

## Extravagant Grace in the Church

Acts 2:42-46

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*"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," (Acts 2:42–46, ESV)*

We ended our service last week by commissioning seventy people in each service to find a creative way to demonstrate extravagant grace to someone in the world. For those of you who received envelopes with \$100, I know that you did not expect to receive such a gift and such a responsibility. But it has been wonderful to hear the stories of how you are praying for the Lord to lead you to the right situation, and it has been encouraging to hear a few of the stories of what God has done in our lives.

I know that some of you are still waiting to see where God leads you. Let me encourage you to wait on Him for the right situation, and when you are led to act, please share the story with the rest of us (<http://www.yourchurch.com/extravagantgrace/>). My goal is not just to give \$21,000 away, but to help our entire church look at the world differently.

The fact of the matter is that we can quickly forget how extravagant grace has been to us. And the effect of this is that we are unforgiving, impatient, less than gracious, and stingy. Our commitment to live out extravagant grace leaks! We forget what God has done for us; we act as if we deserve His grace. But there is even more. We forget how awesome and wonderful it is to extend extravagant grace to others.

You see, I'm not trying to compel you toward a life of extravagant grace just because it is right. It certainly is. But I want you to experience the beauty of a generous, grace-filled life. I want you to see that the Bible is right when it says, "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). We are talking about this subject because not living in extravagant grace is to miss the very best of life. This is not about money. This is not about good works. This is not about getting along with others. It is about what can really make you happy.

*"As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life." (1 Timothy 6:17–19, ESV)*

I want you, and I want our church, to take hold of that which is truly life!

In our first week we saw the connection between extravagant grace and the gospel. We talked about the fact that we live in a broken world, that Jesus brings grace, and that grace wins. Last week we took another step by connecting the fullness of Jesus to the provision of grace in our lives. We learned that Jesus' fullness created a fullness of grace for us.

Today I want to show to one more angle on this: **Extravagant grace is a vital part of a healthy church.** In fact, I think that extravagant grace is one of the "secrets" to churches who are filled with the fullness of God.

### **An Extravagant Grace Culture**

We are going to look at Acts 2 and the story of how the church began. Now the early church was not perfect, but she got a few things right – even at the beginning. And I want to show you how vital extravagant grace was to the life and health of the first body of believers after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To set the context for you, Acts 2 is the record of what happened at Pentecost, a gathering of Jews from all over the known world in the city of Jerusalem fifty days after the Passover. Pentecost was the second of the annual harvest festivals, and it was during this celebration that the Holy Spirit invaded a room where all the disciples were gathered, appearing as tongues of fire on each of them (Acts 2:1-4). Immediately after this miraculous moment, the disciples began preaching in the various languages of the people who had gathered in Jerusalem, and as a result of Peter's sermon, three thousand people were converted and baptized (Acts 2:41).

This was one of the most powerful moments of God in all of the Bible, and it is when the New Testament church really begins. What follows in Acts 2:42-47 is a great summary of what characterized this first gathering of Jesus followers. They were passionate about following Jesus, so this is something important for us to examine. Notice four things:

#### **1. Depth**

It is no coincidence that right after talking about this massive number of people coming to faith in Christ, Luke talks about the core spiritual commitments for the body of believers. With three thousand people coming to believe in Jesus, one might wonder – "Was it real?"

I think that is why Luke says that "they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers" (Acts 2:42). The Greek word for "devoted" means to continue to do something with intense effort, with possible implications of difficulty. It means that they kept on after the initial conversion, and they persisted in following Jesus through four key expressions:

- **The Apostles' Teaching** – There was some communication from those who had been with Jesus as to what He said and what He taught. This was what Jesus had told His disciples to do in Matthew 28:18 – "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." These believers gathered to hear what Jesus commanded.

- **Fellowship** – This is the first use of an important word in the New Testament: *koinonia*. We will unpack this further when we look at verses 44-45, but for now just note that 1) it is the second thing listed and 2) the word means “close association and sharing.” Extravagant grace will fall under this heading later on in the text.
- **Breaking of Bread** – There was some expression of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. We are not sure what exactly it looked like, but it certainly included the basic elements of bread and wine after the pattern of the Passover meal. But it also seemed to include a larger fellowship meal or “love feast” in other settings (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-31).
- **The Prayers** – Prayer was a central part of the Jewish daily life, and this included personal and corporate prayer. The early church continued some level of personal and corporate prayer time. Some of this may have happened in the temple arena, but other prayer times happened in people’s homes. But the point here is simply that prayer was a vital part of their experience.

