

FOLLOW: LESSON THREE (Leaders Guide)

Loving One Another Sacrificially

BIBLE CONVERSATION

Read Acts 4:23-36

- 1) Context: Look briefly at Chapter 4:1-22 to set the scene. What has just happened to Peter and John? What is the larger context in Acts as a whole?**

Peter and John have just been arrested, imprisoned, and interrogated by the Sanhedrin, who have commanded them and threatened them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. This panic on the part of the Jewish ruling council is a direct result of the droves of individuals who are coming to faith as a result of the first gospel messages preached by the apostles. It is a time of unrest and insecurity. It is also the first moment that the apostles are coming face to face with the persecution and opposition that Jesus assured them would come to pass. It is a critical juncture for the apostles. Will they continue on their mission, or will they tuck tail and run away, as they did when Jesus was hauled off and crucified? What happens in response to these threats will set the tone for the early church.

- 2) When Peter and John are released, their first action is to rejoin their community of believers and share what has happened. How is this sharing, by itself, a display of Christian love? Discuss the value of authenticity and vulnerability in developing a loving community. Then consider how this truth applies to our RBC community. What are some barriers that prevent believers from truly being open with one another about their needs and struggles? How might those barriers be overcome?**

Far too often, believers try to be ‘lone rangers’ – perhaps not on purpose, but simply because they fear the response they may receive if they actually share their honest concerns and fears. The apostles had no such qualms. They knew it was critical to be “real” with their brothers and sisters in the faith. They did not pretend that everything was “fine” or that life was going to be all smooth sailing. They were willing to admit that they had fears just like anyone else, and were humble enough to ask for support from their authentic community.

There is much also to be learned from the response of the other believers to whom Peter and John reported the news. They did not dismiss or make light of the difficulties which faced the apostles, but they also did not simply try to offer their own “advice.” The Scripture records that their first response after hearing the news was to pray. We can learn from this example as well. It may often be better to simply fall on our knees before the Lord when a brother or sister brings a concern to us, instead of attempting to solve the problem with our own knowledge. It is never a bad idea to humbly acknowledge that we do not have all the answers, but God does. He is our strength and our sufficiency, and we would be wise to recognize our dependence on Him at all times.

- 3) Imagine the emotions of the believers after hearing the threats from the religious leaders, then examine their prayer in verses 24-30. How did the believer’s prayer show their love for**

God and for one another? How did it reflect the heart they had for the gospel mission? Then think about the needs around you in the body at RBC. How could you be praying for brothers and sisters in the way the early church did?

It would've been very easy for the believers to pray for the safety of their brothers in Christ. Human nature is most often to ask for the removal of trials or difficult circumstances. But that is not how the early church prayed in this scenario. They began by declaring God's character (as it was revealed to them in the Old Testament Scriptures). It is always a good idea for us to meditate on who God is, because a true understanding of His character helps us to view circumstances from His perspective (or at least to see how He is at work in those situations).

Next, the believers continue to meditate on the Scripture from Psalm 2 (which is quoted here in Acts). They recognize that what happened to Jesus had been foretold through the words of King David, and that it had been planned from eternity past by the sovereign will of God. They come to the conclusion that none of this (including the threats they currently face) is a surprise to the Father – in fact, He has predestined the events to occur.

Finally, the believers build upon that truth of God's infinite plan and power, and they make request – not for the trial to be removed, but for the grace to speak boldly in the face of those threats, and for God to display His power in signs and wonders.

We too can bow before the throne of God and admit that all of our circumstances are from His hand. We also can meditate upon the truths of His character and soak in the promises that He has made to us in Scripture. We have the opportunity to pray for grace and strength, just as these believers did – both for ourselves and for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

4) Verse 32 says that the believers were of “one heart and soul.” Consider the depth of that statement. Why is this type of unity a unique feature of communities of believers? Who is responsible for that deep fellowship? How does such inward love show itself outwardly?

