

Gifted and Committed to Be the Church!

A sermon based on Acts 2:42-47, ***"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."***

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Just over a month into the new year, I think it's fair to ask...how are your resolutions coming along? Did you make one or two? If it was to get healthier, either through dieting or a workout regimen, have you been sticking to it? Are you still doing the calorie counting or eating a salad a day or keeping true to the workout program you started last month? Have you even started?

If it was to be more prompt with getting house projects done, have you? Have you compiled your daddy-do list yet? Or have you been using the weather for an excuse...it's too cold to work out in the garage...whatever the excuse is, letting them slide to the backburner again?

I don't mind sharing some of mine, that I've tucked into my daily planner for the constant reminder (and being better planned is one of my resolutions!). Let's see, service with a smile (remembering getting to work for Jesus, no matter how insignificant the task might seem is such a gift)...I think I'm doing that. Praying more frequently and urgently...I'll admit that's the one that I'm always struggling with, but I'm hoping my customized book mark with a weekly prayer list will help me take strides. One more, take my spiritual growth and personal growth more seriously, which is slowly gaining traction, mostly by reading books on being a better dad and husband and being a better shepherd for you (and I'm happy that I'm making the time for that). So, all said and done, I'm doing ok on my resolutions.

As you see and probably know, it's hard to keep your resolutions sometimes. I'm there with you. It's hard to stay committed to your goals. It's hard to be devoted.

Are you gifted to do that, though...to be devoted...to be committed, especially as it pertains to the church? I mean, this really has been somewhat at the heart of our sermons over these past couple of weeks, hasn't it...examining these gifts given to us for the divine purpose of serving God and his people here, ultimately bringing much-deserved glory to God...and then asking the question, are you committed to using those gifts here?

Well, maybe for you, as we've been hearing Paul's advice, his encouragements, even a few of his rebukes when it comes to yours and my spiritual gifts, this concept still feels a bit abstract. How about seeing it in practice?

Look no further than our verses from Acts 2. Here's what I would call the model church. This was right on the heels of the great day of Pentecost, the great miracle of the Holy Spirit. The disciples had been emboldened to witness for Christ. And through their message and the waters of baptism, their numbers had exploded by the thousands...in one afternoon.

After that great day, what did this model church do? Listen closely and start to list their attributes, as I read our verses again: ***"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of***

bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

What do you see in that church? They devoted themselves to fellowship, to prayer. They spent quantity and quality time growing together as a congregation, a lot of it in prayer.

They were filled with awe (presumably at God's grace in action in their lives; again, look at Pentecost). Wonders and miraculous signs were done...like legit miracles, what we think of when we hear the word, although I would contend things like regularly hearing of God's grace and watching more and more join God's family through the waters of baptism...pretty great miracles there, too!

They spent lots of time together. They sold their possessions as they already possessed the greatest treasure of all - forgiveness through the precious blood of Jesus. But they willingly and readily supported the needy.

They met together in the temple courts for worship...how often? Yeah, every day. They broke bread (both in celebrating the Lord's Supper and in even just plain potlucks). They praised God. Imagine the songs of praise they belted out day after day.

Who would like be part of that kind of church? It sounds fun. They got it. Because, above all else, what did they do? None of that would have been possible without a commitment...**“they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.”** In other words, they focused their lives on God's Word and let that dictate who they were going to be as a church. Hear that again. They focused their lives on God's Word and let that dictate who they were going to be as a church. They were committed.

Do we look like that? Do you look like that?

Friends, we've had some, what I would call, very forward conversations over the last two weeks concerning every one of us and our spiritual gifts, and it's really been building up to this. It's time to have a serious, heart to heart conversation...and it comes back to this main question...are you devoted? Are you committed to being the church? In other words, are you committed to what we're doing here as a church?

Let's take a slice out of this congregation and examine. Like, for instance, when you have more favorite hymns being sung in your New Year's Eve worship than people in attendance who actually requested them. And no, I'm not being salty.

Or, maybe the extra worship opportunities provided here during your week aren't even something you consider..."because I went Sunday. Why would I need to go again?"

When a resident at the nursing home's random gift of \$100 to the church (which happened when we went caroling in December) is more than what you gave the entire last year...and that from someone who has absolutely no connection to this congregation.

Or, when a non-member spends more time helping with a church project than you did with your service the entire year...or maybe even offers to fund that particular project...and they're not even invested in this congregation and its mission and the work God has given us (yes, all of us) to do.

When God tells us in his Word that only through his Word can we grow in our faith in him, and yet regular worship isn't a priority; or when only about 25% of the congregation is actively in at least one of our Bible

classes here; or when your Bible is one of those items at home that you have to take a dust rag to because you haven't even opened it in some time.

Or, if none of that applies to you, evaluate yourself in light of this: "*I do intend to continue steadfast in the true Christian faith, be diligent in the use of God's Word and sacraments, and lead a godly life even to death... I will support with [my] prayers, time, talents, and offerings the work our Lord has given to this congregation.*" Recognize that? Those are promises you made when you became a member of this congregation, through your confirmation, either as an adolescent or an adult. Have you kept those commitments?

How do we stack up to the model church in Jerusalem? Right, it's as simple as a side-by-side comparison with this fledgling congregation in Jerusalem, isn't it?

