

This is Discipleship!

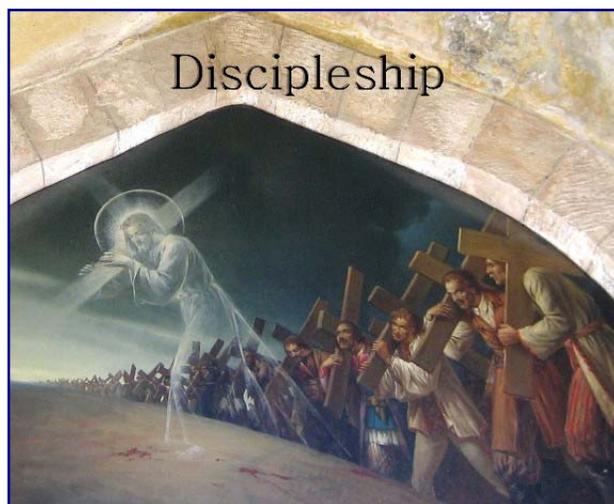
[Acts 4:32-37](#)



Peter and John had just stood before the great Sanhedrin and been commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus any longer. To which they promised civil disobedience. They were then threatened and released. They immediately met with the believing community and reported all the Sanhedrin had said. This prompted a prayer meeting in which they praise God as sovereign Creator of all things and then petitioned Him for boldness:

"And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Thy bond-servants may speak Thy word with all confidence, (Acts 4:29 NASB)

They don't pray for protection, or safety or a comfortable life—they pray for boldness. In light of the threats that they had received this prayer request if answered would bring much suffering. Their boldness would cause civil disobedience to the new law of, no speaking in Jesus name, which would bring down the wrath of the Sanhedrin. I said this last week and I want to say it again, we must get this—they were more concerned with their mission than their comfort. More concerned with obeying Christ than being pain free. Why were they so different from us?



Now in verses 32-37 Luke give us a status report of the early church. It's a snapshot of a community of people whose hearts have been utterly revolutionized by believing in Jesus.

The description that follows, which is an amplification of and expansion on [Acts 2:44-45](#), was intended to further convey the idea of the Kingdom of God being evidenced on earth, and as constantly growing. Here we see that they not only prayed differently than we do, they lived differently that we do.

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them. (Acts 4:32 NASB)

Conservatively speaking the church was now about 20,000 strong. And Luke says they were of, *"One heart and soul"*—this is unity!

Some MSS. add, *"and there was no kind of difference or dissension among them."* This remarkable reading is found in the [Codex Bezae](#), another of great authority, E, two others, Ambrose, Bede, Cyprian, and Zeno.

20,000 believers from various backgrounds and social status and they are all of one heart and soul. How? Jesus prayed that His followers would be one:

that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. ²² "And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; (John 17:21-22 NASB)

Christian unity is not organizational, it is spiritual. The words "as" and "just as" speak of the nature of our unity. It is to be like that of Jesus Christ and the Father—a common life; a unity of will, purpose, and goal.

It's not people being united because they are in the same container—organizationally. It's people who are attracted to each other because they are pulled by the same power.

If you take a bunch of ball bearings and put them in a box, they have a unity caused by the container—an organizational unity. If the box breaks, they all go everywhere. Our unity is to be like that caused by an electro magnet that holds all the ball bearings together because they are all pulled by the same external force—which is spiritual. We are pulled together by the power of Christ.

Notice here in verse 21 that our unity is a powerful testimony to Christ in the world. Even though Christian unity is spiritual it is to be visible. If the world is to see our unity, it must be visible. How can we demonstrate our unity? What is to be our distinguishing characteristic? It's love!

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35 NASB)

These early Christians were living out, the desires of their lord. They were His disciples.

In Hebrew thought there is a huge difference between a student and a disciple. A student wants to know what the teacher knows for whatever reason: a grade, a degree or even out of respect for the teacher. A [talmid](#) wants to be like the teacher, that is to become what the teacher is.

The decision to follow a rabbi as a talmid meant total commitment in the first century as it does today. Since a talmid was totally devoted to becoming like the rabbi, he would have spent his entire time listening and observing the teacher to know how to understand the Scripture and how to put it into practice.

A disciple is someone who more than anything else in the world wants to be just like Jesus. Are you His disciple? If we are going to be disciples, we must be focused on the Rabbi—Jesus Christ. We must be with him in His Word, we must follow Him even if we are not sure of where He is taking us, we must live by His teaching (which means we must know those teachings well), and we must imitate Him whenever we can. In other words everything becomes secondary in life to being like Him.

