



July 23, 2017
Acts 11:1-30
Pastor Larry Adams
Grace Multiplied

Hi Everyone. My name is Larry Adams and I want to take a moment to thank you for reading this message. At Golden Hills we are committed to exalting Jesus and preaching the Word. Your downloading of this message is a great encouragement to us, as we know that our ministry is going out to spread God's Word all over the world.

We want you to know, too, that in no way do we intend these messages to be a replacement for your involvement in a good local church, where, sitting under the authority of pastors and other teachers, you can learn to worship, grow and serve and be engaged with a body of believers where you can grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We realize also, that some of you may be in areas of the world where there is no local church. Therefore, we hope these messages you are using, to gather with your family or other believers, or people from the community that it will be a great encouragement to you, as you hear God speak into your life, helping you to become disciples who are true, reproducing followers of Jesus Christ.

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If you have your Bible today, I'd like you to turn with me to Acts chapter 11. We're continuing on in our series in the book of Acts, *We Are Multiplied. We Are Witnesses, We Are Multiplied*. I have really been enjoying Pastor Phil's teaching. I learn every time from that man. I really appreciate how God is using him to teach me; every time he teaches I learn something new. Seriously. He is a great student of the word, and I appreciate his heart for God and his desire to communicate what God is laying on his heart. We're really enjoying doing this series together. The last two weeks I've been sitting right down in the front pew, listening to him teach and I've been really blessed.

This book is changing me. This word is changing me. I hope it's having an impact on you as well. We keep hearing so many stories how people are beginning to see the world through a different set of eyes, seeing their neighbors, their work associates differently, and even our mission in the world.

In Acts 11, we have a chance to see something remarkable that took place, where God was breaking down hatred and prejudice and replacing them with compassion and love. Building a church that nobody in that day could have imagined was even possible. And doing it through a man named Peter, who would be the least likely candidate to be influencing such a church.

As we begin in chapter 11, Peter is being brought back to Jerusalem to give account for what has happened at Cornelius' house, when the Gentiles, this Roman soldier and his family, are turning to the Lord. When Peter comes back, this is what he finds (Acts 11:1-30)

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers [Jews who had become Christians] criticized him ³ and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: ⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. ⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

⁸“I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

⁹“The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

¹¹“Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

¹⁵“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.

¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.

²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

²⁷ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Let’s pray together: God, what You were doing to tear down hatred and prejudice of every kind, is amazing. Your grace is the answer to those issues in the world today, because You are taking the tremendous diversity You’ve created, and bringing true believers from every nation together to be one church, who will lift up the name of Jesus. And our church, and every one of us as believers, is a part of

this. So today, God, help us to learn about this grace that is multiplied through our lives to reach the nations of the world. And we'll thank You for all that You'll show us, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Ken Hutcherson was a man I loved and greatly admired. He passed away a couple of years ago and I really miss being able to pick up the phone and spend time talking with him. Ken was a black man who grew up poor in the racially segregated South of Alabama in the 1960's. And because of poverty and discrimination and the treatment of his family, he told me he grew up hating white people. He was a good athlete. He could have excelled in a number of sports, especially baseball, but he chose football, he told me, because he learned there that he could hurt white people legally. That's exactly what he did. In fact, he beat up on so many of his fellow white team members, the coaches had to call him in to tell him to tone it down.

Then Ken changed. Jesus came to live in Hutch. God began to turn that hatred into compassion. He saw people not primarily as white or black anymore, but as whether or not they knew Jesus. He went on to play football for the Dallas Cowboys. When I met him he was a linebacker for the Seattle Seahawks. Along with another good friend of mine (who also happens to be black), these men reached out to me. They took the initiative to reach out to me and tell me about Jesus. They invited me to Bible studies and to their inner circle. They became mentors and friends.

Hutch went on to pastor a church in the Seattle area called Antioch Bible Church, a truly multi-ethnic church of diversity. They had all come together in the name of Jesus.

