

They Devoted Themselves

Acts 2:42 -47 with James 5:13-16 NIV

Song: Learning to Live Loved and The Wall as an illustration for devotion. They devoted themselves.

You have heard me speak of a man named Ken Howell. He is one that I could never repay for all the teaching, encouragement, and example that my family and I have received along the way.

His health keeps him from being active in the church now, but this story happened years back when he was very active in the Wheelersburg Church.

Some of the men and women participated in a calling program mostly motivated by Ken, if my memory is correct. And there was a stretch of time when several of those called on decided to go to church; but not the Wheelersburg Church of Christ. The calling group, esp. Ken, got the reputation for making good Baptists.

When I read the following illustration on Sermon Central, it reminded me of what had happened to Ken.

ILL.- A Methodist church tried to get a man to attend, but he never did. "Why don't you come?" the minister asked, and the man finally admitted it was because he didn't have proper clothes. So a member of the congregation took him to a clothing

store and got him a nice suit, shirt, tie, and shoes. But on the following Sunday, he still did not show up. So the minister visited him again and asked him why he didn't come. "When I got dressed up in my new suit," the man explained, "I looked so good I decided to go to the Episcopal Church instead."

What is the purpose of the church? Do we come to show off our Sunday duds? There is nothing wrong with dressing your best on Sunday. But, of course, this is not our main reason for coming. We all know this. We certainly know this in our church. If the best you have is bib overalls, that is good enough here. (And bib overalls aren't cheap, by the way.)

Most people realize that the reason we come to church is not to show off our clothing or to see what other people are wearing. Why then do we come to church? For what purpose?

I read an illustration about a man who visited his mother in a health care facility. While there, he noticed a group of people having church in an activities room right there in that facility.

He attended a large church that had all the bells and whistles. This small group brought a question to mind. So, he

decided to ask his question to those in the group as well as some of the staff in the room.

He went from table to table, person to person, asking, "If the amenities, that is all the bells and whistles, of a church are not important, what is important?"

Here are some of the answers they gave him:

"The attitude of the people."

"The friendliness of the people."

"The closeness of the people."

"The feeling you get in church."

"Caring people."

"Being made to feel welcome."

"Salvation of souls."

"Sincerity of the people."

Only one said, "To hear a good sermon."

And some would say, "Right on!" That's the reason to have church.

Hopefully, when you go, you will hear a good sermon. But to these people, this small group whom the man surveyed, some who had lived many years said the most important reason was the people. (We understand this to mean that these people have become like Jesus; people who are learning to treat others as Jesus would.)

The majority of the people said that the most important thing about the church was the people. People draw people.

Most people go to church because of the people who attend that church. They like the people. They like the friendliness, closeness, and attitude of the people. Here is a saying that I have heard for many years: **‘They don’t care what you know until they know that you care.’**

Jesus put the growth and spread of His church in the hands of 12 ordinary men powered by the Holy Spirit. He didn’t choose the educated religious establishment; but fishermen and the like. Common folk; day workers...

The early church had something going for it. On the day of Pentecost, about 3,000 people repented and were baptized and the Lord added them to His church.

And, as we read on, Luke tells us that the church grew; that the Lord added to the church. In chapter 4, we see the number 5, 000. In chapter 6, we read that the number in Jerusalem grew rapidly...

The early church grew rapidly. 3000, 5000 and more! Why? What was happening? Did they have a great Senior Minister? No, there were no such critters back then. Did they have great greeters at the door of the church house? No, they didn’t have even an official church building.

What about their youth program? Their bus program? Their athletic activities? Their "Spring Fling"? VBS? The multipurpose/megachurch facility?

They didn’t have half of what we have today, but they certainly had something that caused the church to grow. What was it? They had an intense devotion to the Lord and to each other. They devoted themselves.

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

There is one serious problem with this passage. The rest of the Acts account and most of the Bible could be taught or preached from this passage. Where do you start and stop?

One sermon that I read, the writer, Steve Shepherd, outlined the passage like this:

- **Truth that exalts –teaching;**
- **The tie that binds-fellowship;**
- **The table that humbles- communion;**
- **The throne that blesses-prayer.**

The proclamation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and its meaning for the salvation of souls: authoritative teaching coupled with the delight in fellowship; eating together and remembering Jesus in the breaking of bread and drinking the cup; continuing their tradition of and finding new meaning in their regular time of prayer in the Temple.

This new life and devotion to one another broke 180 degrees away from the religious rulers Jesus accused of devouring widow’s houses. As need arose, property was sold to meet needs. Proof of devotion; more that just words-joyfulness and generosity of heart were two of the outstanding characteristics of the early church.

I once heard a preacher say that if Jesus had your heart, he owned your wallet. The same preacher claimed that if you showed him your check book, he could tell you about your spirituality-his

point being money, your possessions, and heart walk the same path.

Remember the story of the rich young man that I used a few weeks ago? He claimed that he kept the commandments, but when asked to give up his wealth and follow Jesus, he went away sad. His wealth, which included material possessions and position in society, meant more to him than eternal life or placing God first above his amenities: all the bells and whistles he thought made him who he was.

There is nothing wrong with wealth and possessions unless they become the most important thing in your life.

