

Why Church Matters: Part Two

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[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible, and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, well, this is the second part of a short, two-part series. This represents some teachings that I did, a number of years ago about the meaning of "church" as it's described in the New Testament. The earliest church communities were groups of Jesus's followers, gathering in Jerusalem, around a core set of habits and practices that are described in Acts chapter 2.

And so, in this teaching, I explore the discipline and the habit of "sharing"—sharing resources and time, and our lives with each other—that "opening up the boundary lines" that we place around ourselves, our time, our resources—and letting other people in, and letting our time and resources out, into the lives of the other people around us.

From the very beginning, this characterizes a core habit of followers of Jesus. So why is that? Why is learning "how to share" something that we can't stop learning—like in Kindergarten [Tim laughs]—but something that we have to relearn and commit

ourselves to in every season of our life? And why does church play such a key part in helping us keep learning how to share? That's what we explore in this teaching from Acts chapter 2. So there you go. Let's dive in.

And, just, "Surgeon General's Warning:" I remember being deeply, personally challenged by this teaching, and I keep coming back to these passages and these texts in the New Testament over and over again, in different seasons of my own life. So I hope it's helpful for you. Let's go for it.

[Musical break (2:34–2:38)]

We're camping out in the first chapters of Acts here, and we're kind of watching Luke's depiction. He's—all through the book of Acts—the Book of Acts is like a "foundation story" for us as a community of Jesus's people. And we're looking at how he depicts the rhythms and the routines, and the values and priorities of this church community. So why don't you open with me, if you haven't already, to the book of Acts, chapter 2. And we're going to dive into the same passage we were in last week, and discover new things there.

In the Mishnah—which is a collection of teachings and reflections on God's word, from non-Christian, Jewish rabbis and so on—there's this great, little phrase they have about the Torah—which is their way of referring to the Scriptures, particularly the first five books of the Bible—and they say, "Torah is like a diamond because you turn it and turn it again, and look, because everything is in it—if you have ears, listen"—right?

But it's, like, this multifaceted diamond, and you can look at the—you can read the Bible, you can read the same passage in the Bible—ten times or whatever, or read it over many years—and then, all of a sudden, you turn it again, and you're like, "Holy—I never saw that before—are you kidding me? No, that's so . . ."—do you guys know what I'm talking about? So that's why these passages—like in Acts that we're about to read tonight—we're going to look at some of the same verses that we liked that last week, because it's like a diamond: turn it, turn it again. Everything is in there.

Chapter 2, verse 42—and we traced the whole story last week: this explosion of new followers of Jesus, after Peter gives this amazing witness to the risen Jesus, through his words, and 3,000 people are "added to their number."

And what are these followers of Jesus doing? Verse 42, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. And every day they were meeting together in the temple courts”—big, big gatherings of people—“but they broke bread in their homes”—small gatherings, too—“and they were eating together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God, and enjoying the favor of the people. And the Lord added to their number daily, those who were being saved.”

The Lord adds to the number of his people when his people are faithful to bear witness to him in their words—like Peter was doing—but also now the life—the common life of this community itself—enforces the words of Peter, and becomes a form of “witness.”

And last week, we looked at these four habits. Look at verse 42. This community of people adopts a whole new set of routines and life habits together. And that’s one way of thinking about what it means to become a Christian, is to adopt a new set of habits around a new set of priorities. That would also describe what the “life of a church” is. It has a focal point, and it has routines and rhythms—of gathering people together around this core set of priorities.

And so I, kind of, laid these out last week—I’ll do them again because we’re going to camp out on a different one. So the first one: What are they devoting themselves to? So the apostles’ teaching, all right? So first and foremost—I’m going to translate these into, kind of, what this means—this is a community of “learning.” This is about exploring: if the Gospel is actually true, what does that mean for every part of human life and experience under the sun? For relationships, for work, and for how you think about money and sex and justice and art, and everything else in between?

And so the apostles’ teaching is about Holy Spirit-inspired—through the apostles—this guidance, of what it means to live day-to-day life as a follower of Jesus. And so this community was known, foremost, as a community that gathered to learn a whole new way of life, a whole new way of thinking, and a whole new way of behaving.

Now, the second thing is what we’re going to camp out on tonight, so let’s just leave that one blank [Tim refers to a visual] for this second.

What’s the third thing they dedicate themselves to? So that is a phrase that sometimes refers to “taking the Lord’s Supper”—like, the bread and the cup. It also could just be referring to, like, them gathering to eat constantly together. Because they either lived in Portland—right?—where we love to eat a lot? Or they’re gathering in people’s homes.

And actually, the two aren’t disconnected. In the home—it was actually, precisely “in the house gatherings”—we learned this from First Corinthians—it was in these home

gatherings that, when these disciples of Jesus would gather, they would eat meals together, and as a part of those meals, they would take the bread and the cup.

It was kind of like the way that you might pray before—at the end of a meal or something. This is how they would eat their meals together. And a part of it would be taking time to take the bread and the cup to remember Jesus's broken body.

And so this isn't just about communion. This is about certain—it was a priority for them in different ways—in big groups, in small groups—to just be together. That's kind of a bland way of describing it. But there's intentionality here. An intentional commitment to be together as often as we can.

