

“GREAT GRACE WAS UPON THEM ALL”

Acts 4:32–37

Key Verse: 4:33

“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

Have you ever seen people being changed? Not just in appearance, but within? It can go either way: Sometimes people go from good to bad, which is really hard to watch. But sometimes it's from bad to good. It may not happen often, but when people change for the better, it encourages and even inspires us. What causes people to change like this? Not just one or two persons, but an entire community? Today's passage describes such a remarkable event. A multitude of people are now sharing so unselfishly. It's the second time in Acts that the author Luke describes them like this (cf. 2:42–47). What's going on? How could this happen? And what does it mean to us? May God speak to us through his word.

Acts opens with the original disciples spending 40 days learning from the Risen Jesus. He tells them to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. After he ascends into heaven, they gather with his other faithful followers and family members, and with one accord they devote themselves to prayer. After they follow God's lead to replace Judas Iscariot, the Holy Spirit comes in power. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, preaches to a crowd in Jerusalem gathered for the Feast of Pentecost and proclaims Jesus who died and rose again as both Lord and Christ. All of a sudden, 3,000 men, convicted by the word of God and the Holy Spirit, repent, believe, and join the original followers of Jesus. And God is adding new members daily (2:47). Not long afterwards, Peter preaches again, and another 2,000 men join. When the leaders try to stop this new movement, all these new believers again come together with one accord to pray, and again the Holy Spirit comes in power. 4:32–37 describes the remarkable way all these people, newly joined together, are changed.

Read verse 32a. “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul...” In Greek, “full number” means “multitude.” And the original word order is important. It literally says “in heart and soul they were one.” Putting the word “one” at the end emphasizes their unity. Have you ever experienced being one in heart and soul with anybody? Even married couples can find it hard to be one in heart and soul, though they work at it for many years. But in this verse are thousands of people who probably didn’t know each other very well before they accepted Christ, and their oneness happens so quickly. When we read this passage, it’s hard not to be skeptical. But their oneness is not created by their effort, or by some genius system; it’s a miracle of God, a work of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is telling us here that the Holy Spirit is real. When we repent, he’s able to change us. He can change even an entire community. Do you believe this?

Luke goes on to describe how this multitude is now one in heart and soul. Read verse 32b. “...and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.” “Everything in common”? Wow. Luke used this same expression in 2:44. No one is enforcing it as a rule; all these people have changed the way they’re thinking about their possessions. They still own things and are free to do whatever they want with them, but they’ve opened their hearts to want to use them for each other. Why? Again, it’s the Holy Spirit who’s changed their hearts, their way of thinking. They’ve actually become “generous and ready to share” (1 Tim.6:18b)!

In Galatians 5, Apostle Paul famously contrasts living by the flesh and walking by the Spirit. After describing much bad behavior, he writes, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love...” Among the fruits of the Spirit, love is first. Without love, we won’t have any other lasting fruit. This multitude of believers has experienced the fruit of genuine love. The Apostle John also famously wrote: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16–18). It’s not about sharing material things per se, it’s about doing it in *love*, real love.

This unity, this genuine love, is a picture of the fellowship all believers will enjoy in heaven, when we are all transformed to the image of his Son

(Rom.8:29). But it's also an answer to the prayer of our Lord Jesus. The night before his own suffering, he told his disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35). His disciples were all so different. They had their share of conflicts. But Jesus allowed them no exceptions, no excuses. Soon afterwards, he prayed to the Father, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, 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 have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:20–23). Our oneness in love is a powerful testimony to the unbelieving world.

And a key to this unity is the word "glory" Jesus uses in this prayer. One aspect of this "glory" is the deep love the Father and Son have for each other. This glorious love expresses their perfect unity. But what's it got to do with us? What Jesus prays here is so hopeful. Though we're so weak and so flawed, when we're in Jesus, he gives us the glorious love the Father gave him. This glorious love unites us with the Father and Son and with each other. It's called "the love of the Spirit" (Rom.15:30). In the love of the Spirit, we begin to have affection, sympathy, and genuine concern for each other (Phil.2:1,20). We have such love when we are actually in Jesus (John 15:4–5,9–10).

How are these people so united? Let's read our key verse, 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." Here, the word "testimony" is the same as "witness," and it's the main theme of Acts: being witnesses of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. It tells us the point of their unity: to be a witnessing community, to keep telling more and more people the good news of the resurrection of Jesus. Secondly, the source of the apostles' "great power" seems to be not only the Holy Spirit, but also the unity of their community. It seems this multitude of believers were graciously and wholeheartedly praying for and supporting the apostles in their outreach ministry. Unity is also a vital source of their spiritual power.