The new heart that was prophesied and delivered to the believers that changed the attitude of the recipient, along with the Apostles teaching and miracles that verified that Messiah had come, found the favor of the people.

But the Apostles would eventually be gone; and the miracles only lasted for the most part through the generation that followed. What was left would have to sustain the church: the teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer—more than enough when coupled with a new heart.

However—don't you just hate the 'however.' This is such an encouraging passage to have a 'however.' However...

The Wall, by the anonymous author, illustrates how, over time, a couple can grow apart. I believe this same principle applies to a group, as well. Anytime you have two or more people trying to go in the same direction; working for the same goal, you will have conflicts.

These conflicts come in all shapes and sizes. King David said that he hid God's Word in his heart so that he wouldn't sin against God. But, we have written record that he did sin against God. So, even the best efforts of a man after God's own heart came up short. So...

James writes:

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (James 5:13-16)

I am aware that this is a controversial passage. Not all the best thinkers in times past agree on how this 'public' confession should play out in the church.

I want to approach this confession and healing that James writes about coupled

with the devotion Luke describes in the early church.

As you read what they were devoted themselves to: teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer; think of these as a combination of vertical and horizontal relationship – vertical being the relationship with God and horizontal with brothers and sisters.

The devotion to these four items mentioned carry all the 'one another' passages written in the New Testament.

As I read through James' letter to the church, I believe he writes mainly to our horizontal relationship. Just at a glance, the topic divisions in the NIV: trials and temptations; listening and doing; favoritism forbidden; just to mention a few, all deal with this horizontal (one another) relationship.

As we grow and do our very best to devote ourselves as the early believers did, our enemy, the powers of darkness, are doing everything they can to get us to 'look for love in all the wrong places;' to allow walls of opinion or personal preference to divide us, in general.

I personally believe that if the enemy can't stop you from becoming a Christian, the powers of darkness will do everything they can to keep you from being an effective Christian.

One way that they can do that is to **drive a wedge between you and a fellow**

Christian. And it doesn't have to be something major. It may seem trivial to some. But the enemy can, over time, make a mountain out of a mole hill. And I'll bet at one time or another it has happened to everyone here.

The best approach is to deal with the mole hill before it becomes a mountain. "Nip it in the bud," Barney would advise. But, we don't always do that. That would be too easy.

We know that hiding sin in our heart rather than God's word, as David did as best he could, can make us sick emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and even physically through bitterness, anger, a lack of forgiveness leading to anxieties, sleepless nights, and such. The list is long.

The continued fallout from the enemies wedge can begin to erode this devotion that we read about in Acts. The enemies' ultimate goal is to divide and conquer.

We may have prayed to God many times about a particular situation, asking for forgiveness, when actually what we need is healing: healing on the horizontal.

If you haven't read Matthew 18 for a while, Jesus addresses this 'healing on the horizontal' in verses 15-17. But don't stop with just these verses. Read the whole chapter several times if necessary.

And it doesn't matter whether you are the offender or the offended, if you are

aware that a problem exists or even suspect that a problem exists between you and a brother or sister, you are accountable to deal with the problem.

Caution: understand this - when it comes to sin - confession, public or private, and healing between you and another or physical healing: all suffering, affliction, and/or dis-ease are a result of sin; sin coming into the world in the Garden of Eden. But, the particular suffering, affliction, and/or dis-ease you may be going through are not necessarily the result of personal sin in your life.

Do you remember the warning about being careful what you wish for, and being aware of what others close to you wish for? Because, if those close to you get what they wish for, it will affect you.

God may be dealing with those closest to you, and you may catch some of the fallout from God chastening them, because we are all connected.

But, know this - if you are aware of a problem, great or small, between you and another Christian, and you do nothing to reconcile the horizontal relationship, your vertical relationship will suffer: it will become dis-eased.

God designed His Church to be interactive and interdependent. The Bible describes the church using the human body as an example: many parts, different functions, making up one body. Unless you do your part, the body suffers.

Your ministry in the church directly affects those closest to you as well as the rest of us, and the universal church as a whole. Now, I'm not saying this to blame you or shame you; I'm saying this to encourage you minister how the Holy Spirit has gifted you because when you do, those using their gifts around you will be encouraged and strengthened and you will receive the same.

If you don't minister as you have been gifted, it's like a transparent wall begins to form around you and severs the connections between your life support from the body of believers and weakens those closest to you. Slowly, the wall thickens and grows until it's like cold stone.

This condition is what I believe James addresses when he writes: **confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.**

You are too important to the body to allow the enemy to sever your life support. You are a precious gift from God to this church. Your soul is so important to God that Jesus left the presence of His Father to dwell among us and secure you a place with the Father by giving His own life.

They (the early church) devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

They devoted themselves to the Lord and each other. This devotion and encouragement became standard operating procedure that carried them through good times and bad times: able to stand their ground when the enemy gave them his best shot, because they knew they were not standing alone.

Closing thought:

The man who visited his mother in the health care facility learned a valuable lesson about church –you can have all the bells and whistles, but what makes the church work is the people: people draw people; people following Jesus example; people who devote themselves to one another... ‘They don’t care what you know until they know that you care.’