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Acts 2:42-47 "A Look at Life in the Early Church" November 22, 2017

Let's open our Bibles tonight to the end of chapter 2 of the book of Acts, chapter 2:42. We're going to start there and finish all the way down to the end of the chapter.

The book of Acts was Luke's second volume that he wrote to his buddy, Theophilus. The first one was the gospel that bears his name, and he started, really, in the book of Luke with the ministry of Jesus upon the earth - carried it all the way through the cross to the resurrection. And then, in this second novel, this second book, he starts right where the first one left off - he looks at the birth of the church, the growth of the church in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the Scriptures - and gives us about thirty years' worth of historical information to the end of the book. So, that's kind of where Luke takes us - from the beginning of Jesus' three and a half years of public ministry to thirty years beyond the resurrection.

So, Acts begins with Jesus having risen, His appearances for the better part of six weeks that gave irrefutable proof to the believers that He was indeed alive (and that's a shock for them to learn and to know) and that they could learn that He was with them even when they didn't always see Him. And then He focused on the promise of the Holy Spirit. Back on Easter evening, He had met with the disciples - 120 of them - in the upper room, while they were hiding in fear, had breathed on them, said (John 20:22), "Receive the Holy Spirit. He's been with you. He's going to be in you." And they received the Holy Spirit. They were born again, these 120 folks. And the Lord opened their understanding so they would understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). But He told them to wait; that though they were now saved - the Holy Spirit had gone from with them to in them - He wanted them to wait until the Holy Spirit would fall upon them because He wanted more from them than just understanding who He was; He wanted them to be vessels through whom He could speak to the world. And so after forty days, Jesus ascends into heaven. The saints have to wait what amounts to ten more days to see the Lord fulfill the promise of sending the Spirit from His Father. They didn't know how long it would take. We, looking back, know that ten days and it became the Passover time, if you will, and that morning the Holy Spirit was poured out from heaven upon these early believers. Signs and wonders accompanied His outpouring that were never

repeated. There was the sound as of a "rushing mighty wind," there were tongues "as of fire" sitting upon their heads (they were metaphors, if you will), and then there was the gift of tongues; but this time (and the only time) it was understood as dialects of the many people who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost.

So, Peter gets to stand up that morning - when people are really freaked out about what they saw, everybody has an opinion - and he gets the privilege of presenting the gospel of Jesus to the thousands of people that were already in town that were now gathered to find out what was going on. So that morning, they get to hear a message from a Jew about the Messiah who is Jewish, delivered to a Jewish audience by a Jewish man. Short sermon. You have it. We've gone through it in depth. It's powerful. It is filled with Scripture references. You almost can't recognize Peter. Who is this guy? He's quotin' the Bible and stuff? He was just usually all goofed up. But not today. And he lays it out for the people that were listening - to explain what they saw and to explain what was going on. Very, by the way, different than you'll find the approach of Peter in Acts 10 at Cornelius' house because there he goes to speak to a Gentile audience about a Jewish Messiah, and the Gentiles have no basis for belief systems in the Scriptures. And so he has to meet them in a different way. The Lord certainly still saves them. But, anyway, here, a few minutes into his sermon, the crowd interrupts Peter. I don't know how much he had left, but he had more to say, and they stopped him. They were convinced of their sinfulness and their wickedness. They began to cry, "What can we do?" and Peter said pretty clearly, "You repent, and then you identify yourself with Jesus. You go be baptized. You stand with Him." And they did, and three thousand souls came into God's kingdom on that first day. Now, a lot of these three thousand folks would leave in the next four or five, six days - would go home to their different countries and provinces, bearing the gospel that they had heard and that they had received. And you will find that to be a pretty good explanation when you go through the book of Acts, and Paul or someone will show up in a place and you go, "Well, how did they ever hear, how did they ever know?" and you go back and you realize that they were in this crowd, and they had gone home, and they may not have had all the information so clear yet, but God had begun to do a work through them. And it's a valuable understanding.

Now, tonight we want to finish these last six verses. They are pretty good insights for us into how the early church worked. They are more valuable, I think, than you might think if you realize that this first-generation church was the most effective church in history in reaching their generation. There has been no effective

reaching for the generation any better than this first generation did it. We said to you - write down in your Bibles (especially in the book of Acts) - what kind of people does God use? And here you might say - what kind of church does God use? What would the Holy Spirit, do you think, want to build in the life of our church? Because here's a generation of people without the aid of a building. There weren't any buildings that the church really got to meet in and call their own for almost three hundred years. They had no seminaries to speak of. There were no programmatic approaches to teaching. There was no internet, there was no television, there were no marketing campaigns. Years later (in Acts 17) they dragged Jason and a bunch of the rulers out of the city, there in Thessalonica. And it says, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here now" (verse 6). Imagine having said that about you in the first fifteen or twenty years. "These guys have just turned the world upside down." That's what they were saying of God's people in the first generation. Paul was able to write, in Colossians 1:5-6, that the word of the Lord that had come to them, the truth of the gospel had been preached in all of the world. And he wasn't overstating the fact. He really believed that they had been able to get to every corner of the globe with the good news of Jesus in thirty years.

