



Unified Church – Part 3

Shared Struggles & Mutual Aid

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Well, there has been a lot of concern these days about your health. Is that not an understatement of the year right there? Colossal understatement. A lot of concern about your health right now. A lot of people care about their physical health these days like never before. If only Christians were half as concerned about their spiritual health we'd be in good shape. There are all these diagnostics obviously in place to try and help you figure out what's going on inside your physical body. Everything from taking your temperature to molecular analysis of your bodily fluids, right? Trying to figure out whether you're healthy or not. If only there were some diagnostic to figure out how you are doing spiritually. If only, if only.

I'll bet you think that I know that there is one, right? There is. Matter of fact, I have gotten to this study of the Antiochian church in Acts 11 and have seen them in the text that we're supposed to study this morning get tested and pass the test with flying colors. Which comes at a good time because the church in Jerusalem is a little concerned about this church in Antioch, all these Gentiles in it and such a cosmopolitan, well-to-do city. Can these people really be, you know, real Christians? Are they spiritually healthy? Well, God is going to put an exclamation point on that today and it would be good for us to know well what is it that God would see as such an important first test of their real Christianity and that it's genuine and that they're spiritually healthy?

Well, before we get to Acts 11, I want you to turn with me to First John Chapter 3 to show you in some of the most stark terms in the Bible, here is the test. Here it is. I mean, there are others, but this one is at the top of the list. This is the thing we see over and over and over again that if you would take your life and lay it on top of this particular diagnostic, we would know today before you left this building, whether or not you are spiritually healthy or not. This is it.

Take a look at it with me in First John Chapter 3, put your eyes on this set of verses because they are pivotal. They are extremely important as it relates to where you stand right now with your creator. First John Chapter 3, you drop down to verse 14, it's been a theme throughout this little epistle, but it really gets to a clear crescendo in this verse. "For we know..." Are you with me now First John 3:14? "We know that we have passed out of death into life." That's a good thing we're not just talking about spiritual health, we're talking about being alive at this point, right? We know whether you're spiritually dead or whether you're spiritually alive. Well, how do we know that? Here it comes, ready? "Because we love the brothers," because we love the brothers. "Whoever does not love abides in death."

I'm thinking take this verse and read it to your non-Christian next-door neighbor and ask them, "Do they love? Do they love their brothers?" They are going to go, "Of course I do. Of course I love my brothers, yeah." Well, there's something in this definition of love that is uniquely distinct in the Christian theology that we've got to make sure we understand. Because



whatever this means, this is a diagnostic that sets me apart from the rest of the world that shows that I have a genuine relationship with God, that God's Spirit dwells within me.

And if I don't pass this test, it's clear the inverse of this is that I've had this belligerence in my heart, verse 15. If "everyone who hates his brother," if I have this discord and this lack of interest, this animosity, this contention with people who are my spiritual brothers, "then I'm a murderer." Well, that's kind of a leap, isn't it? Well, Jesus was the one that started with that whole thing, right? "Anyone who he hates his brother," in his heart, "is a murderer." He is guilty enough to go into the fires of hell. This is a huge statement that Jesus makes, and it all comes down to how I feel and how I treat and how I respond to my brothers.

"You know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." Wow. That's called a fail right there, right? Talk about testing positive for something that's fatal. That's it. It's all down to whether we love. And again, you ask your non-Christian neighbor, "Hey, do you love?" They're going to reply, "Of course I love. I got a love sticker on my computer," or whatever. Well, great. But what do you mean by that?

Well, I'm glad the next verse is there because this helps us really clearly distinguish the kinds of love the world talks about and the kinds of love that's supposed to characterize real Christians. Test of your spiritual health, here it comes, verse 16. "By this we know love..." A lot of people can use that, "I love L.A., I love the Dodgers. I love, you know, whatever." OK, you love a lot of things. But what does that mean, love? Here we go. Ready? "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us," that he laid down his life, that he, Christ of course, laid down his life for us. And that sounds just so easy to say. Matter of fact it's the first verse you've ever learned, right? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." OK, "gave," this simple little verb there, gave. What does that mean that he laid down his life for us?

Which, by the way, he made it very clear, "No one takes my life from me," no one, "I lay it down willingly." So whatever this was, it was willingly both eyes open. He was going to do it. And it was not something that was going to be easy. As a matter of fact, he sat there wrestling in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane struggling and sweating profusely. And he was struggling, saying, "God if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." He was struggling with what?

Well, he was about to be arrested. Let off through a kangaroo court. He's about to be strapped to a pillar and whipped having his back completely filleted open. He was going to then be beaten with Roman fists. They were going to mock him, putting on a robe on him, jamming these huge nails into his head, these huge thorns of the Middle East. He would be bleeding. He would be beaten brutally. He would have all of his clothes stripped off him down to his underwear and they would gamble for his underwear. Then he would be hung up, strung up naked on a Roman execution rack after they put nails through his hands and through his feet and hoisted him up for everyone to see as they mocked and jeered at him and his disciples cowered over there in the shadows.



That's what it meant for him to lay down his life and what exactly are we talking about? Well, that was what was going on in history. What was going on judicially in heaven was God was taking all the sins of the sinners who he was dying for and he focused his wrath, his just anger at the sin and he poured that out. He aimed it, focused it at his own Son "that though he knew no sin Christ became sin for us that we in him might become the righteousness of God." Talk about love.

How about Romans Chapter 5? "That why we were still sinners Christ died for us." We were his enemies. We were at hostility with God and God took sinners who were falling short, so short that Peter was denying him in Caiaphas' courtyard and saying, "I don't even know him, calling down curses on himself." I don't even know this guy. And he was dying naked on a cross so that Peter would not have to go to hell, would not have to incur any of the just response of the Father on Peter for what he had done. And here's Jesus dying. He laid down his life for Peter and every other Christian in this room. The Bible says you want to know what love is? This is what love is. That's love.

