

Evidence of Grace

Acts 11:19-30

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We turn in God's Word this morning to Acts chapter eleven, as we continue down the path of seeing the early church formed and spreading the work of God. And we see the church growing despite persecution—in fact, flourishing—as a result of it. In fact, it has reached our ears because what man meant for evil, God would use for the good. We read of that here this morning in Acts chapter eleven, verses nineteen through thirty, as now the Word of God is having great effect in people being converted to Christ, Jew and Gentile, in what is present-day Turkey. Hear now God's Word.

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord Jesus, we ask you that you would come, by your Word, with the presence of your Spirit, to awaken our imagination of what it is you call us to be as Christians. We would ask you, oh Lord, that what you would bless us with is the thing that we most need: your presence. And may your presence be a wonderful aroma to all that are around us—not for our glory, but for your splendor. We pray you would do this. Now help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

David Brooks, writer, columnist for the New York Times, one of my favorite writers—I recently posted an article on my Facebook page as evidence of the fact that he is a very good analyst of culture—but also what many don't know, or at least, many of the folks I've talked to have been surprised to find out, is that he is on record for saying in public how much he loves Christians and how many of his friends are Christians and how much time he spends in the Christian world. In fact, he single-handedly gave the best summary of the gospel in the New York Times that I've ever read. This is a number of years ago. So, he is a person who clearly has heard the gospel and understands it. But one of the things he understands is that the Christian—as he recently spoke to a gathering of Christians—ought to be able to show evidence of the grace. Evidence of the grace of Christ. Those are his words.

One of the things he understands is this about human beings: we love reading biographies. One of the things we love about biographies is what we learn about the person we're reading about. But he says in summarizing it, and I paraphrase it this way, that what oftentimes inspires us about someone that we're reading is not what made them happy—that's often well and good—but what truly inspires us is reading about the arduous things that they did, and how their hard work and difficulty made them who they are. That is the thing that inspires us. It's evidence of character. It's evidence, if you may allow me, it's evidence of grace. If he were standing here and encouraging us as a congregation, it would be, "How and in what way is the evidence of grace at work in our midst? But how is the evidence of the grace of Christ showing itself to the world around us?" This is precisely what drew Barnabas to Antioch. So let's look at this together, and in so doing you'll see that there's grace on display in verses nineteen to twenty-four, there's the origin of a name in verses twenty-five and twenty-six, and then the model of charity in verses twenty-seven to thirty.

First, grace on display. What's very clear from these opening verses is that the first thing that we must always direct our attention to when looking at where grace is showing itself, is what this passage mentions—it's the first sub-point, if you will—it is: presence trumps plans. Presence trumps plans. Notice what they say: "Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen"—they traveled. And as they went, on the go, they preached. They were making disciples.

And by the way—this is an aside, a freebie—in Matthew chapter twenty-eight, what we call the "great commission", which I still don't know where that came from—but we all know, at least we think we know, what is the first verb in the great commission? That's the way it appears in all of our English translations, but in the Greek it is not a verb. It is not an imperative. It is a participle, which means *as you go*. The first verb, the first imperative in that text, is make disciples. Which means you don't have to go overseas to make disciples. You don't even have to go across town to make disciples. It's as you walk up your cul-de-sac, "Lord, how might you be calling me to make disciples?" So as these Christians, who didn't go because they wanted to go but because they were persecuted, *as they went* they were making disciples.

