

The Mission of the Apostles and the Mission of the Church

Acts 4:29-37

Turn to Acts 4 please. The message today is about two different missions. The mission of the apostles is to preach the word, preach the gospel, and witness to the resurrection of Jesus. The mission of the church is to be the people of God, to be one in heart and mind to and take care of each other.

From the first three verses of Acts, we could see that Jesus was doing something with the eleven that he was not doing with all his followers. We saw the two distinct missions in Acts 2. Peter and the other apostles received the Spirit so they could preach what Jesus had instructed them to preach.

That was their mission. The mission of the church was to be the new people of God that we saw at the end of Acts 2, the new society, the true Israel. In Acts 4 we will see the same two missions as clearly as we saw them in Acts 2. Turn to Acts 4:33, for this is as clear in that verse as anywhere. Today we will begin in v33, which is the middle of today's text.

**The Spirit Produces Two Missions – 4:33–34a**

*With great power the apostles gave their witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.*

God's great power and grace takes his people in two different directions. God's great help leads the apostles speak the gospel openly, and to do signs and wonders. God's great help leads the church body to be unified and take care of each other.

God's helping presence takes these two different forms among his people. Verse 33 does not mention the Holy Spirit, but the divine energy of the Holy Spirit is all through this. When the Holy Spirit is powerfully present, how do we think that will look? What will happen?

One, the apostles will preach the word boldly, and they will perform signs and wonders. This makes sense to us, we expect the power of the Holy Spirit to look like that.

Two, the body of believers will be heart and soul one, and they will take care of each other. And we may say, "no, that is not the power of the Holy Spirit, not in the same way." But it is the same miraculous Spirit power in one as in the other. That's the whole reason Luke sets up v33 the way he does. "Great" power on the apostles to witness, "great" grace on the church to take care of each other.

In both cases, the word “great” means “miraculous help from the Holy Spirit,” and that’s the only real explanation for either one. The apostles aren’t that wonderful, the Gospels taught us that. The church isn’t that wonderful either, just more ordinary people. What the apostles do and what the church does comes from the wonderful Holy Spirit.

### **There was no needy person; the least brother or sister of mine - Acts 4 and Matthew 25**

This line, “*there was no needy person among them,*” is just what Jesus was talking about in the judgement parable of the sheep and the goats. Here’s a part of that parable: Matthew 25:37–40.

*The righteous will answer the king, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ‘The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did for me.’*

The Spirit’s helping grace was so strongly on the Jerusalem church in Acts 4 that they did just what Jesus described in Matthew 25. There was no needy person among them. All of the least of the Lord’s brothers and sisters were getting care. We read this about this church at the end of Acts 2, and here we see it even more clearly.

That’s the church’s mission. We will go back to the two missions, the apostles and the church. Acts 4:43 is part of a bigger story, and we’ll look at that now.

### **The Bigger Story – Acts 3–4**

In Acts 3:1, Peter and John went to the temple for the daily prayers, and on the way in, they met a lame man whom they healed. “*He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God.*”

So a crowd came around, and wanted to know what happened. Peter said, “don’t look at us as if we were anything special. We’re just like you. This happened by the power of Jesus, whom you handed over to be crucified by Pilate, but God raised from the dead. That why this man walks.”

Peter preached Christ, and I love the last line of his sermon, the last line of Acts 3: “God sent his servant Jesus to you, to bless you, by turning you from your evil ways.” God sent his servant Jesus also to us, to bless us too, by turning us from our evil ways. God sent us Jesus to bless us by changing how we live. And he has!

But in 4:1 the high priests and the rulers came and arrested Peter and John. They were very disturbed. It was already late in the day, so they put Peter and John in prison overnight (4:3).

The next day the leaders brought Peter and John out, and Peter preached the same things to the priests and rulers. The leaders decided that they could not punish this, but they could command the apostles not to speak like this anymore, and they could promise all kinds of punishment if the apostles kept preaching about Jesus this way. Peter said, “we have to obey God rather than people. Jesus commanded us to preach this message in Jerusalem.” So the rulers made more threats, and let them go.

So Peter and John went back and got together with the other ten apostles, and the twelve prayed together in 4:23–31. They prayed that God would hear the threats of the rulers, and that God would make the apostles bold. Because they were scared. And this brings up a scholarly debate, which sermons should not have, but once in a while it’s necessary.

### **Who Prays Together in Acts 4:23–31?**

Most of your Bibles will have a heading above Acts 4:23 that says “The Believers Pray.” I am convinced it should be, “The Apostles Pray” rather than “The Believers Pray.” You have a right to an explanation about that.

Scholars are divided on this. Some scholars say that 4:23–31 describes the *church* praying together, and other scholars say it is just the *apostles* praying together. Verse 23 opens with Peter and John going back to their own people, and “their own people” could mean either the rest of the apostles or the rest of the church. “Their own people” leaves it open, so we have to decide from the larger flow of the story.

I’m sure these verses tell us about the *apostles* praying together because of how it ends. It ends this way: “*they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*” Until Acts 6, the apostles are the only ones preaching of the gospel, the only ones speaking “the word,” as Acts calls it. After Acts 6, the Lord calls more people to preach the word, Stephen and Phillip and Paul, but not before that. Even after that, all believers are not filled to speak the word.

In Acts 6, we read about the widows in the church that were being neglected in the daily food distribution. In that story, the twelve spoke to all the believers and said, “it is not right for us to leave *the word of God* to wait on tables. You pick seven to wait on tables, and we will devote ourselves to *the ministry of the word.*” At the beginning of Acts 6, the apostles are still the only ones preaching the gospel.

