

BECOMING AN ATTRACTIVE COMMUNITY ORIGINS SERIES PART 1 - THE WAY CHURCH SHOULD BE Ben Rudolph

Good morning Life Fellowship. It is so good to be here with you this morning. I know that one of the things we announced was about the Life Mooresville Church Plant Interest Meeting. And one of the things that we are really trying to do is make sure that we have prayer that this church plant is birthed in prayer. And so if you have a Contact Card in front of you, and you want to be on the prayer team, we are looking for more people. We are asking for seven hundred people to join us in our prayer journey for the Life Mooresville Church Plant.

Now we did not get this idea from the Seven Hundred Club, I am just letting you know that right now. The seven hundred represents the seventy thousand lost people that are in Mooresville right now. And what we want to do is be a church that makes an impact in lost-ness. And so we are asking for seven hundred people to represent at least one percent of the lost people in Mooresville. So if you would like to join us in our prayer team, please fill out the Contact Card with your name, your email address, and note that you want to be a part of the prayer team. And we will make sure that you are added onto it.

Now let's turn in our Bibles to Acts Chapter 4 where we are going to be this morning. This is kind of sad for me because it is the last week in our first section of sermon series for the book of Acts, and I know we are going to be taking a six week break for mission emphasis and then our Easter series.

I always love the book of Acts because it is about what we call this series, 'The Way Church Should Be. And every single week as we approach God's Word, and as we read what is going on in Scripture, we should be confronted. We should be confronted as a church today, and we should be asking ourselves if our church is matching up to what God created for the church in the book of Acts. So there is always this tension we feel when we read it, and as we wonder how we can become more like this church, how do we become more spirit filled, how do we become a church that lives like this?

So let's look in Chapter 4 and verses 32 through 37. Here is another summary statement. We have the first summary statement after Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes in Acts Chapter 2, where it talks about all the activities of this supernatural church that God is creating. And now we have the next summary statement at the end of Chapter 4. Look how Luke responds and what the Holy Spirit is doing.

“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

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“There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

I don’t know about you, but when I read that I realize it is the kind of church that I want to be a part of, and to be able to see those kinds of things transpire. I read it and there is this sense of generosity that is going on, there is a sense of sacrifice going on. And when I read it and I picture it in my mind I know that is what I want to be a part of. But here is the reality - when you see something really good that you want to be a part of, the question you have to ask yourself is - am I willing to make that happen? Am I willing to make the sacrifice and be generous enough to make this happen?

And the reason why I called this sermon, ‘Becoming an Attractive Community,’ is because I think when the church is living like this, when the church is sacrificing and being generous like the one here in Acts, this is one of the most attractive things in the world to people. And the reason I use the word ‘attractive’ is because most of us when we think about church being attractive we think about what happens in this room for a couple of hours once a week. And that is good, I am not knocking that.

I grew up in church because my dad was in full time ministry. And much of the time there was an old man behind a giant wooden podium and we were singing out of a hymnbook. And there is nothing wrong with that, but things have changed, have they not? So some of the things that we have changed make the church seem more appealing and more relevant, and there is nothing wrong with that, as long as relevance is not the number one ethic.

But here is the thing that I think we cannot forget - we as a church are not going to be attractive merely by what we do in here - we become an attractive church by what we do out in the community. And we have to live in a way that we are sacrificing and being generous towards one another so that the community looks at us, they see that we are different, and that is what they want.

We live in Lake Norman and that means we live in a very wealthy area. Let’s be honest, in Lake Norman culture a lot of people’s resources, their time and their money is their idol. And in a culture where money and possessions are ultimate there is nothing more attractive, I believe, than to be a part of a community where it is not.

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So we are going to talk a little bit about money this morning. And I didn't hear any 'amens' in the first service and I didn't hear any just now either, okay? But we are going to talk a little bit about money this morning. And as we talk about generosity I think the reason why this is so important is because even non-believers, even people who don't follow Jesus, believe that generosity is a good thing. So if the world at large believes that generosity is a good thing, we as believers need to be the ones who are modeling it best.

As we look at generosity this morning we are going to look at the model of generosity, the motive for generosity and then the momentum of generosity - the model, the motive and the momentum of generosity. Let's look at the model of generosity first. We see this in verse 32 and in verse 34. ***"Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul."***

Let me just stop right there. When it says that it should trigger something in our minds, because in John Chapter 17, one of the things that Jesus prayed for was that His church, His followers would be one. So what we are seeing here is the fulfillment of what Jesus prayed for actually happening. They were of one heart and one soul. ***"And no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."***

What is going on here is not in a vacuum. One of the things again as we read about the early church is, it is supposed to trigger our minds back to the Old Testament when God created the nation of Israel. He meets them at Mount Sinai in Exodus and He calls them to be a new covenant people that would represent Him to the world. They were to be His shining light for the nations.