But what we see is this—and this is something which perhaps we often take for granted when we read it—but if there's anything that the modern church needs to hear, it's these words—and this is verse twenty-one—: "and the hand of the Lord was with them." Presence trumps plans. By any church-planting manual, by every seminary course, by every book given today for churches, by all the blogs, by all the seminar world that is trying to feed Christians and the church—everybody is ready to give us their nice little plan for what it means to be the church, for what it means to grow. But we can have all of that stuff and not have the presence of God. We can have the best-laid plans of mice and men, but it will come to naught unless the presence of God is there. Presence trumps plans. Please understand, it doesn't mean we shouldn't plan. It doesn't mean we shouldn't strategize. It doesn't mean we shouldn't be tactical in our thinking. But if we think that being strategic and having plans means that somehow God has baptized it, let us be careful. This was not well planned. It's as they went, they preached Jesus Christ. The hand of the Lord was with them. If you remember anything—presence trumps plans. The seminar this weekend reminded those of us who were gathered here as CPC-ers of this reality: the church is really good at temple-craft. We know how to build buildings, we know how to put a worship service together, we know how to put programs and plans and all of these things together, but does having a beautiful building, does having a well-organized, well-run worship service, does having plentiful programs mean that the presence of the Lord is here? Do plans bring in the presence? Presence trumps plans. The grace was evident because the Lord was there first, and he was working.

The grace was also on display because of what Barnabas learns, and it's easily summarized in four verbs. What it tells us of Barnabas in this passage is summarized in four verbs. This is the second sub-point, if you will, you'll see it right there. It begins in verse twenty-two: "The report of this came to the

ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.” He went as an apostle; he went as a disciple to go, and in so doing, he came as one who was mature in the faith, and he was going to bring shepherding work that was reaching their ears among Jews and Gentiles in Antioch, which was certainly no place considered to be a friend of Christianity. This was all happening in the midst of a very exiled place for a Christian. So Barnabas comes in verse twenty-three—here’s the first verb: “He came.” Second: “He saw.” Third: “He rejoiced.” Fourth: “He encouraged.”

First, he came. He simply went because the evidence of the arduous work of undergoing persecution that God would use to bring the gracious work of the Spirit in drawing people to himself despite the persecution—that evidence had reached the ears of the Christians in Jerusalem. So Barnabas came.

Second, he saw. What did he see? It says, “He saw the grace of God.” Now, we don’t know specifically what it was that he saw. What we do understand is that because of God’s presence there—where God’s presence is, fruit of the Spirit will be produced. Very clearly we know, because it’s inferred in the passage, that they were a generous people, a caring people, a loving people, a humble people. It’s the fruit of the Spirit. That’s what he saw. Beyond a general description we can’t go any further, but he saw the grace of God doing its work. That was the evidence.

He rejoiced. This is something that we must be reminded of over and over again. This is something that we did as a group of folks at the seminar this week; on Friday, they asked all the teams that were here for the seminar to simply give a description of that which we can be grateful for as a church. And we could have gone on all day. There is so much to be grateful for, because it is a gift of God’s grace in our midst. It is stealing from God his glory if we forget to rejoice. It is stealing from God his glory and splendor if we forget to rejoice. What are you rejoicing about today? Even in our stubborn brokenness, as recipients of grace, there is something to be grateful for. If you are not a Christian, there is something to be grateful for, and while you and I may disagree—you may not see it as the grace of God, but I say, if any of us is grateful for anything, that is God’s grace. What are we rejoicing about? Barnabas rejoiced, because he saw—it wasn’t *his* work, it was God’s presence!

Fourthly, he encouraged them. What did it say? It says, “He exhorted them to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.” There is a word here that is also within the Greek though not translated here in this particular translation, but it is, “He encouraged them to remain steadfast *in their hearts* with purpose.” And that is, what did it look like for them to continue to be steadfast? This is what N.T. Wright talks about as the virtuous circle—that for the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, the church is ever to be giving itself to this virtuous circle. The virtuous circle is made up of this: an immersion in the Scriptures. Secondly, a retelling of the stories of Jesus Christ that come from those Scriptures. To live lives as examples to one another. But then, fourthly, to be a community. And finally, to continue in the practices of what it means to be a Christian. That’s what we call the means of grace. Scripture, prayer, celebration of the sacraments—these are things that the church is called to; this is part of the virtuous circle, Wright would say. This is what, though not summarized in that way, when Barnabas said to continue in steadfast purpose in your hearts, he means to be holding ourselves to the Word of God.

