

## Sermon-A Heaven on Earth

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47

Sunday, July 4, 2021

In Acts two we started with a look at the awesome events of the day of Pentecost. We followed that by digging into Apostle Peter's sermon which included both a Biblical explanation of these events and a convicting tie-in to Jesus Christ who is ultimately responsible for these events. And the mark of a good sermon is that it moves its listeners to action. And moved they were. In fact we are told that 3000 people were added to the church that day. That fact alone is astounding. But what is most informative for us is to look at how did these brand new Christians did church.

But before we go there, I want to just remind you of what human society has become from the time Adam and Eve were ejected out of the Garden of Eden. Trouble began quickly starting with their two sons Cain and Abel. Cain got jealous and killed his brother Abel. From that point on, murder, adultery and every evil under the sun kept intensifying. In fact it reached a point where even God could bear it no more and He had to wipe the earth clean of all human beings save Noah's family. But even after the flood, once again took root like weeds and covered the earth quickly. So if you were to put a camera into any group of people and examine what went on, you will only see power struggles, exploitation, strife and broken relationships. The only time human beings came together to co-operate, was when they got the bright idea to build what I call the "tower of folly" because they intended it to be so tall that they could reached God and in doing so boast about it in the whole world. God of course not impressed by such stupidity and knowing the danger they posed to themselves of making a tower that would crumble under its own weight when it had reached a certain height, He stopped the project by introduced different languages so that the builders could not communicate with each other any more and had to abandon the project and move as

far away from each other as they could. Even as humankind spread across the globe, wherever they went, they built societies that always had violence, sexual sin, selfishness and greed. Worship of the true God who made them had become a rare phenomenon. Let me read some statements and summarize well the human condition. Gen 6:5-6 ***Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was altogether evil all the time. 6And the LORD regretted that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.***

Fast forward, to the end of Judges 21:25 and we get this statement, ***“In those days there was no King in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes”***.

Ps 53:1-3 says, ***“there is none who does good. God looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one”***

And finally when Jesus looks at Jerusalem, the famous city of God, He weeps because when he sees Jerusalem what he sees is ***“sheep without a shepherd”***.

Fast forward my friends to the church at Pentecost. This community represents the reverse of everything we just talked about both at the tower of Babel and human society up to this point. In our Acts verses today two things jump out at us. What the new church believed and what they did.

Let's start with what they believed. So we are told that everyone in the church devoted themselves to the teachings of the Apostles. Now we know what they are because that is what the New Testament is derived from. So if you want to summarize this teaching, you could say that the early church had a strong foundation of who Jesus Christ was, what He taught, and what Christ came to do and what their own God given mission was.

In other words, the early church was operating with the new level of wisdom and purpose that the Holy Spirit is able to give people. So the saints in the early church had a clarity of mind about who Jesus Christ was, who their teachers and why they were, which was people who were saved by Jesus Christ and received into His family and now they were been given an assignment to take the Gospel to their city, country and even the whole world. This is what we are told the early church believed.

Now let's see what they did. Because they could recognize the work of God when they saw it, they were filled with awe and wonder at what the Apostles were doing. In other words they had great respect for their teachers and elders (1). We are told that they met often (2). That means they liked each other so much that they could not wait to be together again. And they filled their life with the praises of God.

And in terms of the bonds they had within the community it was really incredible. Let me give you an example. We are told that they sold their possessions and gave it to the Apostles so that they could distribute what was needed to everyone (3+). So if someone lacked food, they made sure to share their food, if someone lacked a place to stay they made sure that they found them a place to stay, if someone needed clothing, they made sure that they had clothing.

Now to make the needs of the group taken care off in this way, may sound strange to our individualistic, capitalistic American ears. When we hear that they had to liquidate all their assets and give it to the leadership to distribute it, it sounds scary to us and might even sound like communism. But there are circumstances where such a scenario might be necessary. For example, if being a Christ follower meant you would not be able to get a job and earn a living, then the rest of the community will have to get used to sharing at a level we have never done before. In such a situation, the only option may be

to liquidate all our assets and allow the leadership to distribute to the group as they see fit. This is what the first church community looked like.

Now I also want to point out that they were doing this within the community of believers, and not in an open-ended way to people outside. I am sure they were willing to extend a helping hand to people outside, but people outside simply did not have the threats to their income and therefore level of need as the people inside the church. Also when you make yourself vulnerable to others to this extent, the wisdom being used in the early church was that you share first with those who are in need and share your values. Others who do not share your values could easily exploit the situation to steal and defraud. There is no wisdom in making yourself a target of crime. That is not what the early church was doing.

