

“The Model Church”

Acts 4:32-5:11

Dr. Jarrett Stephens | September 19, 2021

Intro. Acts 4:32-5:11

Illus. – One year - I am a pretty sentimental guy...I'm kind of a pack-rat. I don't like to get rid of things that mean something special to me. And so, in my office upstairs I have boxes of mementos, pictures, gifts I have been given through the years.

I probably have every hand-written note that has ever been written to me. Well...every KIND hand-written note that was actually signed by the person that wrote it – EVERY one of them!

You may ask, “Jarrett, do you ever go back and read them?” Only when I'm having a bad day or someone has said something negative or the Devil is after me, making me feel like I failed in some way...then I go back and read them and think, “I'm not all that bad! So and so wrote this...and so and so wrote this...somebody likes me!”

Well, these next few weeks and months are going to be really sentimental to me because on Wednesday...it will mark the first time I ever received a phone call about the possibility of becoming Pastor here at Champion Forest.

I went up to my study past week and got the journal over this same time period last year so I could read and reflect as the days go by in the coming months and see what was happening on this exact day one year ago.

I'll never forget getting that phone call on Tuesday night, Sept. 29th. I was actually coaching the twins soccer team. We were the Kickin' Chickens and we were awesome!

And I was out at the practice and keep in mind God had been stirring in my heart for nearly a year that something was going to change for me...something was on the horizon. He had prepared me for it spiritually, but I didn't know what it was. I was in a total “waiting on God” mode.

I remember we were on a break during practice and I was more the manager than the coach. I had never played soccer and after more than 10 years of watching it, still don't know the rules, but I knew how to put a team together.

So, I had my other coaches out there doing the hard work...we were on a break and my phone rang. It was William Vanderbloemen, who you as a church had hired to help assist with the church as you processed all the candidates that were showing interest.

And so, when I looked down and saw the name William Vanderbloemen, I knew what it was about. So I stepped away from my management duties with the Kickin' Chickens, took the call

and I'll never forget what William said. He said, "Jarrett, are you ready to talk Champion Forest?"

And I replied, "I don't know, William. Should I be?" And he said, "Yes". I went home and told Debbie and the process started. That was one year ago to the day on Wednesday.

And let me just say this: I'm so grateful I took that call...and so grateful for the search committee that represented you so well. I met with William the next week, the committee shortly after that and they wanted to know about me of course, and I wanted to know about you!

I had always heard about Champion Forest! This church has always had a stellar reputation from the outside, but I wanted to know what those that were invested on the inside thought about their church. And I asked a lot of questions, most of them rooted in this, "Describe for me Champion Forest Baptist Church to me."

And I just listened. I wanted to know about the church...and let me tell you, I learned SO MUCH. As we continue in our FORWARD series today, I want you to think about how you would answer that question.

If you would have been on the search team and someone asked you to describe Champion Forest...or fast-forward to now and you invite someone to come to church with you and they ask, "What is Champion Forest like?", how would you describe us?

Would you describe our church by saying it's:

- Big and diverse...
- Kind and friendly...
- Has great music or an incredible children's ministry...

ALL of which are true by the way and great descriptions of our church!

What I love about the text we are looking at today is we get a description of what the early church in Jerusalem was like. And I just wonder could we be described as a church today in the same as this early church was described then?

I'm calling the message: **The Model Church**

Acts 4:32-37 – "Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet."

Did you notice some of the descriptors? Talk about an amazing church. This was a devoted group of people. A lot said concerning this church in (v. 32-37).

And to me the key descriptor of this church is found right there in the middle of this passage. It's the end of (v. 33). And it's here we see WHY they were living in such a way.

Acts 4:33b – "...And great grace was upon them all."

The word "grace" here in (v. 33) is the word "Charis" in the original language. According to Strong's Concordance it can be defined or translated as graciousness, benefit, favor, gift, thanks, goodwill. Here in this verse, it's simply translated "grace".

Now, we know that in a salvific sense, "grace" is the unearned, unmerited favor of God. We don't deserve his mercy. We could never earn God's love...never would we deserve his forgiveness.

There is NOTHING we could EVER do to position ourselves to be in a right relationship with God. This is something God does for us "in Christ". (Eph. 2:8-9) - We are saved BY grace THROUGH faith - it is a "gift of God".

So, let's understand what is happening here in Acts 4. You have a group of people who have been "graced" by God. God has brought them into a relationship with him NOT because of who they are, but simply because of his divine prerogative and choosing.