That's not at all what we see today. In fact, today, with all of our Bible schools and retreats and conferences and resources and plans, the church - every year - is losing ground to the population explosion. There are more people not hearing the gospel every year than there were the year before.

And yet here the Holy Spirit does this unparalleled work through some really young and not very well-educated yet in terms of Bible this group was. And the question is - how does that work? And at least part of the answer is found in these six verses because this is how the church began to live its life, and in result of that happening, a great fear of the Lord and the power of God fell upon all that they ran into contact with. The lessons are pretty simple, but I think they're life-changing. What did they do so differently from us to make them so fruitful? And what would God have us to do, commit to, pursue or major in when it comes to the church? Because it really is Church 101 all in six verses. Here's what the Holy Spirit did with those three thousand and more as they began to grow.

Verse 41 says this, "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." Verse 42, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of

bread, and in prayers." Now, just in the construction of that one sentence - verse 42 - four pursuits of the early church are given, and they are all modified by the word "continued." "Continued" - it is a word that means without interruption. And the adverb is "steadfastly" - with great devotion, with constant attention, with a persistence. This young bunch of believers, when they came to know the Lord, without interruption dedicated themselves to these things in their lives. And it speaks of this willful choice that is made and effort that is made. It's a conscious decision to follow. And notice that the four are listed there.

They "continued steadfastly" (a) "in the apostles' doctrine." The apostles had a pretty unique place in the life of the early church. God used them, for the most part, to write, to record and to reinforce the teachings of Jesus that He had given to them; and, as they were led of the Holy Spirit when Jesus was ascended, they brought forth the teachings of Jesus that hadn't really been articulated while He was here. We read in John 16:12 that Jesus said, "I've got a lot of things I still want to say to you, but you can't bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes He will guide you into all truth. He won't speak for Himself. Whatever He's heard from Me, He will speak, and He'll tell you about things to come." And that was, indeed, the outline for what the Holy Spirit was to do with these men that were the foundation pillars for the church - guys that Jesus had chosen after a night of prayer. He had chosen every one of them. Paul would later write to the Ephesians (in chapter 2:19) that "we're no longer strangers and foreigners, but we are fellow citizens of the household of God. And this household of God has been built upon on the foundation of the apostles and on the prophets, Jesus being the chief cornerstone." He would say (in Ephesians 3:3) "how that by revelation it has been made known to me the mystery (as I wrote to you before, my understanding of the mystery of Christ), how that in other ages which were not made known to the sons of men, but now He has revealed by the Spirit to His apostles and to the prophets and to the Gentiles that they would be fellow heirs." So, Paul understood that God used these apostles in very specific ways to bring forth His commandments. Peter wrote the same thing. In 2 Peter 3:2, he wrote that we should "be mindful of the words which were spoken by the prophets and of the commandments given to us by the apostles of Jesus." So, when you read the words "apostles' doctrine," they literally devoted themselves (the church did) to the Words of God that they had been taught, and what they were being taught. Jude will write (towards the end of your Bible), "Remember the words spoken by the apostles" (verse 17). It became the teachings and the framework and the truth upon which we would build our lives. Much of what the disciples taught is written

down in the New Testament. I don't know if we have all of it, but we have all that God wanted us to have to be able to grow. But here's the early church, and notice they were devoted, by choice, without interruption, to the great works of the disciples.

And I want you to notice it's called "doctrine." Now most of the time when we say to people, "Do you know doctrine?" they don't even like the word because it sounds like too much work. "Doctrine" sounds heady and boring. No. It's just truth that is presented in a way that you can not only receive it but you can pass it on. "You know the Scriptures," Jesus said (John 5:39), "you think in them you have life. They testify of Me. Take My yoke upon you." And so the apostles' doctrine was really nothing more than the teaching of God's Word. And the more they learned (the church) of God's love for them, the greater was their service to Him. It changed the way they went about doing what they did. And understand that, at least in the context of these thirty years, everything was against the church. Nobody was cheering them on. We won't even get to chapter 4 before people are already trying to beat 'em up and take away their lives. This wasn't done in a vacuum or in very favorable conditions. All of the work that you read in this book was in very adverse conditions.