But there are some other important aspects of the community of the first church. When this energized little group of people met they were full of praise to God (4+), they were full of prayer (5) and they broke bread together (6) and they had fellowship meals (7) together.

Let me dwell on the energy this group radiated(4+). Verse 46 tells us that they had glad and sincere hearts. There was a joyfulness in the group that was beyond their circumstances. They were not joyful because everything was working out for them. They had to liquidate their assets and give it all away for heaven's sake, literally 😊! They were joyful because the One who makes everything work out for their good was **with** them. They **knew** God and had a strong **fellowship** with God and each other and that was causing them to simply overflow with joy and so they were full of praise to God.

We are also told that their hearts were **sincere(8+)**. Now sincere means that they were genuine. Not deceitful or full of guile. They were straightforward people. They said what they meant and they meant what they said. And when you are in a group of sincere people, it is very freeing because you simply take people for face value. This is a very

liberating, right? You are straight with others and others are straight with you. This too happens only when you have accepted yourself and have nothing to hide. You are also free to trust those around you.

Unfortunately, being sincere, honest, authentic and trusting, are all human qualities that were deeply damaged by the fall and therefore are not naturally present in the society we live in. So we have to always be on our guard with people. But in the community of those who are “being saved” by Christ, there is a glimpse of honesty and sincerity that makes trust possible. The family of God is where you can let your guard down. That is why the place where we worship is also called the house of God. It is a house, the place where those around us are our family members whom we can trust and that is a very freeing thing. The house of God is the one place you are free to have a sincere heart.

Because the early church had the visible presence of God through many miracles, as well as an incredible community with strong leadership, with people whose needs were satisfied and so much joy that they early church in spite of a lack of impressive buildings and worldly power became terribly attractive to the outside world. And because of that the church was growing like a wildfire.

One last observation on this first church community. In verse 47 it says, “***The lord added to their number daily, those who were being saved***”. Pay attention to the phrase “being saved” for a minute. “Being saved” implies a work in progress. That means these people had not reached perfection by any means. They were flawed too. We know that they had their conflicts and disagreements, confusions and failings just like any of us. I don’t want to idealize the people in the first church and put them up on a pedestal. No, the Bible does not put any human beings on pedestals except Jesus Christ and so we should not either. But it is right to give honor to the Apostles and the early church not because they were perfect people, but because for their place in our faith journey. And yet, even in their “work in progress” state we have so much to learn from them,

because out of their obedience to God, God was able to create within the first “being saved” community a glimpse of “heaven on earth”.

So what does this mean for us.

I will summarize this in two parts. What we should believe and what we should do.

Firstly, “what we should believe”. Like the first church we cannot compromise on who Jesus Christ, his unique work on the cross for our sins that paved a way for us to have eternal life. Make no mistake. If you compromise Christ, you compromise everything. But believing does not make us people who have reached our final destination either. Believing and receiving Christ into our hearts makes us, people who are “being saved”. That means we are people who are working out our salvation with “fear and trembling”. Not that we are engineering our own salvation. We are people who are with “fear and trembling” living out what a saved life should look like, so that we can one day stand before Christ and giving an account of our lives. This is a complex topic and I am not saying on the other hand that we should doubt our salvation. What I am saying is that we should consider ourselves both “saved” and a “work in progress”. We should not be cocky about our saved status but focused on living “saved lives” with a great deal of awe and reverence to God. This is the “what we should believe part”.

Here is the “what we should do part”.

When people who are “being saved” come together to form community, you get a little piece of heaven on earth. In India there is a place called Kashmir at the very Northern tip. One of the Muslim rulers who came to India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century saw this place and said, if ever there is a heaven on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here. And if you went there you would easily see why he felt this way. It is a place of incredible natural beauty. Snow capped mountains, beautiful trees and lakes that reflect all the colors in a way that doubles all that beauty. But for many years Kashmir has also been a place of

violence and conflict. In other words, it looks great in photographs but the natural beauty hides the human strife within. But in the church, we have in a way the opposite. If we are doing our job well, our community may not look very impressive on the outside but on the inside, we will have great love, taking care of each others needs, strong Bible based teaching and everybody obeying scripture and God being honored. So let's look to God, learn from scripture and continue to learn from the church in Acts. If we are doing these things my friends we are going to get a little piece of "heaven on earth". Not something that looks like heaven, but something that is actually heaven on earth because God Himself has come to dwell with us. With the help of the Holy Spirit, may this be true of this church and any church that is following the example set for us. Let us pray.