Love is saying it doesn't feel good, it hurts, it's painful, it's sacrifice, it's a commitment to your good, even though it's my bad. It's coming to earth, "not to be served but to serve, and to give my life as," a payment, "a ransom for many" people. That's painful. And Jesus said, you know, you've heard the Old Testament. It says you ought to "love your neighbor as yourself." Well, I got a "new commandment for you," John 13, "that you love one another: just as I have loved you."

Read the rest of verse 16 right here in this passage. We know what love is, he laid down his life for us, and "we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." For who? For the brothers. "For my biological siblings?" No, no, no, we're not talking about that. We're talking about people who share a commitment to Christ, even if you were in Antioch and they were Jewish background believers or whether they're Greeks or whether they're slaves or whether they're slave owners or whether they're municipality or magistrates in the town square, or whether they're rich landowners or whether they're people who have no money. You are to lay down your life for them.

Now, am I going to have to die for them? Am I going to have to be stripped naked and beaten for their well-being? Well, the commitment is and that's the standard that we love like Christ loved. We love each other the way Christ loved us. But probably no one in this room is going to be a martyr for someone else. You're not going to take a bullet for another Christian in the room. That's probably not going to happen. But, verse 17, there are a lot of lesser sacrifices. That though I'm committed to die for you, that's what the Bible said I should do, I'm willing to spend and be expended for your souls. That's how brothers deal with one another.

Well, this text says there are a lot of things that fall short of that. As a matter of fact, there are things that are going to be demanded of you this week if you really love your brother. Like you might have the world's goods, verse 17, and you might see your brother in need. And if you close your heart against them, "how does God's love abide in him?" Now, maybe for my own physical-biological brother, maybe for my wife and my kids, I would sacrifice. If I had three



cars and that person had none, maybe I would give them one car and that's an expensive investment. But there it is. I guess we could do that. But for a guy I don't know who is in my small group and he just started coming, and he's just a part of the team for a while and I really have nothing in common. We've never been golfing. We don't watch football together. I don't know, would I give him a car? I mean, just because I have an extra one, I don't know. I could sell it, make a little money, we could go on a vacation. I don't know that I would give that away.

Oh, he can take the bus. I mean, aren't there deals for bus passes? I mean, I don't know about that. That was as if we're brothers in Christ, our brothers. We are supposed to be willing to lay down our lives. And here's a practical example: the world's goods. Something that I have that you need. And none of us have needs like we're starving to death. But let's just think about the brothers and our needs among us, the brothers and sisters in Christ here. And we have all kinds of culturally substantiated, you know, needs. You're not going to die if you have to take the bus. But the reality of the kinds of goods that I have that might be able to ease your problem, give a relief to your struggle. If I have that and in my heart, I go, "Nah, no." Then the Bible says there is something absent. You're not a person who loves God. "The love of God does not abide in you." You're not someone who has a Spirit of God.

Matter of fact, that's impossible because, "Little children," who are children of God, look at this, bottom of verse 18, We're "not supposed to love in word or in talk but in deed and in truth." I do something. Love is an action, love is not saying, "I feel good, I'm going to do it for my best friends." It's people who share my commitment to Jesus Christ who are part of this thing called the family of God. And if a part of my body has a need, then another part of my body that's healthy and doesn't have that need is going to go over and supply what is needed to make sure that need is met because we're all part of one body.

That's a uniquely Christian kind of thing. It doesn't happen in the Rotary Club, doesn't happen in the Toastmaster, doesn't happen in a motorcycle gang. I mean, it might happen to some extent when people find commonality and it's like, "Yeah, well, we kind of help each other out." Jesus said this you need to distinguish between the world's kind of love and Christian love, because here's what he said, Jesus now, he said, "If you are doing good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?" If you lend to those, you give stuff to people who you know you would get back, I mean, they would give it back if you had a similar situation. They would give... "Hey, listen, then what difference is there between you and the tax collectors and the sinners? None. Everybody does that.

So if you ask your neighbor, "Do you love your brothers?" They've got something in mind in terms of their brothers, who they think that is, and something in mind of what they define love as, and they're going to go, "Well, of course I love them." Well, you do. And I'm not saying the common grace of God does not have a kind of phileo love that operates within the world and in the neighborhoods and systems of the offices all throughout this county. But I am saying Christian love is different. Christian love is a test of someone who's willing to sacrificially love someone who would qualify under this rubric, under the heading of laying down my life for



them. And that's going to test whether or not you're healthy. Matter of fact, it can be a test of whether or not you're alive.

If I bring you up on the front of the auditorium, lay your hand down on the stage here and I take a hammer and hit your left hand. OK? I can pretty well guess what your right hand is going to do if I have a healthy person standing in front of me. After you make a fist and hit me in the face, probably, you will take your right hand and go and nurse your left hand because why? Because there's an organic connection. The body of Christ is like that. You don't have to like them, you don't have to be in with them, you don't have to have them over to your house for barbecues. But if there's a need within the body of Christ, love that exists from God organically and supernaturally supersedes any standards of the world. And the Church of Christ is supplied for because Christians love the brothers.

That is a diagnostic. It's better than any molecular analysis, it is better than any temperature taking, it will tell whether or not you're a real Christian and whether or not you're a healthy Christian. And there is some variance within that because by Chapter 4 he talks about the love of God being perfected in you when you love this way. So let's see how the Antiochian church lays down a template for us because it's quite remarkable. Turn with me two Acts Chapter 11 to see if we can't learn from how the church functioned with its test of genuine brotherly love. They pass it with flying colors. As a matter of fact, they pass it so well that it becomes a super big challenge for us this morning.

So look at it with me. Acts Chapter 11. We're only going to cover four verses. Don't applaud. We're only going to cover four verses this morning which if you're kind of new to the church, you think that means a shorter sermon? Not necessarily. But we're going to cover four verses as we look at what the Antiochian church did in a very unique situation of learning ahead of time what was going to happen and a need that wasn't even quite realized yet and how they responded to it. Let me read it for you in Acts Chapter 11.