So the early church - first and foremost - was a learning church. They were people of the Word. On that day, on Pentecost morning, the Holy Spirit opened a Bible school and put three thousand people in kindergarten. It's all they knew, but they were ready to receive. They were saved, they needed to grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus, and the only way they could do that was to "steadfastly" devote themselves to the task of knowing the Scriptures. They weren't dabblers in the Word. They weren't touch-and-go. They devoured it. Their opinions and their outlooks were formed by the Word of God. And that's a biblically-correct way to move yourself forward. The LORD said to Joshua (in Joshua 1:8), when Joshua was to lead the people forward into the wilderness, "Let this Book of the Law not depart from your mouth. Meditate in it day and night. Observe to do everything that's written therein. That's how you'll have success, if you'll just devote yourself to the knowing of the Scriptures." And the early church longed for, and they turned to know, and then put into practice making a priority of it in their lives. They wanted the Scriptures. You want God to use you? Be a person of the Word. Have answers that are based solidly on the Scriptures. Don't just quote a verse that you think is in the Bible. I had a guy say the other day, "Well, you know the Lord helps those who help themselves." I said, "What book is

that?" He goes, "You're a pastor. It's right there in the Bible!" So I gave him my Bible. "Show me." "Well, you don't have to do that to me. I don't know where all that stuff is." I said, "That's because it's not in there." "Oh, Pastor. It's in there. I've heard my pastor tell us it was in there." Well, it's not in there. There's an old saying that a Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who's not. That's good. Seven days without God's Word leaves one weak. Weak.

The early church was successful because of their commitment to learn and follow the Scriptures. It readied them for anything. It kept them going when the going got really tough, and it got tough pretty quickly. When Paul wrote his last letter to Timothy, he was able to say to him, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). Here, this is what you need. And I would say to you - if you want God to use you, learn the Bible. People get mad sometimes at us because they go, "Well, you don't have a lot of programs. You just have a lot of Bible studies." I'm happy with that because I think that's what God would have us to know. Know Him well, and then the ministry will come right out of there, won't it? It won't take long, here in the book of Acts, before the disciples' ministry is reduced to prayer and the study of God's Word. In fact, it's in Acts 6:4 that they were now limited to that was all that they could do because the needs were so great.

So, God uses a church that is hungry for the Scriptures, that is exposed to sound doctrine, that can practically take what the Bible teaches and translate it into everyday life. And, by the way, in the Bible the order of those things is always the same - it's precept followed by practice. Precept - the truth - followed by the application of the truth in our lives. You can see it in Paul's writings. He starts in Ephesians 1 telling you the precepts - what you have in Christ. He spends three chapters telling you just that. In chapter 4:1, he said, "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called." But he first gives them three chapters of precepts so they would understand it. If you go to the book of Romans, he spends eleven chapters laying out what God did for you. Eleven - before he finally says, in chapter 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." But it is only reasonable because you've had eleven chapters of precepts. You find the same thing true in the book of Hebrews. Ten and a half chapters of precept, here's what God has

done, and then, "Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together, especially as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25). In every place, the learning of God's Word, and the only method that the Bible gives us for real spiritual growth, is knowing the Scriptures. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). So if you really want to know why the book of Acts first-generation church did so well, it's because they were sold out to what they knew. They were absolutely convinced God was right, and they would follow His way. It is spiritual food for the spiritual man to aid him in his spiritual well-being and in his spiritual work. The psalmist would write (in Psalm 119:9), "How can a young man cleanse his way?" The answer, "By taking heed according to Your word." You can read it wherever you turn. We read it in the book of Nehemiah (8:8) just recently that, when the people came together, there was revival because they were reading distinctly from the book of the Law, and they gave sense to it, and they understood the meaning, and the lives of the people changed. We don't need less Bible study. You know what we need? More of it. More devoted study that is well-prepared, and we want to just put ourselves in a place where we can learn from the things of God. Paul, when he wrote to Timothy (who was taking over the church at Ephesus for the first time in his life), said, "Timothy, until I get there, here's what I want you to do. I want you to commit yourself to reading the Scriptures and then exhorting people and teaching doctrine" (1 Timothy 4:13). That was his advice to a 40-year-old man that had never been a senior pastor. Read the Bible, teach the Bible, exhort people to do that. "Meditate on these things; give yourself wholly to them because, in so doing, you'll show the profit that it brings in your own life, and it'll be evident to them, and then they'll do it as well. You devote yourself to the Scriptures" (1 Timothy 4:15).

