Radical Generosity

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[0:00] If you have a Bible, you can turn to the book of Acts in the New Testament, Acts chapter 4. We're at the very back end of the chapter.

So Acts chapter 4, and we'll be reading from verse 32 to 37. I know we've been in chapter 4 for a long time. Some of you were wondering if there were actually other chapters in the book of Acts, but we are now finally, we'll be exiting chapter 4 and be, Lord willing, in chapter 5 next week.
So a whole new chapter next week, but we're going to finish off chapter 4 here. One of Paul's traveling companions, Luke, who's sometimes described as Luke the physician, writes these words as he tells us about the early church.
Verse 32. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, sold a field he owned, and brought the money, and put it at the apostles' feet.
This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray, let's ask God's help as we study this. Gracious God, won't you feed us this morning? We ask for your word to be open to us.
[1:52] We ask that we might see truth in your word, and we ask that we might be changed by the truth that we see. Most of all, we pray you show us your son, Jesus, that we might marvel at the great salvation that we have in him.

Holy Spirit, help us. This is your work to make these words alive in our heart. We ask this all for Christ's sake. Amen. Amen. So as you kind of move along in the book of Acts, this is actually the second snapshot that Luke gives us of the communal life of the early church.
Like as if he came and he visited the church and went inside and said, I want to give you a picture of what the Union Chapel looks like on the inside. This is what he's doing with the early church. The first one was in chapter 2, verse 42 to 47.
And in that first snapshot, which we covered quite a long time ago now, there was a mention there of the believers selling property and giving their material wealth to those who had need. But it was sort of mentioned in passing along with a bunch of other things, like the fact that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, that they gave themselves to fellowship, the breaking of bread, the prayers.
Here, though, in the second snapshot that we just read, Luke zooms in on this radical generosity, this sharing that's taking place in the early church.
[3:17] And he even provides us with a case study of this guy named Barnabas, who's going to become quite a big figure later on in the book. Now, I think we find a passage like this very intimidating.

As I read those words to you, as you read them again, as you look down at them again, I think this is very intimidating. I think we find the level of the generosity here very intimidating.
I find it intimidating when I read it. There's a part of me that goes, are we really supposed to live like this, as Christians together? Are we really supposed to be this sacrificial, this generous?
Is it not like maybe like hyperbole, just to spur us on to be a little bit better than we actually are in this area? So that's what we're going to think about together this morning.
And I want to frame it with a question, frame the whole sermon with a question. The question is this, how were these early Christians able to be so radically generous? How did they get here?
[4:16] And to answer that question, I want us to think about three things. These are our three points. One mistake, one heart, one mission. One mistake, one heart, one mission. How were these early Christians able to be so incredibly generous and sacrificial?

Have a look at, here's the first one, one mistake. Have a look down, verse 32. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared

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everything they had.
So they're all together, and it's this particular togetherness that leads them to claiming that any of their possessions are not their own, but rather they share everything that they have. And then this is practically played out further down, verse 33.
I'm reading from where it says, God's grace was so powerful at work in them, in them all, that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.
Now the language is striking. There's strong, strong language. And this is, I think, why it's so intimidating, particularly verse 32. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own. [5:30] They shared everything they had. It's like there's no space there for much else. The strength of the language here has actually caused some people to suggest that maybe Acts is presenting something of like a Marxist or a socialist vision for what communal life within the church should be.