So He gave them laws as to how He wanted the communities to look like. And when you read what the community of God was supposed to look like in the Old Testament, the church in Acts was also to look like that. If you go back and read Deuteronomy Chapter 15 you will see how the generosity of the entire community was to take place. They were supposed to bless the widows, the orphans, the people who were poor, and the foreigners so that there would be no needy among them.

And what is happening here when we read it is we realize that they were doing it, God is producing what He has always wanted. And we can't do it on our own. In our own strength and in our ways we cannot do this. And every single week as we come across this book of Acts we should realize that this is the kind of church we want to be a part of, this is the kind of community that we need to create.

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But we have to understand that we cannot do this on our own; it takes the Holy Spirit inside of every single one of us. Here was this model of generosity and it flowed from their sense of community. It says they were of one heart and one mind. I think one of the best ways that we can be generous is when we are aware of each other's needs. We can't do it if we are isolated. One of the big reasons why we have Life Groups and why we want everyone to be a part of a Life Group is without that you are not known. Others won't know your needs, and you will not know the needs of others. There is a reason why we have Life Groups because some of this stuff cannot happen in our Sunday morning services. It has to take place within a smaller group where people can share needs. So we see this generosity flowing out of community.

We also see two different kinds of generosity. In verse 32 you have more of an organic generosity where people were learning about needs. *'Hey, did you hear about Joe and his family. He lost his job. Let's go help them.'* *'Hey, this person needs help harvesting his crop. Let's help him get it done.'* That was the kind of thing that was going on. It was kind of an organic generosity. And that is hard for us today, because as much as we can do well about giving our money for some of us the greatest commodity that we protect is our time. We are so protective of our time.

So this was organic generosity happening here and it was a natural outflow. No one considered anything they had as belonging only to themselves. Now let me just say this before some of you get nervous - I am not talking about socialism. Luke was not trying to say that. The Greek word *drassomai* means 'to grasp, to take hold of.' But people were not saying, *'This is mine and you can't have it.'* What they were saying was, *'Everything that has been given to me I am holding with open hands.'*

And that is what a generous person does. A generous person who has everything under their authority, under their stewardship, holds it with open hands, so that when God presents an opportunity they are ready to go. So there was this organic generosity among these people.

Now let's look in verse 34 where it talks about an organized generosity. ***"There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."*** Listen, this is a tradition that was started in the early church that we carry on today. That is the reason why we collect offerings.

Now I know some of you may be new to church, or you may have had a bad taste or feeling when it comes to organized religion and the abuse of money. We have all heard or read about churches using and abusing their power and authority to prey upon

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people, and I get that. I have to be honest with you and tell you that when I was thirty years old and I had my first church, I did not do a good job of discipling our people in this area. And that was because I was too nervous to talk much about money because of the baggage that had resulted from some churches and their abuse with money. So I would go years without talking about money in my former church because I just didn't want to come across as someone who only cared about money.

But here is why this is so important - you and I make financial decisions every single day, don't we? We make decisions whether to spend, or whether not to spend, every single day. Listen, when I drive by a Starbucks, I have to make a decision whether or not to stop for a Nitro Brew or not. I have to make that decision. Now that is a small decision because that is only a five dollar decision, but it is still a decision. So we make small five dollar decisions and we make hundred dollar decisions and we make thousand dollar decisions. We make decisions all the time in life, and that is why it is important to talk about resources and finances and generosity, because the gospel is supposed to drive every single thing in our lives. God is to be Lord over all things, and He is to be Lord over every decision we make even in our finances.

So there is this organized generosity and there is this organic generosity. And here is what I would challenge us to think through. For some of us we are really good at one but it is really challenging to do the other. And we need to be looking for the little opportunities every day to bless other people. That is the organic kind. And some of us have a problem with the organized kind of generosity as we may have a lack of trust and I get that. But one of the things that we need to remember is that God is Lord over it all and we need to be obedient and trust God that He is going to take care of it.