So Jesus said that His disciples would be known by their love and the early church was:

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them. (Acts 4:32 NASB)

“Not one” is emphatic here, “not even one”—***“claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them.”*** Can you understand this? Their attitude was—whatever is mine is yours. Just like us anything that they had they had worked hard for, but unlike us they didn't view it as their own.

They were living out what Paul would later teach the Philippians:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; ⁴ do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4 NASB)

This could be translated "thinking of others as superior to yourself." Unity is destroyed where self-esteem prevails, rather than a higher esteem for others.

Imagine a horizontal line with an S on one end for those you esteem Superior to yourself, and an L on the other end for those you think are Lower than you. Now, if you are honest, where do you put yourself on that line? You no

doubt have some people who you regard as superior to yourself, unless you are really ate up with pride, but think of all those people who you think you're better than. There's probably a lot more of these. It may look something like this:

L-----you---S

You might say (to yourself) of those people who you think are lower than you, "But they're low lives, they don't even use the brain God gave them, they're really messed up. How can God expect me to think of them as superior to me?" Ah, the pride is really showing now, isn't it? Dwell on this long enough and you'll see the depth of your pride. Biblically what should this line look like? We are supposed to view EVERYONE as superior to ourselves.

YOU-----S

Paul brought up the subject of unity in every letter he wrote to a church. Probably there is not a single thing so much insisted on in the New Testament as the importance of unity.

The early church was, in its sharing, simply taking Jesus literally. For example, Jesus taught:

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. 33 "Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves purses which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys. 34 "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Luke 12:32-34 NASB)

The actions of these saints were completely consistent with the words of the Lord. They were taking Jesus simply at His word. Paul put it this way in Galatians:

Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2 NASB)

The law of Christ is the basic expression of Christian living. It is the law of love.

The early church looked upon themselves as a family, and they lived like a family. Thus, if one member of the "family" had more than enough possessions and other member had less than enough, it was natural to share these possessions within the family. "Private property" is viewed differently within the family than without.

Jesus said that all men would know His disciples by their love. This love was fully manifested in this early Jerusalem church. They were a new and unique group! Notice the results of their unity and love:

For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, 35 and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need. (Acts 4:34-35 NASB)

Jerusalem's tenuous local economy and Palestine's famines and political unrest placed some members in economic need. The displacement of the Galilean apostles and other members of the church's central core away from their normal means of livelihood, together with social and economic persecution, necessitated a ministry to meet economic needs.

"There was not a needy person among them"—over 20,000 people and no needy. I think this is an allusion to Deuteronomy 15:4:

"However, there shall be no poor among you, since the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, (Deuteronomy 15:4 NASB)

God's fulfillment of this covenant promise in the church demonstrates not only his faithfulness but also the fact that

the church is the true Israel.

People were selling their houses and land and giving the money to the church to help out those who had needs. This is sacrificial giving. This is true worship. Do you understand that our GIVING IS WORSHIP:

But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. (Philippians 4:18 NASB)

Paul tells them that their gift was overwhelming to him. He was full. Paul viewed their gift as an offering to God, a sacrifice that was well pleasing. Notice the words Paul uses here—"*fragrant*" is from the Greek word *euodia*, and "*aroma*" is from the word *osme*, and "*sacrifice*" is from the Greek word *thusia*. All three of these words are used in Ephesians 5 of Christ's sacrificial offering of Himself to God in man's behalf.

and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice (thusia) to God as a fragrant (euodia) aroma (osme). (Ephesians 5:2 NASB)

“Just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself”—because Christ loved, He gave. I don't think that you can disassociate loving and giving. These words express the language of worship—GIVING IS AN EXPRESSION OF WORSHIP!

Our love for God and our worship of Him may be proved by something that is a major part of everyone's life, and that is our use of money.

How we use our money demonstrates the reality of our love for God. We can pretend to be worshipers, but the use of our possessions shows us up for what we actually are. John linked money and the love of God:

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. ¹⁷ But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:16-17 NASB)

Again, we see here the connection between loving and giving (verse 16). Most Christians will never have the opportunity to lay down their lives; how then can they show that they love their brothers and their God? By giving of their money and material goods. If we fail to do this, we show we don't love our brother or our God. We all show by our giving the measure of our love for God.

There are two directions in terms of Christian giving that I see in the Scripture:

1. We are to give to help support the needy:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. (1 Corinthians 16:1 NASB)

When a needy person crosses your path, you are to help him when you can. This can be done individually; as you see someone with a need, you meet it, but the example in our text is that they gave it to the elders of the church to distribute to the needy.

and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need. (Acts 4:35 NASB)

We see here that giving had, in one sense, become more institutionalized, out of necessity. In one sense, this was more of a test. It is much easier to be motivated to give to one's neighbor, whose needs are immediately evident to us, than it is to give to those we do not even know. There had to have been a high level of confidence in the apostles

for the money to have been laid at their feet. This type of giving is anonymous, so you don't get praised for your giving. And this also recognizes that the church leaders know the flock and know who needs what.

