

The Life God Gives is Made to Thrive in God's Community

Acts 2:41-47 (ESV)

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

We are in the second week of our four week series "**Next Steps.**" The point of this series is that everyone of us has a step we can take in our relationship and life with God. No one ever arrives to perfection in this life, so the goal is not to point us to a certain destination but in a certain direction.

Last week we discussed the first and foundational step of living the Christian life: Knowing God. We looked at **John 17:3** and Jesus' prayer for us and His definition of life.

And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

It's knowing God that is true, eternal life. And in knowing God, not only are we reconciled back to Him, but we are unified to one another. Jesus goes on in this prayer to pray this in **John 17:22-23**:

"The glory that you have given me I have given to them (my disciples), that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."

The Bible states at the beginning that we were created for community. In **Genesis 2**, before sin entered the world, God said it wasn't good for Adam to be alone. He then created Eve for Adam so he could have human companionship. But in **Genesis 3** Adam and Eve sinned and their shame lead them to hide from God and one another. Sin immediately went to work destroying the good in God's creative design. So, in **John 17**, Jesus is praying for our restoration back to God and to one another: an undoing of the curse of sin. Jesus wants God to save us and place us into His family: the church.

Now, this word "church" makes us all feel different things. For some of us church is this *organization* that tries to control our lives and it brings up bad memories. You've seen or read articles on the abuse of power in churches or how harmful they are...There's one right now about Willow Creek where their leaders have hidden sins for decades. The complaints are legit. But that's not the church we see in the NT.

For others, it's this *place* you've went to your whole life. Your thinking is much more aligned with a building than with any set people. But that's also not the church we see in the NT.

Here in **Acts 2**, we get a vision of the pure, unfiltered church: a community committed to one another and being changed by God. It's *this* vision that drives us to plant LifeConnection here in Northeast. For all the failures of the church and for all of its sins and heartaches; when the church is done right, when the church is the church of the Bible, there is no more beautiful picture of humanity in the world! None! Just look at these people:

- They were ethnically and economically diverse people from all over the known world, yet they formed a new community. (**2:9-11**)
- They were people who had mocked Jesus and supported His crucifixion, yet they were redeemed and forgiven. (**2:22-24**)

God is answering Jesus' prayer. How strange and wonderful! How did this group not fall apart? How is that this group of diverse, sin-filled people from all different backgrounds stayed together to become the foundation of the universal Christian church today?

The Life God Gives is Made to Thrive in God's Community

They were given a new life marked by three things:

1. New Rhythms

This whole paragraph (2:42-47) is like a GIF. It's this snapshot of life in the church that is on a loop, happening over and over again. The first thing we see is that they were over and over again devoting themselves to new rhythms:

1. Being Taught by the Apostles
2. Joining in the Congregation
3. Eating Together (Lord's Supper at the meals)
4. and Praying Together. (43)

They lived this life corporately (in the Temple) and personally (in their home). (46) This was not an add-on to their life *but a whole new life*. Jesus was not one of the many things they juggled. He was the center of their life and the one thing that determined what else they juggled.

Why did they do this? Because the Gospel had cut them to the heart. (Acts 2:37) It had convicted them so deeply of their sin that they realized they were sunk before God. They had rejected God and some of them had even cheered on His death. They knew they stood condemned. Yet, they also had experienced God's great grace. God forgave them. God was empowering them. (2:38-41) So, they received this word and were baptized and they formed the new church. The trajectory of their whole lives was changed by the gospel!

It was like they had just gotten a letter telling them some rich aunt they never thought about or visited had died and left them millions in her inheritance. It was unexpected grace! Undeserved grace! And it changed the way they lived! When you understand the power of this grace and the generous nature of it, it will change you forever.

One of the saddest things that can happen to us is that we can get so distracted by daily life that we lose sight of the grace of God and just how amazing it is. We become bored with it or it becomes white noise; "saved by grace" is a phrase we use but it doesn't describe our life. God and our identity as His family become one of the many things we juggle while we pursue all the things everyone else is pursuing. We run after relationships, houses, money, comfort, security, a good life for our kids, sports, control, power, health and perfect bodies. If you notice, none of those things are bad. But they become so important to our version of the good life that they crowd out true life - knowing God as a part of His family, His church.

