

Acts 4:32 - 37

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[0 : 00] Lord, we worship you. Lord, you are our hope. You are our peace. You are our firm foundation, Lord Jesus. We rest on you, Lord, our cornerstone.

Lord, we want to pray with you. Bless us, Lord, as we hear from your word, Lord, this morning. Bless Rob, Lord, as he comes to lead us in this, Lord. Come, stir him, Lord Jesus. Come, fill him afresh. Fill us afresh, Lord, as a church. Open our hearts, Lord, to hear what you want to do this morning. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Good morning, everybody. Just in case some of you don't know me, my name is Rob, part of the leadership team here. And this morning, we're going to be looking at the next part in our series of the book of Acts. And this morning, we're looking at sharing and giving, sharing and giving. So let's just read Acts chapter 4, verses 32 to 37. And the title in the NIV is The Believers Share Their Possessions. So from verse 32, chapter 4, verse 32.

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.

[1 : 30] And God's grace was so powerful at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. 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.

So good, isn't it, to have this passage, which shows us how the early church really supported and helped each other.

Selling things such as land or houses, placing proceeds at the apostles' feet, knowing that the money from the sales would be given to those who needed it.

So what is God's desire for people, for his people? I think there are three things that I believe God would like us to consider this morning.

Firstly, God wants to remind us of the behaviour in the early church, so that we can also participate fully in sharing and giving. And God wants to encourage his people to help us with the same attitude of the early church.

[2 : 56] And God encourages us to really take giving to heart, so that what he desires becomes a part of us. It's not just something which is placed on our hearts just for it to be there, but it's there for us to move and to act on.

I don't know about you, but when we were growing up, we probably all learned a lot about giving and being generous. And most of what I learned about giving as a child was positive and helpful. I was taught to save some rather than spend all the money I received. I was taught not to eat the last piece of cake without asking.

I was taught not to be selfish or greedy. I probably failed at most of those. But sharing was one of our family values we had as we were growing up.

And I was blessed by that. We need to make sure that our understanding of giving is based on what we learn from God, not just from our families. When we consider giving, perhaps we trust God, or maybe we depend on what we have learned from our upbringing, or even how we see others behaving.

[4 : 09] But we need to ensure that we live our lives the way that God intends. So we need to ask God what he desires. Learn from him so we can be generous in sharing and giving.

When Clem and I had been married about eight years, we were renting a housing association property. And then we began to consider purchasing our first house.

It was about 1990. We found a small two-bedroom house, which seemed ideal, and it was close to where we were working. But we needed to put together a deposit.

And so we were attempting to get this deposit right, and suddenly interest rates began to soar. I don't know whether many of you remember that. And in the end, they reached 15%. And we were praying about the purchase of this house and looking at how we could manage. And we just felt there's no way we could actually do this anymore at the moment. We couldn't continue with the purchase.

[5 : 04] But we kept seeking and praying to God and asking God what he desired. And then one day, my father, my dad, just turned up on our doorstep. He came in and then said he would like to give us a gift.

And he had a large envelope with him. Yeah, it's funny. He gave it to us, and it contained the money that we would need for our deposit. Now, that episode taught us a lot about God's provision. But also, more than that, making sure that we also learn to always be generous to God and to others. And sometimes our pride can get in the way, and it prevents us from understanding how God blesses us in difficult times.

I'll give you another instance of that. When I lived on my own in a small village in the middle of the Congo, robbers were passing through, and they broke into my little bungalow I had there while I was out, stole a lot of my clothes and shoes.

I was pretty shocked, but I thought, I can manage okay with the few things I had left and be able to replace them gradually. But the next day, a man who was quite poor and who lived in the village, he came by, knocked on my door, and he said, I want to give you my shirt.

[6 : 20] I was really worried because I felt he can't afford to give away a shirt. So I politely refused. He seemed really puzzled and very upset as he left.