And then what's the fourth thing they devote themselves to? Prayer, or you could say "worship." This is about our response to the God who's revealed himself to us in Jesus.

Okay, so we kind of talked about these last week. I want to focus in on the second one here. And I'm guessing in most of our translations, we're going to—what's the second thing that they dedicate themselves to? What is it? *Fellowship*.

Okay, now, so this is another one of these "code words," in English, right? "Fellowship." I doubt you used it in any other conversation, with anybody, in your normal day-to-day life. But somehow, I go over to someone's—like another Christian's house for dinner, and it was a really great time, and you leave and say, "Oh, wasn't that such a great time of fellowship," right?

[Tim grins] And you would never say that about anybody else—or, like, your friends who aren't Christians—like, "Well, I'm looking forward to fellowshiping with you." [Tim laughs] You would never say that. That's Christian "code language," right?

And in English, what does it mean? It just means "hang out"—let's just "hang out" and be together as Christians, and we'll talk about our faith and life and everything else—and good food, because that's just a part of life—it's what you do. So hanging out is wonderful. You should absolutely hang out with people. That's good for you. And you should absolutely prioritize hanging out with Christians of like mind, and you can help encourage each other and so on.

But that's not primarily what this word means and what this concept is about in the New Testament. So the word that Luke uses right here—I'm going to learn a new Greek word here—the word *koinonia*. Why don't you say it with me? *Koinonia*. So *koinonia* is about much, much more than just, like, "hanging out." And actually, let's just let Luke describe what the word means for us, because he does it in verse 44, and following.

Look back at verse 44. Luke says, "All of the believers, they were together." There they are—they're hanging out together. So that must be fellowship? No, no—keep reading. "They were hanging out together and they had everything in"—now, English translations

have “common.” The word Luke uses in Greek is a form of this word right here: *koinonia*. What does that mean? Well, he says it right here, verse 45: “People were selling their property and their possessions to give to anyone else in the community who had need.”

They’re gathering together—meeting together in the temple courts—and they’re breaking bread in their homes—eating together with glad and sincere hearts. So what Luke’s saying here is they “dedicated themselves”—this was a priority and a commitment—a regular practice on the part of all these disciples of Jesus—to *koinonia*, which, it’s very clear that it involves “being together,” but a specific practice that—it has to do with—as our minds are being remade by the Gospel, it also remakes how you think about your life and your stuff.

And so, a simple way of translating this is: that this is all about “sharing.” This is a commitment to sharing—but it’s sharing all kinds of things. It’s about sharing my resources. It’s about sharing my stuff—my money. It’s about sharing my time. It’s about opening my home to be a place where we can be together and focus and talk about things that matter to us as followers of Jesus, and so on. You guys with me here? Luke defines what “fellowship” means right here—and it’s not just hanging out. It’s a commitment to share my life and share my stuff with the community.

Turn the page—chapter 4. There’s about half a dozen of these places as you read through the book of Acts—which I highly recommend and, actually, doesn’t take very long—there’s about half a dozen places where Luke, kind of, pauses the story, and he just gives a little comment, or a description, of what the life of these church communities were like, and so on. So that’s one, in chapter 2.

This is another one, in chapter 4. Look at verse 32 with me—and this is just a few months down the line here, still [the] same network of churches, here, in the city of Jerusalem. Chapter 4, verse 32, and he begins this description—he says, “All the believers were one in heart and mind.”

Now just pause right there, and just internalize that. All of these—how many Christians are we talking about here, at least? At least 3,000, right? And then, plus those who were—however many—the hundreds before them. And then, maybe we have a week or a month that’s passed here, and we heard that they were “adding to their number daily.” So who knows? Well, well over 3,000 people.

Now that’s crazy—to be able to make a statement about 3,000 people—that they were “all one in heart and mind”? When does that ever happen, [Tim laughs] you know what I’m saying? Like, even—in [the] American context, it’s even more absurd, you know what I mean? To have that idea, “one in heart and mind”—are you kidding me? That’s not how we would think to describe a community of thousands of people.

Well, that's how Luke describes them. It's even more remarkable—how did these thousands of people come together? Well, we just read it last week. There's tens of thousands of people flocking to Jerusalem in one of these pilgrimage feasts. And they're all Jewish—they have that in common. But we're told that they are coming from all different places around the Mediterranean, different languages, different cultures. They're ethnically Jewish, but they're living in different cultures and so on.

So you can imagine, like, there's all kinds of different food in Jerusalem that week. You know, some are eating the hummus. Some are definitely *not* eating the hummus. They're totally about the grape—stuffed grape leaves, you know? And there's this—there are all these diversities of experience and food and language and culture.

And then a whole bunch of them become disciples of Jesus, because they encountered this whole thing while they were there. And a whole bunch decide to stay in town. And so they're staying with these people that they just met a couple weeks ago—[Tim grins] I mean, just imagine the scene, right here.

And so a month or two goes by, and what's happening in this community? They're forming this—“unified in heart and mind—this unified community. And this is actually a really key part of what the word *koinonia* means. It's not just about sharing your stuff. It's about realizing that we're connected in a really unique and important way. Therefore, what's mine needs to be made available to you, if you should have need.

