and is the Greek word *me-gas*, which means, *“at the highest level, superlative and impressive.”* When the apostles gave testimony about the resurrection, which was offensive to the religious leaders, they experienced great power.

The word for **“giving”** is the idea of paying back a debt. Because of all they had experienced they were committed to give back to God by giving the gospel to the lost. This is similar to what Paul said in Romans 1:16: ***“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”***

We're to witness in the power of God because we have the provision of the grace of God. The giving of the gospel with great power resulted in great grace being upon them all. John 1:16 says, ***“For from his fullness we have all received, grace***

upon grace.” I like how one translation renders Philemon 6: **“I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.”** When we give the gospel to others, we understand more deeply the goodness and grace of God given to us.

2. Give our goods to the found. Look at verses 34-35: **“There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”** Because they felt like what they owned was not their own, they were willing to give so others could live. Since they put God first, and people second, their material possessions were a distant third.

The phrase **“laid it at the apostles’ feet”** is in the imperfect tense, meaning they did it over and over, again and again. They trusted the authority and integrity of the apostles to distribute the proceeds as needs came up.

One pastor points out these first followers demonstrated three things:

- **Servanthood.** Everyone placed themselves in service to others.
- **Selflessness.** They placed the needs of others ahead of their own greeds.
- **Sacrifice.** They gave up their precious possessions in order to help those in poverty.

The key is to fall in love with people and fall out of love with things. Or as someone else said, **“Pray that your heart is loosened in relationship to things and tightened in its relationship to people.”** Persecution often strips us of our materialistic focus because it helps us remember things don’t last, but people do.

Some think this is evidence of communism or socialism, but it was actually a voluntary response to specific needs. It’s not **“what’s yours is mine and I’ll take it,”** but instead, **“what’s mine is yours and I’ll share it.”** The early church experienced organic oneness, not mandated oneness. In Acts 5:4, Peter told Ananias he didn’t have to sell his property: **“While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?”** Their mutual caring and commitment to one another was a spontaneous expression of how the Holy Spirit led them. Not only was this voluntary but it was also temporary because after Acts 5 there is no further mention of this practice. Simply put, because they were committed to each other they contributed to one other.

Let's look back to Acts 2:44-45: "***Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.***" The early church was others-centered, not self-centered. When they saw someone in need, they did whatever they could to help out. The word "***divided***" means "*to partition thoroughly.*" Here's how they did it:

- **Through selling what they had** – "***...sold their possessions and goods...***"
- **Through serving those in need** – "***...and divided them among all, as anyone had need.***"

We see this also in 1 John 3:17: "***But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?***"

The First Church of Jerusalem valued ministry over money, and people over possessions. Likewise, you and I have been given time, talents and treasures that are to be used for the good of others and for the glory of God. We're not to love money and use people; we're to use money as a way to love people. When unity of heart and soul is the root; the sharing of our possessions is the fruit.

Over the years I have found these two principles to be helpful.

- **What you have is not really yours.** Psalm 24:1 says, "***The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.***" He has the rights, and I have the responsibility. He is the Master and I am the manager. I am the servant; He is the Sovereign.
- **Do what you can with what you have.** These men and women were mobilized for ministry because they were living on mission. They understood that no one could do everything, but everyone must do something. I'm reminded of Acts 11:29: "***Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.***" Write this down: *We're called to be contributors, not consumers.*

Are you doing what you can with what you have? Your responsibility is always tied to your ability. In 1 Corinthians 3:5 we read, "***...As the Lord has assigned to each his task.***" It's our job to be faithful to what He has given us to do.

Jesus wants us to be free from the love of possessions and firm in our love for people!

We win when we're all in. First, we must *exhibit oneness*. Second, we're called to *extend ourselves*. Third, we're to *encourage others*.

Encourage Others

The Bible not only gives us exhortations to obey; we're also given examples to emulate. Among the thousands of believers in the new church, there's a guy named Joe who stands out because of how he intentionally encouraged others. Drop down to verse 36: ***“Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement)...”***

His given name was Joe but those who knew him best called him Barnabas, because this nickname means “encouragement.” To be the son of someone meant that you took on the characteristics of the one you were a son to. It's as if “Encouragement” was his father, and he was encouragement's offspring. The word ***“encouragement”*** is the word *“Paraclete,”* which is used of the Holy Spirit. It literally means to come alongside and *“put courage into someone”* through comfort and consolation. This word is also used of *“exhorting”* someone.

Not everyone can be like Peter and John, but we can all be like Barnabas and encourage others. Interestingly, his name is used 25 times in Acts. Let's look briefly at seven Scriptural snapshots to get a composite picture of this man's character in the hopes we can become more like him.