The next day, there was a knock on my door, and it was the head teacher of the school, who was Congolese, and he spoke to me, and in no uncertain terms gave me a lecture for refusing a gift. He explained that by refusing this shirt, I'd insulted the man, as in the Congolese culture, it was very rude to refuse a gift, and I had offended him. More than that, I had prevented him from giving as God was telling him to.

So I had to apologise and accept the gift graciously, because it was a gift from God, not just from a person, and I was wrong.

So I learned an important lesson. We should never refuse help or support, which stops others from being generous in the Lord, and we need to continue to be humble.

[7 : 26] I learned a bit more about listening to what God was wanting and not trying to deal with things in my way. So sharing our money and sharing our possessions, God doesn't make that compulsory.

It's not a law. And if you look at the early church, many people have suggested that the early church was like a communist community. They've missed the point. They've really missed the point. They really don't understand how God works. God isn't about politics and socialism and communism. He is about how we follow Jesus' teaching, how we make sure we are learning to be obedient to him.

If we are generous towards God, generous towards our brothers and sisters in Christ, then we can support each other properly. We can encourage each other.

And by our different lifestyle, we can be a tremendous witness to those around us who don't know the Lord. 2 Corinthians chapter 9, Paul says, Remember this.

[8 : 31] Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your hearts to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

I'm going to embarrass Sian now. Food Bank is a great example of this. And Sian, on all those who help, do a brilliant job, and they reach out to many people who need help, but it also bears witness to many others we don't really know about.

And the other day in the village, I was walking along the road, walking the dog, and someone drove past me in our village and just wound down the window and called me over by name. I didn't recognise the car at first.

And then she started to tell me how impressed she was with Sian and the team, because she had delivered food for the Food Bank, and she was so pleased that they would actually be able to use that food to support others, and that they were working in such a way where it really reached out to people around them.

She was really excited that the Food Bank was so helpful. And Food Bank is practical. It is God's desire, and it's also a wonderful witness to those in need, for those in need, and also to those who give generously.

[9 : 53] It's one of many things we do in outreach that is really successful, and I think when we look at our church, we look at what God is doing in Harvest Church, we see that he is moving, and he is moving through many of the things that we do in terms of the outreach work.

So we need to keep praying, praying that all of the outreach work we do not only supports people physically, but also speaks to them of God's support for them, of God's help for them, so people will be encouraged to seek him.

So God is encouraging us to live our lives as Jesus taught his disciples. So we're going to look now just at Luke 21, verses 1 to 4. The widow's mite. Probably a story that most know very well.

But sometimes we know things so well that we actually miss some of the really important things that are there. This is what it says. Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury.

Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, Jesus said to them, Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury.

[11 : 09] For they have all contributed for them from their surplus wealth. But she from her poverty has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood. This is a wonderful episode about giving, isn't it?

It really encourages us. Jesus recognised the rich people's wealth, but he also recognised the widow's behaviour straight away. Here was a widow who probably had very little of her own, living her life from day to day, trying to make ends meet.

Probably she often went without food, and yet she gave the two small coins she had. Wasn't a great sum, but she was determined to give all that she had.

What a godly woman. Wasn't about how much she could give, or even how much this might cause her to struggle.

She wasn't interested in how others were giving, or how much they were giving. Perhaps she felt bad that she could not give more. She was simply trusting God, and being faithful to him by giving what she had.

[12 : 18] She lived as if everything she had belonged to God. She didn't think of it as her own money. It was God's money, and she gave from her heart.

And isn't it interesting that Jesus made sure that the disciples realised she had given all she had. Why was that? So they would remember the lesson on giving, and would be able to live their lives in the same way, and teach others how to be generous in their giving.

And I'm sure that this was the basis of the disciples' behaviour in the early church. Being obedient to God in their giving, and honouring God. I'm always thankful, actually, for how much people give here in Harvest Church.