But what does the apostles' testimony to the resurrection of Jesus mean? We see it repeated again and again in Acts. Because the Lord Jesus who was crucified also rose from the dead, now, no matter who we are or what we've done, we're all invited to repent and believe in him and receive the forgiveness of sins (2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). This is the heart of the gospel that this multitude of believers has accepted. They've experienced God's forgiveness of sins in Jesus our Lord. It's not just words; it's life-giving. Luke says, "...and great grace was upon them all" (33b). He mentions not only the great power of the apostles' preaching, but also the "great grace" upon them all.¹

This word "grace" means joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness, and graceful speech. God's grace makes us gentle and lowly in heart like our Lord Jesus (Matt. 11:29). It's not a personality trait only for some people; it's a spiritual condition, a change of heart, when we're filled with God's mercy and forgiving grace. If we are checked out, distant, cynical, skeptical, annoyed, critical, judgmental, we need to repent and receive the grace of our Lord Jesus ourselves. It's the only way.

And it's a serious matter. When our souls are revived in this great grace of Jesus, though we're just one person, we become like the fragrance of Christ (2 Cor. 2:14), beginning in our homes, and then, in our community. After years of being in a hurtful, unloving family or other environment, we may not have any hope of having such a graceful community. But as Kurt Kaiser's 1960's praise song "Pass It On" puts it, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." It's the spark of personal repentance, of personally receiving the Spirit, that can turn around not just our personal lives but an entire community.

These believers are sharing possessions not because they're better, more disciplined, more sacrificial, more spiritual than everybody else; they're doing it simply because of the great grace of Jesus. Years later, Apostle Paul describes this grace: "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor

¹ In Acts, the word "grace" is repeated eleven times (4:33; 6:8; 11:23; 13:43; 14:3,26; 15:11,40; 18:27; 20:24,32).

of taking part in the relief of the saints...But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also...For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor.8:1–5,7,9). Sharing is not about being rich; it can be done even in poverty! It’s an act of grace and an act of faith; to do it, we simply need to appreciate the grace of Jesus personally.

When we truly grasp the greatness of his grace, our hearts are filled with love. There’s a famous story during Jesus’ earthly ministry. A sinful woman came to a Pharisee’s house where Jesus was invited to dinner. Of course, this woman was not invited, but she went anyway. In front of all the critical eyes there, she took an alabaster flask of ointment, stood behind Jesus, weeping, began to wet his feet with her tears, wiped them with the hair of her head, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment. The Pharisee host, in his heart, began judging Jesus for allowing such a woman to do this to him. In response, Jesus told him a parable of a moneylender and two debtors, one who owed him about \$50K, and the other, about \$5K. Both debtors could not pay, so the moneylender canceled the debt of both. Jesus asked the Pharisee, “Which of them will love him more?” Then he applied his parable to the woman and the Pharisee. Jesus told him: “I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:36–47). According to Jesus, the measure of our love and serving is directly related to the measure of our awareness of our own forgiveness—in other words, of the great grace of Jesus in our lives. The more we know his grace, the more we’re going to be a truly loving person. In light of this, we all need to reflect honestly on how graceful and loving we are in real life. Maybe we should even ask the people close to us how we’re doing. May God help us all to turn to Jesus to experience his great grace, and then show his great love to each other, in practical ways. May his great grace catch fire among us.

Look at verses 34–35. God’s great grace touched even the hearts of the property owners among them to sell the extra they had and bring it to the apostles, to have it distributed to anyone among them in need. They didn’t

despise the needy; they loved and served them practically. Then Luke highlights one particular person. Read verses 36–37. Though he's foreign born, from Cyprus, and a Levite, who could have acted like an elite, Barnabas encourages everyone. He's giving not because he's so wealthy, but because his heart has been so deeply moved by the grace of Jesus.

Barnabas in his graceful giving became an outstanding example in the early church. Later, because Barnabas knew the grace of Jesus, he could embrace Paul right after his conversion, when no one else could trust him. Because Barnabas knew the grace of Jesus, he could encourage new Gentile believers in Antioch, when no one else could trust that this work of God was legitimate. Because Barnabas knew the grace of Jesus, he could bring Paul to that church and cowork with him to build it up. Because Barnabas knew the grace of Jesus, he could cowork with Paul on his first missionary journey. Because Barnabas knew the grace of Jesus, he could embrace John Mark, even after his failure, and help him recover spiritually until he eventually wrote Mark's Gospel. Knowing the great grace of Jesus makes us an encouragement like Barnabas, all throughout our Christian lives.

Let's read verse 33 again. "And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all." Thank God for showing us the secret of being one in heart and mind, and of having an incredibly beautiful community, full of love and unselfish serving. What's the secret? It's the message of forgiveness from our Risen Lord Jesus. May God fill us with his great grace, so that we all can be part of this witnessing community, and full of practical love for one another.