So we are to give to support the needy. What else does the Bible tell us we should give to? Building program? Lear jets for televangelist to sport around in?

2. We are to give to support those who teach the Bible:

And let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches. (Galatians 6:6 NASB)

This is a basic principle of the Christian life: If we receive spiritual blessings, we should in turn share material blessings. If you are being taught the scripture, you have an obligation, a duty, to give to support those teaching you.

Beyond these two things, the Bible doesn't say anything else about the direction of our giving. They are the only perspectives the Scripture gives us. We are to give to the church to support the needy and provide for those who teach the Bible.

I wonder what it would be like if some of the first believers were transported to our time and culture. Certainly they would be impressed with technological advances. But if they were to look at the quality of our Christian life compared to their experience, I'm sure their hearts would be broken. We don't have much unity, nor are we very giving.

Now if you were paying attention you noticed that I skipped verse:

And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33 NASB)

This verse seems to be sandwiched in between verses 32 and 34. The verse before is talking about the finances of the early church. The verse following will also talk about meeting the needs within the early church. Did Luke need some filler material to separate verse 32 from verse 34? Why is this verse sandwiched in here?

What is the "great power" with which the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection?

What comes to your mind when you think of the word "power"? When you think of power, you might also think of strength. You might think of a force of some kind, such as the power of nature in hurricanes or tornadoes or floods. You might think of the power of electricity. You may also think of explosive force, such as that which is unleashed in dynamite or nuclear weapons. You may also think of authority that comes from a certain position someone may hold. Or you may think of miraculous signs and wonders. And there may be other images that come to mind as well.

But let me ask you this, "Did love come to mind?" Although it may not have, it certainly should have. Power and love do go together. In fact, love is the most powerful force in the world! Love is the greatest power in the Universe. I believe that this is not only what the Scriptures teach, it is born out in the experience of people everywhere.

Love is powerful. We all seek to have it. We all need it. Love is perhaps the basic human need. You have often heard me say that the first three verses of [1 Corinthians 13](#) can be summed up this way, "*Life minus love equals zero.*" The psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, declared that "*Love cures people - both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.*" And we are probably all familiar with the quote by the Roman statesman and philosopher, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who lived at the time of Christ. He said, "*Better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all.*" And throughout history people have written about, sung about, and thought about love more than perhaps any other single human need. And I want to submit to you today that LOVE is the Churches power.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8 NASB)

In this text we see that love is linked, inextricably linked with God. Our text says that love is of (or comes from) God. And it also says that God is love.

What does it mean when it says that love comes from God? Well, it simply means that God is the source of real love. True love is based in the very life of God Himself. In other words, there can be no real love without God being behind it. Love has its basis in God.

The word John uses here for "love" is agape. This Greek word was rarely used in Greek literature prior to the New Testament. In the New Testament, the word agape took on a special meaning; it was used by the New Testament writers to designate a volitional love (as opposed to a purely emotional love), a self-sacrificial love, a love naturally expressed by divinity but not so easily by humanity. It seems as though the early Christian church took this word out of its obsolescence and made it a characteristic word for love.

Agape love is a response to someone who is unworthy of love. This concept of love was derived from the cross:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:16 NASB)

God loved the world and gave his son for it. That was a response to unworthy people, to sinners, to those who were his enemies. That is agape. It is a love that proceeds from the nature of the lover, rather than the worth of the person who is loved. It is a love that gives, a love that seeks the best of the object loved. It is the only word ever used to describe God's love. It is a decision that you make and a commitment that you act upon to treat another person with concern, with care, with thoughtfulness, and to work for his or her best interests.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:11 NASB)

Because God has loved us, we have the capacity to love others. We all have the capacity to love, but do we all love? No! Why? Because love is a product of a life lived in dependence on God. Agape love is divine love, God is its source and God loves through us as we walk in fellowship with him. Our obligation is to stay in fellowship with him.

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. (John 15:5 NASB)

It takes the indwelling power of God in one's life to display this kind of character in daily life. Apart from an intimate abiding relationship with Christ, we can't love.

I cannot understand Christians who think they can live a Christian life, a life of dependence, a life of love, without spending time reading their Bibles. It is impossible. Our memories do not retain and maintain what we need to know. We are built in such a way that we need refreshment and reminder - again and again.

