

Prayers

Opening prayer

In the midst of our daily lives, dear Lord, we often forget to talk to You or give You the time that is Your due. Forgive us, we pray, and make Yourself known to us while we do our work, day by day, and hour by hour. Whenever we worship You in church, we proclaim You as Lord and master; so, Lord Jesus, come and reign within us, take authority within our lives, and transform us by Your glory! Dear Lord, do not delay! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: SCHOOLS

1. For yourself

Seek time to focus on your prayers today, and when you do so, say them out loud to God. Bless the Lord by speaking to Him as you would to anyone else

2. For your friends and family

Praise God for the education that you have been able to receive within your family, and pray that God will use it for good, even for those of more advanced years.

3. For the church and its work

Give thanks for all who work with children and schools, and pray that the Bible will be wisely used and taught

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray in earnest that freedom will be granted to enable the Bible to be used in schools by teachers and children. Pray that the Bible will again become part of the essential reading for all who wish to understand the history of the world, and the eternal salvation plan of God

Meditation

Do not fret, the Lord is gracious,
And He will never turn away an anxious call

Do not stress, the Lord is calm
And He will always lead a troubled soul to peace

Do not worry, the Lord knows best
And He will make His plans for you unfold

Do not be tense, the Lord is free
And He will lead you on with love and patience

Let the Lord now do His work in you
Be content to let Him change your world for good

Let the Lord now make His home in you
And welcome Him within, for now, and all eternity

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 4:32-37

³² The entire group of believers was united in heart and soul. No-one claimed private ownership of possessions, but everything they had was shared. ³³ With great power, the apostles bore testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on them all. ³⁴ There were no needy people among them, for those who owned lands or houses sold them, and brought the

proceeds of sale ³⁵ and put this at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Review

Luke offers us a further description of the idyllic life of the early church before persecution set in, in earnest. It stands as a gauge against which God's people can measure themselves. The reading also introduces a character who will become famous later on; Barnabas.

This reading is something of a paradox. On the one hand it seems to conclude everything we have read so far about the life of the early church, especially after the release of Peter and John by the Sanhedrin (4:13-22); it also echoes Luke's description of the church after the first day of Pentecost (2:43-47). On the other hand, if it were not for the fact that a new chapter is marked at the end of this reading, we would think that it flows naturally into the story of Ananias and Sapphira, which comes next. This is the terrible tale of a couple who did not submit their all property to the apostles, and who paid the ultimate price for their deception. We will study this story next, but we cannot escape the fact that our passage today appears to set the scene for this awful story, by describing the communal responsibilities of the early Christians.

We should make no mistake, the early Christians believed that it was right before God to live as a community holding all things in common. Luke's description of this (4:32) reads like the perfect 'communal' life, but the disciples probably did not think of it in this way. They would have thought it was like a return to ancient principles, in particular, what happened when Israel travelled through the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land. Then, the Israelites had to live without the luxuries of settled living (Exodus 12f.), and were entirely dependent on the Lord for their food and drink, 'manna' (Exodus 16:31f.) and 'water from the rock' (Exodus 17:6f. and Numbers 20:8f.). They lived in a highly ordered community without the luxuries of the personal possessions that accompany ownership of land and property.

Earlier in Acts, the general principles of Christian living are set out, listing these five characteristics (2:43-47); dependence on the 'signs and wonders' of the apostles, holding property in common, spending time together each day in worship, breaking bread in the home, and the worship of God. By comparison, today's reading focuses almost exclusively on the issue of holding all things in common. We will look at this shortly, but verse 33 different; it tells us that the church was dependent on the apostle's '*works of great power*', and their '*testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus ...*'. These things are mentioned in both this list and in the earlier one (2:43), and they were crucial to the life of the early church. The glue that held God's people together was therefore a combination of miracles and the apostles teaching. Today, we might describe these as the 'teaching' of the church, and the work of the Holy Spirit in power; the first being found primarily in the Bible, and the second being the result of devotion to God and obedience.

So how important is today's Scripture, and all it says about holding all things in common? It would certainly be an inconvenience to the church today if all believers were required to submit to what this passage says, though many would agree that the upheaval might prove to be a revealing spiritual test. If it were done, this would certainly make society sit up and take notice of the church, because this way of living is completely contrary to the capitalist principles undergirding the Western world! Moreover, some Christians regard capitalism as a proper interpretation of God's will and would argue against the 'communism' found in this passage. But who are we to judge?

