

# We Are Stewards

## Scripture

### Acts 4:32-37

<sup>32</sup>Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. <sup>33</sup>With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup>There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. <sup>35</sup>They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. <sup>36</sup>There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). <sup>37</sup>He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

*Taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.*

## Sermon

For the last month I have been preaching my sermons using scriptures from the Book of Acts. I have been preaching this particular series because I think this book is important for any church, it is important for any Christian to read through and study. By knowing what is in this book, it can help us embrace being empowered by the Holy Spirit which was given to us to help us live out our lives as Christians in this world. This book is also important because it can help us determine ways in which we will engage the world as Christians. The Books of Acts is the story of how the Holy Spirit equipped and directed the early church in how to come together as the body of Christ but also how to reach out into the world and share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today's text is the first time the Book of Acts begins letting us see how this young community of faith began to unfold.

[Read Acts 4:32-37]

In our text this morning, we are taken to the point in the life of the early church where it was just in its infancy and was quickly gaining momentum. The Apostles had begun proclaiming the gospel message, and many Jews were beginning to believe in Jesus. While proclaiming the message, the apostles began to experience some persecution from the Jewish leaders, but it was not really significant to this point.

As the faith community began to grow, many of the believers came to see money and material things differently than the rest of the world. Just as it is in most societies, possessions were an important symbol of power. But the Holy Spirit began transforming these believers' way of looking at the world. These early believers began to understand that how possessions were used provided important social markers about the nature of human relations within particular groups, whether it was in families or churches. They began to see that the value we humans place on private ownership, not only on what we purchase but the motives for acquiring particular items, is an expression of our inmost and utmost loyalties. Instead of living like the rest of the world was, striving for more power and more possessions, the Holy Spirit began showing these believers that God wanted to encourage the formation of a community in which the manner it handles its wealth exemplified friendship and spiritual maturity.

Because of this transformation, these early disciples began to understand that in reality, all they had was because of God in the first place. Since God had blessed them with what they had, they began to feel that their possession should really be available to the rest of the community of faith too. They came to the realization that God had made them stewards of what they had been given, or in other words God was asking them to look after and take care of God's possessions which He had given them. Because of this, instead of everyone holding tightly onto what they thought was their individual possessions and claiming them as their own, they began to see that these things should be held in common by the community of believers. What we see in this early Christian community is that their fellowship included material goods, and that they recognized it was the responsibility of wealthier believers to share with other believers who were in need. The sense of oneness was so great that no selfish hesitation kept anyone from reaching out to meet another's need.

Our scripture today shows us that some of these believers who owned homes and land sold them and brought everything they earned from those sales to give to the disciples to distribute amongst the believers. And because of this practice, everyone had access to what they needed and “There was not a needy person among them” (4:34).

This practice of selling one’s possession in order to give money to those in need showed the believers’ willingness to help other believers. We must take note that not everyone in the community was liquidating everything, nor was there pressure to do so. The sharing of possessions was voluntary (cf. 5:4) rather than required. This was a freewill offering.

What is amazing about all this is that the people of this community were so suddenly drawn together from every class of society, it is certainly remarkable, that they were “of one heart and of one mind.” But the most signal proof of the power of the gospel among them was the almost entire subsidence of selfishness. Among the heathen nations of antiquity, systematic provision of the needs of the poor was unknown. Even among the Jews, whose law was watchful for the welfare of the poor in many respects, those who got into a lot of debt were sold into temporary slavery in order to pay off their debts. It was, therefore, a new thing, to see a large community selling houses and lands to supply the needs of the poor.

Now there may be some people out there that say, “This sure sounds like communism to me.” It is definitely not! The way of living we see in today’s scripture is different from communism because the sharing was voluntary. It did not involve all private property but only as much as was needed. No one lost control of his or her own possessions. Plus, it was not a membership requirement in order to be a part of the church. This way of living showed that each Christian cared more about other persons than material possessions, and this spiritual unity and generosity attracted others to them.

So what does this scripture say to us today? Should each of us go out and sell everything we have and turn it over to the church? I do not believe this scripture sets this up as an eternal model for all to follow, but it is a model of what our concern for the needy should be. It does show us that Christians serve God by loving to accomplish His purposes. Gifts to meet needs of fellow Christians, build places of worship, support the work of the church, and extend missionary efforts are ways in which we can serve Christ through the use of our money.