Because God is love, those of us who claim to know God should live lives characterized by that love, because love is the Churches power.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has beheld God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:11-12 NASB)

God desires for His love to be manifest in us. This text instructs us that since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. As we love one another, our lives are reflecting the very love of God. And this is how others will see

God's love—through us! You see, while God's demonstration of His love through the death of Jesus Christ is a bold fact of history, many people will never look at that historical fact until they see God's love manifested in our lives. Nietzsche said, "*Show me that you are redeemed, and I will believe in your Redeemer.*" The world is looking at us for evidence that there is a God of love. This is what John is getting at when he says in verse 12,

No one has beheld God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:11-12 NASB)

People may not be able to see God, but they can and do see us. How's your love life? Is your life manifesting the love of God in word and deed? Even small acts of love can have a powerful effect. Love is powerful. Never underestimate the power of the smallest deed done in love.

And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33 NASB)

The power in the witness of the believers was their love for one another. The witness to the resurrection was the lives of Jesus disciples. Christ was evident in them. Their love was giving the apostles witness power.

This witness of the resurrection was in direct violation of the new law forbidding speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus.

In the next two verses Luke gives illustration of the kind of giving he has described in general terms:

And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means, Son of Encouragement),³⁷ and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:36-37 NASB)

This is the first time we meet Joseph, who from here on out is known by his nickname of Barnabas. Barnabas' name pops up 23 times in the book of Acts and 5 times in Paul's letters.

Cyprus is an island in the Mediterranean Sea, off Cilicia, and not far from the Jewish coast. There were many Jews living on that island. Though he was a Levite, he might have had land of his own by private purchase. The Levites, as a tribe, had no land in Israel; but the individuals certainly might make purchases any where in the country: but, as Barnabas was of Cyprus, his land probably was there; and it is likely that he was one of those strangers that came up to Jerusalem for the feast, and was there converted, he might have sold his land in the island to some of his own countrymen who were at Jerusalem at this time.

So Barnabas' real name was Joseph, but the apostles nicknamed him "Barnabas," because he was such an encourager.

And the news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.²³ Then when he had come and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; (Acts 11:22-23 NASB)



Barnabas exhorted, or encouraged, those new believers to stay true to the Lord with all their hearts. That's a great example for all of us to follow. We need to exhort and encourage each other to grow in the Lord by abiding in the Word of God.

Later, Barnabas went to Tarsus and got Paul, and together they went to Antioch where they ministered together for a year. When they heard through Agabus that the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem were in the midst of a deep famine,

they took an offering to the church. What a great encouragement to the believers in Jerusalem!

Paul and Barnabas had been on a missionary journey with a young man named John Mark. He was young and inexperienced, and he got homesick and left Paul and Barnabas. When Paul and Barnabas decided to go on another missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to give John Mark another chance. Paul refused to allow John Mark to go, so instead of telling John Mark, "No," Barnabas split with Paul and took John Mark with him ([Acts 15:36-41](#)). What an encouragement to John Mark! Is it any wonder that the apostles renamed Joseph the "Son of Encouragement"?

Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service. (2 Timothy 4:11 NASB)

Here it appears that Paul changed his mind about Mark. Without Barnabas's encouragement Mark may have never served again.

There has been much debate concerning the authorship of Hebrews because the letter itself does not indicate who the author is. Barnabas is thought by some (including me) to be the author. This would give the letter of Hebrews a close affiliation with Paul as Barnabas was Paul's missionary companion, and this would explain the letter's resemblance to Paul's theology. Barnabas was a Levite and would have been acquainted with the Levitical system which is a major theme in Hebrews.

So Luke gives us a living illustration through Barnabas of what all in the church were willing to do. Barnabas sells his land and gives the money to the apostles to help out those in need. We work hard to acquire things, especially land, and here is a man who because others have needs sells his land and gives it to the church. This is truly an act of worship. Barnabas loved and he gave.

For the person who has experienced the love of God and new life in Christ, the only reasonable response is to make Christ the center of his life—relating to Him, following Him, serving others for Him, and pleasing Him rather than self or others. This is what Barnabas personified. He sold his property as a way of saying “Thank you” to God by loving other people.

And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. (1 John 4:21 NASB)

In this snapshot that the Lord gives us of the early church we see what it is that the church is to look like. There is to be unity which is demonstrated by our selfless love for one another. This kind of love gives the church great power, everybody wants to be loved.

Barnabas was a disciple of Jesus, are you? A disciple is someone who more than anything else in the world wants to be just like Jesus.

the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked. (1 John 2:6 NASB)

Barnabas and the early church walked and looked just like Jesus, giving evidence to the fact that He was alive. Do others see Christ in you?

If your church leaders were to give you a nickname, what would it be? Would it be a nickname that you would be pleased to bear?



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2000 Centerville Turnpike
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