What causes a man, filled with that kind of hate and prejudice, to reach out in love to a white guy like me, who, by his own admission, he would normally hate, and love to hurt?

The grace of God did that. You see, Hutch realized that God could have hated him for his sin, yet by God's grace, God saved him from it. He came to realize that this was not something the God wanted to do just for him; this is something he wanted to do through him for all people. The grace of God had been multiplied to me through Hutch.

That same thing was happening on a grander scale in the early church. As people spread out from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, God began to break down hatred and prejudice through His grace, in a way that no one could have imagined.

Acts 11 is the account of how God's grace multiplied, turning enemies into friends, and created a church that no one could have believed. It says in verse 19-21:

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.
²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

The persecution that broke out with the stoning of Stephen, scattered these witnesses across the empire. They were mostly Jews, sharing with other Jews, until some came to the strategic city of Antioch, the capitol of Syria, and they began sharing the gospel with some of the Gentiles, the Greeks that were there, and those Greeks and Gentiles began turning to the Lord. The fact that this was happening in Antioch was significant. You see, Antioch was the capitol of Syria, located about 300 miles north of Jerusalem. There were 16 Antiochs in the ancient world, and this was the most strategic of them all. It had a population of about a half-million people. It ranked as the third greatest city in the empire, next to Rome and Alexandria, in Egypt. In fact, its magnificent buildings, Warren Wiersbe once wrote, caused it to be called Antioch the Golden, and Queen of the East. The main street of Antioch

was four miles long. It was paved with marble. Next to that marble street that ran through the center of the city, there were marble columns all along those four miles. So opulent and so advanced was this city, it was the first city in history that had street lights at night. Antioch was a coastal city. It was a very busy port. It was a center that became known for luxury and for culture. Antioch attracted all kinds of people, including wealthy Romans, who would vacation there and retire there. Many of them participating in the races for gambling and the many bath houses, where they carried on their social life. Warren Wiersbe once wrote, "with its large cosmopolitan population and its great commercial and political power, Antioch presented to the church an exciting opportunity for evangelism."

The church that was established there was made up mostly of Gentiles. They were led to Christ by Jews. That became a model of how God's grace has multiplied through His people, establishing a witness that reaches out to the nations of the earth. It's a grace that God is still multiplying today, through you and me.

As Luke reminds us (Acts 11), God gives the grace to multiply His witness throughout the world. But how does God's grace multiply His witness? Well, as we see here in the church in Antioch, it happens when **God reveals salvation is a gift to all people. Not everybody knows that. And, by revealing that God's people are given back as a gift to the church.**

God's grace reveals salvation is a gift to all people. Here is the way he put it in Acts 11:1-21 --

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds.

The sheet was filled with all kinds of animals that Jews can't touch, much less eat.

⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'

⁸ "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

⁹ "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' ¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

As soon as the sheet is gone, these three guys show up from the house of Cornelius, the Centurion. God tells Peter, I know you wouldn't normally go with them, but go with them. I've already told them that through you, they'll learn how to be saved. So Peter goes.

As he is recounting this to the church at Jerusalem, he says (vs 15-21) --

¹⁵ "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.

¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

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²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

I had an uncle that I loved and really respected. I remember being with him one time after I returned from one of my trips to Africa. I'm telling him about some of the stuff we're doing there, and he asked me, "Why would you do that?" I said, "Why would I do what?" He said, "Why would you go and take all the risks and expense and effort, to go to a place like Africa?" I said, "Because we're telling people there about Jesus. We're sharing with them the good news." He said to me, "Why don't you just leave them alone? Aren't they happy in their own little religion?" I said, "No, they are not happy. They are lost. They have no hope. They are involved in bankrupt religions that are terrorizing them. Many of them are living in poverty and suspicion. They are headed for an eternity in hell because they don't know the good news of God's grace that has been poured out on us to save us from our sin."