You saw where we left off last week. Look back up at all that. The church is functioning strongly. We're a little concerned, they sent Barnabas from Jerusalem. He comes, he sees it, he's glad, he knows God's favor's on these people. They rejoice. It's all good. They're standing strong against the culture there in Antioch, the third most prosperous and important city of the ancient world in the first century and Gentiles are being saved. And they're being called Christians because they're standing against the tide of the cultural evil. And it's just like this church is doing well. Now we're going to put it to the test. We're going to test it when it comes to brotherly love.

Let's read the passage together beginning in verse 27, Acts Chapter 11 verse 27. "Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch." Now, remember, I've told you this before, but don't forget it. Jerusalem is a high elevation comparatively to all the surrounding area. And so whenever we leave Jerusalem, no matter what direction, north, south, east or west, we're going to go down. Because when you're walking, you're very conscious of whether you're walking uphill or downhill. And Antioch, as you remember, this is the Mediterranean coast and Africa down here, Turkey up here, Cyprus and Crete out here in



the Mediterranean Sea. You got Jerusalem down here in an area called Judea, you got Samaria above it. You got Galilee above it. You've got Syria above it, right? And that's where Antioch is way up here.

And so prophets it says from Jerusalem, they go down, which we would say up because we speak in those terms, up and down in terms of north and south. They go up to Antioch. "One of the prophets named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit," so the Spirit is saying this, Agabus is the mouthpiece, and here comes this truthful statement about the future, "there would be a great famine over all the world." Think about this great famine over all the world." It doesn't mean the whole planet over in the Americas, right? This is the ancient world. I know we're talking about the Roman world because the next phrase here talks about it being "fulfilled in the days of Claudius."

Claudius, you might remember back, Caesar Augustus started the Roman emperors, right? Then we had Tiberius during the days of Christ. During the birth of Christ was Caesar Augustus. Just before he dies Tiberius comes on the scene through most of the information in the gospels, right? Tiberius is on the throne. Caligula comes next and then Claudius. And after that's Nero and I know you know Nero, the fifth emperor. But we're going to have all this fulfilled in the days of Claudius, Claudius the Roman emperor.

Now, if you read historians like Josephus, one of the most verbose and lengthy writers on what's going on at the time, he, among other historians, talk about the famines that took place throughout the Roman world during the period of Claudius. That was just confirmed externally, not that we need it. God's word says it. That's true. But it was confirmed by the fact that they had trouble during Claudius' reign with famine during Claudius' reign. So Judea in particular, as Josephus writes, the Jewish historian, it was particularly bad in Judea, and maybe that was part of Agabus' extended discussion on this. We don't know. But the point is, here's what the disciples in Antioch decided, verse 29.

When they heard about this coming famine, which meant financial collapse. Right? "The disciples determined, every one, according to his ability to send relief," that's financial, material gain, right? They're going to help their brothers, the brothers living in Judea around Jerusalem. "They did so, and they sent it to the elders," the leaders of that Jerusalem church, "by the hand of Barnabas and Saul." So Saul, remember, Barnabas had gone off into Tarsus and he went and found Saul. He brought him back, Saul, who would become Paul. And now Saul and Barnabas are going to go down to Jerusalem and bring this financial gift.

Now, this is quite a remarkable thing if you think about it. I understand that it's a well-to-do place. It's like living in, you know, I don't know, South Palm Beach or I don't know, Jupiter, Florida or Orange County or Beverly Hills. I mean, I'm not saying Orange County is Beverly Hills clearly enough. But, I mean, you're not living in Blythe, right? You know that I love our friends in Blythe, you know that I love them. We are on the radio in Blythe. Love you, Blythe. But Orange County, if you think about it, we know it has a kind of economic standard that's a little different than you have in some other places.



And if by just thinking this through, God were to send information, let's just say a couple of years ago, that there'd be a coming economic collapse, we'd have hyperinflation, we'd have a president doing crazy things and a chairman of the Treasury, Secretary of the Treasury who's not thinking straight and the Fed printing money and... This is just all an illustration, I'm just making all the flaws up. Well, let's just say all of that happened and we could foresee it, and it was all led into with all this government stuff that overreaches, we might rightly say because there was this huge COVID outbreak, this strange virus that was going to come out of some lab in Wuhan and all this was going to happen. And if we're back there two years ago, hearing all this is going to take place, I don't think our first reaction would be, "What about Blythe. I wonder if the church in Blythe is going to be OK." Right?

We would probably think what? I don't know, I going to think about what mask company can I invest in? That's what I'm thinking, right? Maybe I should start transferring money out of certain things, and I don't tend to buy some cryptocurrency. I don't know. There are things I'm going to do thinking about me and my family and even my church. Even as the pastor, I'm going to think about our church. I'm going to get ready. This is a remarkable thing to have the Antiochian church that frankly, yeah, obviously is a fairly well-to-do place. And I'm assuming their budget was a lot bigger than the church in a lot of other places. But this church thing, "We got to get together and take up a collection and every one according to their means, we ought to collect some money because we got some friends here, Barnabas being one of them, from a church in a place that's already having all this persecution from the Roman government, and they're going to be hurting financially. If the famine hits them, wow, they're going to be struggling.

So instead of building an extra barn and caring about what we're going to do. Yeah, we got to keep our cupboards full. I get all that. "We're going to plant our crops and we're going to make sure that we look out for the famine that's coming. But we need to send some money and some grain and some stuff and some supplies. We need to send stuff. We need to give them relief." That, you would say is remarkable. They hadn't met anyone there, except for a couple of leaders that came with Barnabas. This was a pretty remarkable thing. A sacrificial thing. They were attuned to the needs, the practical needs of the people in another place simply because they shared a common commitment to the lordship of Christ. "They're our brothers and we care."

It's more than saying, as James Chapter 2 says, Hey, I see my brother with material need "be warmed and be filled." I'll pray for you. They didn't say, I'll pray for you. Now, let's figure out how to build another barn if there's a famine coming. They said we're going to do something. The Bible says even in James Chapter 2, just, I mean, to put a nail in this coffin, your faith isn't even real if that's your response. "Can that faith save you?" No, it's the faith that has works that says, I know that if I have a brother who doesn't have daily provision and doesn't have food and clothing that I don't say, "be warmed and be filled" and I'll pray for you. Because I'm attuned to physical needs, I'm first of all seeing it, and I'm empathizing, I'm sympathizing, I'm feeling and I'm saying, yes, I'm going to respond.