Now it can be hard because some of us may have been burned after being generous. Maybe some of you have gone through that. You were generous and thought you were giving to a project and it was abused in a way that was not honoring to God and it left a callus on your heart toward being generous. I have been through that. I was on staff as the youth pastor at the church where Dan was the pastor when I was twenty-four years old. They had a staff of about eight pastors there, and the church was right off of Sugar Creek Road in Charlotte. We had people coming in all the time off Sugar Creek Road needing money, and the church had a policy that we didn't give out any cash, but we had a house with food and supplies that we would very generously give to those in need.

When I was first there I would feel so badly for these people who would come off the street, and so finally I became the guy who would meet with the people who would come to the church asking for help. I liked to think of myself as this nice generous

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person, but when you meet with people for a while, and you catch them in lies, and you see what they are after, after a time guess what was happening to me? I was becoming hardened toward people because I developed this skewed view that everyone was trying to put something over on me.

And I remember when the Holy Spirit started really confronting this in my life. And He said, *‘Ben, you let me be the judge of them. Here is what I want you to do, just be compassionate. You can be wise, you don’t have to give something to every single person that walks in, but be compassionate.’* And that is something you can always be and that is compassionate toward people. That is the thing I want to challenge you with. Maybe you are not ready to give, maybe you are not ready to be generous because it is hard for you, but let me just say this. Maybe your first step is just simply to be compassionate toward the needs around you, and let the Holy Spirit lead you in your giving. So that is the model. We have to be organic and we have to be organized in our generosity.

The second point of being an attractive church in generosity is the motive for generosity. Now notice I skipped over verse 33. We looked at verse 32 and verse 34, but now let’s look at verse 33. **“*And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.*”** Now here is what I find interesting about this passage and how Luke kind of puts it all together. You could take verse 33 out of this text and the flow of the narrative of what is being talked about and it would still work. Okay?

You could start reading in verse 32, skip to verse 34 and continue to the end of the chapter and the story makes sense. So what is Luke saying here? He kind of puts this little nugget of truth in here in verse 33. Well, he is saying this, that all of these things are happening. They are meeting each other’s needs, they are selling things, and they are distributing money to those who have needs. There is a rootedness to this. This is flowing from something internal; this is not just feeling bad for someone and wanting to do something about it. It wasn’t an obligation; there was something spiritual going on here.

And Luke explains what is going on here by saying the apostles had great power and great grace. And the key words that I think are found in verse 33 that Luke is trying to point out to us is these words- ‘giving testimony.’ That word ‘giving’ is the Greek word *didomi*, and that is a monetary term. It is used in a way that when people owed money to someone else they had to repay the money back. They had a debt and they had to repay it.

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So here is what I think is so fascinating. Luke was talking about generosity and money and how people were giving their possessions to be sold. And right here in this section there were a lot of things Luke could have said like, '*they were declaring the testimony of Jesus.*' He could have used a lot of words to say this but instead he uses this monetary term. Why? I think it was because he was trying to paint them a picture that everything we do is a response to the gospel. Everything we do is a response of understanding what Christ has done for us.

And here is what I think is missing in so many of our lives, and that is that our generosity and our giving is more rooted based in principle than in worship. It is more obligatory than it is spiritual. And what Luke is pointing out here is that the apostles were giving from a deep debt they owed to Christ because they had received everything from Him.

I don't think that we can be a generous people until we understand the depth of what we have received from Christ. We have received eternal life from Him. We have received hope from Him. We have received love from Him. We have received joy from Him. Listen, who you are, your gifts and abilities, is a gift from God. The opportunities, the sovereign plan that God has orchestrated in your life to meet the right people at the right time to give you the job you have, to earn the income that you do, that is something you have received from God.

I want you to take a deep breath right now and then breathe out. That breath is a gift from God. And we will have limitations on what we give if we believe that what we have is more earned than received. If we are going to be marked by generosity we must be a people who understands that Jesus paid it all. We have received an incredible gift of grace. And we can't give apart from grace. We can't be generous apart from grace. Everything that we are able to do is based on this idea of grace. So until we understand that everything we have is received we won't be able to distribute what we have in a way that honors God.

Now my wife is a great cook. We have been married for over 20 years and it wasn't always that way. When we were first married it was spaghetti every night. But she has become an amazing cook and a really good baker. And one of my favorite things my wife bakes are these peanut butter, oatmeal, chocolate chip cookies. They are so good. The problem is she only makes them for other people now. The best thing she makes and it is for someone else.