The reality for all of us is this: there's something that we organize our life around right now. Something that everything else revolves and adapts around. What is it? If I were to take your calendar and your checkbook and throw them up on the wall what story would they tell me?

- *That you live your life revolved around your kids?*
- *That the most important thing in your life is the hope of romance or a relationship?*
- *That the most valuable thing in your life is status and approval from others?*
- *That you want control and safety above all else?*

Something drives your life and it dictates your rhythms and routines. It is the great hope of your life, the thing you believe will make you happy and fulfilled, and it controls everything.

Now, maybe you would ask: what does it matter if I center my life around other things than the gospel, especially if do good things? For two reasons: what you center your life around affects your relationship with people and it affects your relationship with God.

2. New Values

The Gospel radically shaped the way the early church related to one another. **Verse 44** reveals that they saw each other, not based on ethnicity or economic status, but by their faith. They had all things in common because they were Christians. And this new way of seeing each other led to generosity. (45) They saw a brother and sister in need and sold what they could to meet the need. This only happened because they no longer defined themselves by their worldly status (ethnic or economic or social) and they no longer found their security in things and wealth. They valued people more than their reputation or their possessions.

In the book **The Relational Soul**, the authors state "we are made for relationships and by relationships." We are made to *give* and to *receive* from others. And this giving and receiving shapes us for future relationships. We see that type of relationship here among the people of God. Those who have are giving themselves sacrificially to those who don't, and those who lack are receiving from those who have. We see no hint of pride or arrogance, instead we see in **46** that they have "glad and generous hearts," meaning this is who they were and who they were becoming.

The Life God Gives is Made to Thrive in God's Community

The love and grace they received from God transformed them and they mirrored His grace and love in relationship with others.

Their greatest need (forgiveness of their sins and eternal life) was met by the God of the Universe, so they didn't feel a need to hold onto their things or the need to be prideful or arrogant. They had eternal life granted to them by the God who knew them at their worst. What could happen to them that would take either of those things away? What more could they ask for? What did they need to prove? Who did they need to impress?

This is why it matters what we center our lives around, because if we are not rooted in God and the identity He gives us as His family, we are building our lives on something much flimsier. Something that is not going to remain stable. Something that can't endure the pressures of life. Think about the examples earlier:

- *Your kids will not always be perfect little angels and they will let you down. More so, they will crumble under your expectations that they be what you want them to be "or else."*
- *Your spouse or significant other cannot complete you AND even if they come close, they will not satisfy the longing in your soul. Matter of fact, the more pressure you put on them to satisfy you the more anxious and fearful you'll get when they begin to show their imperfections; and the more anxious and fearful they'll be to show and admit their flaws. You'll create a relationship where both people are closed off.*
- *If you are living to get approval or status and want people to revere and respect you, then you are always "on." You can never let your guard down, you can never be yourself, you can never show your imperfections (at least not in a way that you're not in control of), and you can never truly be known.*

As you can see, all of these things affect the way you relate to others. When something other than God is at the center of your life, people will become tools to get what you want, obstacles or enemies to overcome, or you have no use for them in your life. Your false hopes will greatly limit your relational capacity. This is not what God wants for you!

God's desire for you is that you would center your life on something much more stable - Himself. God's desire for you is to live in a community that is constantly pointing you to Himself. God's desire for you is that you live an emotionally healthy life with emotionally healthy relationships where you are receiving His grace, love, and correction and mirroring that in your relationships with others. God's wants you to have a life where you pursue those good things: kids, relationships, comfort, security - out of a heart that knows who God is and has embraced who you are as His family.

Make no mistake, the church gripped by the grace and love of God is the safest place for sinners like us and the most generous place for people in need. Because what that church has to offer is God's love and grace. That church truly cares for one another and gives to each other. That church is mirroring to the world what God has already done for them.

3. New Hearts

Acts 2 is a master class on the work of God's Spirit. He rushed into Peter and the apostles so they could preach (**2:1-4**), He convicted the people so they would repent (**2:37**), and He was given to them when they were baptized (**2:38**). And then in this paragraph: God overcomes them with awe and amazement, He does amazing things through the apostles, He gives them glad and generous hearts, and He adds to their number daily. And He is constantly doing this too.

