

I want to build on what Pastor Karl spoke about last Sunday: the faith, hope, and love of the early Christians. Faith is about what we love but can't see. We love Christ, but we have never seen Him. Some people mock us for loving someone we have never seen. Hope is about what we love but can't have – not yet. We don't want to suffer and die, but we can't avoid them in our present state. Some people mock us for hoping for heaven.

Love is the desire to unite with something. Your child finds a quarter on the street. She wants it and says, "It's mine," and puts it in her pocket and thinks how to spend it. That's what it means for her to unite with the quarter. A man meets a pretty woman. He wants her and tries to marry her, an honorable act, or to exploit her, a dishonorable act. Either way, that's what it means for him to unite with the woman. Men became enthralled with Christ. They wanted Him and vowed to follow Him to the ends of the earth and to die with Him if necessary. That's what it meant for them to unite with Christ.

Here's why this matters: In the Bible your heart means what you love – everything you love – and what kind of person you are becoming because of what you love. To **guard your heart** means to protect yourself from uniting with anything that makes you into the wrong kind of person. We can go deeper. To **guard your heart** means to protect yourself from uniting with anything that alienates you from God.

Something has so corrupted our power to love that we can and do at times love what alienates us from God and is bad for us. How do we guard our hearts against disordered love and its terrible consequences? Today and next Sunday, I want to explore one answer to that question. You guard your heart, when you make the Church your spiritual home. Guarding your heart is a team effort. The forces hostile to the Christian faith and to a Christian view of life have grown strong and bold. You don't stand a chance against them by yourself.

What would help you to make BVBC your spiritual home? One way to get help is to look at models of healthy churches where people have found their spiritual home and see how BVBC matches up. Let's look at two models: the church in Jerusalem and the church in the Greek city of Thessalonica.

### **Beautiful Necessities**

Two passages in the book of Acts give us a sampling of the Jerusalem congregation. The first is Acts 2:42. **They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.** (Acts 2:42)

**The apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer:** maybe these four actions don't seem exciting to you. And maybe three meals a day and good health and people who love you through thick and thin and a warm place in winter don't seem exciting to you. But they make everything else possible. The Church in Jerusalem did much else, some of it eye-popping in its intensity. But these four actions remained constant in that congregation, and they remain powerful in all congregations that practice them faithfully. They are part of BVBC like the sugar, milk, fruit, and sprinkles of an ice cream cone. Let's look more closely at these four actions!

First, **the apostles' teaching** refers to what the apostles said that Jesus did and taught. They were eyewitnesses of what they were talking about, and their teaching was preserved in what we call the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As long as the pastors and teachers of the Church declare, and as long as congregations take to heart

what Jesus did and taught, the **apostles' teaching** will protect their hearts from disordered love and its terrible consequences. BVBC is devoted to the **apostles' teaching**.

Second, the Jerusalem church **devoted themselves to the ... fellowship**. The **fellowship** refers to the web of formal and especially informal relationships in a congregation. People invest themselves in those relationships and in the actions of a congregation that give it strength. That's what the Jerusalem church did. Look at Acts 2:44-46: **All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.**

That feels very different from what people call "going to church" – an item on the Sunday punch list and maybe not at the top of the list. Devoting yourself to **the fellowship** puts the life you share with other believers at the top of the list. It becomes part of your identity. **The fellowship** at BVBC guards your heart against the disordered love that threatens our lives. BVBC is a worthy spiritual home, although our web of relationships needs to be stronger. I'll say more about this next Sunday.

**The breaking of bread** does not refer to potluck meals. They belong to **the fellowship**. **The breaking of bread** refers to Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. The One who fills the pages of the gospels is here with us by means of bread and wine. We hold in our hand the visible representations of Him who said to His first disciples and now says to us, "Watch me, and you will see what God is like." **The breaking of bread** forms devotion to Christ in our hearts, and devotion to Christ guards our hearts.

Finally, they **devoted themselves to ... prayer**. Prayer, especially prayer that we sustain across the years, is our greatest act of faith. We cannot pray week after week and day after day and easily be bewitched by "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." (1 John 2:16, KJV)

### **Simul Justus et Peccator**

Now, I have to avoid a misunderstanding. Bear with me. Verse 45 calls attention to an action of the Jerusalem church that was indeed eye-popping in its intensity: **Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need**. That doesn't mean everyone sold everything. It meant that significant numbers of people in the church were willing to sell personal property to have money to meet material needs of people in the church. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, made no comment on this generosity in Acts 2. But he came back to their generosity in Acts 4:32. **All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.**

And here's the problem. Some people did not share everything they had, but they wanted other people to think they did. Two of them got caught red-handed in their hypocrisy. Acts 5:1-2 sets up the story for us. **Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet**. Everyone else thought they gave all the money they got from the sale of the property. That's what they wanted everyone else in my to think. That was their hypocrisy.

