

# Marks of the Church

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Good morning. If you have your Bible, I invite you to open it to Acts chapter 4. Well today, Pastor Nathan is not preaching the sermon. After hogging the pulpit for several weeks, I think we finally got him to let the rest of us pastors have a chance to preach the book of Acts. Actually, I think this month is pretty awesome because you will get to hear a sermon from each of the pastors. Nathan preached the first week of March, Mike last week, me this week and Pastor Josh preaching next week on Ananias and Sapphira. He's already warned me that we will be taking a public offering at the end of service to tie in the message.

In all seriousness, I am grateful for Mike and Nathan sharing the pulpit and giving me opportunities to preach throughout the year. I am blessed to serve with them and do not take these opportunities lightly. I'm excited to continue our series through the book of Acts this morning by picking up where we left off last week, looking at the last part of chapter 4.

Before we read our passage, let's remind ourselves of the context for our passage, what has happened in this particular story so far. A few weeks ago, we looked at chapter 3 where Peter and John heal a crippled man outside of the temple. Pastor Nathan explained the sign performed and the sermon preached. And this sign and sermon upset the chief priests and elders, and they arrested Peter and John. Last week, we looked at this encounter between the apostles and these chief priests and the boldness Peter and John had during this interrogation. And this is where our passage picks up, with Peter and John being released from custody.

So, let's read Acts 4 beginning in verse 23.

**READ Acts 4:23-37**

Let's pray...

## INTRO

In our passage today, we see Peter and John being released from custody after being interrogated about the miracle that was performed, the healing of a crippled man. Mike mentioned last week that now persecution is beginning to happen as the church expands. It's gaining more attention and upsetting more people. Not because the apostles were offending people, but because the gospel offends people. The gospel of Jesus Christ offends our pride and self-sufficiency by exposing our sin and our need for a Savior.

What we see in our passage today is how the apostles respond to this persecution. How do they handle it? What do they do? And how they respond really shows what was unique about the church, what made the church different from the world.

### [ILLUSTRATION]

There are certain things that just stick out to us. Either we've heard them over and over or seen a certain image so many times that immediately when we see it or hear it, we know exactly what it belongs to. I want to do a quick little quiz to see if you know these company jingles, slogans, or logos.

1. McDonalds – Ba da ba da daa...
2. Kit Kat – "Give me a break, give me a break, break me off a piece of that..."
3. State Farm – "Like a good neighbor..."
4. Nike – "Just do it"
5. Chick-fil-a – "Eat more chicken"
6. Allstate – "Are you in good hands?"
7. Windows – logo
8. Amazon – logo
9. Subaru – logo

That's just good marketing right there. These companies are easily identifiable to us based on their slogan, their jingle, their logo, their colors, their uniforms. We see them and we immediately know what they belong to.

As we look closer at our passage today, we are going to look at two identifiers of the early church: (1) Prayer and (2) Unity. Now, I hope this doesn't surprise you. In fact, you may be a little disappointed because these are not new to us. We've seen the apostles and the early church fellowshiping together in chapter 2. These marks of the early church should be the marks of the church today: both as the church corporately and as individuals.

So, as we look closer at these (Prayer and Unity), we need to examine our own lives and ask ourselves whether these are clearly seen in our lives. Are we devoted to prayer, and do we live in unity with one another? Would the world look at us and see a difference?

Well, the first thing we see the apostles do is pray...

## **PRAYER**

Isn't it incredible that the first thing they do after being released is pray? Is prayer your first response? (Don't worry I'm not going to make you raise your hands). I think if we were to be honest with one another, a lot of us would admit we do not pray as a first response. Or maybe simply, we just don't pray.

When do many people usually pray? When they are in need. When they feel like things are out of control. In many cases, we see prayer as a last-ditch effort when all other options have failed. But this is not the case with the early church. They valued prayer and saw it as the very first thing that should happen.

### **[ILLUSTRATION]**

I've seen prayer modeled well by many people in my life: my mom, Pastor Mike, Pastor Nathan. My wife has even been a big influence for me, seeing how she turns to prayer quicker than I do and how she pours out her heart to the Lord in vulnerable ways that I wish I did. But she saw prayer modeled in her home by her mom. Her mom might be one of the strongest examples of a prayer warrior that either of us know. I mean literally going into a closet and spending hours in prayer. We were talking with her one day about a situation in her life and she said, "I don't know how I feel about it yet because I haven't prayed about it."