So when you get to this one verse, it's so easy to read over, but it has so much to say. These new saints were committed to, primarily, gathering together to learn the Scriptures. And I marvel. I personally marvel at people who think they can come to church for 30 minutes on Sunday and grow up. I don't think you can do it. I'm not saying you have to be here tonight. You can go to any studies you want, any church you want. But you're going to have to put in the time. There's no way it just happens, you know? I was trying to fix my smart TV the other day and realized I didn't know what I was doing. It was smarter than I was. I had to read a book. Ohhhh. Ohhh, there it is. I just want to know God's Word because as you know it, your reaction will be in line with God's will, and God's will will bring blessings to your life. So, I don't know how people think they can just get by. You can't. We regularly, as a church, need to study the Word of God. You should regularly be in

church. You should get your Bible out. I'm singing to the choir. You're here on the night before Thanksgiving when everyone thinks it's not a good church night. I happen to think it is. I'm thankful. How 'bout you? But it has to be a priority. And if I could just convince people that that would be the thing that would change their lives, I would do it. I don't know how. Arrive on time, take notes, read ahead. I think it's the best you can do. I always think about Jesus on Easter afternoon joining with Mary and Cleopas on their way home to Emmaus, and He made Himself known to them. They didn't really recognize who He was, and yet you read (there in Luke 24:27) that, when Jesus began to speak to them, He took them back to Moses. And it says, "He began at Moses, and then He went through the Prophets, and He expounded all of the Scriptures concerning Himself." And then they said (Luke 24:32), "Oh, man, didn't our hearts burn?" I mean, Jesus could have told them all kinds of, "Oh, it's cool, man. I went down to Hades yesterday. You should have been there. It was amazing." Instead, He got the Bible out, and He taught the Bible to them, and they said, "That moved our hearts!" It is so good to know that God's Word has that kind of power. So stay in church, learn the doctrines, or else you're left with sermonettes that create "Christianettes" who leave church to smoke cigarettes. I don't know. It rhymes. (Laughing) I don't have any idea.

Here's a letter. I want to read you a letter. See if you like this letter.

"Dear Pastor,

You often stress the importance of attendance at worship service. I think every person has a right to miss now and then. I've enclosed some valid reasons, excuses and the number of times it should apply. I hope you get some grace. Christmas, I get to miss once. New Year's - once. Fourth of July - once. Sleeping in because I had a hard week at work - three. Once for my anniversary. Three weeks for my vacation. Two days because of bad weather. Once for birthdays for me, two for my family's. Three ballgames. One Easter. One Labor Day. One Memorial Day. Three for being sick. Two business trips. Two time changes. A golf tournament. The last week of school and the first week of school. Super Bowl. Any playoff game in any sport - three more. Unexpected company - two. Family reunion - one. Sick kids - three. Unexpected problems - two. Boy Scouts, soccer, blame-the-kids-not-me - four." (Laughing)

And then at the bottom it says this:

"This leaves four weeks where you can count on me and my family to be there unless it's leap year or August 10th. If that falls on a Sunday, we won't be there. That's our special day. See you next quarter."

Signed,
"A Faithful Member"

Okay, we made this up, but isn't that amazing?! (Laughing) I hope you weren't thinking that really came in the mail. No one would actually say that. They would think it, but they wouldn't say it. So, it's funny, but it's tragic, right? Because somehow we've lost the hunger to learn, or we place a less importance on God's Word, and then we go, "Where's the Lord? Where's His power? Why aren't we seeing what we should be seeing?" And the answer's pretty obvious. We're not going after what God sets before us. And then how do we cry out? We want God to use us mightily. Well, the early church did. They were convicted and touched by the gospel. They were saved. They were "continuing steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine." They were a learning church.

Second of all, they "continued steadfastly in fellowship," verse 42. "Continued steadfastly" (is the modifier) "in fellowship." The word "*koinonia*" is the word that is translated here from Greek. There really is no English equivalent to the word "*koinonia*." It is translated in lots of ways in the New Testament. We will read, in verse 44, the words, "They had all things in common." That's the same word as fellowship. It sometimes is translated communion, contribution, sharing, family. They all kind of define those words. But, by definition of its use, it is the work of the Holy Spirit in taking every believer and putting them in a family with other believers - God's family, God's kingdom. It is that family intimacy that God wants each of us to have when we plant ourselves in the body. Why did the church that was early on do so good? They committed themselves to one another. There was an honest relationship amongst people in the body. They didn't run in to see what they could get served by. They came to serve. They didn't decide whether they were in or out of a church based on what they were getting out of it as much as what they could put into it. There was a complete dedication of the heart to the lives of the individuals. It is far different from families in the world. It is characterized by a love only God can put in your heart by this love. This is the kind of love that you find in the heart of someone that has been born again. The Lord moves in, and you're saved, and because of that, your love is found. 1 John 3:14 says, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren."