And of course, they didn’t have the word of the New Testament to pass around to each other yet, but they were telling stories about Jesus Christ and his death on a cross, his resurrection on the third day for our sins and our salvation. And they were preaching that name. But they were also seeking to live lives of example to each other. Barnabas himself, an apostle, he was coming and he was encouraged. He rejoiced. Their example was evident to him. Here’s a question that I was presented with and our team was presented with at the seminar that I was so convicted by: is your life worth imitating? Is my life something anyone would want to imitate? Is my family a family anyone would want to imitate? Praise be

to God, the only way any of our lives are worthy to be examples is because the presence and the grace of God is active. To continue in community and continue in these practices, this was the grace on display.

But then what happens after he has encouraged them to do this, we come to the first example, the first acknowledgement of the name Christian in the New Testament. It's mentioned three times: here, later in the Book of Acts in Acts chapter twenty-six, and then in Peter's letter. So there we see three times, and it is not a self-designation. It was a name given from those on the outside. We see it here, in verses twenty-five and twenty-six. So Barnabas went to Tarsus—that was about a hundred and twenty miles away—he goes to get Paul, he's busy preaching there, he brings Paul back, he stays for a year. This was the beginning of the missionary journeys. And it says there that they taught a great many people. What was it they were teaching? They were teaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were preaching Christ, telling the stories, showing the fulfillment of the Scriptures in Jesus Christ. And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians. Now we know by the way it was phrased that it was phrased as something that would only have been given as a name from the outside. And in so doing, what's clear is, what was it they were known for? This is important. This was not Christians going around with bumper stickers, if you will, sewn on the back of their tunics, saying "I'm a Christian," you know. No little Ichthus magnet. It's fine if you have one, but you get my point. This was someone coming up to them and calling them, "You are a Christian."

Why were they called Christians? Why did this name first appear? What did it mean? Very simply, it meant that because of the evidence of the grace, because of the stories that they told in their preaching, because they went back to the fulfillment of the promises in the prophecies of the Old Testament, finding their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, preaching Christ crucified and raised from the dead—that they were known in all that they did as Christ-followers. Because it must be clear that to be called a Christian, it meant that Christ was so on their minds and so on the tip of their tongues in what they did and how they lived that they were called Christians. It was a blessing. A blessing! Even though some may have meant it as an insult, to be called a Christian was a blessing. Now what is it, then?

So if you are not a Christian—or even if you are—and you wonder, what does this mean to be called a Christian? Very simply, it is this: if your idea of being a Christian begins anywhere else other than the central person, Son of the Living God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, than you will have started from the wrong place. Being a Christian doesn't begin from the outside in; it begins in a relationship from the inside out. Being a Christian doesn't mean, first and foremost, being obedient. Being a Christian, first and foremost, doesn't mean going to church. Being a Christian, first and foremost, doesn't mean all the accoutrements that we try to pack in to that. It begins and *only* begins and finds its ending in Jesus Christ and him crucified and raised from the dead for our lives. We might have a lot of information about Jesus, we might have a lot of information about God, observed from nature, read in stories, intuited from the reality that you are made in his image, but if all we have is information and not a relationship, then we will have missed what it means to be a Christian. It's very clear—it's all through the gospels—that if you want to know what God looks like, you look at Jesus. If you want to know how God acts, look at Jesus. If you want to know how God loves, look at Jesus. If you want to know how God forgives, look at Jesus. You see where I'm going. It begins and it ends in Jesus Christ.

And so if you are a Christian today, you must recognize that in our culture we need to begin the process of reconstructing what people think "Christian" defines. It's not about the radio station you listen to. It's not about the books you read. It's not about the language that you use or the vocabulary that you use. Being a Christian is not how you vote or don't vote, or how you feel or don't feel. Being a Christian only begins and ends in the person and work of Jesus Christ. If we present anything else, we will have drawn people *away* from the good news that is a person and not information. We will have made Christianity into a composite made up of a lot of other things that might be good things, but they are

never central. How you vote *is* important. How you live *is* important. How you educate *is* important. But it's never the main thing. Ever. *Ever*. The name on the outside of your church might be important, but it's not the main thing. Jesus—can I beat that one more time?—is the main thing. The origin of the name began and must continue to be because people see Jesus, and if they see Jesus, they've seen God. We have been made in the image of the living God, been given the grace of the living gospel, so that God and Jesus and the Spirit might be on display. May that be the reason why we are given the name. There it might be an insult—so be it; there it might be a blessing—so be it; if all of it goes to his splendor and glory.