1. A Generous Giver. Because believers in the early church faced pervasive persecution, they did not have much money. In response to this need, we read in Acts 4:37 that Barnabas ***“a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.”*** Interestingly, as a Levite, Barnabas would not have been allowed to own any property in Israel (see Numbers 18:20), but he did have some real estate on the luxurious island of Cyprus. Perhaps this was a piece of property that he inherited. Wanting to make a kingdom impact, Barnabas willingly gave it to the church. Even though his home was hundreds of miles away, he made himself one with the Jerusalem church.

Are you known as a giver or a getter? Are you a lover or a looter?

2. Empathy for the Underdog. Turn now to Acts 9:26-27 where we read what happened after Saul's conversion: ***“And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not***

believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.”

Barnabas, at risk to his own reputation, put his arm around Paul and brought him to the apostles. He went with him and he also spoke up for him, telling these leaders that Paul was genuinely converted and completely committed to Christ.

Barnabas took the time to stand with Paul and to speak for him. Are you known as someone who comes alongside the underdog? Do you speak for those who can't speak for themselves, like the preborn? Do you accept outsiders? Are you willing to believe in, and befriend a new believer? Who can you come alongside this week? Will you pour courage into a new Christian when others are tearing him down?

3. Grace-Based. In Acts 11, we read about the explosive growth of the church in Antioch. Recognizing that these new believers needed to be mentored and disciplined, what do you think the church in Jerusalem did? They sent the Son of Encouragement to Antioch, a distance of over 300 miles.

When Barnabas arrived, verse 23 tells us what he looked for: *“When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.”* He saw evidence of God's grace everywhere and because of that, he was glad. This gladness then led him to encourage and exhort these new believers to keep on going with the Lord. Grace led to gladness which led to growth.

Barnabas never got over God's grace in his own life and he had a radar to spot God's grace in other people's lives. He was even able to celebrate grace in an imperfect church. Don't you love people who give grace? That's so much better than being around those who blast away at imperfections. James 2:13: *“Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!”*

Are you a discourager or an encourager? Are you a grace-giver or a fault-finder? When people see you coming, do they take cover or do they try to get close to you?

4. Fully Faithful. Acts 11:24 tells us the key to the character of Barnabas: *“For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.”* He was a good man *because* he was filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith. He was committed to the Great Commandment and the Great

Commission. Our goodness can only come out of God's grace because it is a fruit of the Spirit's work in our lives. Barnabas obviously took the time every day to cultivate his relationship with Christ. As a result, he was directed by the Holy Spirit, was known as a man of faith and people saw him as a good guy. In summary, Barnabas was the real deal. And as a result, ***“many people were added to the Lord.”*** The way you live can bring others to life.

5. A Team Player. Barnabas knew that one of the secrets of a fruitful life was to play on a team. He encouraged the people at Antioch, but he knew that he needed some help. Look at Acts 11:25-26: ***“So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and 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.”***

Barnabas left Antioch on a mission to find Paul so that they could minister as a team. Perhaps he knew that Paul was a better teacher and that the church needed some significant training. This shows his humility because after Acts 13, when their names are used together, Paul is always listed first. Do you have the humility to admit that you need others?

6. A Forgiver of the Fallen. Working as a team is not always easy. Paul, Barnabas, and a young man named John Mark ministered together previously and according to Acts 13:13, Mark bailed on them and went back to Jerusalem. When Paul prepared to take another missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take Mark along. Paul did not think very highly of Mark and refused to have him on the team. Acts 15:39 says regarding Paul and Barnabas ***“...there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.”*** Barnabas took Mark and went one direction and Paul settled on Silas and went a different route.

Don't miss the significance of this. Barnabas was willing to have conflict with Paul in order to forgive and restore a fallen brother. Paul had labeled Mark a loser but because Barnabas was a lover, he never gave up on him. The only label he put on Mark was this: *You matter to God and therefore you matter to me.* We know from Scripture that because Barnabas poured courage into Mark, this discouraged and defeated man became a contributing member of the team once again.

Paul eventually realized that Mark mattered to his own ministry. Listen to Paul's words in 2 Timothy 4:11, penned right before he died: ***“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”***

Brothers and sisters, is there someone you have written off? Have you labeled anyone a loser? It's time to give grace and stop gossiping. Who will you contact this week?

7. Knows his Fatal Flaws. I love how the Scriptures are so real when it comes to human character. Even the heroes of the faith had fatal flaws. We don't have time to fully develop this, but Barnabas was called out by Paul for hypocrisy. Evidently, Barnabas was a people-pleaser and afraid of conflict. Look at Galatians 2:13: *"...so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy."*

Brothers and sisters, let's follow the model of Barnabas and pour courage into others because *we all win when we're all in.*

Here are some questions to ponder...