But it starts with you being attuned to physical needs, to practical needs, to tangible means. If you're taking notes, just put it down this way. Number one, you as a Christian, you want to pass this test and be a healthy Christian? You need to "Be Attuned to Practical Needs." And what are the practical needs among the brothers and sisters in Christ who you rub shoulders with or who you interact with, maybe even across the country, maybe even in another country? What kind of practical needs do they have? Because part of your Christianity should be concerned about those practical needs, because that's what real Christians do. OK.

I want you to think about what we just read, verses 27 and 28. "Prophets come down from Jerusalem," we would say come up from Jerusalem, and they come, "to Antioch. And they say," Agabus in particular, "there is a famine coming." I just want you to ask yourself the question, why would we need a miraculous disclosure of a forthcoming famine? Why a miraculous disclosure of that? Why do we need to be miraculously informed about this? I mean, can't we at the beginning of the famine have people come up and say, "Hey, it's particularly bad in Judea and so can we get together quickly?" I mean, not even that it was suggested, but maybe the Spirit of God at that point would be like, "Hey, you guys need to give." So, I mean, in other words, it just seems superfluous for us to have a supernatural predictive prophecy that foretells us.

And by the way, it is supernatural, which is the marks of the apostles and prophets by the way. The apostles were doing miraculous signs. We saw that in Chapter 9, people getting healed, people being raised from the dead even, a couple of times in the book of Acts, twice in the book of Acts. That is a miraculous sign that says you ought to trust these apostles as spokespersons of Christ and the prophets were there teaching and one of the things that they did in teaching New Testament truths without a written New Testament, because we got a gap between the founding of the church and a New Testament, to say, "Well, here's how the church should function. Here's how the church should be led. We don't have priests anymore. Well, what should we have? Well, we have pastors and we should have deacons. We should structure this way." How do we know that?

Well, the prophets come and they teach New Testament truths without any tradition from the Church, without any written Scripture of the Church. And how do we know they're telling us the truth? Well, God, much like the Old Testament prophets, periodically God punctuated their messages about what you should know and what you should do with, here I'm going to tell you it's from God because they are predicting the future. As we read about Cyrus, for instance. A hundred years before Cyrus came along we know the prophets are telling the truth because the prophets come along and do things like foretell the future. Only God can foretell the future. As Isaiah says, "Only God knows what's to come." So the prophets are punctuating their messages with things like this.

But again, I'm thinking why this? Why this? I mean, there have been other things that would have seemingly made more sense, because if there's a famine, it's like we're going to know there's a famine because there's no rain and our crops are drying up. We don't need a miraculous warning about this. We will see it when it's happening and we don't need heaven



to tell us about it. If you want to know why, I guess you stand in line and wait to talk to Christ when you get there and you can ask him.

But I got a guess. And I think it's an informed guess. At least I see the parallel and you can't argue with the parallel, even though I don't know for sure, but it seems like this might be one reason. I know that being informed about a need in another place and they have no connection with them in terms of their ethnicity and anything else, connection sociologically, I get why God would test them to see if they love their brothers. I get that. But here's why I think God supernaturally informed them about this as a coming event, because there's something that God does supernaturally from this point on in every generation of Christians to be able to motivate and press and convict and drive people to meet physical, practical needs from within because the Spirit of God dwells within people.

It is to put it in the words of First Thessalonians, here's how Paul says this, "No one needs to instruct you as to how to love a brother. No one needs to write you about that for God himself instructs you how to love the brothers." In other words, there is something that God's Spirit does when the love of God abides in us it kicks the door of our heart open when we see the need and we're going to meet that need. God does something supernatural in us. We care for people who we wouldn't have otherwise cared for willing to lay down our material goods for them which we wouldn't have done as a non-Christian because God supernaturally, not as disclosing it before it happens, but he's certainly moving us to do things that we wouldn't otherwise do. It is the love of God dwelling within us and that is driving us to care for the physical, practical, tangible needs of other people. That's a God-thing. And I think the supernatural disclosure of this to the church of Antioch, at least, is a nice parallel to the thing I see throughout the Scripture of God's love literally abiding in us. God's love abiding in us that now makes me love in a way I wouldn't have loved otherwise.

A word on the prophets. Jot this down if you would, Ephesians Chapter 2 verse 20. Ephesians 2:20. The Bible talks about the building of the church and talking about the assembling of Christians within the church. And it says, "being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself being the chief cornerstone." The foundation of the apostles and prophets. If I were to bring someone out here and say, "Hey, we got a new staff hire and he's Apostle Jim." You'd be like, "Whoa, wait a minute." Or if I said, "I got another guy here, I've got Prophet Bill." I think you would pause for a second and you should pause because we know something about the foundational functioning of the apostles and prophets before the nine chosen authors of the New Testament who God picked to codify that information and put it in writing so that I could look at Galatians, I could look at First Timothy, I could look at Second Peter and be able to say, here's what God thinks about how we should function, what we should do and the principles of New Testament truth because now I have a New Testament.

But between the founding of the Church and that we've got the foundational work of the apostles and prophets. Today, some people would say, "Well, there are prophets," even some would say, well, "there are not apostles, but there are prophets, and the prophets are the kind that will tell you around the donut table after the service, something that's going to



happen to me." And they carve-out a particular theology that says, "Well, it's like Agabus coming on the scene and saying there's going to be a famine." And so someone might come up to you they would say at a church that believes in this kind of prophecy, and they're going to tell you that he's a prophet that's saying things and they'll often say, "I have a word of the Lord," you know, "a word from the Lord for you," right? "I have a word of knowledge," and they say, "I'm going to tell you this thing that's going to happen."