You see, my uncle's view was like so many people. It's the same view I used to have. Why be concerned about these people who are so different, so far away and in many cases, would be your enemy? We care about them because God cares about them. We care about them because they are no different than us. They may look different, their culture may be different, their language may be different, their ways may be different, but they are no different: they are as lost as anybody without Jesus and they are not going to be saved unless they hear of Him.

That's what motivated these Jews in Antioch to take the risk to share the gospel with people they were forbidden to be with. God's grace was being multiplied through them. God's unmerited favor. They hadn't earned it and they knew it. Now, they were giving it away as a free gift.

You see, this grace was for all people and that's what God had to reveal to Peter and the church in Jerusalem: this is for everybody. That's why it says (vs 1-4)

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." ⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story

The whole story about how God, in a dramatic vision, taught Peter that nothing is impure that God calls clean (or holy). So Peter then was willing to go to the house of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, something on his own, he would never do had not God poured out His grace to make it happen. Peter said (vs 15-17)

¹⁵ "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.

¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

God gave them the same gift as He gave to us. It was a grace gift. A grace gift to us. Now it would be a grace gift to them. God's grace was being multiplied, but not just in Antioch. Through Peter, God was

now going to pour out His grace on the church in Jerusalem, to help them to understand grace multiplied to all people. That's why it says (vs 18), "¹⁸When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'" God's grace, multiplied to all people.

This is always what God intended to happen. This is why He created the whole Jewish nation. This is why Israel existed. He would form a new nation, Israel, to whom God would reveal Himself and they would reveal God to the nations, to all people. That was God's message to Abraham. Remember Genesis 12:1-3:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

²"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
³I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

It was God's message to Israel through the prophet Isaiah and the other prophets that reinforced this message. You are to be a light to all nations. Isaiah 42:5 --

This is what God the Lord says, the creator of the heavens, who stretches them out as He spreads out the earth with all that springs from them, who gives breath to its people and life to those who walk on it. I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Remember Phil told us last week – God is restoring all things. Isaiah 49:6—

⁶ he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Wow, God tells Israel, it's too small a thing for you just to reach other Israelites. My plan is bigger than that! You aren't to keep this to yourself. This salvation is so great, it is going to be lost on just one nation. This is for all people! So, He said, "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that My salvation will reach to the ends of the earth."

There was no coincidence that when Paul and Barnabas were later rejected by the Jews, they knew that they were to carry the message to the Gentiles. (13:46-48)

⁴⁶ Then Paul and Barnabas answered them [the Jews who rejected them] boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

“I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

He was quoting from Isaiah 49.

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

The scriptures all revolve around this, that this message is to go out to all nations. That grace is to be multiplied. This is why, when Jesus was born and dedicated at the temple, the devout priest, Simeon, responded the way he did. Luke 2:28-32 –

²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

Simeon recognized that this Jesus was a light to all nations. And this is why Jesus, when He saw the many money changers in the temple, He reacted the way He did. Mark 11:15-17 –

¹⁵ On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for **all nations**’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

Why was Jesus so hopping mad? It wasn’t just because the Jews were ripping off their fellow Jews, selling exorbitantly priced, inferior sacrifices to be used at the temple. Yes, they were doing that and He was upset about that too, but that wasn’t the primary thing. They were doing it in the outer court of the temple, called the Court of the Gentiles. The court of the nations. So here are these Jews, ripping people off in the very court that is supposed to be for the nations, but the Jews weren’t allowing anybody but Jews to come in there! Jesus saw that and He took a whip and said, “Get out of here! You aren’t even using this for what I created it for! So get out of this place! This is to be a house of prayer for all nations!” That’s why He was so angry.

How would Jesus feel about a church today that wasn’t reaching out to all the people around them? To all the nations. How does He feel about Christians who aren’t willing to be used to multiply His grace to others who maybe don’t look like them, sound like them, act like them? Some who might even at times be viewed as enemies?