Frequent meeting together for worship...do you? Breaking bread together, taking part in opportunities to grow with your family here...do you? Spending quality time in prayer...do you? Willingly and readily supporting the work of this congregation with your offerings...do you? Being filled with awe at the miracle of the gospel, the message of God's love given to us, and then praising him in response...is that still you? And above all else, being devoted to God's Word – hearing it, reading it, studying it, learning it, craving it, sharing it...is that still you?

Is that still us?

You see, put all of that together, take our pulse, our worship attendance, our Bible Class attendance, our personal devotion lives, our offerings, our prayers, our willing service in the church, and the question needs to be asked: Have we lost sight of what it means to be the church?

The early Christians lived only for their Lord and for other members of His Body, the Church. That was their focus. That was their life. How cheap in comparison is our indifference to the Church; how sad are our compromises with the world which are telling us church (and everything it entails) isn't important. How unfortunate is our lack of commitment and devotion to God's Word and to being the church God has gifted us to be. How sinful.

Friends, I know this is hard to hear. Hard because it's you. Hard because it's me, too. Hard because our sinful natures do not want to hear it; they'd rather shut your ears and tune out everything else from here on out. But these words are no different from God's Word...from the mouth of Jesus to another congregation (Christians in Laodicea), "*I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.*"

If you've been coasting as a Christian for too long, the senior slide, if you will, when it comes to your commitment and devotion to being the church as God has gifted you to be...if you've stopped caring, that's God's Word to you...again, to all of us...this is God's warning.

Do you understand? Something's gotta change. Do you know how the model church became the model church? Something changed. Do you know what it was? Well, what happened prior to these verses from Acts 2? The day of Pentecost.

Do you remember the most spectacular part of that day? The tongues of fire on the disciples' heads was unforgettable, as was their speaking in tongues. The enormous number of 2000+ people joining God's family was nothing short of incredible. But that all paled in comparison to the message, which was spoken in the tongues and which lead to the mass conversion and baptism.

You see, that day, Peter preached a biting sermon. He confronted the people with their sins, how they were the ones who put Jesus on the cross and murdered him. And the result of his words? We're told the people were "*cut to the heart.*" They felt the guilt of their sins. They repented of their sins.

And God's response? He forgave.

Are you and I any different? The lack of devotion to God and to his Word and to being the church God wants us to be...it sends the same message. Those sins – yours and mine - we killed Jesus. And that truth...it cuts us to the heart. And we confess our sin. And God's response? He forgives.

You know why? It's because of commitment...not ours, but God's to us. For our lack of commitment to God's Word, God remained devoted to his word, the greatest promise he made, starting in the Garden of Eden, where he promised to send his Son who would "***strike [the devil's] heel***" and crush his power...which happened the moment the cry "***it is finished!***" left Jesus' mouth in his final moments of life on the cross. That's the culmination of his work for us, his perfect life, given as the priceless offering on the altar of the cross to take our sins...that everlasting forgiveness, which was guaranteed in full and forever the moment Jesus stepped out of the grave, alive.

Through that commitment, you are forgiven. Hear that again. Through Jesus' devotion to you, you are forgiven! You have been baptized and made part of God's family. By God's grace, he's made you part of this family.

Now it's time for our response. It's time for us to remember our commitment. It's time for us to re-devote ourselves to this.

Have any of you ever renewed your vows with your spouse? Why would you do that? Because, while it's an incredible blessing, marriage is also hard. It takes work. And sometimes we get lazy and need the reminder of what it's all about...putting in the hard work in order to love and be faithful to your spouse for life, no matter what.

Is it time for you to do that here? Can this - no, will this serve as the call for you to re-devote yourself to being the church, bringing your focus back to God, his Word, and living in grateful response to his Word?

Are any of you familiar with the "Year of Jubilee"? It was this time in Old Testament Israel – every 50 years – where peoples' debts were forgiven. If you had sold your property off to pay a debt, that land was returned to you. If you had sold yourself off as a slave to pay a debt, your freedom was returned to you. You got to start over.

Can this be our "Year of Jubilee" here at Light of the World? I won't forgive any monetary debts you might have. I will remind you you've already been forgiven the debt your sins amassed through Jesus' commitment to you. And today gets to be the day we start over.

We've lost ourselves. We've lost our sense of what it means to be the church. We've lost sight of our purpose. A book I'm reading, called "The Simple Church," puts it this way, "**Many of our churches have become cluttered. So cluttered that people have a difficult time encountering the simple and powerful message of Christ. So cluttered that many people are busy doing church instead of being the church.**"

So, maybe it's time to get back to the basics...to be like the model church here. And notice, I called it the "model" church, not the perfect church. It was made up of sinners, just like this one. It means being like this is not beyond our capabilities. We can, and get to, go back to being all about the gospel...to devoting ourselves to the teachings of the apostles...God's Word.

And here's God's promise. He will bless that devotion, much as he did with the model church. How, I don't know. In what way? We'll get to work and see.

Friends, you are gifted by God to be part of his family here. Now, let's pray that God would bless our commitment to being the church – his church – here: "**Lord, open our eyes to your reality, your grace in our**

lives. Help us to order our priorities, devote ourselves to you, and focus as a congregation on your goal, being transformed by the power of your Word and sharing that life-giving Word. That's a worthwhile – divine – commitment.” Amen.