So here's the early church. They were aware of what they were saved from, but they were aware also of what they shared in common. So there's a tremendous

benefit and power found when you are involved in a church that loves one another. It's a challenge to busy life in our society. It is reduced oftentimes (fellowship) to cookies and coffee in the Fellowship Hall after the church service for ten minutes. "We were in fellowship." No. You were eatin' cookies. (Laughing) Right? And it is easy to lose the strength of community involvement when you lose sight of what God has made of us. There are plenty of people who believe they don't need fellowship. Mostly guys. "I don't need it. I do better on my own. I'm like a redwood." Well, redwoods have very short and shallow roots. But the only reason they stand so tall is they interlock their roots with the ones standing next to them. So they can't really fall; they're all connected. Fellowship isn't something you can do alone. You can't do it over the internet. It requires your presence. Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. You've got to have fellowship. And some believers believe that if they just show up in church, "Well, we had fellowship." That's ridiculous! There's no fellowship in that. Fellowship is the sharing together of commonality in the Lord. It is every joint supplying what is needed. It is belonging to a local church. And, again, I'm not selling our church. I happen to like ours, but there're plenty of good churches. The thing is you should find one and stay there, and be plugged in, and work through your problems, and find out how you can serve. Because fellowship is one of the strengths and towers and pillars of the early church. I find there're a lot of people - and maybe it's because we live in southern California - that I call "blessing bouncers." They call around and look around to see who's playing, what concert is where, and what speaker is over there, and what retreat is that guy going to be in, "I'm going to go over there with those guys," and they just run around, not at all in fellowship, but just "Gimme, gimme, gimme, gimme, gimme gimme." They just want to take. There's no accountability. There's no desire. There's just a quest for blessing. And yet that's a hard way to live, and it's a hard way for the world to look at the church and see Jesus.

Fellowship means we care for each other and love one another and help each other in our walk. They steadfastly devoted themselves, by choice, to others. Here's my question for you. How well do you know people sittin' around you? What are you praying for them for? Do you spend enough time to even find out? Or you can't wait for me to shut the Bible down so you can run to your car? "Starbucks. Yay!" Fellowship. It's a great gift from God so that we can do well. Some people come to church only when it's convenient as if, somehow, "I can't fit it into my schedule. If I've got nothin' else to do. I've got plans." They don't see their responsibility to you or to one another. They just take. They use church as a "gimme, gimme." And if I say something they don't like, they're gone. Or if we do something they're not

happy with, they're gone. Because there's no dedication to you; there's only a dedication to self. And that's a destructive way to go in any side and especially so in the body of Christ.

So, look, we come to serve one another. We come to worship. We come to bless. We want to take our place in the body. And sometimes being in church means I get rebuked. "Confess your trespasses one to another, pray for one another, that you might be healed." That's what James (5:15) said. Sometimes you come to be encouraged. Sometimes you're the encourager. Sometimes you're the "rebukee." But whatever it takes, it'll keep me solid, and it'll keep me strong. When Paul finished his precepts in Hebrews 10 (in the middle), he said, "Don't forsake getting together. Don't forsake that. Hold fast to your hope without wavering. Consider one another. Stir up one another to love and good works. Take care of each other." That's how the church works. Unfortunately, so often that's not at all how we see the church. And I'll tell you what. Sometimes you can get in small groups in a church, and you can begin to isolate yourself from the bigger church. "It's our little home study. It's our little group of servants. It's our" And you just do like this, and there's no big church anymore. "Just us." Just as destructive. Everybody has a part. Everybody should play a part. But, look, it's God's church. In fact, if you want, just go through the Bible sometime (or if you have a computer program), just type the words "to one another" into the New Testament, and find out how often God speaks to the relationship in the church; what you should do "to one another," and the list is endlessly long because fellowship is so important. God uses a church that is strong in fellowship, that is pursuing a family relationship, that has their faith and their life held in common. It's a great argument for being in a local body and throwing yourself into that church wholeheartedly and finding your place. Who does God use? God uses a learning church. God uses a loving church.

The third one, verse 42, "and they continued steadfastly in the breaking of bread." Now "breaking of bread," in the Bible, refers to two different things. At the end of verse 46 it speaks about communion, which is part of the mealtime, and it seems to have been taken in these love feasts as well. But just "breaking of bread" means to eat together. Sometimes it refers specifically to communion. But communion is interesting because it helps us look back to how we got saved, the cost of our salvation, the love that Jesus displayed for us. It forces me to realize I started on my face. You know? And that's why I'm in - because Jesus gave His life for me. There's power in fellowship and eating together and having communion and the

worship that it invokes. It is healthy for the church to be mindful of the God that we serve, and communion puts that all into focus. We have communion once a month on Wednesday nights. The Bible just says "as often as you do it." So you can do it so often it becomes commonplace, and that's not helpful. Or sometimes you are moved to have communion. Our smaller groups have communion. Our home fellowships as well. A learning church, a loving church, a lauding church. I know I'm reaching, but the word "laud" means to worship or to praise.