Look how he describes this here. He says, “All the believers were one in heart and mind, and nobody claimed that any of their possessions was their own. But they did”—what, what does it say?—“they shared”—I have, in the New International Version. Any other translations? Do we all have “shared” there . . . ? “They all shared their possessions”—or “everything they had,” or some of your translations have, “everything among them was common.” And guess what word Luke uses, right here, once again?

Everything was *koinonia*. Everything was subject to this deep, unifying value as a community: that we are connected in Jesus. There's a connection between us that maybe didn't exist three months ago, before all of this went down, but now there's something that binds us together—that's even deeper, for these people, than their own existing blood ties as Jews. It's their identity as disciples of this Jesus. And that all of them are coming together on level ground before this Jesus, who lived for them, who died for them, and who was raised [for] them.

And it begins to remake their minds as they gather to learn the implications of the Gospel—as they commit to meeting each other in relationship and gathering and focusing their worship. And it remakes how they think about their stuff. They see themselves as one community, and therefore, there's a commitment to share—you guys with me, here?

Okay, let's keep on going. Verse 33, the plot thickens—*dun, dun, dun-dun*. “With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” And we’re thinking, “Oh, that’s exactly what Jesus told them to do. ‘The Holy Spirit will empower you—you’ll be my witnesses, starting right here, in Jerusalem.’” It’s spreading, spreading, spreading—so they’re doing their job, exactly what Jesus told them to do.

“The apostles continued to testify”—pay attention, right?—this is so profound. “God’s grace was powerfully at work in all of them.” Or some of your translations have, “and great grace was upon them all [Tim pauses] for there were no needy people among them. From time to time, those who owned land or houses, they would sell them, and they brought the money from the sales, and they put it at the apostles’ feet, and then it got distributed to anybody who had need.”

This is really, really profound—and it struck me: this is one of the “turn the diamond,” and then, holy cow—I never . . . I’ve been reading Acts for years—never noticed this before. So we have this commitment to *koinonia* here—this commitment to share, which means—now some people, kind of, have run with this, since—“the first Communists, right here—there you go, right?” They’re like, “No, they didn’t own anything—everything they had in common.”

What’s interesting is that his language would lead you to believe that, but then he goes on to describe how it actually worked out. And it was that they didn’t view their stuff as their own. Therefore, somebody who would own property, or this, they would sell it, and then that would get distributed. It’s not like: if you’re a disciple, you can just walk into some other Christian’s house that you don’t know: “Hey, your stuff, my stuff. Hey, you know—I’m going to crash on your couch,” or whatever. So not talking about that.

Talking about: there was this awareness that other people in this community have something that I need, or maybe that I’m not using that I have, but I don’t need—and so they would sell it, and so on. It’s sort of like—this happens really commonly at my dinner table right now—where everything is subject to *koinonia* at my dinner table, because I sit by my two-year-old son, and he’s got a perfectly good sippy cup right here—it’s a wonderful little sippy cup—but then there’s my glass that’s right here. And somehow my glass is better than his, always, you know?

And so he’ll be like, “Dada, I want a drink.” And I’ll be like, “Yeah, buddy—like, your sippy cup’s right there, dude,” you know? And I’d be like, “Go for it, buddy.” And he just—oh, he grabs mine, right? And he grabs mine, and then it’s, like, the backwash and the bits of broccoli and this—and the smeary, all over the cup. And then he puts it down, and I’m just like, “Well, we’re family,” you know? So it’s *koinonia*.

So that could be what Luke’s talking about, right? *Koinonia*. What he actually goes on to describe is something more like Roman [Tim referring to his son]: “You know what? I

have two water glasses. Here you go, bud. Here you go—I'm not even using this one at all." And then you take what you have—you don't need, or whatever—and you give it to the community.

And there's actually quite a lot of debate about how this shared stuff worked in this church, and Luke doesn't give us that much information. But you get the principle. You guys with me here? There's an awareness that I am so deeply connected in—with the fate and the lives and the well-being of the people in my community—and the Gospel remakes—and we'll talk about how that works—the Gospel remakes what I view as mine.

And so these people are in the habit of taking whatever they have, but don't need—or have and maybe need, but feel like they need to give for the well-being of others—they dedicate to the community. It gets sold and distributed to anyone who has need.

Now also—sanctified imagination, too—you have to think, how many untold stories are underneath this here? So if you have, like, over 3,000 people with a big money donation-and-distribution system, think of all the people gifted at administration that had to run this process. We never hear about them. Like, their stories are not—who are those people? And did they get frustrated when somebody's—"Really? Why'd you sell that?"—you know, that kind of thing. So, but that's what's clearly at work underneath this, here. There's a whole community working out the details, and it's all based on this huge value, right here.

Now, look at verse 33 again. This is the process—this is what it looks like. And Luke, he thinks this is remarkable. Otherwise, he wouldn't be sharing this with us. It's as if there was a power at work—animating and motivating and inspiring these people to do things with their stuff that people don't normally do. You guys catch that?

And look at verse 33. He has a word to describe what was going on, or what was at work in these people—and what is that word? It says "grace." Grace—did you see it there? So, "great grace was on all of them." How do you know grace was on them? Because this is what they were doing, and he describes this whole commitment to share—God's "grace."

Now, this is an important, important pairing of ideas, so I'm going to connect to them here. "Grace"—this is another very rich, rich word with a whole bunch of deep connections to *koinonia*. And that's what we're going to explore with the rest of our time.

