

Lesson 13

They Had Favor with All the People

Acts 2.47

praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Introduction

The life of the early church was not lived in secret. The result of the spiritual activity of the first Christians had a great impact on the Jewish community in Jerusalem. So much that throughout the opening chapters of Acts, Luke tells us that thousands upon thousands were being added to the Lord's body. The excitement and enthusiasm must have been enormous . . . on a scale that is hard for us to imagine.

Enjoying the favor of all the people

In the early days, the church gathered at the temple. They enjoyed the freedom of being able to openly share their faith and worship publicly. Everyone who came to the temple grounds would have been able to see them gathered. People would have heard about and seen lives that had been completely transformed. This had an amazing impact on not the religious class, but *all the people*. One writer has likened them to the "salt" of Matthew 5.13. They were a "wholesome, provocative force in society."⁴⁹ People were observing something new, listening with attentiveness, and their hearts were receptive.

There is probably no better picture of how to prove the words of Jesus true than to see the example the early church set:

"I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another," John 13.34-35.

They also functioned as an answer to the Lord's prayer in John 17.20-21:

"I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word. May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me.

One of the best evidences we have concerning how the early Christians were viewed comes to us from Aristides, who wrote an apology to Hadrian while he was in Athens around 125 AD. Aristides became an important witness to the nature of early New Testament Christianity. He writes:

And these are they who more than all the nations on the earth have found the truth. For they know God, the Creator and Fashioner of all things through the only-begotten Son and the Holy Spirit; and beside Him they worship no other God. They have the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself graven upon their hearts; and they observe them, looking forward to the resurrection of the dead and life in the world to come. They do not commit adultery nor fornication, nor bear false witness, nor covet the things of others; they honour father and mother, and love their neighbours; they judge justly, and they never do to others what they would not wish to

⁴⁹ Rosscup, p. 1887.

happen to themselves; they appeal to those who injure them, and try to win them as friends; they are eager to do good to their enemies; they are gentle and easy to be entreated; they abstain from all unlawful conversation and from all impurity; they despise not the widow, nor oppress the orphan; and he that has, gives ungrudgingly for the maintenance of him who has not.

If they see a stranger, they take him under their roof, and rejoice over him as over a very brother; for they call themselves brethren not after the flesh but after the spirit.

And they are ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of Christ; for they observe His commands without swerving, and live holy and just lives, as the Lord God enjoined upon them.

And they give thanks unto Him every hour, for all meat and drink and other blessings.⁵⁰

MacArthur adds more from Aristides:

For this reason they do not commit adultery or immorality; they do not bear false witness, or embezzle, nor do they covet what is not theirs. They honor father and mother, and do good to those who are their neighbors. Whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly. They do not worship idols made in the image of man. Whatever they do not wish that others should do to them, they in turn do not do; and they do not eat the food sacrificed to idols.

Those who oppress them they exhort and make them their friends. They do good to their enemies. Their wives, O King, are pure as virgins, and their daughters are modest. Their men abstain from all unlawful sexual contact and from impurity, in the hope of recompense that is to come in another world.

As for their bondmen and bondwomen, and their children, if there are any, they persuade them to become Christians; and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction.

They refuse to worship strange gods; and they go their way in all humility and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them. They love one another; the widow's needs are not ignored, and they rescue the orphan from the person who does him violence. He who has gives to him who has not, ungrudgingly and without boasting. When the Christians find a stranger, they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as a true brother. They do not call brothers those who are bound by blood ties alone, but those who are brethren after the Spirit and in God.

When one of their poor passes away from the world, each provides for his burial according to his ability. If they hear of any of their number who are imprisoned or oppressed for the name of the Messiah, they all provide for his needs, and if it is possible to redeem him, they set him free.

If they find poverty in their midst, and they do not have spare food, they fast two or three days in order that the needy might be supplied with the necessities. They observe scrupulously the commandments of their Messiah, living honestly and soberly as the Lord their God ordered them. Every morning and every hour they praise and thank God for his goodness to them; and for their food and drink they offer thanksgiving.

If any righteous person of their number passes away from the world, they rejoice and thank God, and escort his body as if he were setting out from one place to another nearby. When a child is born to one of them, they praise God. If it dies in infancy, they thank God the more, as for one who has passed through the world without sins. But if one of them dies in his iniquity or in his sins, they grieve bitterly and sorrow as over one who is about to meet his doom.

⁵⁰ Aristides of Athens. "The Apology of Aristides." *The Gospel of Peter, the Diatessaron of Tatian, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Visio Pauli, the Apocalypses of the Virgil and Sederach, the Testament of Abraham, the Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, the Narrative of Zosimus, the Apology of Aristides, the Epistles of Clement (Complete Text), Origen's Commentary on John, Books I-X, and Commentary on Matthew, Books I, II, and X-XIV*. Edited by Allan Menzies, Translated by D. M. Kay. Vol. 9 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1897, p. 276.

Such, O King, is the commandment given to the Christians, and such is their conduct.⁵¹

This is the testimony of the early church . . . this is why they turned their world upside down.

They Experienced Amazing Growth

The Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. Communities were being so impacted by the conduct and attitudes of the early Christians, that people were continually being saved. The power of their transformed lives, church unity, and joy served as a powerful witness to the gospel message. *True evangelism flows from the life of a healthy church.* Evangelism was not based on a slick handout or brochure. It was not contained in a set of bullet points. Those in the world were attracted to the joy the Christians experienced and wanted to know its source. People wanted to be with those who were continually praising God and discover the same gift the Spirit had given those who were saved.

⁵¹ MacArthur, *Acts*, Vol. 1, p. 90-91