The problem is that you can't function in a church like that for very long without it being very evident and obvious that they're often wrong. And when they're often wrong, then you have to say, well, the prophecies like this within the church that continues on after the New Testament, it must be a kind of erroneous, well, at least a fallible kind of prophecy. In other words, it's probably that it's not always right. And so people who believe this will teach you, "Well, if you hear someone prophesy over you, well, you ought to take it with a grain of salt because you're not really sure if it's true yet. But just wait and see if it happens."

OK, now even how I say that I'm not trying to be dismissive because there are some great, very intelligent men that believe that. But I'm just saying I'm thinking that becomes problematic for me instantaneously as a practitioner of church and New Testament ecclesiology. I'm like, how does that work? Right? "Thus, sayeth the Lord. But then let's wait and see, because I'm not sure if it's going to happen or not." It certainly changes the function of the prophet and the word and the title of profit from the Old Testament, when it said, if a prophet says something that does not come true, you disregard him because he is speaking presumptuously. As a matter of fact, elsewhere, we see that there to be stoned to death. So capital offense for you to be wrong about prophecy in the Old Testament.

But in the New Testament some have said, well, there's a carve out for them and they do point to Agabus, not Agabus here, because what happens is clearly attested in history, but they'll go over later in the book of Acts, Acts 26, when Agabus shows up again and says to Paul that he's going to be bound and he's going to be taken to Jerusalem. And that picture of him being sent off, ultimately to Rome, they'll say, "Well, he wasn't right." Well, I would contend that he is right. Matter of fact, I put a couple of books on the back of your worksheet, if you want to deal with the issue of fallible or infallible prophets. I believe in infallible prophets, not fallible prophets. That's my position here.

A couple of books there. And I think even Edgar Thomas, I think his name or Thomas Edgar. That's another one that doesn't have the word "fallible prophets" in the title. But those are three. Or you can just go on the Internet and start looking at the debate that goes on about fallible prophets, as opposed to a different category than existed in the Old Testament. That's for further study. My point in this sermon is just that God used supernatural predictive prophecy in this particular passage coming from people who would teach New Testament truths without a New Testament and he authenticated it, Hebrews Chapter 2 verses 1 through 4 or Second Corinthians 12:12. A lot of verses coming at you. Hebrews Chapter 2 verses 1 through 4, Second Corinthians Chapter 12 verse 12.



The picture of authenticating the apostles and prophets was the things that they did that human beings can't do. And I don't think it's what human beings can't do batting .300. I think it's just like the Old Testament. It had to be always true or you're really not a true prophet. And I think because the church is built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, and now we no longer have apostles and prophets. OK. You may not agree with me on that. That's fine. We won't have anybody escort you out right now. But I'm saying you at least need to know where your pastor stands on that and you need to know that we shouldn't be expecting someone at the donut table to tell you how many kids you're going to have and what they're going to grow up to be, or how you should feed them or anything like that. And that happens in churches all over South County and all over the country and all around the world. But here, don't do it.

OK. Here's what I'm going to say. The supernatural informing of this is an informing that reminds us of the way that God instructs us from within to be attuned to physical needs. We cannot close our hearts to them. We cannot just simply say I will pray for you. We should do more than that because real Christians do more than that because they're driven supernaturally, internally by the love of God to meet needs around them. And it starts with what we see in verse 29. So look at verse 29 if you're still there. And I hope that you are still there, Acts Chapter 11 verse 29. Acts Chapter 11 verse 29. It says in verse 29, "So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea." Amazing. You hear there's a famine coming and it's going to come all over the Roman world and you are part of the Roman world, but you're going to care about people who you think have less than you. So you have "determined" to do this. OK.

We need to determine to do what God is internally compelling us to do, which is to meet physical, practical needs even, and I love the timing of this, before it happens. The need wasn't quite there yet. The famine was coming. It wasn't already. And again, here's another example of the faith that you're going to need to say, "God, I trust that my commitment to meet a need is a reflection of what your love demands of Christian people." And that is that we care in a way that says, yes, I determine even ahead of time that I will sacrificially love, just like Christ sacrificially loved me by laying down his life for me, I want to lay down my life for the brothers. If that means the goods that I have, some of them have to be given to my brothers in Christ, great.

Number two, we should all determine to do that right now in the comfort of this air-conditioned room with a padded seat under your seat, you should "Determine to Sacrificially Love." Number two, determine to sacrificially love. You ought to say I will ahead of time say that when I see the need and I'm attuned to the need and it surfaces and I see that there's a need, I'm not just going to say I will pray for you. I am going to determine that ahead of time, I'm going to love them in a practical, sacrificial way.

Luke is the author, of course, of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. It's a lot of material. Matter of fact, it's more material in the New Testament than any other author wrote, more than the Apostle Paul in terms of numbers of words. When God enlisted Luke to write these things, the word that we see translated "determined" in this passage Luke used six times. This is an



interesting factoid, are you ready? Of the six times that he employed this word, the subject of this word was only human beings one time and it's right here. Every other time the word is used, it was God determining something.

God determined, like he says at the end of Luke, God determined that Christ would suffer and die on the cross. In Acts Chapter 2, God determined beforehand that these things would happen, that the Christ would suffer and then rise from the dead. God determined, as Paul would say at the Areopagus in Acts 17, he determined ahead of time when people would be born and where they would be born. He determined that. Matter of fact, we would use the word "decreed." We see in the book of Acts that God determined that Jesus Christ would be the judge of all mankind. God determined, God determined, God determined, God determined. We would call it the decrees of God. God decreed and decided something finally and resolutely. And if God decrees it, guess what? It's going to happen. It's only one time Luke enlists this word under the direction of God's Spirit drives him to write this, only one time he uses it where people are determining it. And all I'm trying to say it's a strong word. Very strong word.

I mean, if a human can decree something you as an individual sitting in a church should decree. This is the example. That's what they did, and I'm provoking you to do the same thing. You need a decree. I'm making a decree right now that the next time a need surfaces, every one, according to his ability, if it's within my ability to meet that need. You can't meet a need that... If someone needs a car, it's like, "I got one car. I can't meet that need." OK, great. But if I have the wherewithal to meet the need and a brother or sister in Christ needs the goods that I have, then I am going to decide ahead of time that I am going to sacrificially love that person and express the spiritual health of my Christian life by saying I'm going to meet the need, I will send relief.

