**Holy Spirit Victory**

Show picture of oxpeckers.

Do you recognize these birds? You would if you were an African buffalo or a rhinoceros. These are “askari wa kifaru”, the rhino’s guard. In English they’re called “oxpeckers”. These are the birds that ride on a rhinoceros’ or other large African animals’ backs eating ticks that have engorged themselves with blood from the helpless host.

You wouldn’t want to ride on a rhinoceros or buffalo yet these very different animals find a way to get along, working together for each other’s common good. God really knew what He was doing when He created. Isn’t it strange that God’s highest creation can’t get along like that?

Worse is that often the people of God’s own family can’t get along. A Church of God in Christ in Wichita, Kansas went to court for an order requiring four members to stop interrupting the worship services. According to one minister Grace Kinard,

         *They would run through the sanctuary shouting*

         *They would run to the pulpit and close the minister’s Bible while he was preaching*

         *They took his microphone and one hit him with it*

         *They even held the pianists arms down so she couldn’t play*

         *The police were called several times*

         *The congregation went from over 600 to less than 50 members*.

Erma Bombeck said it well, “*Never go to a doctor whose office plants have died*.”

Is there anything uglier than a church that doesn’t get along and work together? We’re talking about a local congregation, not the church as a whole. A local body of believers. How terrible it is when the members of a church fail to serve a common goal.

Reality is, because churches are made up of people it’s inevitable that there will be differences. One Baptist preacher asked, *What do you call 50 people all with a different view of something?* Answer: *A Baptist church*.

Honestly, I think you’d be hard pressed to find any church today that doesn’t have differences and sometimes dislikes and fighting. There was one church that got it right, if only for a little while.

It was a young but growing church. Experience has shown us that rapid growth usually leads to dis-function in a church, but not this one. This church grew by several thousand members in only a few months.

         They did it without a big budget to hire professional staff.

         Their leadership didn’t have credentials from accredited seminaries; none had written a book.

         Most of their leaders had arrest records.

But this church had what would help any church get it right. Filled with the Holy Spirit the people had genuine love, unity, and loyalty to each other. Before they were a church that reached thousands of people with the love of Christ, they shared that love with each other.

Today we’re looking at Acts 4:32-5:16. Bible publishers break this up into three parts:

         4:32-37 – The believers share their possessions

         5:1-11 – Ananias and Sapphira

         5:12-16 – The Apostles heal many

That division is unfortunate for this is one story. It’s the story of a church in which the members had unlimited commitment to Christ and to each other. It’s the story of a church with unwavering loyalty, member to member. And it’s a story with two illustrations which we’ll look at shortly.

Luke begins this section. *All the believers were one in heart and mind.* Acts 4:32a

This sounds very similar to 2:42-47. In fact both passages describe what the church, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked like. They had prayed for God to do signs and wonders through them in Jesus’ name (4:29f). God answered their prayer. After they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken (Vs. 31). Σαλευθω describes movement, shaking as in an earthquake.

The church was shaken metaphorically as well. This church, made up of people with differences, from different backgrounds, and with different personalities, *were one in heart and mind* (Vs. 32).

         One heart – καρδια is the sense of reason and emotions. They loved Jesus and they loved each other.

         One mind – ψυχη is life itself.

These Christians had their minds, emotions, and wills open to each other. In this church they were interdependent on each other.

Unity and loyalty is the victory of being filled with the Spirit. The Holy Spirit manifested Himself in that church…

         in deeds as well as in word,

         in service as well as in witness,

         and in love for the church family as well as in testimony to the world.

I think the most significant attribute of the Holy Spirit among the members of that church was their unity demonstrated by their care for and loyalty to each other. The two passages, Acts 2: 42-47 and 4:32-35 picture three radical attitudes in that church that demonstrate Holy Spirit victory:

1.    They had a radical attitude about possessions.

         2:44 says, *All the believers were together and had everything in common*.

         4:32b says, *No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had*.

Both verses use the same phrase, απαντα κοινα, all things in common, or all things shared. No one looked at his possessions as for himself only. They weren’t a commune. They made a choice to be concerned for each other.