Do you know someone who is a “prayer warrior”? Someone you don’t doubt for a second actually prays for you when they say they will. Someone who makes prayer a priority in their life. Someone who turns to prayer for everything, not just in the midst of a crisis. But this really shouldn’t be unusual, should it? We should all be “prayer warriors.” Prayer should be a natural thing we do as Christians, not a last resort.

I think one reason we fail to see prayer as a first response, or even pray like we should, is because we have the wrong view of prayer. In a moment, we will look closer at the apostles’ prayer in our passage. But first, let’s consider what prayer is.

One theologian, seeking to summarize what the Bible teaches on prayer says that prayer is “calling on God to come through on his promise.” It’s calling on the name of God, his character revealed, to be faithful to his promises. Prayer is connected to the gospel, the hope of redemption. Another pastor has said:

“Prayer begins with longing for God’s presence before his provision.”  
- John Onwuchekwa

It doesn’t mean we don’t ask for provisions, but we start with desiring his presence. And this is exactly what we see in the apostles’ prayer here in our passage. Let’s read this prayer again, beginning in **verse 24**.

There are 3 components to this prayer that I think we can learn from and incorporate in our own prayers to strengthen our prayer life. The first thing we see in their prayer is that they acknowledge the attributes of God.

## **ATTRIBUTES OF GOD**

Look again at **verse 24**.

<sup>24</sup> And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them,

– Acts 4:24

They start their prayer by acknowledging that God is both the Sovereign Lord and the Creator of all things. They did not start their prayer with a request, or even acknowledge their situation or persecution. Rather, they worshipped God for who he is. And what primarily are they acknowledging about God? That he is in complete control. He has created all things and all things are in his providential control. We see this same theme again later in the prayer in **verses 27-28**.

<sup>27</sup>for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, <sup>28</sup>to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

– Acts 4:27-28

The apostles are reminding themselves that God is not surprised by things happening in the world. It was not by random chance or even the will of man that Jesus was crucified. God had predestined that it would happen, in the exact way that it happened. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was accomplished according to the plan of the Father.

Acknowledging God as Sovereign Lord and Creator also reminds them of who has ultimate authority. It is not the religious leaders of the day. It is not the Roman empire. It is the Yahweh, the LORD.

Is this how we start our prayers? Do you start by acknowledging who God is, acknowledging his attributes? When we start our prayers, not by asking for things but by acknowledging his character, our hearts and minds are refocused and reprioritized. Our situation or our circumstance no longer seems as great compared to the greatness of our God.

Acknowledging who God is also builds the relationship with God in prayer. How do we normally start conversations with people? By demanding things or by acknowledging who they are?

## [ILLUSTRATION]

Any men in here get a honey-do list from their wife? You wake up and your wife says, “We need to do this, this, this, and this today.” “Hey when are you going to get around to finishing this?” That’s not a great way to start out the day, at least not for me. I would much rather wake up, acknowledge each other, enjoy time together talking before diving into the tasks of the day. Because that’s how we cultivate a relationship, by seeing, acknowledging and knowing each other.

After they acknowledge God as Sovereign Lord and Creator, the second component of their prayer is the Word of God.

## WORD OF GOD

In verses 25-26, the apostles quote Scripture and use it as their prayer. I think we often think our prayers have to be spontaneous and original. That its somehow not as authentic if we write it down or rehearse prayers in the Bible. But the apostles know that using Scripture strengthens your prayer life. Using the Word of God to pray back to him. If you want to grow deeper in your prayer life, you should follow this example. An easy way to begin praying Scripture is to read a Psalm and pray through it. Allow the words of Scripture to guide your prayers. Pray what comes to mind as you read, rephrase what you have read.

Here’s what that would look like, take Psalm 23 for example:

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”  
Oh God, you are my great provider. You are my shepherd. You lead me, guide me, and direct me. You provide everything I could ever need. I never want or lack anything because you care for me as a shepherd cares for his sheep.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.

Lord, you know when I need rest. You bring life and refreshment to my soul. When I am weary, you care for me.

“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”  
And God you don’t do these things according to my worth or glory. You do these things according to your name. For the glory of your name. For you are Yahweh, you abound in steadfast love. You are faithful throughout all generations. You never fail. You always uphold the glory of your name.

Praying Scripture will dramatically change your prayer life. Not only will you grow in your understanding of God’s Word, but you will probably pray for things you have never prayed before. You will pray for things beyond yourself and pray for God to work and move in the world. If you want to take one thing away today, pray the Word of God.

