

## Grace Leads to Giving

### Acts 4:32-37 (NIV)

<sup>32</sup> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all <sup>34</sup> that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. <sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

The book of Acts from the Bible shows us how the Church lives the fact that the Messiah promised to all humankind since the very first sin had now actually arrived. Jesus had fulfilled that mission of living perfectly as our substitute, crushing Satan and sin with the sacrifice of his life on the cross, and defeated death with his resurrection giving us the certain hope of living body and soul forever with God. Since Jesus' resurrection, this group has grown to a few thousand believers but are also already being threatened by the Jewish religious ruling council, the Sanhedrin, to never preach in the name of this Jesus. The believers got together and prayed about this, asking God in light of these threats to make them bold in saying what Christ had done for them as well as to perform signs confirming their message.

Today's Bible reading shows God's response to their prayers: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need." (verses 32-35)

One of the responses of the believers was to help the needy people among them with their wealth. It wasn't commanded socialism or communism. People still owned property, and it was the apostles who decided how to best distribute the wealth. In fact, this selling of property and giving the money to the church to help the poor wasn't even commanded by God. Since "all the believers were one in heart and mind," (verse 32) they noticed that some among them were in need, and they didn't ignore them. They acted because "God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all." (verse 33)

Grace is such a wonderful word. Generally, we define that word simply as "undeserved love." It's not earned, but it's freely given. The giver decides from his or her own heart, his or her own motivations, to give something.

Grace is a defining characteristic of God, and no wonder! Everything God does for us is motivated internally, from himself. The whole promised Messiah to save us from sin fulfilled by Jesus was all motivated by his grace, nothing in us caused God to do that for us. By his grace he gave you life. By his grace he gave you a working body. By his grace he provides all the sunlight and heat as well as night and sleep. We may be tempted to think that we earned our jobs, our paychecks, our homes, our possessions, but it was by God's grace that he gave us all the abilities and time and productivity and the opportunities to earn these things. In this way, we can truly say that all of our wealth is given to us by God as gifts of grace.

When you look at all your wealth and realize that it is all a gift of grace from God, how does that change your attitude towards it? Again, it's tempting to take credit for our wealth, and so also it's tempting to be selfish about it, that I earned it, that I need it, that I need to store it away for me. When we view our wealth as earned by us, then we are more reluctant to part with it. We then need a good reason to give up our wealth because we kind of always need more and can always use more.

Amazingly, even though he gave us all our wealth out of his grace, God doesn't demand that you sell your land, your houses or to give up your 401K, your pension, your savings for him. No. God needs nothing from us. Unlike all the other "gods" of this world who demand something from us before they act for us, God continues to give to both to believer and unbelievers because that's grace.

God doesn't need your money, but do you know who does? People. Now, I don't know your financials. I don't know what assets you have. I don't know what you pay in terms of housing and food and vehicles. I don't know what you give to charities and causes. I don't even know what you give to church. But I know that you have been showered by God's grace. And if you haven't in a while, now is as good of time as any to look at how God's grace is evident in your life when you look at your bank account and your assets. As you do so, you first simply give thanks to God that whatever you have has been provided to you out of his grace.

Now, looking at your wealth, you may realize that you are just scraping by and, because of that, you are not in a position to give to people in need because you honestly need yourself it right now. Note that these believers gave of their wealth from time to time. You may not be at the time when you have the money to give to help needy believers, but wait for next week's sermon. Grace that leads to giving is not exclusively given with money.

Maybe as you see the overdraft fees piling up, that you're living on all Great Value brand items, or that you're constantly talking to your landlord about giving you more time to make rent or to the bank for your mortgage or your car loan, you realize that you are probably a believer in need. If you take honest assessment, maybe that is because you don't budget, that you don't exhibit self-control to live within your means. Maybe it means you need to do something different of the wealth God has graciously given to you. But also, have you let anyone know that you are struggling financially? If not, is that because you want to handle it on your own? Is it because you are too proud to admit that you're struggling and need help? Is it because you don't want to face the fact that you are not making good decisions?

While we as a church don't have piles of money that can be thrown around, we do have an assistance fund that is used at the discretion of our board of elders – Harry Short, Andy Hartmann, and me. It's there to help our fellow believers, to give to those in need just as we ourselves have received by grace what we have. We've used it in the past to help people with rent, with bills, with food, with gas, with car needs. Whenever we disburse it, there's never an expectation to pay it back. We also don't give it to those who have earned it. We also don't just give it because you asked. We do want to look at other things to help you sustain your living because the funds will run out real quick if the assistance fund is paying your mortgage every month.

Maybe you are on the other side of all of this. You look at the wealth that you have, the house you own, the vehicles you own, the RV, the vacation cabin, all that, and you realize you have more than what you need. Recognizing that all of this is under your care by God's grace, what do you want to do with that additional wealth? Maybe you can honestly sell something that you no longer need and then give that money to someone else, another believer, who does have a need.

Where might that be? It might be to someone here you know. It might be to somewhere completely different. Maybe you want to do estate planning and arrange that your assets would go on to help the church help other people, that your wealth would go to share God's grace both in money, taking care of the needy, and in sharing the Gospel. Maybe it would be giving to an organization like WELS Christian Aid & Relief or WELS Kingdom Workers, non-profits that specifically seek to help people in need in the US or around the world. Maybe you want to give your additional wealth to a place like New Beginnings, a home for single mothers in Milwaukee, WI that helps them advance their education, learn parenting and financial skills, participate in counseling, and overall become self-sustaining. Or maybe there are other organizations not connected to our church. The opportunities to give are endless.

Right now, thinking about this, you might be feeling uncomfortable. I think it's supposed to because giving of the wealth that God has graciously given to us fights against our sinful nature that wants to only use it for ourselves, to store it for our needs so that we don't become the needy people. This fight going on in your mind right now probably also went through the minds of people like Barnabas as he "sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." (verse 37) Feeling as uncomfortable as he did, he remembered that he had this wealth, these assets, by the grace of God and by the grace of God he could use it to help others and by the grace of God he would still be taken care of financially. God's grace wouldn't stop now. So, God's grace led him to give.

Joseph was nicknamed Barnabas by the apostles, meaning "son of encouragement." (verse 36) Think of the encouragement that this giving motivated by grace gives to people. From time to time, there are a couple of people who ask me if there is someone in the congregation that they could give to. I always try to give them a name or two. Then they go out, buy a few things, and deliver them. Always people are thankful because it helps them and shows that we see you and that we care about you. We may not be able to take away all your financial burdens, but we as the church, this gathering of believers, want to and do help. We give graciously from the grace that God has given us.

God does not need our money. He is the gracious giver of everything we have, particularly of all our wealth. We then in turn shower that grace of giving on other people. To God be the glory as we give out of the grace given to us. Amen.