And as a result of this grace that God has shown them inwardly, it is now working itself outwardly and they are gracing others. This is what we see in the sharing, giving, witnessing of (v. 32-37)

And so, what does God do with a church that responds to his grace like this? He continues to "grace" them – not so much in the salvific sense – that's already occurred – that's inward. But now that the inward grace God has shown them is being expressed outwardly by them to others, God now gives them more grace outwardly.

Maybe a better way to say it is to translate this word "grace" here in (v. 33) as it is translated elsewhere in scripture as the word "favor". This is an echo of what we read in:

Acts 2:47b – "...having favor (grace – same word) with all the people."

If you want to know what made this Jerusalem church what I call the "model church" – it's this right here. What I would call:

Key Descriptor #1: The Model Church had the Favor of God

This church is making a difference because the favor (grace) of God is not only working in and through them, but is being showered upon them!

God is pouring out upon this church his blessing...probably because of what we have seen previously as they were continuing to meet together and pray.

Just my opinion but I think (v. 33 – the favor of God) is taking place because there was such a commitment to prayer in (v. 31).

The divine favor of God! This is what we want...this is what we are after as a church! And let me tell you when you know you have it. Three things will typically be present where the favor of God is:

1. Spirit of Unity

Notice in (v. 32) those who believed (unity in belief...in doctrine...that Christ is God...that he died and was raised to life. And this common belief brought them together and they were of “one heart and one soul”.

Now, we can't manipulate the divine favor of God...he gives it freely wherever he wishes. But let me tell you where you FOR SURE won't have it - where there is division and strife!

God HATES disunity and so no way will his favor be where something he hates is present...and listen: hate is not too strong of a term.

Prov. 6:16-19 – “There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him:¹⁷ haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,¹⁸ a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil,¹⁹ a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.”

Unity is powerful. Think about it in a marriage or with a team. I was watching the OU game last evening and they have it on their helmets! Unity takes place when we are brought together under a purposes that is bigger than ourselves.

It was one of the final prayer requests of Jesus before he went to the cross.

John 17:11b, 20-23 – “...Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one...I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

You better believe this sense of oneness is a priority to Jesus. How it must break his heart to see schisms and divisions in the body of Christ. It's warning to us, Champion Forest. We want the favor of God...this means we must each do our part to maintain unity.

There will be no favor of God where there is no unity among the brothers and sisters in Christ. I can tell you, this is one of the characteristics that drew my heart to this church – the unity amidst the diversity (same for Jeff Young!).

This isn't something that just happens though! According to Paul it's something we are going to have to work hard to maintain!

Eph. 4:1-3 – “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain (some translations use the phrase “make every effort to keep”) the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The emphasis here on “keeping unity” seems so strong! Makes me believe losing unity is not that hard!

In the early part of Acts 4, Satan was trying to destroy the church through outward persecution...that didn't work! And so, if that doesn't work, trust me, he'll get busy on an attempt to destroy the church through inward division – how many times have we seen this happen through the years in churches we've grown up in!

Illus. Churches in Arkadelphia and Dallas

What does this say to a watching world? This is a real temptation that we need to be aware of today and to be on guard against. Let's strive to be of one in mind and one in purpose! What this church believed drew them together and they shared this same sense of mission – watch this? About what mattered!

Listen: one of the reasons unity is NOT present sometimes is because selfishness is! We want what WE want...think OUR opinion about something matters most...we're not listening to others to see their point of view because we are fixated on making sure they understand OUR point of view.

Selfishness will destroy a sense of oneness – every time! Be on guard against it. Ask the Holy Spirit to make you very sensitive to it.

Psalm 133:1 – “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!”

Here in this early church, these people were unified. And typically, where you there is unity in the church, you will also see the favor of God. There will also be where God's favor is a spirit of:

2. Spirit of Generosity

Did you notice how unselfish these people were in this passage? Keep in mind, they had nothing, yet were giving everything – incredible!

Acts 4:32, 34-35– “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common...There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

THIS is what the grace and favor of God in your life will cause you to do. CRAZY stuff! Well, it will appear crazy to a world that has not experienced the grace and favor of God!

BUT – to those who have been changed by Jesus, selling a house or land that you own and giving it so that needs can be met is NO BIG DEAL. Sharing what you have so that others can benefit from it, this is what the early church did.