So I don't have an "I" for the last one. "And they continued steadfastly in prayer." I'll use the word they "laid down on their faces." The Lord uses a learning church, a loving church, a lauding church, and one that is on its face. See, notice at the end of verse 42, "they continued steadfastly in prayer." Jesus had said to the church (John 16:23), "In that day, you'll need to ask Me nothing. I'll say to you, 'You can ask the Father in My name, and He'll give it to you.' " That was a promise. And so they took that to heart, and the church began to pray. Though many like to pray alone and should, this is a word that, because of its application, speaks of corporate praying. Praying with others, praying for others, having your needs known and their needs known to you - following Jesus' example of bearing one another's burdens. Here's a church that learned the value of prayer.

What do you have in your heart about prayer, in terms of value? How much do you value it by the way that you pray or how often you pray? Or how much do you value it when you say to somebody, "I'm going to pray for you," and it isn't just a dismissal? It's a commitment, it's a hope and a bond that says, "I'm going to stand with you through this until the Lord answers, till He moves." How do you view prayer? Do you expect great things? Are you living in that kind of dependence upon the Lord?

God uses a church that is on its knees. You should watch how often, in the book of Acts, you find the church praying. I've got it marked in my Bible just because it struck me one time reading through. Man, they were always praying! And a lot of the prayers are recorded - more so than any other book, except maybe the book of Psalms (but those are pretty much prayers for the most part, anyway). So, look, we have prayer meetings here on Saturday mornings at 8:00 - one week it's men, the other week is women. We have prayer on Tuesday mornings at 6:45, early in the morning. We have prayers that run through the services on Sunday mornings - all three of them. We have some people praying for you tonight. We have a prayer room. We have prayer slips. We have a prayer chain. Got a missions prayer group.

We've got a lot of stuff that has the word "prayer" attached to it because if we want God to use us, we've got to pray. The early church was successful because they went forward on their knees. You're going to do well spiritually when you go forward on your knees. And without prayer, we're not going to be able to continue to do anything. I think Pastor Chuck used to say, "Until I pray, I can't do anything. Once I pray, I can do anything because then I'll know where God wants me to go." So, who do you pray with every week? Who do you pray for? And how do you anticipate that God is going to answer your prayers? How do you view prayer? How valuable is it to you? If I go by the attendance at prayer meetings, I would say a lot of people don't think it's very valuable. Now I don't mean nobody shows up. We have thirty or forty people show up, but in a church this size, that's not a lot of folks. And I just trust you're praying somewhere else. And that's fine. But we need to be men and women of prayer and to know that God answers prayer. And I'll tell you what - you will find this church, early on, and especially as the pressure comes up, constantly praying for God to help, constantly asking for God to work.

Here're the four things. They're a learning church. They're men and women of the Word. They respect it greatly. They believe it wholeheartedly. They loved the Lord's Word. They love one another. They are in fellowship. They are concerned with others other than themselves. They see the mechanics of, "I'm in the body of Christ, I've got something to do, and God's got a work for me to play so everyone's going to do well." Everybody's a part. They find themselves worshipping the Lord and praying together.

And then we read, verse 43, as a result, "Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles." Two important kinds of results of their spiritual practices. The power of God began to work through them by faith, and there was a tremendous "fear," the word translated reverence for God. In other words, there was a serious outlook from the saints to who they were serving. And God showed up. Unfortunately, unless you have these priorities of prayer and the Word and fellowship and all, you're going to lose reverence for God with pretty great regularity. If you don't really have a respect for God's Word, you're not going to have a respect for God. You're going to start to treat Him like one of the guys. You're not going to find yourself bowing your head. And as a result of losing fear of the Lord, you lose power of God. And what happens is the standards begin to be lowered. They're God's standards, but we don't follow them anymore. So immorality's okay and lying's okay and blasphemous doctrine is okay, and shallow commitments are the norm. And over the time, the church begins to

look a lot more like the world than God's people. It's lack of reverence, lack of power, lack of holiness. But that doesn't happen if you keep these first four things in line. Then you find fear; not afraid, just reverence. "Man, we're messin' with Almighty God! He's the One that saved us. Oh, man, I'm bowing my heart in His presence. I'm aware of who He is. And yet He loves me."