- 1. What can you do this week to exhibit oneness?**
- 2. How can you extend yourself by giving a possession to help another person?**
- 3. Who will you encourage this week?**

A Common Union

How many of you are still stuffed from Thanksgiving? Meals bring up a lot of memories, don't they? On the night before Jesus was crucified, He gathered with his closest followers to eat His last meal. This supper was rich in spiritual meaning with sweet symbolism that goes back to the first Passover. This annual meal commemorated the defining moment in Israel's history and was celebrated the same way, every time, every year.

Jesus was set on celebrating this supper and was eager to explain the meaning of this memorial meal. Luke 22:15: *"And he said to them, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.'" That phrase "earnestly desired" literally means, "I have desired with desire."*

At its heart, the Passover supper was designed to celebrate the temporary deliverance that came through the blood of a spotless lamb. Jesus now initiates a new meal that celebrates the timeless deliverance that comes through the blood of the sinless Lamb of God.

Each element of the Passover meal had symbolic significance. The unleavened bread represented the haste with which Israel left Egypt. Bitter herbs reminded them of the pain of their slavery. A paste-like puree was prepared to look like clay to recall their forced labor. The Passover lamb helped them remember God's merciful "passing-over" and the wine symbolized the blood sprinkled on the lintel and doorposts.

Everything was going according to the Passover plan. The disciples knew the drill and could recite every word. And then in Mark 14:22, everything changes: "***And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke and gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.'***" Jesus, as the Bread of Life was born in Bethlehem, the house of Bread and now He holds up the bread and "***blesses***" it. We get the word "*eulogy*" from the original, which means, "*to speak well of.*"

What Jesus says next no doubt stunned them: "***Take; this is my body.***" With these five words Jesus broke from a tradition that had lasted for centuries.

Before they could fully recover from this shocking statement, we read in Mark 14:23: "***And He took a cup, and when he had given thanks, He gave it to them, and they all drank of it.***" Jesus blesses the bread and then gives thanks for the cup. The word "***thanks***" is the Greek word, "*eucharisteo*," from where we get Eucharist. This is likely the third cup, commonly called the "cup of redemption" or the "cup of thanksgiving."

The script for the supper is back on track and then in verse 24, Jesus startles them again when He says, "***This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.***"

The Old Testament was filled with rules, regulations and religious rituals and now God relates to us through relationship. Don't miss this. The angel of death only "passed-over" those homes where the blood of the lambs had been applied. Likewise, unless you have applied the blood of the Lamb to your life, you will die in your sins.

Communion Correctives

As far as we know this memorial meal was celebrated with dignity and decorum in the early church (see Acts 2) until we get to the chaotic and confused church in Corinth. Please turn to 1 Corinthians 11 where we will see four "Communion Correctives."

1. To Remember – “Look Back” (23-25). Paul received these instructions from Jesus Himself: *“I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you [this is the language of substitution]. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”* Twice in this passage we’re told to remember what Jesus did for us.

Because many of us have spiritual amnesia, we need to look back.

2. To Rejoice – “Look Forward” (26). *“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”* We’re to look back and remember the cross and also look forward to the crown. To **“proclaim”** means, *“to announce publicly, to declare, publish, and perpetuate.”* The bread and the cup tell the story of redemption and help our faith fast forward to the culmination of history. We eat and drink now in anticipation of a glorious banquet to come.

3. To Repent – “Look Within” (27-28). *“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”* Once we remember by looking back, and rejoice by looking forward, we can’t help but look inside and see our need to repent. Paul is cautioning us about approaching the Lord’s Table in a trite manner.

4. To Reconcile – “Look Around” (28-29, 33-34). *“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself...so then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another – if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home – so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.”*

Let’s make sure we’re living in union with those we’re in community with – we could call communion our *“common-union.”* Jesus has made us one, so we need to act accordingly. *We all win when we’re all in.*

Shortly after this supper, Jesus poured out His heart to His Father. It’s notable that the number one thing on his mind was unity for His followers as seen in John

17:11: ***“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”***

How many of you went shopping on Black Friday? As the deacons come forward to prepare for communion, would you close your eyes as I read something I wrote when pondering Black Friday?

*On that Black Friday over 2,000 years ago...when the darkness was so thick it was impossible to move...when our Substitute absorbed the wrath we rightly deserved...when after hours of intense pain, our Savior shouted out a victory cheer, **“It is finished”** and then breathed His last...when the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom giving us full access to the Father...when the earth shook and the rocks split...when those who witnessed all that happened were terrified and exclaimed, **“Surely he was the Son of God!”** But even though Christ was buried, and the tomb was sealed on that very dark day, He didn't stay dead. For the grave can't hold the One who came to shine light into the darkness.*

After shopping for those great deals, remember that Jesus paid a debt He did not owe because we owe a debt we cannot pay. During this season when we look for savings, let's be grateful that Jesus paid the price to save us.

As the elements are passed we're going to sing, “Bind us Together.”