This is where the church began – with these key dynamics. Each of them is vitally important for the life of the church, and I wanted to start here as we talk about extravagant grace in the church so that you understand the context. The reason that I am highlighting this is 1) so that you realize how critical extravagant grace is for a church, and 2) so that you will remember that extravagant grace is not everything. Balance is the key.

A church that emphasizes teaching, the sacraments, and prayer but neglects true, biblical fellowship is an unhealthy church. And a church that really shares and cares in the lives of people but does not have a commitment to teaching, sacraments, or prayer is also an unhealthy church. A body of believers is called to be just like Jesus – full of grace and truth. Individual believers are called to the same spiritual pursuit – to be full of grace and truth.

Let me tell you that when a church is able to balance teaching, sacraments, prayer, and fellowship, there is nothing more glorious or powerful. Discovering how to balance these elements is not easy, but in doing so, the church is unlike anything else on the planet. A church full of teaching, fellowship, sacraments, and prayer can change the world.

Extravagant grace is only truly powerful when it is set in the context of depth.

## 2. Power

There is something nearly irresistible about a church that loves the gospel and lives out the gospel. Verse 43 says that “*And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.*” God had miraculously empowered the apostles to perform miracles that validated the work of God in their midst. This miracle-performing ministry seems to be something unique to the early church. Does God still perform miracles? Yes. But my sense is that God does not do them in the same way – namely, through specific people. These signs and wonders were for a season.

But the real point of verse 43 is not the signs and wonders, but the sense that God was in their midst. That is what “. . . and awe came upon every soul” means. There was a real sense of the work of God in their midst. It seems that this refers to people inside and outside the church – a reputation that something supernatural was happening in the life of this body.

One of reasons that I wanted to talk about extravagant grace is because I know from personal and pastoral experience that it is a faith-building experience. To know that you have been a part of God’s mission, or to be the recipient of God’s grace when you needed it so desperately, confirms in your soul that God is real.

Since last Sunday I have heard from a few of you who were on the receiving end of extravagant grace. One man told me that during a week when they were not sure how they were going to pay for groceries, someone, for no apparent reason, paid for their groceries while in a checkout line. With tears in his eyes he said, “It was unbelievable how God took care of us.” Extravagant grace is a part of the powerful demonstration that God is at work.

Jesus said it this way to 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, ESV)

### **3. Fellowship**

In the first point I mentioned the idea of fellowship, and now we come to the two verses that help us to see the connection between the early church and extravagant grace.

*“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.”* (Acts 2:44–45, ESV)

I am sure that there were many ways that the church expressed its fellowship with one another, but this was the most visible and tangible expression. There was a heart-felt care and love for one another. In other words, the church was a place where hurting people were cared for.

First, there was a unique sense of togetherness. At a minimum this means that they met together. They gathered regularly as a group of believers. But the sense of this goes far beyond just meeting in the same location.

Second, we get a clear picture that this togetherness meant more than just meeting in the same place. The people “had all things in common.” This does not mean that they lived a communal lifestyle or no longer owned any possessions. Rather, it is a statement about how they viewed their lives in relationship to others. They were together, and their experience of God’s grace led them to see the needs of others through a different lens. They loved God and others so that the needs of others became a priority for them.

This is what the gospel does when you really “get it.” It is what I hope happened to those of you who received the envelopes with \$100 in them last week. The gospel should pull you out of your self-concern and self-focus and cause you to be concerned about the needs of others.

Third, we learn what they did. They not only saw the needs of others differently, but they also saw their own “things” as the means by which the needs of others could be met. In other words, they experienced God’s grace personally, they saw everything that they had through this grace lens, and they leveraged their grace gifts to be the means by which the needs of others were met. According to verse 45, they sold what they had in order meet the needs of people around them.

How counter-cultural this is! No wonder people stood in awe. They saw what they had as the means by which they were able to meet the needs of people around them. That is not how people see their stuff. That is not how our children see their stuff! One of the first words that they express is “mine.”

But the gospel transforms how you see your stuff! When you know that everything you have, you have received, it changes how you view what has come under your care. The gospel changes how you see your role in relationship to the needs of others.

Let me show you this in another section of Scripture and then come back to the effect of an extravagant grace culture.

### **Extravagant Grace Economy**

About fifty years after Pentecost, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about a number of issues, but one in particular was related to the needs of the church in Jerusalem. Paul was encouraging the church in Corinth to be extravagant in their love, and he wrote 2 Corinthians 8-9 as a case statement for why they should give themselves and their resources as another church had done (2 Corinthians 8:4-5).

Central to Paul’s motivational argument was that through generosity the church in Corinth would be entering into God’s economy of grace. I am using the term “economy” because there is a divinely ordained system of the management of resources and needs.