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is perhaps the most defining characteristic of a genuine believer. His presence in our lives unites us in a way that is simply impossible for the unbelieving world. For all the differences in personality, background, life experiences, jobs, relationships, and so many other things, the core of our being is the same – the Spirit of God. Paul writes to the Ephesians that they are to keep the “unity of the Spirit” because there is “one body and one Spirit” for all who are in Christ.

Just because we share the Spirit does not mean that it will always be easy to love one another (in Paul's words to Ephesus, he says to “make every effort” to keep that unity – it's not a passive process!). It does mean, however, that we have a point of common ground – the most important piece of common ground that there can be – we are all sinners saved by the grace of God and sealed by His Spirit. That Spirit can lead us to love one another as Christ loved us – in a way that is self-sacrificial and perhaps not even what we “want” to do. As we yield ourselves to His leading, we can display that kind of love to our brothers and sisters, because Christ first loved us.

- 5) **The Word says that no one claimed his possessions as his own, but rather that they were common property. In Jewish culture, inheritance meant everything, so selling property to support others (see v. 35) was an incredible sacrifice. What would motivate these believers to act in such a manner? How would these sacrificial actions affect the relationships within that community? Next, apply this principle to your own life. What tasks of service could you perform in our local body to demonstrate you are willing to honor others above yourself (as Jesus did)? Ask God if there is anything (time, talent, treasure) that He would like you to give, and to whom He would like you to give it.**

We delight in giving gifts to those whom we love. Jesus makes this point Himself, saying that even we who are evil know how to give good gifts to our children (and how much more we should expect our perfect Heavenly Father to give us good gifts as well). Clearly, the presence of the Holy Spirit has built an authentic community among the early believers – an environment in which they are willing to make sacrifices for the sake of one another. More than that, this type of forsaking of earthly possessions is a demonstration of the focus of these believers on their eternal inheritance. It is much easier to hold our possessions with an open hand if we realize that one day they will all pass away anyhow. Our true reward and treasure is in the Kingdom of God – in the life that is to come. The more we recognize that truth, the less we will cling to those things which are temporary.

It is very likely that the relationships between these early believers were only strengthened by the sacrifices that they made for one another. They knew of one another's needs (a demonstration of authentic vulnerability) and were prepared to meet those needs as prompted by the Spirit. So too, we can seek to build a community with brothers and sisters where we know their needs and can use our time, skills, and resources to meet those needs, thereby building a stronger bond within the local body of Christ.

- 6) **At first, verse 33 seems unusual, as the author notes the powerful evangelistic efforts of the apostles. Examine the context of verses 32-35, and discuss how tangible love for one another furthered the gospel-spreading efforts. Why is it that meeting needs within the body would result in the abundant grace and strong evangelism we see discussed here?**

So often, if we have concerns or worries within our own lives, it hinders us in our ministry – not because God is any less capable of using us, but simply because we are too distracted by our own problems to pay attention to the opportunities that He places before us. By contrast, if we knew that we had a community of support standing behind us to help us work through whatever struggles we may face, we could devote more of our energy to the tasks and mission God has given to us. This passage has already shown us how the believers supported one another in prayer and through sacrificial giving. Clearly, no one was left worrying where their basic needs were coming from. Thus, the apostles could do the work of spreading the gospel message that had been entrusted to them.

- 7) **Relate what you've just discussed in verse 33 to your life today. Have you ever had an experience where unbelievers took notice of the love and commitment within your circle of Christian friends? What was their reaction? How could those moments be opportunities for gospel conversations?**

Leaders, consider situations in your own Christian walk where another believer has been there to support you in a time of need – in prayer, through financial giving, through service or just offering a listening ear. Has anyone ever asked you why someone would do that for you? The world expects compensation for their service, so unbelievers often quirk their eyebrows when we help each other and receive nothing tangible in return.

Also think about ways that you can be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you. How would you explain to a curious unbeliever about the life you have in the body of Christ?