

The Fear of God and Freedom From Goods

by John Piper

The early church experienced a radical commitment to one another and a deep love for God, which was rooted in their fear of God and their commitment to the apostles' teaching.

Duration: 24:45

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 2:37, Acts 2:42-47

Topics: "Book Of Acts"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Acts 2:42-47 and explores the early Christian church and the way they lived together. The speaker identifies four key elements that the believers devoted themselves to: the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. The speaker then unpacks these elements in verses 43-47, highlighting the awe and fear of God, the sharing of possessions, the gathering in both large and small groups, and the emphasis on prayer and praise. The speaker concludes by emphasizing the importance of loving one another and not holding onto possessions, as well as the joy and fun that can be found in a God-centered community.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at www.DesiringGod.org This morning's text comes from the book of Acts, in the second chapter, beginning in the 42nd verse through the 47th. So you can turn there with me in your own Bible, or maybe grab a Q Bible, or look on with a neighbor.

Acts 2, 42, And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

And they sold their possessions and goods, and distributed them to all as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

This is a glimpse into the earliest Christian church, and what kind of life they lived together. And I want us to learn some things from it this morning, in the few minutes we have left here. I want us to see how Luke put this text together, and what he wants us to get from it.

Verse 42 looks to me like a summary verse, that is unpacked in the next verses, 43 to 47. So let's read verse 42, and then see how Luke unpacks it, as he describes the way these things are lived out. Verse 42 says that they were devoting themselves, these new believers, were devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers.

Those four things. Now in verses 43 to 47, in one way or another, those realities are addressed, or unpacked. So let's take them one at a time and see how that's the case.

First, what about the apostles' teaching? And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Verse 43 mentions the apostles. It doesn't mention their teaching, but let's read that and see what that contributes.

It says, and fear came upon every soul, and many signs and wonders, or wonders and signs, were done through the apostles. So the apostles are mentioned here, even though the teaching isn't mentioned, and fear is mentioned, and that triggered in my mind, verse 37, where these people, who are now converted, had at first heard the teaching of the apostle Peter, preaching, and they had been cut to the heart, verse 37 says, and cried out, what must I do? And I think that's an expression of a kind of trembling, a kind of awe, a kind of fear. Is there any way to get right with this God that we've so deeply offended by our sin? And the answer is given.

They believe, and a fear, and now since it was triggered by the apostolic teaching, I don't think it would be wrong to say that what we have in verse 43 is a statement that this fear that's sort of lying upon the church, which is not a negative thing, we're going to find out that it's a joyful thing. It's like a joyful, expectant, shocked and trembling awe at the reality of God and what He might be pleased to do, and that you don't trifle with the apostolic teaching. So my sense is, is that what verse 43 is supposed to contribute is this.

When they listen to the apostolic teaching, they also saw the apostles doing these wonders and signs, and two things then led into their being awestruck at God, namely the content of the apostolic teaching, which was Peter's sermon that they'd already heard, and then the demonstration of this power that the apostles had, which was the presence of God, and they just came away every time the apostles spoke saying, you don't trifle with the apostolic teaching. You don't fool around and play games with what the apostles teach. We'll see that especially in chapter 5 when Ananias and Sapphira tried to fool around and they both dropped dead.

So there's a sense here that this is just stunningly, awesomely real. Nobody's playing church yet. That comes pretty quick in the Christian life, but right now these people have upon them an awesome spirit of God is real, God is great, God is powerful, God is doing immediately in our presence wonders and signs.

You don't trifle with God or the apostolic teaching. Second, what about fellowship? They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, verse 42, and fellowship. Now, we have a lot of images in our minds, if you grew up in the church especially, of what fellowship is.

Fellowship halls, or it stands for fellowship, right? Halls where you hold donuts and punch or coffee and talk with one another until you get tired and go home. And that's Christian fellowship for a lot of people. And there's something gloriously true about that, which we'll see, but it's not here yet.

The reason I think it's not here yet is because this word fellowship in verse 42, many of you know the Greek word here because a lot of Sunday school classes are named this, koinonia, koinonia class. I don't

think we have one here, but most churches have a koinonia class. Koinonia means fellowship.

But that little word koino, koino means common or having in common or sharing. That turns up again in verse 44. That's what triggered my mind to the fact that in Luke's mind, the unpacking of the word fellowship is in verses 44 and 45, not verse 46, which we'll see is the unpacking of the breaking of the bread.

Let's just zero in on this idea of commonality that's in the word fellowship, koinonia. Let's read verses 44 and 45. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

There's the word koina, koina. It triggered the connection in my mind. And they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all.

So koinonia first means having things koina, having things in common. It is not first eating together. It is first owning or having in common things.

Now, in a minute, Luke is going to talk about eating together. And we'll make much of that. But the first illustration Luke wants to give us of what koinonia or fellowship is, is something that has to do with the fact that these people were so bonded.