So notice that the signs and wonders were done through the apostles. There were plenty of signs and wonders done through ordinary saints' lives as well - guys like Philip and Barnabas and others. But the Lord, early on, established these apostles in the place of leadership and authority; and so, indeed, God gave them an anointing that made everyone aware that these were the guys they should be listening to.

We read, in verse 44, "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." Three thousand people had come to the Lord that day. They came from far and wide. Everyone traveled to Pentecost for the one-week-long festival. Their conversion caused some folks not to go home right away but to try to stay around in Jerusalem for a while. After a while, that's where the apostles were. And they wanted to learn. So, what you read in verses 44 and 45 was a temporary solution for a very unique problem. I only say that to you because when I got saved in '72 (but I grew up with a lot of guys in the 60's), there were a lot of these communal living places, and they all used these verses - all the hippies. "Oh, we'll just sell everything we've got, we're going to hang around the house together." Which was ridiculous because they all went broke. Nobody's working, they were just lazy as could be. They were saved, but they were lazy. So, that's not what this verse says. Within the context of what was happening, there was a need to take care of the thousands who were coming to Jesus who weren't at all from the area; they lived 50 miles away, 100 miles away, 500 miles away. They traveled for days and weeks to get there. They would eventually go home. In fact, with the killing of Stephen, everyone went running for the hills; nobody stuck around then. But I want to point that out to you that, though there was a spirit of selflessness (as there should be) - and I must say I think our body, more than any church I've been involved with, are the most giving people that we have. When we need food to feed folks, we always have enough food. When we're taking boxes down to the kids (Hermosillo, Mexico) - we're going to take, with another church, almost 1,000 boxes down to 1,000 kids next week. God has a way of you guys are the best givers, I think, to the things of God. I'm always excited. I never worry about will we have enough. We always have enough. God is so good. But understand that this giving -

in one sense, there was that selflessness in the hearts of the people, and it is an expression of the fellowship and the love that you find in the church, but on the other hand, don't walk away and say to others, "Hey, look, we should all do this." Because we shouldn't. In fact, if you keep reading (go through the epistles), the church in Jerusalem goes broke. They are the most impoverished bunch of believers you'll find in the Bible. Paul runs everywhere to the Gentles going, "Hey, you want to give me some money for the church in Jerusalem because they're always broke." The effect on the Jerusalem church (even of these two verses) is it left them destitute in many ways. So, this is not a formula. This is just a report of the heart of the people as there was a unique situation that came up.

In fact, in verse 46, it talks about them gathering "daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house." So there were plenty of people who still had their homes, but this is all about taking out-of-towners provisions for a time. And, like I said, get to chapter 8:1, and watch everyone run for the hills because the Lord didn't want them all camping in Jerusalem. Even the apostles had not left Jerusalem. He said, "Start in Jerusalem, then go into all....." "Yep. We're just going to stay in Jerusalem." And then Stephen gets killed, and Paul goes on the warpath, and everybody goes running.

So, it was a pooling of resources for a necessary time. But again, here's the love of Jesus, and people are denying themselves materialistically for the spiritual well-being of others. And, like I said, I've never been in a church that is so ready to help people. We've been in position to help people with rent and temporary aid, and it's awesome when God provides. It is contrary to the flesh of man, but it is awesome.

Now, people try to abuse that sometimes. I'll tell you about a guy from thirty years ago; he won't remember, but I'll remember. We used to have our men's retreats every year, and every year we'd say, "Well, if you don't have enough money, then come and tell us, and we'll see if we can help you. And if you have more than enough money, if you'd like to sponsor somebody, then give us extra money, and we'll try to get it to the guy we think is in most need." And this guy would come every year, and he'd tell you the story about how broke he was. First couple years we'd go, "Oh, yeah, we'd like to be able to help you." And then we'd go up to the retreat, and he'd be the guy sittin' around the bookstore with ten books he just bought and a big drink and sandwiches. And I'd go, "Dude, where did you get all that money?" "Oh, the Lord blessed." "Okay." So next year, he'd come and go,

"Hey, can you help me?" I went, "No. What I want you to do is ask the Lord to bless you again, like last year." He was hustlin' us. (Laughing) We weren't really thankful for him at all.

But here're the guys who believed, and because they were believers, they denied themselves, and they got rid of things that they could help each other with. And it is certainly an outgrowth of God's work in your heart.