Well let's just say my wife makes some of these cookies this afternoon (and this is a big hint to Liz), and we go off on a date. So there is twelve cookies left and I leave those for my three teenage children. And I tell them, '*Hey you guys distribute these*

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twelve cookies,’ and then I pick one of the kids to be responsible for distributing them. As a parent have you ever had that issue? How do you think it is going to work out? It could be good, or it could be really bad. So let’s say I tell my oldest son, *‘Jaden, here are twelve cookies, make sure that Haley gets four and Sage gets four. Make sure that everyone gets four cookies equally distributed.’* So then let’s say my wife and I leave and when we come back we find out that Jaden has locked himself in his room and he has eaten all twelve cookies. And that is very possible for a 17 year old to do that.

So what am I going to do now? I am going to have a talk with him because here is the thing, *‘Jaden, you didn’t make those cookies, and you didn’t buy the ingredients. Everything about those cookies was given to you.’* And I think one of the things that we forget is how much we have been given. Everything good we have is a gift from God. It is His grace, grace upon us. If we are going to be a people that is marked by generosity, by the way we give, it must be rooted in our response to the gospel. When you write that check, or when you type in those numbers on that giving ap, is it rooted in the response to what Christ has done for you?

I get that it is challenging. I grew up in church. My dad was a pastor and I remember in Sunday school they would pass this little white plastic church that had a slit in the roof and you were supposed to put your little coins in there. And I was taught to give ten percent because it was drilled in my head. My dad would pay me a dollar in dimes so I would have one dime to give to the church. I was taught not to steal from God. Some of you probably grew up that way also, with that sense of not stealing from God. And there is nothing wrong with that.

But here is the thing that I want to challenge us with. For some of us it is hard to give at all, for others of us we do give but it is not out of a sense of worship and love. Rather it is out of a sense of obligation or principle. If this church is going to be marked by the Holy Spirit it means that everything we do is rooted in love, and it is a response to Jesus.

Finally, we have the momentum of generosity. And we have this picture of generosity in verses 36 and 37. ***“Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”*** I think Luke is doing something here. He is painting a picture of what happens when a culture of generosity is taking root in the body. There are some people that will go above and beyond because of the inspiration of what they see.

Now this is the first time Barnabas is introduced to us. Barnabas is going to end up being one of the main characters in the book of Acts. He is known to us as Barnabas

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but his real name is Joseph. I believe Luke is showing here where Barnabas gets his nickname , (son of encouragement.) He gets his nickname from this act of generosity. We don't know much about Barnabas, but we do know this, that whatever God was doing in his heart led him to do this. Maybe it was seeing some of the people who didn't have as much give more than he was giving percentage wise and he decided he could do more.

It says that Barnabas was a Levite. And one of the things that is interesting is if you know the Old Testament you know the Levites were the tribe of Israel that served the Lord at the temple. They were a dedicated priestly tribe. And one of the things that is interesting about them is that they were not allowed to own property. Levites were not allowed to own property. But here is a Levite who owns a huge tract of land. And maybe he just started reading Scripture, and the Word of God became alive to him, and he decided he wanted to be faithful and obedient to God. So maybe that is what was going on in Barnabas life.

Some church traditions teach that Barnabas was the rich young ruler. And remember Jesus had said to the rich young ruler, *'Sell everything that you have, give it to the poor and come follow me.'* And when that young ruler walked away it still left an impression on him. So maybe this was his story and he ended up coming back and now was selling all that he had and giving it to the poor.

Now we have no way of knowing if Barnabas was the rich young ruler, but here is what we do know. Here is a man who saw people being obedient and he wanted to be obedient as well. He was ready for God's next step. And when we start being obedient, when we start living out our faith, it becomes contagious. Things start happening. Momentum is a beautiful thing.

I am starting to see a little bit of this in our church. A couple of weeks ago we had our My Circle Training, which was to try to help our church become more effective in sharing our faith with our friends. Our One Life Initiative has been teaching us to witness to that one person close to us and far from God. We also have been praying as a church over these hundreds of people that have been identified with Our One Life Initiative. We have been praying for them daily and then sharing our faith diligently with them.

At our My Circle Training one of the things that we heard was a story about Sandy. Sandy is a woman in our church who had her One Life bracelet on for a woman in her life who was close to death. And over a few weeks as she prayed and prayed for her she finally had an opportunity to spend some time with her in the hospital. She shared Jesus with her and she accepted Christ before she passed away. Sandy shared that story here during our My Circle Training. And Terry and Jeannine are right here in the

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front row this morning and they heard Sandy's story. Jeannine's father is in the hospital so they started praying for Jeannine's dad who was far from God. And this past week Jeannine, sitting by our dad's bedside, led him to the Lord. (Applause.)