But finally, we see that because of the name, because of the grace on display, we see it lived out in their model of charity. In this model of charity, what we see is this: now in those days, prophets were coming. This was early on in the church, the gift of being a prophet. One of those was Agabus, and he came, and he predicted because he had been foretold by the Spirit, the text tells us, that there would be a great famine. Praise be to God that from multiple sources outside of the Scriptures, there is clear evidence from non-Christian sources that there was indeed a famine during the reign of Claudius. They believe it was somewhere around forty-six to forty-eight A.D., and it was within the Roman Empire. So what is clear is this: that they heard that there was going to be this famine, and they gave by faith, according to what they were able to give to their ability, to send relief to brothers living in Judea. So what this group of largely Gentile converts to Christ were doing is they were giving gifts to Christians who were Jewish converts in Jerusalem, in and around, because they could not provide for themselves. And they gave generously.

What is so beautiful about this picture is that their wealth brought them a solidarity and a unity in purpose so that in so doing, they would be able to live in interdependence. To be a Christian for them, to live out the name, to display the grace of God that was evident and at work in them, their wealth became an opportunity to express solidarity and unity with other Christians who were poor, and it led them to a great interdependence with those Christians who were a long way away from them—eight days, very likely, by some accounts. But they gave, and they gave to Barnabas, and to Paul, and they took it.

What is so interesting about this for us is this: wealth is an enormous blessing, but it can also be an enormous challenge. Because for us in the west, wealth tends to not build solidarity and unity and interdependence; it tends to build individualism and self-dependence. Wealth is expressed in the west by gaining greater distance from other people and greater independence as a result, and self-dependence. That is what success looks like in the wealthy west. But for the Christian, we fight against that. Why do we give to our diaconal fund? We give because we trust that the Lord knows who has need, and that God has ordained and called these men to serve you and to serve those who have need. Because the Lord desires for our wealth to be a blessing that calls us into greater unity and interdependence, to fight against the suburban west of independence and self-dependence. Do you see? This is what we get to do.

So when we give, we give according to our ability, according to that which you and the Lord have determined, that which you are able to give with thankfulness to the Lord, and we let the Lord use those gifts for caring for his people. Now, we can use it in various ways; we can give to the diaconal fund; this morning we're going to be doing Operation Christmas Child, we're going to be talking about that; there are many ways in which we can give to others. We give by way of doing mission work; we give by way of doing other mercy ministry here in this community; there are lots of different ways to give. You might be wealthy more in time than in financial resources; there's an opportunity to give. But it's all a blessing of the Lord, and may he enable us as he did these early Christians to go away from self-dependence to interdependence, because it is, if you will, it is for us a beautiful thing that this passage is here.

These early Christians, despite the persecution—the Lord was at work. And it is for us an example worth imitating. But the beauty of it all is that it wouldn't have happened, and it will not happen in us,

unless the presence of the Living God is at hand. Unless he moves us. Unless he broadens our imagination for what he wants to do. But surely, if this is what he was doing in the early church, how much more does he not want us to receive his grace? And I will use it till the day I die—and you’ve heard it already twenty times I’m sure—that we are to be the colander of God’s grace. His grace will never be exhausted. It is poured out. And may CPC grow to be a colander of grace, so that it flows out in all the holes to be a blessing to others, because the Lord has done this, because it is evidence of his grace. Let’s pray.

Now, Lord, come and make us to be a people for Jesus Christ, that the aroma, the evidence of grace would be on display to one another and to the world at large. Lord, we cannot do this—we can’t strategize, we can’t plan this—it will only come as a result of your presence. So Lord, as you have promised, pour out your Spirit on your people, pour out your Spirit on this congregation, that the evidence of your grace will be for your splendor and our good. In Jesus’ name. Amen.