So they "continued daily." Remember, we read "continued steadfastly." They "continued daily with one accord in the temple." Now that was the meeting place for the church for a good long time. They went to church every day. And they would "break bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." So here's, in verse 42, the corporate work of people in meeting together, and then, here in verse 46, the smaller groups that meet together for their own benefit. You can't be one way at church and the other way at home. So here's the church meeting in big groups and in small groups. And I think we've told you before, until Constantine the church didn't have a building. So the churches met in houses - everywhere. Even with these thousands, they had to go to houses or to the temple. So there weren't these huge kinds of churches as we have today. But they would meet for accountability and for fellowship and with support and groups. I got saved in a home study. I taught two, three, four at a time for a while. I love home studies because they're places you can ask questions. It's kind of tough to stop and have you ask questions tonight. I know maybe sometimes you come up afterwards and ask, but it's nice to be able to go in two directions. You know? And so they would gather together on a daily basis, and they would minister to one another. Jesus was at the center of church life. He wasn't a bit player.

But notice the words "continued daily, one accord, with glad hearts, with simple hearts." And it is a life that is "uncomplicated and hopeful," and they're walking with Jesus, verse 47, and they were "praising the Lord." They "had favor with all the people." Now you won't read that in the Bible very long. In fact, all you have to do is just skip a chapter, get to chapter 4:1, and you'll realize that Peter and John are under arrest for being Christians. But at least for the early time, the start, everyone seemed to be happy with the church. They weren't really offending anyone. But that wouldn't last.

On the other hand, if you read the words, they "found favor with all the people," I've always believed that the best employer, the best employee, the best friend, the best wife or the best husband is someone who walks with God. So you couldn't have it any better than an employee who loves Jesus. You don't have to worry about him stealing or showing up late or lying to you. If he's walking with Jesus, he's the best guy to have. He's the guy that you want around. So these saints were a blessing to those around them. I think that you can write - next to this verse - the gospel should offend everyone, but you should offend no one. There's no offense here.

And, as a result of verse 42, those four steps, and the self-sacrifice, verse 47 tells us that "the Lord," through the church, "added to the church daily those who were being saved." And I would point out to you the words "being saved." Isn't that interesting? Because you and I know that when you get saved, you're saved like that (Pastor Jack snaps his fingers), the minute you open your heart and ask Jesus into your life, to confess your sins. Salvation is not on a timer. There's no clearing process. You're not on restriction or on hold or on probation. No. You're in. However, getting to that point of receiving Christ sometimes takes a long time. And that is what the Bible (and it calls it in several places) calls "being saved." Not just saved, but you're in the process. I met a guy (more than one) who actually came to church here for 14 months before he got saved. Last year. He told me. I said, "How long you been in church?" He said, "14 months." I said, "Now you just get saved?" He goes, "Yeah, today." And I went, "What's wrong with you? Or what's wrong with me? What happened here?" And he goes, "Oh, I just had to think about it, you know." There was that work of God that just kind of continued. And I love the concept because salvation is instantaneous, but preparing of the heart can take much longer. And I love the idea that you're in process. So it's good to think that when you go to share with somebody and they refuse you, and you go, "Man, I failed," no, they're in the process. They're "being saved." God's doing a work. You can't add up all the parts. The next guy's gonna come and give 'em a little somethin' somethin', you know? And eventually they're going to come around, and you'll have been a part. You don't know. But I love how the Lord added. Every day there were people coming around and others that were in the process of "being saved." I've always marveled at churches that offer classes by so-called experts on how to see people get saved, and they work on advertising and organization and pressure and prompting and influence. And I'm thinkin' the best way people get saved is to see that you're saved. If you're walking with God, they'll notice. Right? That's the light that God has come to bring. So, the best method

of church growth is believers walking with God openly, and that's exactly what you read here. If the church is what God wants it to be, He'll add to it. Pastor Chuck used to say, "Healthy sheep only beget (or give birth to) other healthy sheep." That's the fruit of your life. So it is biblically correct. Evangelism is to be done by the church. It isn't always in the church, but it's supposed to be done by the church as we live our lives in the world.

So, God help us to never replace the teaching and the value of God's Word with artificial kinds of powerless ideas without the Holy Spirit, because the best kind of evangelism is living your life in a way that God lets Himself be seen through you. Paul said to the Corinthians, "You are living epistles read by all men" (2 Corinthians 3:2). They watch you. You watched somebody before you came to the Lord.

But notice what kind of churches God uses. He uses a godly church to be evangelists for them to then reach out to others. So, look, if we are (verse 42) doing this continuously - learning God's Word, staying in fellowship, taking our place in the body, coming and bowing ourselves before the Lord, recognizing who He is, committing ourselves to prayer, respecting the things of God, and being willing to be used by the Lord and poured out - the result is going to be that the Lord is going to be worshipped, and people are going to get saved. It's the secret for success in the Bible. You've learned it in six verses. Now you're absolutely responsible for all of it. You didn't want to be responsible, you should have stayed home.

Next week, we'll pick up with the lame man at the Beautiful Gate.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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