This is one of the true blessings that we have as a church, that people are always ready to give generously. And we need to continue to consider prayerfully what is God saying to us about giving? It's not what others say, or what others do, so that people can... It's God that is saying to us what God is saying to us about giving. So that people can continue to be blessed, so that God's work is never restricted.

[13 : 44] Get that in a second. So God is encouraging us to make a place for giving in our hearts. His desire is for generosity to continue to be a wonderful part of who we are.

We need to consider how we can ensure that generosity has become a mainstay in our relationship with the Lord. It mustn't just be an add-on.

We've seen how Jesus saw it as an essential part of who we are as his followers. It's not only for some, it's for each of us to prayerfully consider the way that we live our lives, the way that we receive from the Lord, the way that we can give.

So what else does Jesus teach us about giving? Luke chapter 6, verses 30 to 34, Jesus says, give to everyone who asks you. And if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.

Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?

[14 : 56] Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect

repayment, what credit is that to you?

Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, lend to them without expecting to get anything back. And then your reward will be great.

Be merciful just as your Father is merciful. God knows our hearts. He doesn't tell us how much we should give, but we need to remember that God himself is amazingly generous towards us.

And he always provides for us. We never need to worry. We need to listen to what God says and then we need to pray about our giving so we can be faithful to him.

So as most of you will know, this week is our gift week which starts today. Our giving is an essential and wonderful part of what we do and it does benefit so many different people.

[16:00] So as a church this week, we want to ensure that we support those who need our help. And this week, we'll be allocating almost a third of our giving for those who need our help.

and half of that will go to the Caring Fund and half to our support for international mission. And the rest of our giving this season is being used to make significant alterations to our building to help us to cope with the growth of our church.

So let's just consider our part in giving. we should remember how Jesus was obedient to his Father and gave everything on the cross. The ultimate sacrifice.

Nothing held back. Suffering unto death in order that each of us could be saved. No regrets. No argument. Jesus was prepared for whatever it would take to pay for our sins on the cross and he remained perfect throughout.

He didn't consider the cost. He was ready to give everything so that he could be obedient to his Father. So we should always be ready, shouldn't we, to give more of ourselves on God's behalf.

[17:19] It isn't just about giving financially. It's about giving ourselves to the Lord unconditionally. Listening to his voice. Responding faithfully to what he's saying to us.

We need to ensure that we honour God day by day. We always need to be ready to share his word with others. Share what we have with others as God speaks to us.

Share our time. Share our prayers. Our lives. Our money. Our possessions. Our successes. Our failures.

Our strengths. Our weaknesses. The wonderful thing is that the Lord wants to continue to transform us into the people he wants us to be.

I find that really exciting. He never stops working our lives because he wants to continue to transform each one of us day by day. So let's just consider for a moment the changes we may need to be willing to make in order to be a faithful servant.

[18:25] Let's just finish with a few verses from Timothy. Timothy reminds us of the need to avoid letting love and money cause us problems. As for some it causes them to wander from the faith.

Sorry. Don't worry. I'll come back in a second I think. But godliness with contentment is great gain Timothy says for we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it.

But if we have food and clothing we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. And then Timothy says this but you man of God flee from all this and pursue righteousness godliness faith love endurance and gentleness. So let's just take those wonderful words to heart as we consider our giving this week. I'm just going to pray and then Sean will be taking over.

[19:46] Let's just pray. Father God we thank you for the way in which you are so faithful and so generous to us. You've given us so much and we just want to thank you and give thanks to you every day Lord for the way in which you help us you strengthen us you look after us you bestow good gifts to us you demonstrate your love to us and Father we thank you for that.

Lord help us to be faithful to you help us to be people who are ready to serve you Lord in whatever you ask. Help us Lord to hear your voice and know what you're saying to us so that we can be faithful to you.

Lord continue to encourage us we'll continue to change our hearts Lord so that we can be more like you Lord continue to help us to serve you to serve you well to listen to consider and to obey so that we can always be obedient to you in Jesus name we pray Amen Amen to you Sean Thank you Rob Thank you for