To hold all things in common is surely the logical consequence of Jesus' command to His disciples to 'love one another' (John 13:34f.); and this is one of only very few commands given by Jesus to the disciples. Doing this would quickly show the world a better way of living, a world where there is an immense gap between the world's billionaires and the billions who have little to eat and no prospects in life. It would only take one billionaire to do this in one African country for the whole world to take notice of what God can do, and I suspect that such a move would be accompanied by 'signs and wonders' on a scale not recently known amongst God's people. But we are too scared of this godly principle and we believe we cannot compromise on the idea of personal ownership!

In truth, we all know that however people honour God's Word, few Christians will put this Scripture into practice. If it was seriously suggested, some would argue against it and most would avoid it because it is too costly. Of course, this is properly a spiritual principle that applies in heaven and is our inspiration on earth. We must understand that in following Christ we must give up everything, or our repentance and conversion are not complete. Moreover, this spiritual principle needs to be applied in some way in our lives, or else we

cannot be said to love each other as Christ has asked of us. Christ has done so much for us; is it not right that we should give up all things for the common good, to bear testimony to Him, here on earth, now?

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Great grace
- Placing possessions at the disciple's feet
- Joseph, a Levite, called Barnabas

Notes on the translation of the passage

V32 'the group of believers was united in heart and soul...'

Other translations:

'All the believers were in one heart and mind' (NIV)

'the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and soul' (New King James)

The Greek sentence reads literally 'the number of believers was in one heart and soul ...'. So the problem is how to translate the Greek phrase 'number of believers', and though most of the translators have a different take on what this, the translations all mean roughly the same thing.

Note that I have retained the original phrase 'heart and soul', which is close to the Greek text. It does not seem worthwhile changing any of these words as the NIV does (to 'heart and mind'), because both words have a substantial pedigree within the Bible and should be understood for what they each say about the nature of humanity. Specifically, the word 'soul' is open to interpretation today, for it is thought of as the part of a person that survives death. However, the Bible uses the word 'soul' in a different way to speak of the whole created and fallen person, which is what is meant here.

V32 'no one claimed private ownership of possessions'

Other translations:

'no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own' (NIV)

'Not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own' (New American Standard)

The Greek sentence reads literally, 'not anyone claimed his own possessions as his own', and every translator struggles with constructing an English sentence that conveys this idea and is a succinct expression in English. I have written in terms of 'private ownership', because it is important for us to understand today that this is not a quaint ideal, but the radical and total opposite of capitalism (see notes).

Great grace

At the end of verse 33, Luke describes what happened to the disciples as they were obedient to the Holy Spirit amongst them. Luke says that they experienced 'great grace'. This is the only place in Scripture where we find this phrase. It is wonderful to read that this was how the Lord blessed His people and we should certainly look for the Lord's 'great' grace, but what does it mean?

A clue to this may be found in the Old Testament, in the prophet Zechariah, who said this:

This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts. What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain; and He shall bring out the top stone amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it' (Zech 4:6,7)

In this wonderful passage, the prophet is encouraging the Jewish leader Zerubbabel to press on with the work of completing God's house, until the final stone is put in place. Then, as this work is complete, the shout goes up 'grace, grace!' All this sounds wonderful, especially if we recall that the early Christians would have seen this as a prophecy that spoke to them of God's work to build a new Temple, the Temple of the church of God!

But what does 'grace' mean in this context? The word 'grace' come from the Hebrew word for 'favour', and expresses something like this; the overflowing favour and love of God towards those who show their love to Him. So when Luke says here that 'great grace was on them all' (4:33), this is a way of saying that the early Christian community experienced God's favour and blessing in abundance, because they perceived that they

were see in themselves the completion of God's work, just as the prophet said when encouraging Zerubbabel!

Placing possessions at the disciple's feet

This passage says twice that possessions are placed 'at the disciple's feet, firstly in verse 35 where Luke is describing how the early Christians dealt with their possessions; they sold them and then placed the proceeds 'at the disciple's feet'. The, this is mentioned again in Luke's description of Barnabas' individual obedience to this requirement of the church (4:37). But what does this mean?

Firstly, we might naturally assume that this was a way of saying that the people who brought the money from the sale of property placed it properly in the disciple's remit. To be at someone's feet, in those days, meant to serve the one seated; clearly, the giving of the money was seen as a form of support for the apostles, and once the money had been given it was completely at their disposal for the good of all.