One of the reasons Israel ended up in Egypt, one of the reasons why Jonah was sent to Nineveh, one of the reasons why the Jews were taken captive to Babylon and Persia and unto the Medes – was

because they weren't sharing God's grace, to be multiplied among the nations. So what did God do in His judgment? Because of their idolatry and false religion, God judged them and what did He do? He sent them out and dispersed them among the nations because they weren't going. So people like Ezekiel and Daniel and others were out there, telling the nations about God. That's exactly what God wanted done.

It's the same commission that was given to us as a church. Matthew 28:18-20 –

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This is why Jesus left the apostles that this message was to be shared with all of us as He ascended into heaven in Acts 1:8, "⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

People, God is bringing the nations to us. In my neighborhood, there are so many people there from so many different nations and backgrounds, it's hard to keep track of them all. They're not there by mistake. God wants me to be a light in my neighborhood. He wants you to be a light in yours, in the place where you work. Because God wants His grace to be multiplied to all nations.

What is He going to do with that? He is going to build a church like He did in Antioch. He is going to build a church that's comprised of all people, exactly what God is wanting to do in us and through us today.

Not only that salvation is God's gift to all people, God had to reveal that all of His people were going to be His gift to His church.

In Acts 11:22-26, it says:

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Many of you know, who are involved in our ministry downtown, called the Community Outreach Center (the COC). Karla and I go down there on a regular basis, as often as we can. Karla leads worship and I get a chance to speak to the people. One of the things we really love going down there for, is to have time to talk to some of these folks. We get to see what God is doing in their lives. People we are growing to love, and see the grace of God at work. One of the most encouraging things to see is some of these poor and homeless are now being used by God to be a blessing to the body there. People who are praying and even giving and serving. People who are washing dishes and serving food and cleaning bathrooms. You see, many people view the poor and homeless as a problem to be solved, rather than as people whose potential in Christ needs to be released. When we're down there, we see evidence that these people have been touched by God. His grace is being multiplied through them.

Now, they are being given back to the ministry there as God's gift to His people. The people are God's gift.

You know, that's true for you and me. Now, I'm not advising that you go around saying, Hey! did you know I'm God's gift to the church! I'm not suggesting you say that. But the truth is, you are. You are God's gift to the church. One of the reasons He saved you and equipped you and gifted you was so that He could give you back to His church, to be able to strengthen it and multiply His grace and witness in the world.

That's what the church in Antioch and the church at Jerusalem needed to see. When the church at Jerusalem (mostly Jews) heard what was happening in the church at Antioch (mostly Gentiles), they sent Barnabas to investigate. (11:22-24) –

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

The word in Jerusalem was, there is a whole church of Gentiles in Antioch! Barnabas, go up there and take a look. So Barnabas arrived and sees the evidence of God's grace multiplied everywhere, and he is glad! He says, "WOW! Keep this going!" Barnabas was not his real name. His real name was Joseph. He was a Levite of the tribe of Levi, of the priestly line of Judaism. He was sent because the church at Jerusalem knew what kind of a man he was, a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, of faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. They knew they were going to get an accurate report back from Barnabas. He would handle it right. So Barnabas shows up and encourages the church there – a Jewish Levite shows up, to encourage the Gentile church! Barnabas was God's gift to the church at Antioch.

But Barnabas didn't stop there. He knew a man powerful in the scriptures who was commissioned by God to teach Gentiles just like this, and he wanted him there. So he went to get him. That's why it says, (11:25-26) –

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

For a whole year, these two prominent Jews, Paul (Saul) and Barnabas, are teaching the church at Antioch. Saul and Barnabas were God's gift to the church there. And so effective did their witness become, that the disciples were first called "Christians" in that church! Now the word "Christian" is a compound word. Christ is the Greek word for "the anointed one." The ending, "ian" is a Latin word, meaning "to belong to the party of family of." So when the people of Antioch and the people of Jerusalem heard the amazing thing happening in that church and the way these people are living, they called them "you guys belong to the party or family of the anointed one, Jesus!" Only He could be doing this! And the name Christian came to mean "little Christ." To be called a Christian, which at times was used as a derogatory term, became a label of encouragement and pride for the church because, by the way they were living, people said, you're like little Christs.