What passage do the apostles quote in their pray? They quote Psalm 2. One thing that is affirmed in this prayer is that Psalm 2, though written by a human author (David), was written by the Holy Spirit. They understood Scripture to be the Word of God written by human authors through inspiration.

But why did they quote Psalm 2? Let’s read **Psalm 2**.

The apostles are acknowledging this Old Testament passage’s fulfillment in Christ. They have seen the nations and rulers plot against the Messiah in the crucifixion of Jesus, God’s Anointed One. They realize that God is in control. The authorities on this earth tried to plot against God and his Anointed, but they actually fulfilled his plan in doing so.

They connect the promise of Jesus’ reign over the earth to their present circumstances. They reassure themselves of the futility in the plans of the kings of the earth.

[ILLUSTRATION]

It reminds me of when I was younger. I was homeschooled from 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. My mom worked a part-time job with Hallmark

and would be gone for a few hours in the afternoon, which really just meant trouble for me as the younger brother. Because this meant free reign for my brother to torture me. I remember as soon as my mom left one day, my brother came and sat on me and tickled me. I was screaming out, MOM! HELP! But my brother would kindly remind me...she was gone.

There were many times that we would play “King of the Bed.” Basically, a full-on wrestling brawl on my parents’ bed. My brother being 4 years older than me would just pick me up and throw me off the bed. I would get so angry and charge him and start punching him with all my might (you know, as brothers do) and he would just laugh and say, “marshmallow fists, marshmallow fists.” Which would just make me even angrier!

But all my attempts to beat him in “King of the Bed” were futile. No matter how hard I tried, I was not going to win. He was older, bigger, stronger.

That’s how the apostles see the plans of the rulers of the earth. It’s futile. God is in control and God gets the victory. I love **verse 4** of this psalm.

“He who sits in the heavens laughs...” – Psalm 2:4

So, using Scripture in our prayers reminds us of the truth. It helps us remember the promises of God. It overcomes our doubts and fears, our own insecurities, by replacing them with the truth of His Word. So, let me encourage you to pray the Word of God.

And finally, the last component of this prayer I see is the Power of God.

## **POWER OF GOD**

Look again at **verses 29-30**.

This is a prayer for the power of God to work. The apostles are praying for boldness to continue preaching the gospel of Jesus. They are not asking God to

remove the persecution or make it easier for them. Rather, they are asking God for boldness to continue to preach the gospel no matter what.

In his book on missions titled *Let the Nations Be Glad*, John Piper compares prayer to a war-time walkie-talkie. He says this:

“Prayer is a war-time walkie-talkie, not a domestic intercom for ringing up the butler to change the thermostat. It is a war-time walkie-talkie to call in firepower because the enemy is greater than we are. If you try to turn this into a domestic intercom to bring another pillow, it malfunctions, and you wonder why. It’s not made to be an intercom. It’s made to be a war-time walkie-talkie.”

- John Piper

He’s saying prayer is not meant to be used to make our lives more comfortable or grant us all our wants, but rather for God to move and act in the world, according to his will, for his name’s sake. The apostles were not asking for God to give them comfort or to remove any hardships they might encounter, but rather that they would be all the bolder to proclaim the gospel despite the opposition. They were calling on their war-time walkie-talkie for their commander to bring reinforcements, to encourage and equip them.

But not only that, they are calling on God to move and act in his power. Look at **verse 30** again.

“while *you* stretch our *your* hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of *your* holy servant *Jesus*.”

They know that nothing can be done apart from the power of God. They realize they have no power in and of themselves but need God to move and to act. They are calling on God to move in power through healing, signs, and wonders in the name Jesus.

Do we regularly ask for God to move in power through his Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus? Do we believe God can still do miracles? That he can and does save sinners through the gospel?

Maybe you are discouraged because you have shared the gospel with friends or family, and they do not believe. Be reminded and encouraged this morning that “the gospel IS the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

Romans 10:17 says:

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

It will only be the gospel that brings someone to salvation. So, we must continue boldly preaching it, asking for God to move in power through it.

On the other hand, maybe you are here this morning and have been resting in your own works. Maybe you believe your works and efforts have been what has held your life together. Or maybe that your works and efforts are what has accomplished things for God.