He saved them from their sins by His Spirit but then chose to work through these new rhythms to grow them and mature them. As they are taught, as they devote themselves to meeting together, and eating together, and praying together - God floods their hearts with amazement. It's like a child at a fireworks show, every new explosion seems better than the last. "Ohhh...Look at how awesome God is there!"

He changes the way they see one another and then uses their love and generosity to change their hearts to be more joy-filled and humble and generous and worshipful. And God uses this transformation to make them attractive to the world around them and grow His church. And it begins with a changed life that embraces new rhythms of community.

Let me ask you some questions: Are you bored with life? Are you frustrated with the way things have played out for you? Do you feel like you haven't felt overwhelmed by God in a while? Or that you haven't seen a change in your own life in a long time? Could it be that you have centered your life on things that are good but not great? That you have centered your life on love, or on ministry, on your family, on your own self-importance and not God and the new identity He has given you?

The Life God Gives is Made to Thrive in God's Community

I believe that most people are bored in their life because they have taken good things from God and made them ultimate things. They are finding their identity in trying to *do things* for God or themselves instead of resting in who God is and who they are (or could be) in Christ. If you are a Christian, you are God's child, a part of His family! Yet, we push this identity to the side and juggle it around some other good thing we've made our ultimate thing!

Mission, ministry, and family are not designed to bring you lasting joy and awe and amazement – God is! It's God who's supposed to overwhelm our hearts and empower our lives. In **Acts 2**, we see that it's when we center our lives on God and our identity as His family and embrace these rhythms of church and family, that we find ourselves overwhelmed by His greatness and empowered for His mission.

The Church is not man's idea. It's God's! Church is not a man-made organization. She's Christ's bride! It's who He died to save! (see **Eph. 5**) It's who He is going to surround Himself with in eternity! (see **Rev. 7**) Church is not the enemy to mission, the church is the mission! Church is not the enemy to your family life, it's the source of true family and life and joy! Church is not the enemy to your ministry and purpose, the church is God's ministry and purpose!

The New Testament is not primarily about how to maintain your love life or start a Bible study or a parachurch ministry or how to organize your book club or maintain your social life. Instead, the NT is filled with instructions on how to exist, minister, and lead within and as God's people, the local church. Because it's in the context of the local church that all those other good things find their true source of energy and power! Their source of worship! Jesus says it's the church that the gates of hell will never overcome!

I'll freely admit the church, as most of the world thinks about it, has come to signify this large non-profit organization that meets every week and may do some good social work in the world. But that's not the church as the NT puts it. That's not the church Jesus describes:

- It's a place filled with sinners who are saved by the grace of God.
- It's a place of structure and order, where leaders take the responsibility to teach the Bible and protect the people in their congregation from false belief and people who want to take advantage of them.
- It's a place of accountability, where even the elders are subject to challenge in their sin.
- It's a place of flourishing, where men and women are given space to grow and encouraged to use their gifts to teach one another and to serve one another. It's not a few serving the many, but all serving all.
- It's a place of love and grace, where we meet the needs present in our congregation at great cost to ourselves. And where we share our lives beyond a Sunday morning and through the course of our week.
- It's the place where God's eternal life is most clearly displayed to the watching world. A place where diversity can thrive and differing politics don't divide.
- It's a place of safety, where those in great sin can come and repent. There they will find people who call their sin "sin" and find that those same people will put their arm around their shoulder and walk with them as they move toward Jesus.

I want a church like that, don't you? I want to be part of a gathering like that, don't you? So, let's repent of our sin and our false hopes and those things we have placed at the center of our lives and turn to Jesus. The giver of life, the One who uses the rhythms of the church to grow us in worship and generosity. What would it look like for you to take Him at His word this morning?

- Plan to be a part of a Gospel Community this Fall. They will be on Tuesday or Wednesday nights.
- Mark it on your calendar to be at Leader Community on August 26th.
- Prioritize serving on a Sunday morning, especially in discipling our kids.

Act and respond in a way that says: If my life does not experience growth, if I don't experience more of God's presence, if I don't see God do amazing things, it's because God is not faithful to use the methods He said He would. But God is faithful. He will do it.

The Life God Gives is Made to Thrive in God's Community