What does the world need to see today? They need to see people of every stripe and color and background and culture, living together in a body the way God intended it to be. So God has called

people to be His followers and then He gives them back to the church. From wherever He calls them, He gives them back to the church to be His gift.

Then something beautiful and unexpected happened, as evidence of God's grace multiplied. (vs 27-30)

²⁷ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. [A famine, controlled by the sovereignty of God, for a purpose.] (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Do you see what's happening? God creates this famine. Out of this famine, the church at Antioch (the Gentile church) hears about the need of the people affected by the famine back in Jerusalem. So what do they decide to do? The church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas. Barnabas went to get Saul and this became a gift to the people at the church at Antioch. We're going to send these men there as my gift to strengthen you. Now watch this: the hurting church in Jerusalem, primarily Jews, is now going to be blessed by the church at Antioch, who sent back a gift to help them. The church at Jerusalem was a gift to Antioch, and now God says, My church in Antioch is going to be a gift to you. God's grace multiplied.

This is why Saul the Jew, who became Paul the missionary to the Gentiles, would later write to the Ephesian church (Ephesians 4:1-8) –

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.” (Psalm 68:18)

Don't miss this, folks. In the context of Ephesians, Paul is talking about spiritual gifts every one of us have been given, more than one to some. God is equipping us to do the work He has called us to do. The reason he is quoting that, is that Paul also understood that the gift that God gives to His people are God's people. He is giving them back as a gift to be able to serve and strengthen the church for its mission in the world.

One of the reasons you and I were saved and given spiritual gifts and the truth of the gospel was so that God could give us back as a gift to His church. That's why, when you are praying and giving and serving and sending missionaries, participating in things, and all the other things you are engaged in at church – when you are involved in that, you are being utilized by God to be the gift He intended you to be to the body He gave for you to be a part of and to His church in the world.

But when you come and just sit in a pew, or make it haphazard, or you don't give, or you don't pray, you don't serve, you're not really engaged, then in every sense of the word, you are robbing God of the gift of you. And you are not allowing Him to use you as He called you to be, to serve His church.

Remember when it said in the book of Hebrews (Chapter 10), do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together as some are in the habit of doing? That wasn't just so you and I wouldn't reap the benefit of mutual accountability and being together for encouragement – we're not to forsake our assembling together because we don't have the right to do that. God saved us and gifted us and equipped us and gave us back to the church. He expects us to be there, to be engaged, to be used by Him, to multiply His grace to the nations.

There is much racial, economic, and political tension, not just in our country but in the world today. You'd have to have your head stuck in the sand not to hear it. What is needed today is the same thing that was needed in the first century: God's grace to be multiplied. It's going to be multiplied through His people, like you and me. God reveals to us that this grace He has extended to us is for all people. This grace that He extends to us is to make us a gift that He can give back to the church, to strengthen it in His mission to bring glory to His name.

Paul said, I became a servant of this gospel for this purpose. Peter had a lot to learn and God showed him. If I've called something clean, don't you call it unclean. I've got a work bigger than you can see, Peter. I want to use you to help the church at Jerusalem to understand what's going on in Antioch. My grace is being multiplied there.

People – that grace that was multiplied in that church is still being multiplied today through you and me. God uses us to share with people next door, across the street and around the world. Grace is being multiplied.

Father, thank You for this reminder. It changes the way I see the world. It changes the way I look at my neighbors, the way I see people in the community, the way I pray, get involved in what's going on in the world. Thank You for the book of Acts, for allowing us to learn our own history, why things happened the way they did, why there are things like famines and other natural disasters, that You want to use your church here and around the world to spread Your glory and Your goodness, to help people to see the grace of God that is still being multiplied as it was to us. Thank You for the people who came before us, who shared this grace with us. Thank You God, for the people we now have the privilege to share this grace with. It is a gift received and a gift given, and may You use it through us, continually as more and more of us become engaged in this grace multiplied. And we'll thank You, in Your precious name, amen.