That’s Acts 6. If already in Acts 4, all the believers were speaking the word of God boldly, Peter’s words in Acts 6 about the twelve needing to preach the word make no sense. It only works if in Acts 6, the twelve are still the only ones preaching the word of God. That means the prayer for boldness, in Acts 4, comes from the twelve. The heading in your Bible above Acts 4:23 should say, “The Apostles Pray for Boldness.”

If you think about this, it makes sense that “their own people” would be the other apostles. Right from Acts 1:1–3, the apostles have been a tight group, always together. In Acts 2, Peter’s sermon comes from that group.

In Acts 3:1, Peter and John go to afternoon prayers at the temple, but not the other apostles. Peter and John preach, and then they are in custody overnight. The next day they are commanded not to preach about Jesus any more. The other apostles will want to know what happened, and since they are the preachers, they need to be told about leaders forbidding them to preach.

By the beginning of Acts 4, the church numbers 5,000 men, besides women and children. How will they get them all together? That happens only at the temple. It makes more sense that Peter and John would first speak to the other apostles.

Now we’ll read verses 29–37, to show more clearly how Acts carefully goes back and forth between the apostles and the church, to show the mission of the apostles and contrast it with the mission of the church.

### **Mission of the Apostles - 4:29–31**

*Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.* That’s the apostles.

### **Mission of the Church – Acts 4:32**

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.* That’s the mission of the church. Now Luke gives us both sides again, just to be completely clear.

### **Mission of the Apostles Again (4:33a):**

*With great power the apostles gave their witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.* Just what we saw in 4:31 - *They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*

### **Mission of the Church Again (4:33b–37):**

*And great grace was at work in them all so that there were no needy persons among them. For, from time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.* The mission of the church was entirely one another.

## **The Purpose of the Book of Acts: The Gospel Creates the New People of God**

In Rev 7, John sees a great crowd that no one can number, a multitude from every nation and tribe and people and language, all praising God and the Lamb. Acts tells us how that happened, how the gospel spread from Jerusalem, by the work of the Holy Spirit, to include more and more of the world's nations and peoples.

When Acts describes the church, it does not speak about more witnesses and more missionaries. It does not describe all believers going to seek and to save the lost. It speaks about the new people of God, the new nation, the new society, and how they are unified and love one another. All of this just echoes how Moses taught Israelites to live with each other.

The mission of the church is to be this new holy people, this new holy nation, the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the city on a hill. They will know we are his disciples, if we love one another. Acts teaches us that the gospel of Christ brings this new people of God into existence. The gospel spreads to create the new people.

At this early stage of Acts the apostles are preaching the gospel, but that did not take them out of local church life. They would not wait on tables, they had a different service than that. But the people brought their money to the feet of the apostles. The apostles were involved in that church and knew who had the real needs. At this stage, the apostles were the elders of that first church.

The apostles were involved enough to be impressed with that Levite from Cyprus, whose name was Joseph. The apostles saw that consolation poured out of this man onto other believers, and called him "Barnabas," "son of consolation." Those called to service outside the local church stayed involved in local churches. This was consistent in the New Testament, though sadly it is not always true now.

## **We Are the Church**

As I said last week, the Lord still gifts and calls people as evangelists. Some spread the good news right where they are planted, and the Lord sends some far away. I don't if this includes any of you, although it might. Remember that everyone he sends goes.

Our church business before God, our mission, is to be his people. We cannot treat our life with each other as optional, or an accessory to Christian life. Jesus was not much interested in love for God that did not show itself in our love for one another. This is a real challenge in our individualistic society, with our endless distractions, and our lives that are already so busy.

On the other hand, with God's help, much of this happens here. I see much, and I just see a fraction of what happens. God has been pulling us this way, and that shows in this body. The only question to ask is, "what works for me?" Don't worry about what others do that does not work for you. We all have limitations, based on who we are, and our situation.

Right now, most households carry difficulties and troubles. That's our situation. Yet the Lord brings us together, and we worship and pray, we eat the bread and we drink from the cup.

What works for you? Some of us serve the body regularly, and some once in a while. That's all the Holy Spirit at work. Some of us do things at the front, and some do things no one sees. That's the Holy Spirit at work. What could *you* do that builds unity and serves others? Don't ask me what you should do. I don't know, I have my hands full sorting out what I should do. Take care of one another. One on one works just fine.

Remember the church at Ephesus, the first church Jesus speaks to in Revelation 2–3. They worked hard to carry his name faithfully in a hostile setting, and they did this well. Jesus commended them for this. But he said they had left their first love for each other. They had been like this early Jerusalem church in Acts, and then had left that behind.

Remember, Jesus says, and repent, and do what you did before. If you don't, though these other things are good, I will take away your lampstand. You will no longer be the light of the world, no longer a church. These people had stopped loving each other as Christ loved them.

That's not us. There's lots of care for one another happening here. I mention the church at Ephesus only so we'll grasp what's at stake here. Much care for one another happens here.

We all have limitations, and church life has never been any different than that. The Holy Spirit is not limited by our limitations. Jesus asked, "what do you have?" Five loaves and two fish can go a long way. We have a mission, and every week the Holy Spirit's power carries it along. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, you said that the fields were ripe but the workers were few, and we should pray to you to send more workers into your fields. Lord of the harvest, there are not enough workers in those fields. There are people out there ready to turn to you. Send workers out with the good news, fill them with the Spirit and send them out.

And Lord, fill us with your Holy Spirit, so that we can be heart and soul one, and so we can serve one another and care for one another. We want to bring glory to your name. We want to live like your people. Fill us with your Spirit for this. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.