In addition to this, the idea was so entrenched within the first century AD that some scholars have suggested that the disciples actually sat on seats raised high, so that people could give their gifts without having to stoop impractically low! This might sound rather laughable, if it were not for the fact that archaeologists have found throne like seats from that time period in Christian dwellings that suggest its leaders did in fact sit on high seats! All this sounds as if people of those days were sticklers for interpreting things literally; but their words and deeds put us to shame. We live at a time when people's convenience is paramount, and even church service nowadays are timed and arranged for convenience, rather than for gaining the maximum impact when declaring God's Word.

Joseph, a Levite, called Barnabas

At the very end of our passage is a delightful brief verse introducing one of the great characters of the early church, Barnabas. Luke is careful to introduce all the main characters in his story, and this helps us immeasurably as we try to understand the story of the first half of the first century AD. WE learn here that Barnabas was a Levite with the Jewish name Joseph, and he came from Cyprus.

The name given to Joseph from Cyprus, Barnabas, is given a translation, so that we know it meant 'son of encouragement'. This is a fascinating name, and it fits with the man we later find helping found the first truly Gentile church in Antioch (Acts 11:19f.) and then begin the first great missionary ventures that characterised the working life of Paul (Acts 13f.). We imagine him to be a gregarious and approachable man, always willing to speak about Jesus, though we do not know whether he ever met Jesus personally. Barnabas did what was required of all the early disciples, by selling his field and committing himself to the common cause of the fellowship.

There is one other thing worth mentioning. Luke tells us that Barnabas came from Cypress. It is not often remembered that Paul and Barnabas began their missionary journeys by travelling from Antioch, where they were commissioned, to Cypress. From there, they travelled to Asia Minor to begin the famous missionary journeys through the heart of what is now Turkey. In the light of what we read here, it is perhaps not surprising that they should go first to Cypress, because it was Barnabas' home region of the Roman Empire!

Discipleship

Application

The use of this Scripture

On occasions, the Christian church needs a sharp challenge, and the time will come when this Scripture will have its day and God will use it to inspire men and women to new things. I believe that it is only when people who are young in faith begin to grasp this, and other great texts of the Bible, that we will see the church changed for the better. Too much church life, even amongst the big 'mega' churches of our day is tightly controlled financially, and all that members are required to do is contribute their tithes. In general, this gives the church leaders a great and ample income and plenty left over for church work. But the Gospel is far more important than keeping the balance sheets of the church in good order for the state authorities! Scripture says more, and always challenges the new disciple to give all, and continue giving all for God's glory and for the good of fellow Christians.

Works of power and 'testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus

Of course, as well as the matter of sharing things in common, our passage has more to say about works of power and 'testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus' (4:33). I believe that one of the important features of a true Christian fellowship is 'testimony' to the risen Lord in the lives of people, freely given, and welcomed within the life of the church. I find that when I argue for leaving the microphone open for free testimony in a church, the church leaders quickly cringe, and people argue that this will lead to a lack of flow in the service, and a lack of clarity in the worship. In truth, they do not want to cede authority, as they perceive it, and they abhor a vacuum that can be filled by the Holy Spirit. I have often heard people argue that it should not be done because it will give the more needy people in church a chance to dominate proceedings by speaking too much and too long. Of course, such pastoral issues need to be dealt with elsewhere, and if a church has people who are longing to speak and cannot, then a lid is being placed on the Holy Spirit.

I also believe that when God's people are obedient to their Lord and open to what He will do with them, then they will find that 'works of great power' spring up from them, often without knowing. Miracles do not have to be engineered. They are the natural and spiritual consequence of the work of the Holy Spirit in God's church. It is only when they do not happen that there is a real problem.

Questions for groups

1. How can God's people respond to the challenge of this Scripture to hold all things in common possession?
2. Why is it that most Christians completely ignore the general challenge of this Scripture, let alone what it literally says.
3. How would the literal acceptance of this Scripture change the church and/or change the world; imagine what it would do for the poor.

Discipleship challenges

- *Think carefully about this passage of Scripture, and ask yourself how you meet its challenge. One way of doing this might be to write out how much money you own, then add to it the value of your possessions, and the insurance value of them, and place these totals before God in prayer, asking Him to take it from you and use it for His glory. If you can face doing this, then you may find that things change in your life.*
- *Pray for the church and for its leaders. Pray that this Scripture will be preached and taught within the world's churches.*

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, You came amongst us quietly, and then the Holy Spirit began to make You known in the world. Come by the power of Your Holy Spirit, to make the quiet church noisy again, so that the world takes notice of the Gospel of truth! May we be worthy of this great work of Yours; in Jesus' name we pray; AMEN