Now, a couple of caveats here. Nearly every commentary you read will point out that what we read here is NOT an argument for some sort of communism.

What makes what the disciples were doing here so powerful is they weren't being coerced or forced to share what they had with others.

The ONLY coercion that was going on here was the coercion of the Holy Spirit. These people were voluntarily doing this...it was out of a willing heart hence the phrase in (v. 35 and v. 37) “laying it at the apostle's feet”. This was an act of complete devotion and surrender to God.

Illus. FORWARD offering – voluntary...freewill...your choice to participate.

Again, you see this almost cycle if you will. These believers had been so transformed inwardly by the grace of God, that they couldn't help but show grace/favor outwardly to others and God just poured out upon them more grace...more favor.

The grace of God FULLY comprehended and taken in will make you do (what appears to the outside world) crazy.

- What? You are taking vacation time – money you earned and going on a mission trip?
- What? You got a raise and not spending it on yourself? You're giving it to a ministry or a cause that helps someone else?
- What? You're not going to sell that car and NOT make money off of it? You're just going to give it to a family that needs it?

The extravagant grace of God in our lives will make us do some things that seem crazy. For this early church, they were selling their homes and land...it wasn't communism. It was love!

Again, self wasn't in their vocabulary. God had favored them and it just made sense that they favored others! It's how they thought...it was their M.O.

Now, we don't read of anywhere else in scripture any other churches doing this. It's a great example for us, but it's not doctrine. It's not something the church is to teach as what it means to follow Jesus – come to him and in order to be obedient you have to sell your house and land. This isn't a part of discipleship.

Illus. Invitation – “Come forward. Give Jesus your heart, and we'll take the deed to your house.” NO!

Now, God may tell you to do that...and if he does, you have to obey, but it's not required for discipleship. This example is a great example for us as to what it means to be generous, but it's not commanded we do the same.

God's not against us having material possessions and being wealthy is not bad or evil. You should not be looked down on for having money and certainly you shouldn't feel guilty about it.

By the way, if you are in this room today and you have clothes on your back and a roof over your head, when I say wealthy, I'm talking to you!

Half of the world's population lives on less than \$6.00 a day. That's almost as much as my Caffe Misto I get at Starbucks...or those pumpkin spice lattes you're about to start getting! That's the queso you'll eat at lunch today!

10% of the world's population lives off of less than \$2.00 a day. I'm making the point here that we are ALL wealthy. And we shouldn't feel bad about that, we just need to make sure that we are stewarding what God gave us with wisdom and an upright heart.

This text doesn't teach that we have to give in this exact same way as these early believers, but what it does teach is that there should be a generous spirit in us AND it reinforces the fact that favor is NOT defined by having more!

Don't think because you see someone that has MORE, “Oh, they must have the favor of God” NO! The favor of God is present when you GIVE MORE regardless of what or how much you have.

There's something else that is always present where the favor of God is and that is:

3. Spirit of Evangelism

Acts 4:33 – “**And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus** (this was a recurring activity for them...it was like breathing!), **and great grace was upon them all.**”

I won't stay here long, but do want to say this. Where there is an evangelistic zeal...a desire to tell people about Jesus, God's favor will follow.

Again, by definition you can't manipulate the favor of God. It rests upon whoever and wherever according to the divine prerogative of God. I've noticed though in churches:

- where God is seeming to bless...
- where his favor is being poured out...

You usually find a strong desire to evangelize and win the lost to Christ. You find people who are passionate about sharing their story of how Christ changed their life!

Illus. Baptisms/LOM

Key descriptor #1 of this model church. They had the favor of God. May this be said of us, Champion Forest. There is a second descriptor given here as well.

Key Descriptor #2: The Model Church had a Fear of God

Acts 5:1-11 – “But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, (same as what we saw with Barnabas who we will learn a lot more about in the future at the end of chapter four) ² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. (the sin here is pretense...hypocrisy -c/f Matt. 23. They pretended like they laid it all down, but kept back some. Keeping back some wasn't the problem – again all this was voluntary in the first place. The problem was acting like you gave it all – its deception in the heart!) ³ But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart (you're supposed to be filled with the Spirit and here Ananias is filled with the lies of Satan) to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” ⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. ⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” ⁹ But Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.”

The favor of God is something that is given...the fear of God is something that is learned. And God is teaching this church that God is holy...that he is separate and distinct...that he is to ALWAYS be revered and honored.