They were so in love with one another. They cared so deeply with each other. Their lives were being knit together so quickly that when one of them was in need, the others felt terrible having lots of possessions and doing nothing about it.

Rather, they, if they needed to, sold something and then used the proceeds to help the needy member. That's just the way it was. They loved to do that.

Now, this is very threatening to us. We own a lot of things. I own a lot of things.

And we believe in private property. Because the Bible says thou shalt not steal, which would make no sense if there were no such thing as private property. And so we get threatened by a text like this and say, Well, it wasn't a command.

It was just the way they did it then and there's no reason we would have to do it now. Or we say, well, there's no coercion here. It's all voluntary.

And so they didn't have to. And we might say, well, it was just an experiment and probably didn't work anyway because Paul had to collect money for the saints because they were so poor in Jerusalem 20 years later. So it was a wash.

We respond to texts like this very, very defensively. Our first thought as wealthy middle class Americans is, it can't mean this. It can't mean that I'm going to have to really give up anything.

It can't mean that there might be some real sharing here, that our life together at Bethlehem might have some economic implications for me personally in my lifestyle or that there being terribly poor Christians in Ethiopia might have something to do with my lifestyle. We are tremendously defensive. And our first textual reaction is to remove the stinger out of this text at all costs.

Now, that's real dangerous. When you find yourself doing that with a text, you just best, if you want to be honest, check yourself and say, Oh, I see what I'm doing. All right, Lord, I see it.

I'm sorry. Now, let me just really be honest here with this text. Now, in my judgment, and I hope you agree, Luke records this story, verses 44 and 45, because he thinks what they did was praiseworthy.

Luke loves what this church did. And he's the inspired writer here. He did not record these verses to make fun of them.

He recorded these verses because this reflects the spirit of Jesus in loving your neighbor as you love yourself. Luke admires these people. And Luke is the one we're to key off of here because this book is in the Bible.

Luke is the inspired writer. Why is he telling us this story? Because it's a wonderful story. It's something that should excite us.

It's something that we should say, Wow, where's an expression like that at Bethlehem? What in my life corresponds to that kind of generosity, that kind of freedom from goods and possessions? And then I stepped back and I thought about Luke as I was preparing this. I said, Luke, you've really got a thing about possessions, don't you? And Luke said, I sure do. Check out my parables, for example, Luke said.

And so I got out my list of parables, which is between the Old and New Testaments and one of my new Bibles, listed the parables. And I found that Luke is the only Bible writer who told the Good Samaritan parable. Luke is the only writer who told the parable of the rich fool.

Luke is the only writer who told the parable of the great banquet to which everyone was invited and people wouldn't come because they had fields and cows and wives to tend to instead of God's banquet. Luke was the only one who told the story about the dishonest manager who used unrighteous mammon in order to make friends for himself in heaven. Luke is the only writer who told the parable of the rich man Lazarus.

And Luke looked at me and said, I got a thing about this because Jesus had a thing about this. Jesus said, a man's life does not consist in the possessions that he has in the abundance of his possessions. And Luke, more than any other biblical writer, both in his gospel and in the book of Acts, is burdened to make plain to us, you can kill yourself by holding on to possessions.

It is suicide to build bigger and bigger barns and lose your soul that night. And the antidote to that suicidal materialism is verses 44 and 45. Namely, to so love one another, to be so bonded together as a group of believers that when there is a need, what you have is felt to be not really even your own.

I cannot hold on to a luxury while my brother or sister is in need. How can I? When Jesus has taught, love your neighbor as you love yourself. Or do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

This is simply the economic free outworking of the spirit of Jesus. Fellowship is more radical for Luke than coffee and donuts. Third, what about breaking bread? Back to something a little more manageable, right? Verse 42, and they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship and to the breaking of bread.

Now, that's unpacked in verse 46. Day by day, attending the temple and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts. I do not know the answer to the question, does breaking of the bread mean the Lord's Supper? Scholars are divided.

My guess is that it does. That there's two things. There's the breaking of the bread because that sounds like Luke 24.

They recognized him in the breaking of the bread. That sounds sort of formal and like Jesus would sit there and break the loaf and then share it in a kind of symbolic way. And then this statement about partaking of food with glad and generous hearts would be what follows.

And many scholars say that what happened was that when they met, they first had a brief dedicatory or ceremonial Lord's Supper. As they broke the loaf and they shared the cup. And then, when that was over, they ate together.

And that's probably true. I can't be sure, but that looks right to me. What you can be sure of is that every day they love to be together.

And eat and be happy and generous with each other. And that just boggles my mind. It's just wonderful that the Spirit is so alive.

There's so much joy. There's so much enthusiasm about Christ and about his people that they can't wait for Sunday. They go to the temple probably.

Two, three thousand of them and meet in Solomon's colonnade and praise publicly like we'll do more of next summer. And then at night, they couldn't get enough of each other. They'd be at each other's houses, it says, and eat together.

So, a few had houses still. It's really interesting. They did have houses to go to.