The Greek word for "grace" is the word *kharis*. *kharis*. Any Kharis's in the room? Bummer. It's a big room, so I thought there might be one here. So maybe you know a friend named Kharis—that's most likely a girl. Her name means "grace." The core idea of *kharis* is this connection with the idea of "gift." Gift.

And so we think about, you know, God's "grace"—one of the most important ideas at the core of the Gospel is that: what is God's response to a world of human beings who've been given immense opportunity and responsibility—just with our lives and our choices and our relationships and our decisions? And what have we done with the place? I mean, it's a good thing sunsets still look so beautiful, you know what I'm saying? But we've pretty much ruined the place, and ruined each other. And that's what the story of the Bible is trying to tell us.

What is God's response to a world of people who ignore Him—who ignore the Creator, who ignore, or begin to dull and mute that sense, that knowledge of good and evil that's inside of us—how we redraw the concepts of "good and bad," always for our own self-advantage, and we ruin the place—and what is the Christian God's response to a world of people like that?

And this is at the core of the Christian view of God and of the Gospel. His response—and it's one of the key words in the New Testament—is *grace*. *Grace*. Not only does he *not* give us what we do deserve, [but] he [also] gives us something that we do not deserve—which is the definition of a "gift," right? So if you worked all year long for something, and then that's what you got for Christmas, you're not stoked on that. Like . . . that's not grace at all, right? But what makes Christmas so rad is when you get something that was just totally a surprise—and it's a gift. So it's grace. It's grace.

Most of us are familiar with that idea: that God, in Jesus—in His living for us, in His dying for us, in His rising for us, in doing that for us, and in our place—and that if I grab on, in faith, to Jesus, what's true of him is now true of me as a pure gift—just, there you go. It's yours. That's God's decision, that he did that, to move towards us in Jesus. That's the base-meaning of "grace" in the New Testament.

But the way Luke is using this word, it seems like Luke sees more to this. In other words, when he says, "There was great grace on all of them," he's not just talking about, "and all of these people, like, *felt forgiven* by Jesus," right? Or "forgiven by God." There's something more here.

The way he's using this word, it's as if Luke's saying, "You know, the only way I can describe what would motivate people to do this with their stuff—and be so free and so generous, and commit to sharing anything and everything for the well-being of others in the community—the only thing he can think of, to describe what would motivate that, he says, "grace"—*kharis*.

And what happens with this word in the New Testament—we're going to see this in a couple of other places—is that Luke is using "grace," not something to describe this act that God has done on our behalf, but he's describing what happens when you accept that gift. It starts to mess with you. It starts to do stuff to you—especially if you're in the

habit and the routine of remaking your mind around the story of the Gospel, and constantly reminding yourself of it within a community of learning. And it begins to mess with you, and do stuff to you.

This is how I'm going to try and describe what Luke is saying here. It seems to me he's saying that God's grace was not just something that he did for them. It becomes this power, or a presence in their lives, that begins to motivate and generate these kinds of behaviors. And not only that, but then it becomes this word in the New Testament—we're going to see this—it comes to describe, not just the gift that God gives us, and not just the power and presence that motivates giving inside of me—it comes to actually stand for the "act of giving" itself.

And so there are biblical passages—we're going to look at one in a second—that actually call on Christians to "show grace." And by that, it means "to be generous with my stuff." You guys with me? Yeah, this is a very rich word and concept in the New Testament. And Luke is drawing on it here, too, saying: "The only thing I can explain as to what happened here with these people and how dedicated they were to each other—whereas they probably didn't even know each other a year ago—was that God's grace was messing with them. God's gift to them, in Jesus, began to motivate and empower a whole new way of living with each other—namely, sharing, so that none of them had any need."

Okay, let's take one more step here. So about fifteen, twenty years go by, and the church in Jerusalem ends up expanding and even dispersing [in] some parts, and you just read the story of Acts. And so then, kind of, the hub of operation moves up north, to a city called "Antioch." And from there, the Jesus movement—or the community of Jesus's disciples—starts spreading, just, all over, to the big cities of the Roman world.

And the key player in the book of Acts, in starting many of these new communities, is a guy named—what? Paul. We spent all of last fall focusing in on one of his writings. And so Paul—he's starting all of these new communities of disciples, and they're mostly not Jewish, right? They're not ethnically connected to these Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

And something happens in Jerusalem, and in the region around—and that's a huge food shortage—a drought and a famine. You can read about it in the book of Acts. And so these Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, they get hit super hard. There's starvation, and there's poverty, and people can't find anything to eat. And it's very, very difficult times for everybody—especially these Christians in Jerusalem.

So Paul, being the intense guy that he is, he gets this hairbrained idea. He said, "What if we did this—what if I were to make this quick trip around all of these churches of non-Jewish Christians that I helped start, and I help rally them towards an act of unity, with these Christians in Jerusalem? And not just an act of unity—it's a fundraiser. It's an act

of *koinonia*, is what it is. We're going to demonstrate our unity across 1,000 miles with these Christians that I've never met and don't have any particular connection to—except that, you know, we wouldn't exist as a church community here in Athens, Greece, if it weren't for what happened there, in Jerusalem.”

And so Paul—you can read about this project in many of Paul's letters—and he describes it. And there's one episode in this whole interesting story of Paul doing this fundraiser, as an act of unity, that broadens into this connection, here, of *koinonia* and grace, and what this means for us to be a church community.