This is a recurring theme in the Old Testament. In Deut. 5, in the context of the giving of the Ten Commandments – remember the scene – talk about the fear of God...the people are terrified to hear from God – Moses tell us what God says, we'll do! God responds:

Deut. 5:29 – “Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!”

Moses when he has to get a second copy of the 10 Commandments because he broke the first set due to the people's sin.

Deut. 10:12 – “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

I came up with my own definition of what it means to fear the Lord some time ago. Here is my definition of the fear of the Lord:

Honoring God from so deep within that we live a life wholly pleasing to him.

Every phrase of this definition is important:

1. Honoring God – we hold him in the highest esteem.
2. From so deep within – it starts in the core of our being...it's the foundation of our life.
3. We live a life – real reverence works itself out...it leads to action...to walking it out!
4. Wholly pleasing – inside and out. This covers thoughts, motives and action – everything is pleasing!
5. To him – it's all about him...for him...unto him.

Ananias wasn't honoring God! He wanted honor for himself. His ambition was NOT to please God. His ambition was that others would be pleased with him. And it cost he and his wife their life.

We read this and we get shocked by the judgment of God – that he strikes them down in a moment. We should read this though and be shocked by their sin! They lied to God and thought they could get away with it!

You can't get away with sin! God sees what you do and just a reminder he sees WHY you do it! He has x-ray vision into the heart!

The early church might not have known Ananias and Sapphira were keeping some money back for themselves, but the Holy Spirit knew...and if you sense in me saying this a “uh-oh” in your spirit about that, that's a good thing...it probably means there is some fear of the Lord in you!

God is a holy God...and believers (Ananias and Sapphira) what we know of them was they were believers too! And God in his holiness took their life because of their presumptuous sin.

Listen...in the fear of God – this idea of him not being mocked is underscored! I don't say this to scare you...I say this so I can stand before God and say I taught the whole counsel of God.

God will not be mocked. He is a pure and holy God and just because no one knows your sin and you think you are getting away it – God knows and we need to be VERY careful with how we treat and think about that which is HOLY!

If I had time, I'd outline for you scripture like:

- 1 John 5:16-17 – that there is a sin that leads to death...
- 1 Cor. 11:28-30 – that some have fallen asleep – died because they didn't take what was holy (Lord's Supper) seriously.

Now, to be clear the fear of God isn't walking around thinking, "God will strike us down if we disobey" as if he is an out of control, angry person who loses his temper...that's not it at all.

I like how **O.S. Hawkins** defines it: **“– “The fear of God was not the fear that God would put His hand of retribution and punishment ON me. It was the fear that God might take His hand of blessing and anointing OFF me!”**

What God is doing in his church is purifying his church. We're so used to coming to God in a casual and cavalier way! Act as if we can just stroll into the presence of God however we want to...we've lost our fear of God!

And we need to gain a sense of it back! Read stories like:

- Adam and Eve from Genesis chapter three – where they are cast out of the garden for their sin.
- Nadab and Abihu from Leviticus chapter 10 – they offer unauthorized fire before the Lord and what happened? Fire comes out and consumes them!
- Korah and his followers? Numbers 16. These men rise up against Moses and Aaron presuming to take charge over Israel. They offer incense to the Lord and the earth opens up and swallows them...and everyone and everything that belonged to them!
- Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6 – puts his hand on the ark to keep it from falling – and “God struck him down”.

Reading stories like help serve as jumper cables if you will to shock us back into the reality of who we are dealing with when we come before God. So much more I could say about this!

Can I just read you some verses about the fear of the Lord as we bring this message to a close. Let God's word speak and minister to you:

Psalm 34:9 – “Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack!”

Psalm 33:18 – “Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him...”

Psalm 128:1-4 – “Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways! You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.”

Proverbs 1:7 – “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

Proverbs 10:27 – “The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.”

2 Corinthians 5:11a– “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others...”

Acts 9:31 – “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”

Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, summed it up like this: **Eccl. 12:13 – “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”**

Let this describe us, Champion Forest. Let us be like this model church in Jerusalem. If I had to give an action step as we leave today it would simply be this right here:

- 1. Let’s pray for the favor of God.**
- 2. Let’s walk in the fear of God.**

I’m telling you, we do this – we’ll be an unstoppable force for the Kingdom that honors our Lord and people see what God is doing here. And as people hear what God is doing at our church...just like me when I received that first phone call a year ago this week...the thought will be, I want to be a part of a place like that!

Let’s pray.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.