So if this is not the biblical example of giving for us, what is? The tithe is the clearest Biblical standard for our stewardship to God – but there are many times God calls particular people to give much more than that. A tithe is one tenth of our earnings, and according to scripture, this included everything earned, including livestock and produce, not just monetary income. Offerings and gifts are over and beyond a tithe. They are something optional.

One of the struggles for us humans who live in a world of consumerism is many people now expect something when they give to the church. They expect a great preacher, they expect good programs at the church, they expect moving worship services, they expect all of their wants to be met, and sometimes they expect their way, and they will quit giving when they feel these “requirements” are not being met. What spiritually mature Christians understand is that we should not expect anything from our tithe. We should see our tithe as our contribution to God’s work in this world and should understand that God will do great things with it. It may be used

for something that we may personally benefit from or it may be used to benefit others. I believe that those who expect something out of their tithe are giving to the church for the wrong reason, and they most likely will withdraw their tithe when things are not going the way they feel they should.

I will tell you I was personally raised on the tithe. My mother and father taught me and was an example for me from the time I could talk until the moment I left home that tithing to the church was not an option. I was raised understanding that tithing was part of my duty as a Christian. I was taught that the first thing I did with what I had earned was to give my tithe to the church. It was to always come first, above everything else. Ever since I had a paying job, starting out 33 years ago working as a soda jerk in a local Drug Store (1985), the first thing out of my paycheck was my tithe. I was also taught that the tithe did not only come out of money that I earned, but also should include special gifts that I received. When I received money as a gift, like a Christmas or Birthday present, part of it was always given to the church. Even when my family went through some financially difficult times, we as a family still tithed to the church. For me tithing is an important part of my faith in Christ. I truly believe that because my family and I have done this all our lives, we have been blessed financially. Please do not get me wrong, there have been some rough times, we have not always been able to do things we wanted to do, but our true needs have always been met. I would like to give you just one example.

I would say that I come from probably a lower-middle class family. My dad worked a lower paying job as an underwriter for an insurance company. My mom stayed at home until both my brother and I were in high school, then she worked as a secretary. So throughout my life, we never had many luxuries, like cable TV or fancy new cars or even touch-tone phones in the house. When both my brother and I were in college at Auburn, my dad was laid off from his job for over a year. Here was my brother and I, going to an out-of-state college, and my parents, who had been paying for a lot of our college expenses, all living on a secretary's salary. But everything ended up being OK. Both my brother and I were in the co-operative education program and had been given two really good paying jobs. Both of these jobs allowed us to stay at home when we worked, which allowed us to save even more money. This ended up helping to pay for most of school, but not all of it. We were also paying in-state tuition for our schooling because of a loop-hole my dad discovered that Auburn had in its guidelines for what it considered as an in-state student. And we both were living in really inexpensive, but not decrepit, housing when we were in Auburn. Because of the situation of my dad being laid off, you would probably expect that both my brother and I would have some substantial student loans. But, we both graduated without a single loan to pay back. I truly believe God blessed my family through all this because of our constant good stewardship of the resources God had given us and what we have returned to God. I have continued to see how God still blesses us today as my new family still tries to be good stewards of what we have been given.

The early Christians sacrificed a lot for their community of faith. What we have to understand is that stewardship is measured by the sacrifice we make, not by the total amount we give. So someone who gives a million dollars to the church, but has millions more, is not seen as better than someone who gives \$1000 and works at a minimum wage paying job. What our scripture today from the book of Acts shows us is Christian stewardship involves sacrificial giving which counts the needs of the church and others rather than the availability of resources for our own personal use. But stewardship is not just about the church having the funds to sustain and

expand its ministries. It is also a key lesson in discipleship, instilling the value of giving as an ongoing and essential part of the Christian lifestyle.

The early Christians in the community of faith in our scripture today were seen as generous and filled with compassion. Because of this, the Christian church grew by leaps and bounds. How many people do you think would choose words like “generous” and “compassionate” and “sacrificial” if asked about Bible-believing Christians today? According to recent studies, the answer is: almost none.

The reality for us is that data shows that in the past forty years, as American Christians have grown wealthier and wealthier, their debt has grown larger and larger, and their giving smaller and smaller. Studies have shown that Christians today give less percent per capita than they did during the Great Depression. When we have more, and give less, than ever before, something is amiss in our hearts, and in the vision of gospel living that animates our churches.

