

LOVE BY GIVING

An American missionary was traveling across Korea by train. At a busy station an old man boarded and sat across from Him. The man was Korean and he addressed the American in his native tongue. The Missionary responded in the only Korean phrase that he knew which was "I don't understand". A few minutes later the Korean tried again, but the missionary could only say "I don't understand" The Korean then tried a third question, only this time the American recognized a familiar word YESU which means JESUS.

The American pointed to himself and said YESU the Old man did the same thing with a smile of delight on His face. The Korean then unwrapped the bundle he was carrying . It was a large Korean Bible. He turned to a page and pointed to a place that he wanted the American to read.

Understanding the reference, the American man took his own Bible and counted the number of books and chapters to the place that the old man had pointed to. The old man had pointed to Mark 3:35 "Whoever does the will of God is my brother." The American searched for a suitable reply. He counted out and pointed to it in the Korean Bible. It was Psalm 133:1 "Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" The Korean man read it and smiled in agreement and for the rest of the journey, these two men, ages apart in culture were brought together in a remarkable friendship as they pointed first to one verse and then to another. Their separate Bibles had a common language of the Spirit.

Today we are continuing in our series I Love My Church. We have already looked at how love requires community and serving. Today I want to talk about the fact that love involves giving of not just our time and talents but also our treasure.

Acts 4:32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. 34 There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

1. United in Mind (vs. 32)

This passage starts here by saying that all the believers were one in heart and mind. The key word here is BELIEVERS. There was one thing that united this group together, and that was Christ. The believers were one. They were one with each other because they had believed the same message and loved the same person. Notice what it says here in verse 32;

... "all the believers were one in HEART and MIND." There was unity. They believed the same message and loved the same Lord. What does it mean to be united in MIND?

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

When we walk in the light of the truth of God's Word we can enjoy true fellowship with one another. It is our common faith which unites us. Walking in the light means walking in truth. When we are united in belief we should be united in fellowship. Unfortunately that is not always true. What we often see in the church is that, even though we are united in major issues we allow minor things to divide us. We are united in WHAT we believe, we are not always united in HOW we believe.

There once was a man who was stranded all alone on the deserted island who was rescued. His rescuers asked him what the three structures were that he had built on the island. Three buildings seemed perplexing for just one man. He said one was his house, one was his church, and one was where he used to go to church before he got his feelings hurt!

It was not like this with the early church. Remember the day of Pentecost?

Acts 2:7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs -- we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

When the Holy Spirit came it drew together people from very different nations and languages and culture. Thee things, which had divided them faded away into insignificance. They had met the Lord. They were together and they were one.

The early church was not only united in mind but also in HEART. Their faith had brought them together and now their desire was to follow Jesus Christ. The love of Jesus had created a love for Jesus and also for His church.

One of the things I love about this church is that even though we come from many different backgrounds and look very different we are all united in Jesus. It is a beautiful and powerful thing when we come together in worship, declaring our love for Jesus. It is a taste of heaven. This is what I loved most about being on the Doulos. It was what I loved about being a pastor of the church in Kuwait.

In 1988 I had the chance to teach English in Qingdao China. One day I was out with some people from our team in the local market. We were looking at this one stall to buy something. The woman at the stall was so nice. We asked to look at something and as leaned forward a cross fell out attached to the chain around her neck. She quickly tucked it back in. One of the girls on our team pulled out her own cross that she was wearing. Though we could not speak Chinese there was a moment we all smiled, understand we had just met a sister in Christ who loved the lord as much as we did.

2. United in Mission (vs. 33)

It says that the early church was not only united in heart and mind but also in mission. In other words, they were not only united in who they were but also where they were going. They had a common purpose and mission. They were all heading in the same direction.

These people were not only one in spirit, they were one in purpose. That purpose was to proclaim the good news of Jesus to everyone. It says here that the apostles were giving witness "with great power." It says further, "much grace was upon them all." They were experiencing great power and great grace.

There is nothing quite like a church that is united in purpose. Unity in terms of our direction and focus is powerful. It produces an even greater sense of community among us. It is good to be united in terms of our identity, but that has to move towards a practical unity of purpose, otherwise we will quickly become inward and introspective.

Unity has a purpose. We are a community but we have also been given a cause, a job to do. There is work that needs to be done. There is a Great Commission to be fulfilled.

We are united in who we are because of what Christ has done for us. However, unity of purpose is a choice. We are united in purpose only when we choose to walk together in love and vision. That only happens when we can see the bigger picture. It means laying aside our own kingdoms and preferences and working towards a common good. That means that all the different parts of the church need to work together.

This is one of the reasons why we decided to only do the 101-401 Discipleship course this fall. It does not mean that we do not believe in Men's Ministry or Women's Ministry or Marriage Ministry. It means that we want to make sure that we are all on the same page. It means that we all want to be moving in the same direction.

One of the ways that we can all stay on the same page is by being up to date with what is happening at the church. We have a great website that we work hard at keeping up to date. It has a ton of information on it. Over the last couple of months we have been developing a new church app for those that would prefer to have something like that. It is available now for both Android and Apple devices. With this app you can watch a sermon you might have missed and find out what the upcoming events are. It has push notifications – which means that if you are part of a group you can be informed and reminded of what is happening. There is even a prayer wall where you can post prayer requests and interact with others.

I grew up in Sarnia. We had a house near the Lake. If you go swimming in the lake, the water is not moving. The closer you get to the mouth of the St. Clair river the faster the water moves. At the most narrow point under Blue Water Bridge the water is moving very fast. That is the power of focus.

3. United in Material Needs (vs. 34-35)

This passage ends saying “There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”

Not only was the early church united in mind and mission, it was united in material needs. The truth of Christ unites us in who we are. The power of Christ unites us in what we do. But the love of Christ unites us in how we treat one another.