So in Second Corinthians—and you can turn there, to Second Corinthians 8, or I'm going to have it up here on the screen because I want to play with the Greek words, and do that kind of thing up in front of you. So Paul's going to tell a story, right here. He's writing to the Corinthians, and he's telling a story about grace and *koinonia*—about *kharis* and *koinonia*.

He's going to tell a story about how he went up to some Christians who live up in Macedonia. And he says this to the Corinthians that he's writing to. He says, “And now, brothers and sisters who are in Corinth, we want you to know about the grace”—here's our word—“about the grace of God that has been given to the Macedonian churches.”

Okay, stop. Just stop right there. Pretend the rest doesn't exist, right? So let's say I were to come up to you and say, like, “Hey, you know, dude, I have to tell you about this amazing story of grace that's happened to these people up in Macedonia.” What kind of story would you think I was about to tell you? And my guess is you'd probably think, “Oh, this is going to be a story about how they heard the Good News about Jesus, and became disciples of Jesus, and accepted God's forgiveness for them.” And that's not the story that Paul tells.

What he tells is a story about this—he says, “Brothers and sisters, I want to tell you about this thing that happened to these Christians. These are already disciples of Jesus, but something happened to them. God's grace happened to them.” He says, “In the midst of very severe persecution, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” But that—there's a whole story underneath there that is incredible and inspiring and profound.

So you have a community of Christians—and we have at least one of Paul's letters to these Christians in Macedonia—we call them “First and Second Thessalonians”—but they are letters written to these Christians, right here. And we know that they were undergoing persecution—we don't know quite what form—if there was execution or there were people being arrested or kidnapped or something—but it was very, it was stuff like that—super intense.

So you have these brand-new communities of Jesus's disciples, and that's what they're going through—and they're dirt poor. That's what he says, right there, "deep poverty—extreme poverty." But what describes their attitude and their mindset? What does he say? "Joy." Now let me ask you: your sister got kidnapped—you lost your job because you associate with Jesus. How are you feeling when you wake up tomorrow morning? Right?

So *joy*—so this is a whole other message, or series, we could do on joy as a Christian. Because it's not just about an emotional feeling that you get. Joy, as a Christian, is about a faith commitment: that I will not allow my circumstances to determine the significance or the meaning or the trajectory of my life. That Jesus has such a firm grip on me—because he lived for me, he died for me, he rose for me—that not even death itself gets the last word in my story.

Jesus's life, his death, his resurrection for me determine everything for me. That's my identity—that's my future. Therefore, I can grab onto this "joy" that everyone else will think I'm absolutely crazy for experiencing—because they think I should be like, you know, considering suicide right now—my life is so hard. That's what's happening here.

And so you have these Christians—under extreme persecution—they're dirt poor—but they're utterly, utterly hanging on to Jesus in faith and, therefore, have joy. And what does all of this result in? What does he say? He said, "Dude, they came up with so much money, you wouldn't even believe it," right? "They came up with so much *koinonia*."

Their commitment to the unity and sharing with these other Christians in Jerusalem, whom they've never met, it just—look what he says here. He says, "I'm telling you, I testify"—by which he means, "I swear to God"—that's what he means right there—"I swear to God, they gave as much as they were able. No, excuse me—correct that: they gave *more* than they were able to. I have no idea how they came up with this huge gift for who they were and their circumstances. It's crazy. And listen, this is entirely on their own. None of us were pressuring them. They were pleading with us for the privilege of"—and come on, come on—what?—it's just too convenient, right, it's all connected—it's all connected right here—"koinonia."

In other words, they're saying, "We were going to leave them out. You know, like they're really poor. They're having a hard time. We were going to ask the Macedonian Christians. And they were like, 'What? You want to leave us out? No way.' You know, they were pleading with us, 'We want to give. We want to give.'" And so he says, "They wanted so badly—they pleaded with us for the privilege of *koinonia* with the Lord's people"—and that refers to the Christians in Jerusalem.

Now just stop and think this—this is amazing. What an amazing story. Is this a good story? This is an amazing story. Their faith and their joy and their commitment has been retold millions of times throughout the 2,000 years of Christian history. And this is a story worth retelling, is that: their commitment to both the unity—“I have no idea—I’ve never met these Christians in Jerusalem, but they’re brothers and sisters in Christ, and they’re going through a food shortage? Holy cow, I know what that’s like. They’re going through persecution, right? We know what that’s like.”

They sense a deep unity and connection with these Christians, and that results in the act of sharing—sharing the little resources that they do have. And so Paul—look at—so Paul is trying to—how do you explain something like that? And he uses the same exact word that Luke used to describe this crazy commitment to sharing in the book of Acts.

What happened to these Christians? What happened to them? He says “grace.” *Grace happened* to them—both God’s gift towards them, but he’s describing, like, something [that] empowered them and energized them to be able to do this. And then, here’s where the passage gets really great, because then he turns to the Corinthians. And the Corinthians had said, like, “Yeah, we’re all in. We totally want to give to this.” And then, like, three months later, Paul hears the report like, “Yeah, they kind of forgot and they, like, haven’t been, like, saving up, or anything like that.”