I hear these stories and I get really excited because I wonder what the next story is going to be. Is it going to be your story? Is it going to be my story? Is it going to be us being obedient to share our faith in Jesus Christ with our one person? That is momentum. We hear about God doing something and we think, *'Yeah, I want to do that too. God, I want to be the one this week that sees you do something great.'*

I think that one of the things that we do is we think money is so private. And I get that because it seems to be an American thing. But one of the things that we have to do is we have to start sharing our stories of what God is doing in our hearts with generosity. We have to start being open not only with our own needs but in the way that God is showing us how to bless other people. Sharing the stories is an opportunity that God has given us to represent Him to people far from Him. And we need to be a church where the attraction of the people is where they look at us and wonder what is going on at Life Fellowship. And that is going to require us to be open about what God is doing in our lives.

Someone after the first service this morning told me that their biggest hang up was in knowing who to give to, or how much to give. And that is a good question. Here is what I think they should do. Let the Holy Spirit guide them. Again, we are looking for rules to abide by so we can check that box off. And we need to let the Holy Spirit lead and guide us to whomever needs encouragement. We have to be willing to let the Holy Spirit guide us and shape us. And at a moment's notice we should be willing to take a left turn and do something for Him.

I was doing a funeral yesterday afternoon for a friend of mine who passed away unexpectedly. And I had prepped my sermon for the family, but thirty minutes before the service the Holy Spirit told me to do something else. And I hadn't prepared for that, but I knew that was what He wanted me to do. Do you know how scary that is? It is very scary. But I got up there and I do it and I knew it was just God speaking through me. And afterwards some told me that it was wonderful and I told them it was not me.

And I think that is what we should long for as a church body. That the Holy Spirit inside of us is working, leading us, guiding us and teaching us. And the moment He says *'Turn left,'* we turn left. And the moment He says, *'Give this,'* we give that so that we become an obedient people listening to the Holy Spirit. We stay close to Him so that when He is leading us as He was doing here in our passage, we are able to respond and be obedient.

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Now I have a couple of application questions I want to end with today. Number one is this - if you were in crisis, would you turn to the church or to your credit card? If you were in a crisis would you turn to your church community or would you turn to a credit card or some other safety net to catch you?

The second question is this - do you look at all that you have as received or as earned? Let's start putting that label 'received' on everything good in our lives. It will change the way you look at life, and it will change the way you hold onto things. It will change your heart and soul.

The third question is this - how much does the gospel influence your generosity? Listen, maybe you are sitting here this morning and you have never even received the gospel. The greatest gift that you can receive is Jesus Christ. He loves you, He shed His blood for you, He died for you and He rose again on the third day. And the riches of His love, the riches of His grace are ready for you to receive them. You don't have to work for it, you don't have to earn it; you simply have to receive it. Maybe you are sitting here this morning and you have never received the greatest gift of all that you could ever receive and that is Jesus Christ. I encourage you to do that this morning.

As we finish, I hope that we can be an attractive church. Not by how good our Sunday services are, but how well we are representing Jesus and living generously in the streets Monday through Saturday. Let's bow our heads and close our eyes.

For Barnabas, his next step was selling that field. What is your next step? What is the next step God wants you to give? What is the next step that God is working in you to take? Are we of one heart and one soul in this room this morning asking the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us? What does He want you to do? How does He want you to live?

We are going to have a number of ways that you can respond this morning. We have four stations across the room where you can partake of the Lord's Supper. If you are a member of the gospel, I encourage you to do that. Maybe you want to talk and pray with someone. Maybe you want someone to pray with you about your One Life person that God will give you boldness. We have some pastors and elders in the front here that would love to pray with you. Maybe there is some other need or burden that you have that you want someone to pray with you. Maybe you have questions about God and what it means to follow Jesus. Maybe you have questions about receiving that gift of salvation. If any of these are you, please come and meet with one of these leaders up front.

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We are having a baptismal service this morning. Maybe you have never obeyed the Lord in believer's baptism and you want to be identified with Jesus. There is room in the pool for you. Just come forward and be obedient this morning.

Father, we come before you now. We want to be a people that are ruled by Jesus, that are filled and led by your Spirit. Oh God, may we be an attractive community, not by what we do in here but by what we do out there. God, we are desperate for you. We want to be the church you want us to be. Don't let us settle for anything less. Show us what that next step is, Father. We pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

The preceding transcript was completed using raw audio recordings. As much as possible, it includes the actual words of the message with minor grammatical changes and editorial clarifications to provide context. Hebrew and Greek words are spelled using Google Translator and the actual spelling may be different in some cases.