Therefore, I would like you to stop just saying to people when they tell you I got an issue, I got a problem, I got a struggle. Stop saying I will pray for you and start saying I will pray for you and how can I help? I will pray for you and how can I help? What can I do? Right? And I know that we're so used to saying, "Oh, nothing and just pray." But I want you to listen and even come back with a rejoinder on that and say, "Are you sure? Is there something I can do? Is there anything that I have that you need that will get you through this trial, this struggle, this famine of whatever it might be in your life?" Think about that.

I mean, there are some you who just think practically about people, I talk about taking the bus, somebody who's got three cars, someone who's got no cars and yeah, they can buy a bus ticket. I get that. But there's something about the standards of how people function even within this context, within this church, within this culture that you ought to say, if I can meet a need, practically, I'm going to commit ahead of time to meet it. This is how the early church functioned. In Jerusalem, it said of it twice in Acts Chapter 2 and Acts Chapter 4, "that no one had a need among them." If there was a need that someone couldn't meet with what they had, even sitting there in front of them in their wallet, they would go and sell a piece of property so they did have the resources and they would give it. And people had what they needed. That's a great picture of the church functioning the way it should, because God



supernaturally is informing and driving and convicting and motivating people to say, just as Jesus laid down his life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

To put it in the words of Philippians Chapter 2, you ought to "have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God," and all the riches of heaven and everything he had going for him, "something to be grasped," and hung onto, "but he emptied himself." The glory of heaven, he laid aside. He showed it in the transfiguration. But all the greatness and independent exercise of all of his divine attributes, he said, I'm going to put that on hold so that I can be found in the appearance of a man. I'm going to "humble myself," to be to the place where I will be, "obedient, even to death, even death on a cross." Why? Because I'm going to redeem their lives. I'm going to do good for them.

Put it in the words of Second Corinthians Chapter 8, "Though he was rich, Christ, for your sake became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich." That is the picture of Christ. And before that great christological section in Philippians 2, it starts with this, "Do nothing out of selfishness or vain conceit, but in everything you ought to consider others as more important than yourself. You shouldn't just look after your own needs, but you ought to be looking after the needs of others." And that's the part of you being your brother's keeper within the body of Christ and saying, I'm going to determine ahead of time that because I'm a Christian, I'm going to love the people around me and my brothers and sisters in Christ, I need to meet their needs.

Some say, "Aren't we supposed to love everybody." Great, I get that. Galatians 6, "Do good to all men." Do you know the rest of that verse? "But especially the household of faith." You have an obligation to your brothers, the test throughout the book of First John is your brothers, your brothers, your brothers, your brothers, spiritually connected to the body of Christ because Christ dwells in you. You do understand that when the rich young ruler came to Christ and said, "I got it all together, I'm fine. I kept the commandments." Jesus got right to the problem of so many people's lives and he said, "Great take all that you have. Sell it," give it to people in need, "give it to the poor. Then you come and follow me." Talk about an act of faith, right? Like, OK.

What was he trying to do? Well, he's trying, as I've often said, to reveal his failure in the first commandment to have no other God before God. And he was the incarnate God saying, "sell all you have." But look what was more important to him. That's why Jesus' response to the disciples was, "Sure is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God." And the disciples' minds were blown. Why? Because the more you have the easier it is to value that over the people's needs around you. And Jesus was saying show me that. Because that's the sign of real spiritual life.

And there are some who will play along with this for a while. As Jesus told in the parable of the soils, there are going to be people who show like they're walking with Christ and they're all about it. They go to a small group. They might even say, "Hey, you need babysitting, I'll do it." "Hey, you're in the hospital, I'll make a meal," and you see this initial reaction to God living



within them. And it looks like it's all real, but then the cares of the world and riches, all that chokes it out.

It's like Demas. Do you know that name Demas? When Paul was writing to Timothy he said, you know, here's the problem with Demas. He was with us. He was doing the thing. He was doing what I was doing. He was spending and being expended for the souls of people. "But because he loved this present world he deserted." There are people in this room that maybe because of a sermon like this or because of pressure or I don't know, maybe because it feels good at first to do it, you will be sacrificially giving and sharing and being generous, saying I'm going to love other people sacrificially. But 10 years from now, you won't be. Matter of fact, you probably won't even be going to church because it's old, it's a hassle. Whatever.

Here's the thing the Bible says it really comes down to what's going on in your heart, whether you love God and the love of God dwells in you, which shows that you always love people more than you love your things and you're willing to part with your world's goods when there's a need around you and you can meet that need according to your ability. And as long as I'm quoting Second Corinthians let's turn there real quick. Because I want to make it clear this is not about you going without so other people can live a flush life. That's not the case.

Second Corinthians Chapter 9. There's so much here. Chapters 8 and 9 are great. And maybe we should start in Chapter 8. Let's go to Chapter 8, bottom of Chapter 8. Start in verse 13. By the way, if we were just to read through Chapters 8 and 9 of Second Corinthians, you'd say, "Oh, this is the thing my pastor that I grew up with used to teach on about giving to the offering," before the QR codes. It was all about putting money in the bag. And so all these passages that talk about giving and seed for sower and God loves a cheerful giver, we always think that's about giving vertically to God, which we do by giving to our church. That's not what the context is here. The context is not about that.

The context as a matter of fact is identical to what we see the Antiochian church seeing that there were people in Jerusalem who were suffering, Christians who were suffering, and they were taking up a collection, and Paul was. Just to get context and prove it to you. Let's start at the beginning of the chapter. "We want you to know brothers," this is Second Corinthians 8:1, "about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction," they were doing poorly, they were being persecuted, "their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means," this is what we saw, "and yet I can testify, and beyond their means," it was like amazing what they gave, "of their own accord, begging us earnestly," sincerely, earnestly begging us, "for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints." They wanted to help. Right? That's what this is all about.