They didn’t denounce private property. They shared private property without relinquishing control of what was theirs. (That idea will show itself in the second illustration we’ll look at in a few minutes.)

2.    They had a radical attitude about sacrifice for each other.

         *Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had* need (2:45).

         *From time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need* (4:34b-5).

Don’t dismiss this as unreasonable. Sacrifice was voluntary. No one was forced or required to give up anything for someone else. They shared according to the third radical attitude…

3.    They shared based on genuine need. Both passaged refer to *anyone as he had need*. The Greek words used are exactly the same, καθοι αν τις χρειαν ειχεν. They saw needs, they responded.

This wasn’t an obligation. It was an act motivated by love and loyalty. (It doesn’t suggest that they tolerated freeloaders. In fact we can infer that they did not from Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:10…*When we were with you, we gave you this rule: “If a man does not wish to work, he shall not eat.”*)

The factor that allowed them to reach out so effectively with the Gospel was the Holy Spirit filling them with intense love and loyalty to each other.

Before they were a church that reached thousands of people with the Gospel, they were a church that loved with each other. As a result…*The Apostles, with great power, continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all* (Acts 4:33) which is what they had prayed for (4:29).

Luke, and I believe this was intentional, included two illustrations, one of what loyalty looks like and the other of what happens when loyalty is lacking.

The **first** is about a man named Ιωσης, in English “Joseph”. The Apostles had nicknamed him Barnabas, translated into Greek υοις παρακλησεως – in English Son of Encouragement.

We do that same kind of thing. We nickname people.

         Walter Payton? Sweetness

         President Trump? The Donald

         Bette Midler? The Divine Miss M

         The Flying Tomato? Shaun White

Barnabas was a generous man who gave of himself in many ways. Whenever we meet him in the New Testament he is encouraging in some way, helping, affirming, uplifting, seeking the best in people.

According to tradition Barnabas owned the “Upper room”. He must have owned other property because he sold a field, αγρος, the same word Jesus used in Luke 17:7 when He spoke of…*a servant plowing or looking after the sheep…when he comes in from the field.* Αγρος is farm ground.

Barnabas sold this farm ground and brought it to the Apostles to distribute as anyone had need. That’s what being filled with the Holy Spirit looks like.

The **second** illustration is about a man and his wife who hadn’t gotten into the love and loyalty thing. They so wanted a reputation of greater generosity than they deserved that they interrupted the Holy Spirit’s victory with an evil act.

Do you remember the story in the Old Testament of Israel defeating the city of Jericho?

God had told them, *Keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it.* Joshua 6:18

One man, Achan took some of those devoted things, interrupting the nation’s victory. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called The Septuagint, it says he “*took* or *kept back*” (ενοσφισατο) some of the devoted things.

Acts 5:2 says Ananias and his wife Sapphira, with her conscious agreement (συνειδησις), *kept back part of the money for himself*, using the same word, (ενοσφισατο) (Acts 5:1f).

Ananias…*brought the rest and put it at the Apostles’ feet. Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.”* Acts 5:2-4

While the church was filled with the Holy Spirit, Ananias was filled with Satan.

This sermon isn’t about what might happen to an individual who violates the loyalty and trust of the church. It’s about how that affects the church as a whole and how it interrupts Holy Spirit victory. So I’ll read the rest of the story without much comment.

*When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.*

*About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” “Yes,” she said, “that is the price.” Peter said to her, “How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”*

*At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.* Acts 5:5-11

(And I thought Eutychus got a bad rap when he fell asleep during a sermon, fell out of a third story window and died.)

This was a church of great unity, love, and loyalty, and here are two leading members who are dishonest with the church, who are looking out for themselves, who showed ugly dishonesty. Had God not dealt so severely and definitively with them, their selfishness and disloyalty might well have infected the congregation, harming their reputation and witness in Jerusalem.

The church saw the wondrous things the Holy Spirit did through Barnabas. They also saw what happened to Ananias and Sapphira. Great fear in the sense of awe gripped the church. The result of all this was that that church continued to witness of Christ and many men and women believed in the Lord and the Apostles did signs and wonders and healings.