Here is what Paul says:

*“I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 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. And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”” (2 Corinthians 8:8–15, ESV)*

Notice what we hear in this text:

- Generosity proves the genuineness of love (v 8)
- Extravagant grace flows from our understanding of the example of Jesus (v 9)
- Giving comes from what you have. In other words, no one is able to “take a pass” on generosity (v 12)
- God intends that the abundance of others will meet the needs of those who are in need, and when life circumstances change, that there will be a reciprocity in meeting the needs of others (v 14)

Paul’s point here is simply that extravagant grace is the way that God meets the needs of people. And when we enter into this system of grace, we are joining Him in His work. In other words, God has not only given us grace and gifts to meet our needs but also to meet the needs of others. It would be tragic if you stopped the flow of grace. It would be spiritually unhelpful for your soul and for the people around you for you to become a cul-de-sac rather than a conduit. If you have “the gift of receiving,” it says something really bad about your understanding of grace.

Now a mindset like this creates some immediate challenges or questions. You might be thinking: *So I have to be generous? or If I’m gracious, someone might take advantage of me or If I give, or I might not have enough.* Those are all understandable concerns. Here is how Paul answers them in 2 Corinthians 9.

*“The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.” (2 Corinthians 9:6–10, ESV)*

To address those concerns, Paul says the following:

- True generosity is not something that is forced. Therefore, we need to work on getting our hearts ahead of our resources (v 7)
- God is able to give you sufficient grace for the gap that extravagant grace creates (v 8)
- Generosity is a powerful step of faith in God, putting your trust in His sovereignty, and it is something that will help your soul (v 10)

Extravagant grace is not just about our resources. It is not about your money, time, schedule, or plans. Extravagant grace is about entering into a spiritual economy that is good for your soul, good for the needs of others, and good for the life of the church.

Look at Paul’s summary statement in 2 Corinthians 9:11-15 and notice how it all comes back to extravagant grace:

*"You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:11–15, ESV)*

I hope you see how important this is. Extravagant grace is the beautiful intersection of grace to us, grace to others, and glory to God. And I would encourage you to think about how to apply this in your life. Here are a few ideas:

- Some of you really struggle with giving at any level. Maybe you just do not give to anyone or anything. It's time to start.
- Some of you are blessed with a great deal of financial abundance, and you need to think through what generosity looks like for you. Generosity is not a just a big number; it is a costly number.
- Some of you give out of other people's checkbooks. When you see a need you think, *The church should do something about that or the people with money should do something about that*. But I want you to see that **you** should do something about that.
- Some of you need to see your relationships not just as something that is good for your soul in terms of accountability and community. You also need to realize that God has brought you together to help each other.
- Some of you are not in the kind of relationships that I'm talking about. You would know about a need because you are not close to anyone. You need to take a step toward getting into the lives of other people.
- Some of you need to change the lens through which you see your time, your stuff, and your money. You need to embrace an open-hearted perspective on life.

There is something really beautiful about this – something amazing about God's economy of grace, and yet it is really easy to lose that perspective. Our default is to think about our needs, our desires, and our wants. And we need to be reminded about God's grace and our role.

### **The Effects of Extravagant Grace**

Let's go back to Acts 2 and see the final picture of the culture of early church. There is a clear sense of the favor of God as the Lord kept expanding their ministry:

*"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." (Acts 2:46–47, ESV)*

God blessed the early church with more opportunity to reach more people. It was not just growth for growth sake, but there is clearly a sense here that God entrusted them with even more. God brought more needs and more people their direction. The church developed a positive reputation in the community. They were a church with an influence that was irresistible.

You see, that is what I want for our church, and that is why we spent the last three weeks talking about this subject. The spiritual needs in the community of Indianapolis and around the world are incredibly huge. The darkness and the need are great. Yet the church of Jesus Christ as lived out in all of our lives has the real solution. God's grace can change people's lives. It has changed ours. And there is something compelling – even irresistible – about a group of people who are passionate followers of Jesus in what they believe and in how they live.

People who “get” grace, give grace! And College Park, our world needs lots of extravagant grace. Sin and brokenness and pain and need are so great. But grace is greater still.

Here is how the hymn writer said it:

*Sin and despair, like the sea waves cold,  
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;  
Grace that is greater, yes, grace untold,  
Points to the refuge, the mighty cross.*

*Dark is the stain that we cannot hide.  
What can avail to wash it away?  
Look! There is flowing a crimson tide,  
Brighter than snow you may be today.*

*Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;  
Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that is greater than all our sin*

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