And then there's a verse I quoted, verse 9, drop down to verse 9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor so that by his poverty we might become rich." That's an amazing thing. God did that for us. He laid aside all the things that would be for his advantage so that we, through his poverty, might have forgiveness. Now drop down to verse 13. He says, "I don't mean that others should be eased



and you be burdened." I'm not saying, listen, you guys have yourself nothing in the cupboards in Antioch, and let's just make sure that all of the saints in Jerusalem are fat and happy, right? Just send them all your stuff. That's not the point.

I don't mean that others should be eased and you burdened. "But as a matter of fairness," let's just make sure you both have enough, "your abundance at the present time," and certainly in Corinth was a lot like Antioch. Corinth was not... Antioch's a whole different city and Corinth, you know, way out west. But the point was that both of these were well-to-do cities with above-average incomes. And he says, "the abundance of the present time," but at least you guys are doing well, "should supply their needs, so that their abundance may supply your needs, that there might be fairness. As is written," now he quotes about the manna in the Old Testament, "the one who gathered much had nothing left over and one who gathered little had no lack."

And just so you know, going now into Chapter 9, this is not about Communism. It's not about just socialism, make sure that we steal from one to give to the other. It's not about the rich paying their fair share. That's not what this is about. Matter of fact, let's start in Second Corinthians 9 verse 5. "So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift that you promised, so that may be a ready and willing gift, not as an exaction." It's not like I'm taking a poll or a tax or taking this money from you. No. "The point is though, whoever sows sparingly is going to reap sparingly, whoever sows bountifully will reap bountifully. Each one must give as he's decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work."

This is about the lateral horizontal good works that we do in the church to each other. In this case, church to church, Corinth to Jerusalem. And all I'm trying to tell you is this is a picture of the kind of giving that we're preaching about this morning. Did you notice this is not a sermon about you giving to the church budgets? I've got sermons on those but this isn't it. And Paul talks about that, by the way, in First Corinthians Chapter 9. Do you want to talk about the need for you to give to the church budget? That is a requirement and you must do it and that's what the Bible says. First Corinthians 9, Galatians Chapter 6, First Timothy Chapter 4. We go to a lot of places to show that you and I need to give to the church. That's an act of worship to God. We got to do that.

I'm not talking about that. In this passage, all these verses that are quoted by your pastor about church giving, it's really about this giving where you see needs and you're meeting those needs. Not for tax write-off, obviously. Not for, you know, just making sure your church is healthy, which OK, that's good too. It's about you making sure that there's no one in our church who has a need. There are no brothers in Christ that we have, that we know of where we see a need and we don't say, "I love you and I'm going to tangibly meet that need."

Go back up to Chapter 8, it's just full of so many good things. Look at verse 6 of Second Corinthians 8. "Accordingly, we urge Titus that as he started, so he should complete among



you this act of grace." In other words, you by God, you're moved within your heart, you're not closing your heart, you care about these people who are struggling in the church and what you started was your commitment to do it. "But as you excel in everything," excel in everything, "in faith, in speech and knowledge, in all earnestness and in our love for you, see that you excel in this act of grace also. I say this not only as a command, but to prove the earnestness of others that your love is also genuine."

Verse 11, "Finish doing it well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have." Now I'm preaching right now in the middle of this sermon, think about what we're doing, about you committing ahead of time when you see the need, you're going to meet it. But right now it's all about the readiness. I want you to leave this service ready, ready to put your love for fellow Christians above your attachment to your material things. OK? That's the readiness. Now, he says, in this case there was a need, meet it, complete it, do it.

Back to our passage. Great little wrap-up to this sermon as we just simply have a nice, tight conclusion here in verse 30. Back to Acts 11 verse 30 printed on your worksheet. Right? Verse 29 is about the determining. Verse 30, they did it. We look at those. "So the disciples determined," verse 29, and they did it. "They did so and they sent it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul."

Now I just want to switch the P.O.V. for a second, the point of view. I want to move from the fact that, yeah, I want you all to be ready and who knows what the next need is. As you pray right now to say, "God, I want to meet the need, whatever it is, if I can, whatever my ability is, I'm going to do what I can do." OK? I want us now to flip this over for just a second and say, well, that's great, I got you all primed and ready to be the kind of loving church that you should be. That's spiritual health, spiritual vitality. That's a great thing.

But now I want us to think about the fact that if we're all poised and ready to do that, what's it like to be a part of a church like that? I think one of my questions in the worksheet that I wrote this week is like, how great would that be to be a part of a church where everyone has that mentality. That no one as it said back there in Acts Chapter 4 considered stuff being their own. It's like, if you need it, you got it. I'm going to do what I can with what God has given me to steward that, to love you in practical ways if you need it. OK? Well, that would be great.

Matter of fact, talk about the non-Christian world not doing that. The non-Christian is not a part of anything that functions that way. As a matter of fact, we are the only organization on the planet that has that kind of insurance policy on our lives, and that's so important. That brings us assurance to have insurance, right? Think about that. And just because I'm a part of God's family, and if you're part of God's family, I know you're committed to me and I'm committed to you. And I don't think if, as I've often said, if I get a pop-up right now message that says, "Pastor Mike, your house just burned down." I've said this many times. I don't think I'd be figuring out which underpass I'm going to sleep under tonight, right?



Even if my bank was cleared out and fraud alerts pop-up, I got no money and I got no place to sleep tonight, I'll bet there are a few people here that would let me borrow their spare bedroom. I might be a week. "Well, we're going to find out what Pastor Mike is really like. He's going to stay in my guest room for a week." (audience laughs) I don't have a problem. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid because the body Christ works that way. If the right hand gets smashed, the left hand is going to do what it can to deal with it. When one part of the body suffers all the parts suffer. We're going to meet needs. There's a great assurance in that.