And so, look at what Paul says next here, just two sentences later. He says [Time paraphrasing Paul], “So you Corinthians,” he says, “you excel in everything. You guys are growing. It’s just like—you’re growing in faith. You’re growing in speech—how to talk about this ‘new life in Christ,’ and talk about it amongst each other, with other people. You’re growing in your knowledge, as learners and disciples of Jesus. You’re growing in total earnestness. No one can, you know—no one can fault you for that. You really are into everything that you’re doing. You’re growing in love. So you guys, don’t forget that part of being a disciple of Jesus means excelling and growing in grace.”

Now what does that mean? It’s very clear what he’s talking about. He’s talking about *giving*—generosity—this commitment to *koinonia*. And so what both Paul and Luke are getting at is that being a disciple of Jesus, and accepting this gift of God’s grace to me in Jesus—that before I was even looking for it, I was not looking for it, I was completely anti- and opposed—or I was just doing whatever I wanted to do—to a world full of people—who either are ignorant, or willfully ignorant and just doing their own thing—God’s response is to give a gift: to make a decision to permanently bind himself to broken, screwed up, sinful, selfish humans forever by becoming one of us in Jesus of Nazareth, and living for us, dying for us, being raised for us.

And therefore, when I pledge my faith to Jesus and grab onto Him, this is not just some, like, “legal transaction” or external transaction that takes place that’s sort of like, “Okay, *check*—received the gift. Okay, here I go with my life now.” What Paul’s saying is that

when you sign up for this ride of pledging your faith to Jesus, like, *stuff happens to you*. If you join a community of faith and commit to being together—making Jesus more and more the focal point of what your life is about—and you commit to learning and having your mind remade, *this will follow*, Paul’s saying. It’s just a natural outflow.

Why? Why? Because what happens when I become a Christian—it’s not simply that God’s just like, “Okay, like, great—you’re passed over—not going to destroy you—now on to the rest.” It’s actually God sharing his life with us. It’s God binding himself to us in Jesus, sharing in our humanity. In the Spirit—in the person of the Holy Spirit—actually coming to be *with* us, and to bind his life and begin to share His own character and life with us. When the Holy Spirit takes up residence in your life, it’s the Spirit of a generous, giving God—are you with me?

And so it’s not just like, “Okay, I’m a Christian—it’s good to share stuff now . . . I guess that’s a nice thing to do.” No, it’s like, “the generous, giving God has bound himself to me permanently in Jesus. He’s taken up residence in my life.” And so Paul says, “Listen, you’re growing and learning—you’re growing in faith. You’re growing in this. Seek to grow in this grace too—learning that my commitment to this community is not just some, like, volunteer thing that I do. It’s who we are. We’re disciples of Jesus, and we’re bound together in unity because [of] the gift of the generous, giving God. And he’s in our midst—prodding, poking, influencing us, to get our eyes off of ourselves and onto the needs of other people and to do something about it.” [Tim laughs] That’s just to put it very simply. That’s what Paul’s getting at here.

And so, look at how Paul sums all this up in Second Corinthians, chapter 8, verse 9. And look what he says here—he grounds all of this. He says, “Listen, you guys. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ”—and he’s going to describe this, right here. He says, “You know the grace, that even though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich.”

God’s grace is that decision that God made to become what we are, so that we may become what he is. That’s the story. That’s our foundation story as a community. And so Paul says, “If that’s who we are—if that’s the power that’s at work within us—then seek to grow in this area of your life. And it will result in *koinonia*—a heightened sense of unity and commitment to the community of disciples that I’m a part of.” And a heightened commitment to share my life—to share my time, my resources—in a way that benefits other people. You guys with me?

Let’s just stop, and let’s just reflect on this. Because, if you really think about it, how you choose to spend your time—how you choose to spend whatever resources of time or money that you have—those just speak volumes about what you care about most in life. And same for me—what we care about most in life.

And what it means to be a part, and to commit to this particular community—as with any church community, I would hope, but it’s what we’re shooting for in this one—this is part of who we are. We’re disciples of Jesus, and we’re seeking to grow in faith and knowledge and in speech, and all these other areas. We want to seek to excel in this grace, too. Because if we’re not, it means that we’re actually neglecting the very presence of the giving, generous God in our lives, who’s trying to get us to become more like himself. And who this God is, is revealed in the great gift of grace. It’s who we are—it’s where we’re going.

And so it seems to me, there’s three implications that I want to take a few minutes to explore here for us. And again, just like last week, I just kind of put the ball in your court. And just ask yourself: what does this mean for you? If you’ve been a part of Door of Hope—if Door of Hope’s your home church—if you’re considering being committed to Door of Hope—ball’s in your court: What does this mean for us?

So the first implication, I think, is kind of what you’re all going to expect me to say. [Tim grins] And I don’t even need to say very much about it, except being a part of a church means a commitment to be a part of a church, right? And so we totally recognize some people are in “fly-on-the-wall” mode. You know, you’ve been, whatever—you’ve been burned by Christians—or you have never been a part of a church before—you’re a new Christian—or you’re coming back, and you’re interested, you’re owning your faith in Jesus for the first time ever, maybe as an adult—all over the map here. And so you need to be in “fly-on-the-wall” [mode] for a while. We’re so stoked to be a place where you can do that—that’s wonderful.