Notice the spontaneous expression of that unity. In order to provide for the needs of all among them, those who had possessions sold them and laid them at the apostles’ feet so that they could distribute the money to those in need. As a result, no one lacked anything. This was a spontaneous expression of what God had done in their hearts. Their unity led them to voluntarily and joyfully share with others.

This is not communism. It is not saying that everyone has to be exactly the same. God calls us to unity, not uniformity. It is saying that those who have extra should share with those that do not have anything. This is not something that can be demanded of us. It must be something that flows from within.

This does mean that you have to automatically respond to every request that is given. We have a man who comes to the church and begs for money out in the parking lot. He has been told a number of times that if he has real needs then he should come in to the church during the week and speak with our Care

Ministries Pastor. That way his need can be evaluated and he can receive help. He does not do this because he makes more money just begging. Even though he has been told to stop he continues because well meaning people continue to fuel his dependency. In the end run you are not helping that man but actually hurting him. If people ask you for money, have them come and sit down and share their need. We are able to help.

This is why we have tithes and offerings. This is why we have a Benevolent offering the end of every month. When people are faithful in giving back to God a portion of what they have received then everyone has enough.

There's a story told about a couple of guys who were discussing their approaches to giving. a. One man said, "Here's how I decide how much to give. I cash my paycheck in small bills, then I go home and draw a circle on the floor. I throw the money into the air and whatever falls into the circle is God's." b. The other guy said, "I think my way is even better. On payday, I cash my check in small bills. When I get home, I toss the money in the air, and whatever God catches he can keep.

The late Larry Burkett, a financial expert said, "If every Church member in America would increase their giving to an average of 10% (current estimates are that American Christians give less than 3%), there would be an extra \$69 billion for overseas missions and an additional \$150 billion in income for American churches." You see, the funding is already here, it's called a "tithe." The biblical word for giving 10%.

Notice that it says that they "distributed to anyone as he had need." It does not say want. There is a big difference.

I'll never forget Easter 1946. I was 14, my little sister Ocy was 12 and my older sister Darlene was 16. We lived at home with our mother, and the four of us knew what it was to do without many things. My dad had died five years before, leaving Mom with seven school kids to raise and no money.

By 1946 my older sisters were married and my brothers had left home. A month before Easter the pastor of our church announced that a special Easter offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially.

When we got home we talked about what we could do. We decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow us to save \$20 of our grocery money for the offering. Then we thought that if we kept our electric lights turned out as much as possible and didn't listen to the radio, we'd save money on that month's electric bill. Darlene got as many house and yard cleaning jobs as possible, and both of us babysat for everyone we could. For 15 cents we could buy enough cotton loops to make three pot holders to sell for \$1. We made \$20 on pot holders.

That month was one of the best of our lives. Every day we counted the money to see how much we had saved. At night we'd sit in the dark and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them. We had about 80 people in our church, so we figured that whatever amount of money we had to give, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. After all, every Sunday the pastor had reminded everyone to save for the sacrificial offering.

The day before Easter, Ocy and I walked to the grocery store and got the manager to give us three crisp \$20 bills and one \$10 bill for all our change. We ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. We had never had so much money before. That night we were so excited we could hardly sleep.

We didn't care that we wouldn't have new clothes for Easter; we had \$70 for the sacrificial offering to give to a poor family. We could hardly wait to get to church! On Sunday morning, rain was pouring. We didn't own an umbrella, and the church was over a mile from our home, but it didn't seem to matter how wet we got. Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the holes. The cardboard came apart, and her feet got wet. But we sat in church proudly. I heard some teenagers talking about the Smith girls having on their old dresses. I looked at them in their new clothes, and I felt rich.

When the sacrificial offering was taken, we were sitting on the second row from the front. Mom put in the \$10 bill, and each of us kids put in a \$20 bill. As we walked home after church, we sang all the way. At lunch Mom had a surprise for us. She had bought a dozen eggs, and we had boiled Easter eggs with our fried potatoes! Late that afternoon the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand. We asked what it was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 and seventeen \$1 bills. Mom put the money back in the envelope. We didn't talk, we just sat and stared at the floor.

We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash. We kids had such a happy life that we felt sorry for anyone who didn't have our mom as a parent and a house full of brothers and sisters and other kids visiting constantly. We thought it was fun to share silverware and see whether we got the spoon or the fork that night. We had two knives that we passed around to whoever needed them. I knew we didn't have a lot of things that other people had, but I'd never thought we were poor. That Easter day I found out we were. The minister had brought us the money for the poor family, so we must be poor.

I didn't like being poor. I looked at my dress and worn-out shoes and felt so ashamed, I didn't even want to go back to church. Everyone there probably already knew we were poor! I thought about school. I was in the ninth grade and at the top of my class of over 100 students. I wondered if the kids at school knew that we were poor. I decided that I could quit school since I had finished the eighth grade. That was all the law required at that time. We sat in silence for a long time. Then it got dark, and we went to bed.

All that week we girls went to school and came home, and no one talked much. Finally on Saturday Mom asked us what we wanted to do with the money.

What did poor people do with money? We didn't know. We had never known we were poor. We didn't want to go to church on Sunday but Mom said we had to. Although it was a sunny day we didn't talk on the way. Mom started to sing but no one joined in and she only sang one verse. At church we had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun-dried bricks, but they needed money to buy roofs. He said \$100 would put a roof on a church. The minister said, "Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?" We looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week. Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope.

She passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me, and I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering. When the offering was counted, the minister announced that it was a little over \$100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our small church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church." Suddenly it struck us! We had given \$87 of that "little over \$100." We were the rich family in the church! Hadn't the missionary said so? From that day on I've never been poor again.