Somehow Peter found out what they had done. Verses 3-4: **Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal. What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.”**

“It was your property. You didn’t have to sell it. After you sold it, the money was yours. You didn’t have to give it away. You could have said, ‘I am giving part of the money to help the needy and keep the rest for myself.’ But, no, you wanted us to think you were more generous than you were.”

Do you know what happened to Ananias? God struck him dead on the spot. His wife came in later, not knowing what had happened, lied to Peter, and God struck her dead on the spot. Can you imagine the pastoral staff and the board of deacons trying to explain that to the police? It would be almost as difficult as what I have to say next.

We are talking about what would help you to make BVBC your spiritual home. I said that one way to get help is to look at models of healthy churches where people have found their spiritual home, and the model I hold up features two hypocrites who lied about their generosity. What kind of model is that? Hypocrisy is exactly what turns many people away from organized religion.

I feel your pain, but I’m sticking to my story. The Jerusalem church stands as a model of a healthy church. What made it healthy was not the absence of sin but the presence of accountability. The hypocrisy that turns people away from the Church is not the sins of its people but the effort to cover them up.

Healthy churches are not sinless churches. They are churches of sinners who are returning to God. Jesus said, **“I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”** (Mark 2:17) Paul said: **While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** (Romans 5:8) Churches are not made up of people who finally got good enough to get in. They are made up of people who finally realized they were bad enough to get in.

Don’t leave the Church because someone disappointed you. Deal with it. Dealing with disappointment and hypocrisy also makes the Church your spiritual home.

### **The Inside Story**

Now, let’s look at our second model church. It is startling that within 30 years of the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, communities that worshiped Him had blossomed in major cities around the Mediterranean Sea. The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to one such church of new converts in the Greek city of Thessalonica. From his letter emerges the picture of another congregation that models what a spiritual home looks like. Turn to 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10.

Everything we said about failure in the Jerusalem church can be said about the Thessalonian church. Everything we said about accountability in the Jerusalem church can be said about the Thessalonian church. It was a church of sinners returning to God, and it was already healthy enough to model a spiritual home for hungry people. Let’s look at two marks of their spiritual health.

First, they welcomed the Christian message. Verse six says: **You became imitators of us (apostles) and of the Lord: in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.** I hope you will take something to

heart. Whether it's me or the next senior pastor or anyone else who stands here to preach, the big deal is not how good the sermon is but how good the Word of God is. Don't come here on Sunday to see if the sermon is good. Come here hungry to hear a word from God. That hunger is strong evidence that this congregation has welcomed the Christian message. Welcoming that message made possible the second mark of the Thessalonian church's spiritual health. It makes it possible for us too.

The Thessalonian church stood as a sign of contradiction to the non-Christian world where they lived. Verses 8-10 unfold that idea gently at first in verse 8: **The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere.** Their non-Christian neighbors knew they stood for something different from everyone else. The **severe suffering** verse 6 talked about makes you think their non-Christian neighbors didn't like what they stood for.

Dislike for the Christian message still happens. The California State University System has denied campus privileges to InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, because InterVarsity actually requires its leaders to affirm a clear set of Christian beliefs. Whatever happened to pluralism and diversity in the secular university? But we should rejoice that Christianity stands out at Cal State like a lily on a stagnant pond. When people stand for something true and good, it is an honor to be disliked and shunned. You should also know that BVBC requires its leaders to affirm a clear set of Christian beliefs. Do you think the PC Police will come knocking on our door, taking away our political privileges?

Verses 9-10 identify a clear set of beliefs that made the Thessalonian church a sign of contradiction to the non-Christian world where it lived. **They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.** How could they not be a sign of contradiction? Their beliefs had huge social consequences. Turning from idols was to turn from the only way of life that anyone had known for generations beyond counting. Believing that a man had come back from the dead permanently and might reappear on the streets of Thessalonica just seemed crazy. And the hint of God's wrath to come seemed like a reprehensible, holier-than-thou attitude. No wonder they endured **severe suffering**.

What BVBC and hundreds of thousands of other churches stand for stings just as much. Try this experiment some time. Without a hint of coercion and without being argumentative or even trying to convert anyone, casually drop into a conversation with friends that you believe Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. Casually drop into the conversation that you believe God created the world. It was His idea, you say, to create humanity as male and female, and that's why your church teaches that sex and children belong inside marriage between a man and a woman for life. You will create consternation like a cherry bomb going off at a Presidential motorcade. You will discover why this church and hundreds of thousands of other churches are signs of contradiction.

### Take Away

BVBC organizes its life around Jesus Christ. Devotion to **the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer** makes this congregation a stable community of faith. The belief system we stand for seeks to tell the truth about Christ and the world and ourselves, and it gives us a powerful way to resist the world's incessant

propaganda. The hypocrisy that marred the Jerusalem church's generosity teaches us that our own efforts to be holy can easily become holier-than-thou. This devotion and these beliefs and this humility about our own virtue enable you and your children to flourish in your faith and your day-to-day living. As churches flourish, they help our nation to flourish. BVBC is a worthy spiritual home for you and those you love. Why don't you make it your spiritual home?