[ILLUSTRATION]

Have your kids ever tried picked up something way bigger than themselves? Evelyn always wants to grab something 3 times her size and move it. She’s not even 2 yet and she always seems to gravitate toward trying to move the big heavy object. When she was even smaller, she would try to pick up the big water jugs we brought home from the grocery store. I’m not gunna lie, it actually does impress me how strong she is sometimes.

Just the other day, Hannah and Evelyn were outside throwing out some old potted plants. Of course, Evelyn tried to pick up one of the big pots and put it in the trash bag, but she couldn’t do. Even with all her grunting. So, Hannah came and helped pick it up with her and put it in the trash bag. Hannah, feeling good and strong went to pick up the bigger pot and struggled to do it. They she told Evelyn, “we might have to wait for daddy to do this one.”

A lot of times, we try to do things in our own strength, even things for God. But let’s be reminded that it is not by our power, but by God’s. He is the one who we call on to work, to move, to heal, and to save.

In this prayer, the apostles call on and acknowledge God's character, they pray Scripture, and they call on God to move in power. Do your prayers look like this? Are we praying like this? Are we even praying?

As Christians, we need to be a praying people. There is a great quote that says:

“To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”

Let us be a praying people who acknowledges the attributes of God, who prays the Word of God, and who seeks the power of God.

The second thing we see in response to persecution is their unity.

## UNITY

Look again at **verse 32**.

One of the clear marks of the early church was their unity. They were “of one heart and soul.” I wonder if this is a clear mark of the church at large today. Are Christians seen as people of unity or divisiveness? One thing I am continually encouraged by is the unity that we have here at Cornerstone. This is seen time and time again in our serving one another and the community, in our business meetings, and our genuine love for one another and meeting needs.

So, in our passage here, the early church had unity. But what does this mean? How were they united? And how was this unity outwardly expressed? They were united in the gospel and united in their giving.

Let's read these verses again, beginning with **verse 33**.

The first thing we see about this unity is that they were united in the gospel.

## UNITED IN THE GOSPEL

What is the gospel? It's the testimony of Jesus Christ: his life, death, and resurrection. They were united in the gospel of Jesus and the Word of God. This is where real, true unity exists. There are many churches today that try to unite around other things: same age, same race, a watered-down doctrine, preferred music style, you name it. But this does not bring about real unity, just the appearance of unity. As we see in our passage, real unity is established by the gospel of Jesus.

The early church was a diverse group of people. There were Jews, Gentiles, men, women, children, rich, and poor. The kind of unity that is established in the gospel is a unity amidst diversity. Our world likes to pit people against each other by our socio-economic status, by our race, by our gender, by our political party, by our sports team. They say you can't have unity unless everything is uniform. But here we see the gospel break down all of these walls. It says in verse 32, "they had everything in common." It wasn't that they were not a diverse group (that they all liked the same things, looked the same, etc.), but that they found unity in the gospel in their diversity.

#### [ILLUSTRATION]

It reminds me of hearing an orchestra. How many people have heard a live orchestra before? It could have been one at a play or musical you went and saw. What does the orchestra do right before the show begins? Here's what it sounds like...[Play sound clip]. Why do they do this? You may have thought this was just a way to signal the show is starting or maybe have no idea why. They do this so that they are all tuned to each other. Everyone tunes to the one instrument and then they are all unified for the performance. There is unity between all the diverse instruments in the orchestra.

This is what we see in Christian unity. The gospel is the note that all Christians tune to. There is diversity because the gospel is for all people. All nations, tribes, and tongues. The gospel knows no bounds. The gospel is for you and it's for me. It's for sinners who see their need for a Savior. It's for believers to strengthen their daily walk. The gospel applies to all of our life, not just a conversion story.

Maybe you are here this morning and you have never put your faith in Jesus Christ. I'm here to tell you that the gospel is for you. That Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came down from heaven and dwelt among us. He lived a perfect and sinless life, one that we could never live. He took our sins on the cross, taking the full wrath of God, purchasing forgiveness and redemption by his blood so that sinners could be saved. And he rose again from the dead to the right hand of the Father so that those who trust in him for salvation can have eternal life because he is the resurrection and the life. He did this for me, and he can do it for you. If you have questions about this, please come and talk with me or pastor Josh after service. We would love to show you how you can be forgiven and free.

Well, we see the church was not only united in the gospel, but they were united in their giving.

### **UNITED IN THEIR GIVING**

Verses 34-35 show us that this unity, grounded in the gospel, was expressed outwardly by their giving. It tells us that "there was not a needy person among them." This is radically countercultural. In a world that tells you to make the most money you can, buy as much stuff as you can, to hoard, and to collect, we see the church doing the opposite. They were selling what they had in order to meet the needs of others. All that we have is the Lord's.