I’ll be realistic. I don’t expect that Agape Christian Church is going to see the kind of signs and wonders that the church in Jerusalem experienced. We probably are not going to see miracles and healings. And I doubt that people will be bringing their sick hoping that the shadows of our Elders will fall on them as they pass by.

Here’s what I think. I think Agape Christian Church is a generous loving church. When we see needs we do our best to meet them. We willingly sacrifice for others. We don’t knowingly let one of our members suffer alone of fall through the cracks. We live up to our name.

Where we fall down is in the unity and loyalty area. Because God has given us freewill, we can block His grace and sometimes we do by breaking our unity and by being disloyal.

I seriously thought about not doing this part of the sermon. I’m not sure anyone is going to want to hear what I say next.

If this doesn’t apply to you, please forgive me as I speak to the rest of us. If it does apply to you, please grow with me.

To be clear, I don’t think we’re different than most any other church in America. I will challenge two specific behaviors that we’re currently getting wrong and I believe interrupt the Holy Spirit’s victory. I’m talking to all of us, that includes me.

**First** is our unity. Our world is so calloused and self-absorbed that people can’t disagree without becoming disagreeable. That shouldn’t be in the church, but sometimes it is. We should be able to differ without hard feelings toward one another.

When differences result in conflict we should be able to reconcile. Unfortunately I know that we struggle with that. I know of a number of broken relationships, even ongoing animosity. Not every broken relationship hurts the church, but they never help it.

Part of the problem is that we’re not open to being held accountable. If anyone criticizes it often results in anger and broken friendships. The problem is the exacerbated by failing to forgive.

That shouldn’t be. Not if we’re filled with the Holy Spirit. I don’t know how to fix it. I try to accept everyone even if we differ in our thinking. I believe we can worship and be the church together. I try to reconcile when conflict arises and I try to help others reconcile their differences because broken unity interrupts Holy Spirit victory.

I believe it has to start with praying for the Holy Spirit to fill us and give us the courage to overcome ourselves for the sake of unity in our church. If we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us we will be of one heart and soul, even with our differences.

A **second** behavior that I think we’ve been getting wrong is loyalty. When we get loyalty right it strengthens rather than interrupts victory. When I speak of loyalty I’m thinking of three characteristics:

**One** is how we speak of each other. It hurts our church when members speak badly of one another. If we have a problem with someone, we don’t need to disparage. It’s one thing to discuss our problems with a confidant that we trust and allow to hold us accountable when we’re wrong.

But when we start bad-mouthing one another throughout the church, or worse yet in the community, it destroys our testimony about Jesus.

If we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us, we will not speak badly of our brothers and sisters.

A **second** characteristic I think of about loyalty is participation in the church. On any given weekend we can only expect to see about half of our members in worship. The Bible is clear that God expects His people to worship regularly, and regularly in the Bible meant each week. This began when God commanded observing the Sabbath and His people built their worship around that.

I try not to bore you with constant nagging about coming to church. I’m smart enough to know nagging doesn’t really work. I shouldn’t ever have to mention it. Regular worship should be a Christian’s priority - but it seems that there are a lot of other things that usurp worship’s place in our lives.

If we’re filled with the Holy Spirit it’ll take something of great importance to keep us away when the body gathers to worship. If we’re filled with the Holy Spirit we’ll be loyal to participate in the activities of the church. Instead of a small percentage of members, a majority will be involved in whatever the church is doing.

A **third** characteristic of loyalty is staying put. We live in a time in which people hop from church to church with a consumer mindset seeking “What’s in it for me?”

It’s one thing to leave a church that has left the spiritual roots of the Bible, but more often than not people when leave a church it’s because they don’t like someone or some unimportant thing. Loyalty would be to help fix things that are broken.

We are a wonderful church. We’re as loving as any church could be. I believe that if we will allow the Holy Spirit to fill us, all of us, so that we absolutely value unity and loyalty, God will do mighty things through us, not unlike He did with that church in Jerusalem.

If we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us we will experience real Holy Spirit victory.