What we must come to realize like the early church did is that we were created in the image of a self-giving God. God did not need us, but our very creation – the creation of all things – was an act of overflowing generosity. We do not deserve anything. The fact that we have a single moment of life, the fact that we have breath, and food, and families, is because God is generous. And God is so extravagantly generous that He not only gives us being and sustains us in being, He not only gives us lives and homes and families and jobs, but He even gave us Himself in Jesus Christ, and gave us salvation on the cross and new life in the empty tomb.

What we also have to see is that generosity is not something we can choose or choose not to do. It is who we are, who we are created to be. God gave us to ourselves so that we could give ourselves to one another. God gave himself to us in Christ, so that we could give Christ in us to others. Generosity, in other words, is at the heart of our creation, our salvation, and our purpose.

Today, I would like to challenge each of you to examine your ideas on stewardship of all God has blessed you with. How do you see your possession? Do you have an attitude that everything we have belongs to God (Psalm 24:1), comes from God (James 1:17), and is to be used for his glory? Or do you see everything as yours.

Are you returning some of what you have been blessed with to God’s church? Are you tithing, which is the Biblical example, or are you giving out of what is left over at the end of the month? And if you are already tithing, are you willing to let God show you some ways that you can give just a little more, even if you are tithing?

Maybe you are saying, “I just cannot afford to go to the tithe all at once.” That is OK. 10% can be a good chunk of your income if you are not used to it, but you can at least start working towards it by taking small steps. Each month or each year give just a little more than what you are already giving. If all our active families gave just \$10 more a week, the church’s offering would increase by over \$82,000 dollars in one year. Just \$10. That is about one-half or one-third the cost of one good meal at a restaurant. Can you imagine what mission projects we could do, the ministries we could start, or the people we could help with \$82,000? Each little step counts, and through prayer and a little work, you can make it to the point where God would like you to be in your stewardship.

While the Bible tells us we are to be generous, we also have to be careful, we have to be good stewards with what God has blessed us with. It is unfortunate, but there are people in our world who will try and take advantage of our generosity. I can tell you personally, I have seen it in small town churches as much as I have in large city churches. Not all people who ask for help are truly in need, and there will be some people who will try to take advantage of generous people due to greed or laziness.

Even though the Bible commands us to be generous, we are not called to give all we have, or become poor or needy ourselves in the process. If someone asks us to do something that could harm our own financial health, we should deny that request in a loving way. If someone asks for help so they can continue in their sin, we should deny their request. We are not commanded to be accomplices to slothfulness and laziness and sin. We are not commanded to be accomplices to help drug seekers. We are not commanded to lather people in riches either. The command we have been given is if we see a Christian brother or sister or even an enemy in NEED, not WANT, but NEED we should find a way to help them.

That means we must use discernment in our generosity and be cautious about our giving. The Bible calls us to be good stewards of our resources, and if we overspend or help so many people that we become poor ourselves, that can even possibly lead us into sin. What I have found is, if you are constantly looking to God, if you are trying to be a generous person, if you are trying to be a good steward with what God has blessed you with, the Holy Spirit will move you and let you know when you should give and when you should not.

My prayer is that Varnell UMC's reputation in this community as a church that is filled with compassion and generosity will continue to grow because each person uses the gifts, talents and resources given to us to serve the Church and others.

## Sources Used

*Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles*; Beverly Roberts Gaventa; © 2003 by Abingdon Press; Nashville, TN.

*The Bible Reader's Companion*; © 2004 Cook Communications Ministries; Database © 2007 WORDsearch Corp.

*A Commentary on Acts of the Apostles*; J. W. McGarvey; © 1872 by Transylvania Printing and Publishing Co.; Lexington, KY.

*Disciple's Study Bible*; © 1988 Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN; Database © 2012 WORDsearch Corp.

*Interpreter's One Volume Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles*; William Baird; © 2010 Abingdon Press; Nashville, TN.

*Life Application Bible Commentary: Acts*; © 1999 by The Livingstone Corporation/Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.; Wheaton, Illinois; Database © 2004 WORDsearch Corp.

*New Interpreters Bible, Volume X*; © 2002 Abingdon Press; Nashville, TN.

*Reimagining Generosity: Reshaping the Conversation on Stewardship, Giving & Generosity*; article by Jack Alexander on MinistryMatters.com posted on April 28th, 2014.

*Stewardship Options: Why Do I Give?*; article on MinistryMatters.com posted on July 15th, 2013.

*The Teacher's Commentary*; © 1983, by Scripture Press Publications, Inc.; Database © 2007 WORDsearch, Inc.