Number three, let's put it down that way. You need to "Enjoy the Assurance of God's Family." That's a peace-filled thing. And in days like ours, that seem to be, and I know I kind of jokingly said it, but hyperinflation and the craziness of our economy and printing trillions of dollars, that is a scary thing financially. Are you going to be able to retire? Think about it. Are you going to be able to...? Are your investments going to go well? What's going to happen to our economy? Those are things that really make the average person scared. It's a little disturbing, but for Christians, it's not scary because I have no right ever to be scared because I know this, I'm a part of the body of Christ.

And being a part of the body of Christ, I've got nothing to worry about because I know that whatever happens, we're all going down together as a body of Christ, right? Because we're all going to share and help each other all the way to the end. I've said this so many times before, whether we were facing Y2K or whether we're facing some big problem or COVID or whatever, I'll say it again here. In Southern California, it could be the giant earthquake that takes place today and half our homes are knocked down. Let's just say all of our homes are knocked down and 145 Columbia is just a pile of rubble. OK? Here's what I'm going to say, for all of you who survived, OK, we're in this together, and I would say, as I've said for many years, meet me here. Just meet me here.

I mean, that's another reason to live close to the church, but it would be good for you just to come here, seriously, because we'll figure this out because I'm willing to lay down my life for you. I trust you're willing to lay down your life for me, and we're all willing to lay down our lives for each other. And we'll find out who's a good shot and can hunt for jackrabbit and hook it up at the end of the day, because we will survive as best we can together. We'll all either be exterminated together because the world collapses or we are going to survive together. But we are in this together just like a family.

It's not every man for himself when there's an earthquake and family members scatter. Well, we're a spiritual family and we don't scatter. We are people who gather and we are part of an organic connection. And there should not be a need among us that we're not willing to liquidate whatever we need to make our needs be met. And I'll tell you what, in a world that's filled with fear and anxiety and panic attacks and all the rest, I just want you to go (exhale) that's a good thing being a part of the body of Christ. I am committed to lay down my life for them. They are committed to lay down their life for me. We'll face any challenge.

You know, when this whole COVID thing first hit, of course, they said we all going to die or at least half of us were going to die or whatever. We had a pastors meeting immediately and we



started working through it and we were ready. We were ready. As bad as that initial panic, like the sky is falling announcement was from the CDC, we were like, "We're ready. We'll divide up how many funerals we're all going to preach, and we're going to figure out to buy a bunch of Kleenex. We're going to help each other through the grief and we're going to get through this because we are committed to the body of Christ. And that, if it's our mutual commitment, nothing better than that. I mean, really nothing better than that.

Jesus said "It's more blessed to give than to receive," and for you to be completely positioned and poised to give. Think about this now. There's nothing better than that. And whenever it happens, when someone gives, here's what the Bible says in Philippians Chapter 4, it's like a "Fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice to God."

Pastor P.J. took me out to another state as we're looking at our next church plant. And he took me to two barbecue places in two consecutive days, which I was thinking, I don't, you know, I don't think I need barbecue two days in a row. Well, the two different barbecue places he took me to eat, I could eat at them seven days in a row. It's so good, right? Now Lucille's, whatever is, I don't want to offend Lucille's, but it ain't barbecue compared to what I recently had in another state. And what was so amazing is when you're pulling up, I'm thinking that that place is on fire. The restaurant's on fire billowing smoke coming out of it. And then I open the door of our rental car, I was like, I just want to take a nap right here before we go in. And there was like the Pied Piper, you know, I was just being drawn to the front door where all the ribs and pork and it's just like, amazing. And I thought, you know, if I move here to church plant with you, Pastor P.J., I'm going to rent an apartment right near this place downwind. I just want to smell it all day. Amazing.

When Paul said, you know what? "You've met my needs. Not that God would not supply all my needs one way or another. But you did it. I'm glad you did it because it has happened to your credit. God saw this as a gift, a fragrant offering." And remember the offerings of the Old Testament, that's what it was. It was barbecue. Think about it. They were barbecuing these animals as a fragrant offering to God. It smelled good. You went to church, quote unquote. You went to the Temple Mount, it was going to smell like a barbecue. And I'm just telling you this, God says when that's happening in the church, that's how God views our church. I hope it's not just a little hibachi in the corner over here because 20% are doing 80% of the work.

I just hope the whole place smells like that barbecue joint, those two barbecue joints. That is when the church is... By the way, joy is a byproduct. When it says if you reap sparingly, you'll sow sparingly, right? If you sow bountifully, you'll reap bountifully, that has got to, at least in the mind of Paul, I got to think, as he quoted it in the book of Acts, it's got to be about that blessedness, that joy. In First Chronicles 29, David is collecting stuff for the building of the temple and when he gets it all done, in verse 9, he says, "Then the people rejoiced because they had given willingly, with a whole heart they had offered freely to the Lord. David the king rejoiced greatly."

The joy that can settle in on a church, even if we have full-blown economic collapse, when the church is willing to care for itself the way the Bible intends, will be a beautiful, wonderful,



assuring, peace-filled security that the rest of the world doesn't have. The demands are higher than the rest of the world, I get that, to be a Christian to love as Christ loved. But the benefit and the security are unrivaled. I hope you have a sense of that as a Christian in the body of Christ.

Let's pray. God. Like a soul. In the midst of a sermon like this and looking at the Antiochian church to say we want to be like them, that we trust you so much that when the needs are surfaced that we will feel that internal pull to do whatever we can, even ahead of time, even before the need is evident and obvious before it's there that we're going to determine, based on our ability, we can't give more than we have, but we're going to meet the need as best we can, as specifically as we can, as tangibly as we can.

God, I know in our church it's simple things right now, people in the hospital, they need meals. People need to visit, shut-ins that need people just to talk to, people who are discouraged, they need someone to write him a note. We lay down a lot of smaller things as we spend and our expended for the souls of other people. We, as I often say, we need to go the extra mile and spend the extra dollar and stay the extra hour, and we become a church that is blessed by these fragrant offerings that ascend to you like that sweet-smelling aroma the Bible says. God, I pray we'd be characterized by that. Thanks that you gave your all, laid down your life for us that we would lay down our lives for the brothers. Make that a reality for us in a new and dynamic way in our church.

In Jesus name. Amen.