I've heard one person put it this way:

"The question is not, 'How much of my money should I give to God?' but rather, 'How much of God's money should I keep for now?' –  
Don Whitney

And this is exactly what the early church understood. It says in verse 32 that "no one said that any of the things belonged to him was his own." And really, it's not, right? All that we have is what the Lord has given us. It's his and we are stewards of it.

Does this mean everyone must go and sell all that they have today and give it to the Lord? Well, no. Not unless he is leading you specifically to do that. But it does mean that we hold loosely to our things. That we have an open hand with our money and possessions and not a closed, tight grip on them. It means we are willing to give and give generously to help those in need.

I have been so encouraged by the response of our church the last few months. We have had three major opportunities to give above and beyond the general tithe: the Fields church plant, the Silent Auction, and the Ukrainian refugees. And with each one we saw our church respond in a generous way by raising over \$4000 for each opportunity.

That's what it means. To view the blessings God has given you as resources to use for his kingdom. To meet needs. To spread the gospel. To glorify him. And this doesn't make sense to our world. It doesn't make sense that someone should give away their money, give up their possessions, meet someone else's needs. Our world sees gain, selfishness, accumulation as the way to happiness. But our joy is in the Lord, and he supplies our every need.

C.S. Lewis said in his book *Mere Christianity*:

“I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.”

– C.S. Lewis

So, the early church was united in their generous giving to those in need.

## **CONCLUSION**

So, we have looked at two marks of the early church: Prayer and Unity. The early church valued prayer, it was their first response. And they called on the attributes of God, they used Scripture in their prayers, and they asked for the power of God to work miracles and give them boldness. How do you respond to circumstance in your life? Do you see prayer as the last step, or the first? What can you do this week to grow in prayer, to strengthen your prayer life? Maybe it's downloading an app to remind you to pray as Nathan mentioned a few weeks ago. Maybe it's

praying through the Psalms. Maybe it's coming on Sunday mornings at 10am and praying with a group here in the sanctuary. Whatever it is, let us be a praying people. And let us pray that God would make us a praying people.

And what about unity? Does the world look at our church and see us being united or divided? Are you united in your giving to the Lord? Do you give generously? Is how you steward your finances countercultural to the world's standards? Maybe God is leading you to become a regular giver, taking a portion of your income to give to him. Maybe God is leading you to give to give above your tithe and give to missionaries. Whatever God may be leading you to do this morning, let's be a generous people, holding loosely to our material possessions and holding tightly to our Savior.

Just like we are able to identify different companies based on their branding, the world should look at us and see that we are different, that we are Christians. This should be evident by the way we pray and the unity we have.

Would you pray with me...

## COMMUNION

I'm going to invite Kyle and Dan to come down as we prepare to take communion. This is another great way for us to express our unity in the gospel and with one another. Communion reminds us that Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many, to shed his blood in the place of sinners so that we can be forgiven. This is not something we do *for* God as if we earn some right standing before him, but rather, this is a reminder of what God has done *for* us. The elements we take, the juice and the bread, call to our minds the body and blood of Jesus that was broken and poured out for us.

This act is an ordinance of the church, which was taught to us by Jesus Christ, Himself. It is intended for Christians, those who are born-again believers. 1 Corinthians 11:27 says:

<sup>27</sup> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.

If you are here this morning, and you do not know Jesus Christ as your Savior and have not personally put your faith in him for the forgiveness of your sins, we are so glad you have come this morning, but we ask that you heed the warning in Scripture and not partake of the elements. Please don't be embarrassed by that. Rather, I would urge you to consider your own need for forgiveness.

Here at Cornerstone, we practice open communion. If you are a baptized follower of Christ, we want to invite you to come and participate with us. In a moment, I will pray, and Dan will dismiss each row to come down to the front, gather both elements, and return to your seat. Please hold on to the elements until the end and we will take them together as a sign of our unity.

1 Corinthians 11:28-29 reminds us:

<sup>28</sup> Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

Scripture calls us to examine ourselves and confess any known sin, trusting in the forgiveness secured by our Savior. Would you take a moment and pray privately to the Lord, confessing any sin in your life and asking God to forgive you of it?

Pray...

#### RECEIVE ELEMENTS/SONG

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

<sup>25</sup> In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.