But we are not stoked if you do it for too long. [Tim laughs] And it’s not selfish—it’s actually, we don’t think it’s good for *you*. Because you can grow in all kinds of areas, but you won’t grow in this “grace,” in the grace of *koinonia*, if you forever remain a “fly-on-the-wall.” It won’t happen—there will be parts of you that will remain, just, un-mature and not compelled and forced to grow if you don’t make some level of commitment—both to relationships, and then also to put—you know?—your money and your time where your mouth is.

And so Door of Hope, you know, throughout the four-and-a-half-year history, you know: finances have always been a challenge. [Tim grins] And it’s been the thing we celebrate and scratch our heads and get frustrated about, all at the same time, right? And we’re excited about it because there’s a lot of new believers. And so, this is a growing process. And it seems, as with the Corinthians, as with most of us, like, this is one of the last “graces” that we grow in for some reason—[Tim laughs] right?—as we become Christians. And so this one takes a while.

And so we’re glad to be a place where you can grow, but we do think it’s healthy for you to grow. We have a lot of young people who aren’t super financially stable. And so, you

know, that's—it's been one of these funny things where we have big attendance spikes in Door of Hope history, and then the giving goes down. And we're like, "What? How do you make sense of that one? [Tim jokes] Like, that's—there's more people and less money. Like, how does that work?"

And we're in a culture that doesn't think about things this way. One of the ways that we have our minds remade is that, if I'm a part of this community, it's both about the resources of my money—yes, that's a part—but also about my time and, just, being around—committing, serving, giving. It's just part of who we are. We're disciples. We pitch in. We help feed into the common life of what's happening here—you guys with me, here? It's the first implication. You guys were probably expecting me to say that.

And if you're feeling guilty—Josh loves to make people feel guilty, in trying to motivate them—and then. We're kind of the two ends of the spectrum here. And so, I'm all about, "Just, kind of, let people simmer," whatever. And he's like, "They've simmered long enough." Like, just [Tim laughs] . . . tell them what to do." And so he'll get up here next week, and he'll do that, and that's fine. That's how we work as a team. I'll let that sit with you—but you're actually acting against your own well-being. If you forever remain around Door of Hope, but never connected, never choosing to invest—that's the first implication.

The second implication, for me—it just struck me again—the "turn the diamond and you see it," and you're like, "whoa." It's—just think about the language used in both of these stories that we read, here, in the New Testament. These are stories about these Christians doing unbelievable acts of giving, right? These Jerusalem Christians sharing their stuff—selling it so they can give, give, give, give. These Macedonian Christians who are dirt poor—they're under persecution—but they give, give, give.

But in both cases, the way Luke and Paul describe what happened, and why these people did what they did—they use the language of these Christians who are giving—but they say that they were *given something*. Did you catch that as we read this story?

Paul says, "These Macedonian Christians, they gave more than anybody thought they had." But how he describes it is—he says, "They've been given—they were given a grace." That's what he says. A grace was upon these Christians, and happened to them, and was given to them to empower them. The very presence of the generous, giving God in their lives, empowered them.

And this is so profound, I think, for how we've talked about giving around here. Because when Paul wants to talk about what motivates somebody to give something, what he says—and what looks at this—is that they *received* something. They received a power. They received a gift that started to mess with them. And all of a sudden, it was just—this is just what you do. You just give.

And this is profound, I think, because—in other words, he describes these Macedonians—the Corinthians, clearly, Paul says, “Like, yeah, you need to pray that you get some of that, you know? Pray that you grow in this grace.” But the Macedonians—it just happened to them. And clearly, Paul’s amazed, and doesn’t really know how to describe it. He just says, “God’s grace happened to them.”

And so, think about it this way. Yes, it’s a commitment to give. If I’m a Christian and disciple, I’m going to commit to give and to share and to be a part of what’s going on here. But how many of you have been in situations—whether you’re in a church, or you’re at home or whatever—and you see commercials, you see TV ads, or magazine or something—and it’s the disaster relief organization—it’s the orphan organization—it’s one of the 2,000 nonprofits that exist here in Portland, right? And they’re sharing with you the specific thing that they’re working on, and the need and what they need.

And you know, we’re saturated with these, online and on TV, and so on. And so, how many of you have had this experience? You’re exposed to so many of these in a day, and all it does is shut you down—you guys with me here? You’re just kind of like, “I’m just going to go home, you know, and have a martini,” or something like that. [Tim laughs] I don’t know, you know? We just don’t know what to do. It’s this . . . paralysis, by this overwhelming barrage of need—“there’s so many, how do I even begin to know where to give time or volunteer or do this or that?” And so we end up doing nothing.

And I think there’s wisdom here, in these two passages, and in this idea about how you begin the discernment process. Because when Paul describes these Macedonians, he just says, “Dude, they were given a grace. How else do you explain these poor persecuted Christians? And the moment they heard about it, they were just on it—‘We are all over that. We can’t *not* do something about that.’”

And so, maybe there’s—again, ball in your court—there’s a prayer that you need to begin to pray. Because Paul says to “seek this grace”—*seek*. There’s a grace that we are given for certain things. When the Macedonians responded to this need, there was—something happened in them. He said, “God’s grace happened to them, and they could not *not* do something about it—they *had* to do something about it.”