So, not everybody had sold a house. And yet, perhaps somebody had sold a house. And created a fun for the poor widows.

And then they went to eat with somebody else at their house. And so, I just hope that we don't debunk coffee and donuts. I hope that we don't debunk eating together.

I said in the first service, though it's not here. I just, since they seem to never eat alone, it grieves me that probably some of you always eat alone. It ought not to be that way.

Married people and single people, old people and young people, we ought not to spend much time alone. You know that? That's what this text says to me. Christians ought not be alone very much.

Every day they were together. Not every two weeks in small group, did my duty in togetherness. Every day.

We in America are so incredibly isolated. And I'm not blaming anybody for this. We all are.

We have our little boxes we live in. Rear our kids in. Make sure every one of them have a bedroom.

And be away from each other. It's just, we live in a society that is just pulling us apart. Our cars pull us apart.

Our businesses pull us apart. The pace pulls us apart. And I don't have any solutions except to say, let's be creative.

Let's be energetic. Let's reach out. Let's look around.

Number four, what about prayers? They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and finally prayers. And I think that's unpacked in verse 47. Praising God and having favor with all the people.

Praising God and having favor with all the people. When they went to the temple, they praised God. When they met in small groups at their home and ate together every night, they praised God.

I was eating with a pastor on Wednesday. And he bemoaned lunches that he has with certain leaders, church leaders, which are two hours of straight church talk. And no Jesus.

No Jesus. And it just grieves him that there are people, and I know the kind of people he means, who come to church, work for church, and talk church incessantly, but can't even say the word Jesus. It's too intimate.

It's too feeling. It's too real. They just are church people.

They're just institutional people. They are formal people. And it's dangerous.

I mention it because these people, when they came together, praised God. When they met each other, they met God. Now, don't misunderstand me.

I'm going to try to qualify this, and then I'll go back and say it real strong again. This does not mean, as sometimes I'm heard as saying, that every togetherness has to be religious. And so you can't play games together on Thanksgiving, or do something as a family kickback.

You always got to be formal. That's just not at all what I'm saying. What I'm saying is, these people were so saturated with God, so shot through with the reality of Jesus, that when they played games, they praised God.

God was in their scattergories. You heard that game? That game will divide your family right down the middle. It's an awful game.

It's fun, but it's terrible. It just creates all kinds of animosities. Do not think that when God is present, joy and fun and relaxation can't be.

Let's just be so radically God-centered, that everything has to do with God. That we don't feel a tension in ourself between playing with our family and praying with our family. Now, the kids don't feel like, oh, now we got to pray, you know.

But rather, of course we're going to pray. We just had a great time playing together. It was a gift of God.

I believe that's the wholeness that these early Christians were experiencing. So let me just summarize quickly. I see seven things marking this early church.

One, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. We have that now in the New Testament. Two, they experienced wonders and signs.

I believe those are available to us through spiritual gifts as God blesses. Three, they were in a state of awe and wonder and fear. The stark reality of God was so great.

Four, they shared possessions as though things were not their own when another was in need. Five, they got together in big groups in the temple. Six, they got together in little groups in their homes often, every day almost it seems like.

And finally, seven, when they met each other, they met God. They prayed and they praised. Now let me just close by asking this question and trying to answer it briefly.

What made all of this work? What's the dynamic or the force that is producing such a freedom from goods, such a love of needy people, such a readiness to praise and pray? And I think the answer is verse 43, that the fear of God had come upon them. That is not a negative thing, but a kind of trembling sense of the stark, utter, shocking, present reality of the living God. They couldn't trifle with God.

He was real. He was right there. And they knew it.

And I'll tell you, when that's not true, we do start accumulating possessions. When that's not true, we don't care much anymore about needy people. When that's not true, we don't feel natural about praying in the midst of play.

But when that is true, when you sense God's reality, when He draws near and makes Himself known, and you have a trembling sense you don't trifle with this glorious, good, wise, powerful, loving God, then goods don't start to mean very much. People start to mean a lot more. Need becomes more urgent, and you want to care.

Prayer is everywhere. We're going to end the service now. And after I pray, I just want to make known to you again that if you brought into this service a burden, or if God has touched you in some way and you'd like to pray with anybody or somebody about any of those needs, some of our people will just stand along the front here and off to the sides, and they'll be identified with little badges, and just walk up to them and say, Would you pray with me about this? Let's pray.

Father in heaven, I want so much to be more like this early church myself. I long to experience your radical, real, shocking, fearful, joyful reality in my life every day, to free me from the love of possessions and to fill me with the love for people and to make me sensitive to needs and to shoot me through with the spirit of prayer and praise. And I know there are hundreds praying with me right now that this would be so in their lives.

Lord, come and do it in our church. Grant that we would be a church who doesn't just have a lot of good formal togetherness in small groups and worship times, but just massive, massive informal togetherness that folds everybody in to a loving relationship. Help us to seek the kingdom first, I pray.

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