And so perhaps there are times, there are places, there are moments where God gives us a grace for a certain need. And the thing that we need to begin to pray is not like, “Make me into Superwoman or Superman, who can meet all the needs of the world,” [Tim laughs] right? It’s to just, “Give me a grace for one thing that I can focus on, and that I can give myself. Give me *a grace* for this thing.”

And what happens—that you have been given *a grace* for something? It’s because when you hear about it, like no one needs to guilt you, and—you don’t need to hear

Josh guilt you next week, [Tim laughs] you know what I mean? Like, you're just like, "I have to do something about that."

So earlier last year, when we had the opportunity to bring Anna Clithero on, and start Door of Hope Mentoring—it was awesome, right out of the church among you all, connecting with at-risk youth for mentoring and so on—and there's a whole bunch of you that you just, you heard about that, and something happened inside of you.

And it's a big commitment—so it's a big time commitment of your lives. But for those of you that I've talked to who are doing it, it doesn't—yes, it's a big commitment, but it energizes you. And Paul would say, "Dude, *grace* happened to you. You've been given a power and a grace for that. Run with it." You guys hear me here?

And so Paul says, "Seek this grace." Some of us, like, it's not even on our radar. And so my encouragement to you would be, like, you know—don't just sign up for everything. Don't do everything for every need that comes across your way. Pray for the grace that will be given to you to do the thing that God will give you to do.

And see, what this does is it frees us. There's some people who are just really passionate, in the church, about their thing, or whatever. And so it's very easy to get into—they clearly have a grace and a passion for something, and then they, like, start to look down on the other Christians in their church who aren't as passionate about their thing. You guys know what I'm talking about?

And then it's sort of like, it's like, "What's up? These other—these lazy Christians—they don't love Jesus. Like, they're not into, like, this thing—orphan care for this or that or whatever—[Tim grows more intense] why don't you wake up, people?"

And it's like, "Chill—hold on. Chill out." Okay, it could be that they're lazy. That could totally be the case. It could also be the case that they've been given a grace for something else, and that's okay. That's great, you know? You have your run with yours, you know? And then, all of a sudden, when you meet people who have been given the grace for the same need that you're passionate about, there's a special bond there—you form a team. You're not alone in it anymore.

And it frees us from the anxiety and the frustration to just say, "Seek to grow in this grace." What will "growing in this grace" look like for each and every one of us? I have no idea—this is what the Holy Spirit's job is with us. That's the second implication: to seek to grow in this grace for the particular needs. And when the Holy Spirit is orchestrating it, the body will grow—the body will grow.

Which leads to the third implication—and this is really more of an encouragement, but I think it's so important to speak this to us. What Paul emphasizes about these Macedonians, and what Luke tells us about these disciples of Jesus, [is that] it's very

clear these were average, everyday people. These are Jewish people who had come for one of the feasts in Jerusalem. They're just normal people. These are just poor Macedonian Christians, or whatever.

But when grace happens—when people receive and seek to grow in the grace of *koinonia* and of generosity—ordinary people are capable of *extraordinary* stories and acts of generosity. Are you with me?

For 2,000 years, the story of these poor Macedonians, like, it got into the Bible, you know? Like, how's that? [Tim laughs] That's awesome. What if it was a story of you? That would be so humbling and scary and incredible, too. But like, really think about that. These are just normal people.

And I think for many of us—whatever, like our church experience we've had, maybe even experiences you've had at Door of Hope—maybe it's the experience you had in your family growing up—we get into this mindset that we're not capable of very much—that you're actually not capable of doing anything very significant as a disciple of Jesus.

And these passages just come along, and they just say, “You have no idea. The Son of God loves you. He gave himself for you. His very presence and power are with you. He knows your whole story. He's challenging you to pray for the grace that would empower you to do the thing that he has put in front of you, or is going to put in front of you. You have no idea what you're capable of.” Every single one of us is capable of incredible *koinonia* and generosity—who knows, you know? And so that's the story that remains to be told here.

And so I just—as we close in prayer, as we move on in our gathering here—I would just—again, ball's in your court: What does this mean for you? What does it mean for you to take a step, not being a fly-on-the-wall anymore? For some of us, it's about not just like being involved, but actually beginning to embody my unity and connection with this community, by serving and by giving.

And for some of us, it's beginning a discernment process of: “how do I discern among the many things I could do?” And then just, dude—you guys have no idea what we're capable of. There's so many people in this room right now. There's, like, way more people here than normal. [Tim laughs] I'm kind of freaked out about it right now, you know?

And so it's just, like, man—who? Look at you—look at—this is so much of the city of Portland represented right here. There's so many workplaces represented. There's so many apartment complexes and streets of our city represented. If all of us had something happen to us—like what happened to the Macedonians—just imagine the stories of grace that could be told because of what God did in our midst. And that's our prayer. And that's my prayer for you.

[EMSB theme fades in]

All right, you guys, thanks for listening to the “Exploring My Strange Bible” podcast. I hope this is helpful for you. If it is, you can help share the word, which means sharing these episodes with other people that you think might also find them helpful. Or just go to iTunes and leave a review—that’s helpful. Or whatever—don’t do any of those things. Just enjoy listening to them, and that’s great. I’m happy to share them with you. We’ll see you next time for a new series and a new episode. So there you go.

[EMSB theme fades out]