So no private ownership. Put everything at the feet of the apostles. I wouldn't put it at the feet of these elders here because they're a bit dodgy, but put everything at the feet of the apostles. Let the collective wealth of the community sort of be distributed then for economic parity.
If you think of the sort of famous statement from Karl Marx that he made popular, he didn't actually come up with it, but he popularized it, from each according to his ability to each according to his needs. It can almost look like Karl Marx was sitting with the Bible in one hand, meditating on Acts chapter 4, while he was writing the Communist Manifesto on the other side here.
Now is that what's happening here? Is this some sort of centralized divestment of property? The short answer, sadly for those of you who are of a more socialist leaning, is no, that's not actually what's happening here.
And it would actually be a mistake to think that such an approach would lead to radical generosity. So there are a few things actually here in this text, and then in other parts of the Bible that make this clear.
[7:01] Now some of this is a little bit technical, so stick with me here. A couple of things I want you to see. Number one, first thing, several commentators have pointed out, and this is the technical part, that the verbs that Luke uses, the doing words that Luke uses both, in that snapshot that we have back in Acts chapter 2, and the snapshot that we have of the early church here in chapter 4, they demonstrate the types of verbs that he uses, that the selling of the properties, and the giving of the proceeds to those in need was an occasional activity.

So if you've got an NIV translation like the one that I just read, that translation tries to demonstrate this in verse 34, where it says, from time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them. This was not a once-off, everybody come, once-off divestment of all property and assets to the church for distribution. This was voluntary, occasional giving, particularly by some of the wealthier members in the congregation.
So I saw one study this week, that said, based on historical evidence, from what we know, what we're able to piece together, roughly only about 5 to 7 percent of the population in ancient Jerusalem, was wealthy enough to be able to own land, at the time of the book of Acts.
So this is not a once-off divestment, it is voluntary giving, voluntary generosity, occasional voluntary giving and generosity. That's the first thing to think about.
[8:33] Second thing, in verse 32, where it says that no one claimed any of their possessions was their own, that is not them sort of coming together and covenanting to divest themselves of their private property.

Rather what it is, is it's Luke's statement about the attitude of their heart. That word claimed, there's a word that means something like reckoned. They did not reckon their property to be their own. That is in their heart of their hearts, in their heart of hearts, they're sitting there going, this property, which is mine, I want it to be as if it was for everybody else. I want it to be as if it was for everybody else to use, particularly those in need.
So that's the second thing to think about here. Third thing then, if you go to other parts of the Bible, you see that the principle of private property is established and upheld. The most obvious place you can see this is in the Ten Commandments.
So the Eighth Commandment, thou shalt not steal. That presupposes some form of private ownership. If nobody privately owns anything, then theft is not really a problem, is it?

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[9:38] The theologian Wayne Grudem, who's written quite a lot on economics, he puts it this way, he says, the command you shall not steal, assumes that there is something to steal, something that belongs to someone else and not to me.

I should not steal your ox or your donkey or your car or your cell phone or your wallet, because it belongs to you and not to me. Therefore, the command you shall not steal assumes private ownership of property.
So you've actually got private ownership embedded into the Ten Commandments. Then, though, particularly related to this passage in the New Testament, you've got several direct references to Christians owning homes, and it's never sort of seen as a bad thing, like, oh, he owned a home. What a terrible Christian. In the first snapshot of the early church that we get, in chapter 2, we're told that the Christians met together in their own homes, not in the church's homes, not in some sort of centrally controlled homes, they own homes.
In other parts of Acts, in several of the letters, we're told about believers who owned homes. We're told about churches that met for worship in the homes owned by believers.
[10:44] So Mary, the mother of John in Acts 2, Priscilla and Aquila, they must have had a nice home, because their home gets mentioned three times. In Acts 18, Romans 16, and 1 Corinthians 16, Paul must have been impressed with it, because he's always like, well, did you know their home?

We went there. Philip, in Acts 21, Nympha, in Colossians 4, Archippus, in the book of Philemon. And then right next to our passage that we just looked at, we have another example of the implicit lawfulness of private ownership.
So at the very end of the chapter we just read, chapter 4, you have this positive example of Barnabas. He sells some of his land, and he gives the proceeds to the church to help those in need. Now he's contrasted to two other people that will come in the next chapter, Ananias and Sapphira. See, they're looking around, and they're wanting to get in on all this generous giving, this bug of generous giving that's going on in the church.
They're like, we want to be part of this too. And so they sell a property, and they give the proceeds to the church, but they pretend like they're giving all the proceeds of the sale to the church, when in actual fact, they're only just giving a portion of the proceeds to the church.
[11:56] Now here's what the apostle Peter says, when he then confronts them on this dishonesty. So this is chapter 5, verse 3. Peter says, Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart, that you have lied to the Holy Spirit, and have kept yourself some of the money you received from the land?

Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? So Peter's issue is not that they kept some of the money back.
It's that they pretended that they were giving it all. And so he's implicitly underlining their right to own property.
Wasn't this your property anyway? Weren't the proceeds your proceeds anyway? You could do what you want with that. You could have given all of it to the church. You could have given some of it to the church.
You could have kept it all for yourself. It was yours anyway. But don't try and make yourself look more generous than you actually are. Don't lie to God. Now next week we're going to dive into that passage in more detail.
[13:00] But I just want you, for our sake, to see Peter here. He seems to be okay with private ownership of property. Which means that in his mind there's obviously no disjunction between owning property and the radical generosity we see in chapter 4.

So that's the third thing to think about. Fourth thing to think about. One more reason. This is not kind of Christian Marxism or whatever you want to call it. The Bible is explicitly clear that our giving should not be under compulsion.
Our giving should not be done under compulsion. Here's the Apostle Paul. This is 2 Corinthians chapter 9. And here he's actually speaking within the context of taking up an offering to help people who are in poverty in ancient Judea, in Jerusalem.
He says this. He says, So Christian generosity does not flow from institutional compulsion.
It flows from joy. The disposition of a graceful heart. That's where it comes from. Let me sum this up for you here.

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[14:19] It is not wrong to own property. It's not wrong to have assets. Owning property, having assets, is not at odds with radical Christian generosity.

In fact, in many ways, if God by his providence has given you those sorts of things, correctly stewarding them might enable you to engage in more radical generosity for the sake of the church and his kingdom.
Paul actually lists giving as a spiritual gift in Romans chapter 12. And he says to those who have that, they should do that generously. Now all of us are going to go, I don't have that gift.
Well, maybe you do. And maybe I'm going to try and help you see that maybe you do have that gift.
I was listening to a talk by the Presbyterian pastor Kevin DeYoung on this passage earlier in the week.
And in speaking on this passage, he actually points out that one of the aims Luke seems to have in writing both the gospel of Luke that he writes and the book of Acts, is to encourage wealthy people to use their wealth more effectively for the kingdom.
[15:28] So all the way through Luke and Acts, you constantly see contrasts between two types of wealthy people. Wealthy people who use their positions well for the kingdom, serving God with it, and wealthy people who are caught up in their greed and trapped in idolatry, worshipping their money.

Just like we see here with chapter 4 and chapter 5. Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira. Those patterns are all the way through Luke and Acts. So being a wealthy property owner is not at odds with being radically generous.
It might actually be a tool to that end. According to the income and expenditure survey conducted by Stats SA in 2023, Cape Town actually has the highest average household income of any major metro.
Now I know some of you guys who have seen your colleagues in Johannesburg earning a lot more than you are crying foul right now. It's like, no, no, no, no, that's not true. In Johannesburg they earn much better salaries and they don't have to pay mountain tax.
It's not fair. In certain professions people in Johannesburg earn more, particularly in finance and management. But on average, household incomes are quite a bit higher here in Cape Town than they are anywhere else.
[16:47] Pretoria is actually the second highest. Now our church and the footprint of our church happens to be in one of the wealthiest parts of the city.

Three of the five most expensive neighborhoods in the entire country are within the catchment area of this church. By most measures, we are, on average, a church made up of affluent people.
Or you might say, well, we're a very young church, and by that I mean the age of the average person here. We are a church made up of affluent people, or we're a church made up of people en route to becoming affluent.
And so it would be, I think, a grave mistake for us to think that institutionally, centrally controlled, coerced giving will bring about radical generosity among us.
It's not what the text teaches. I don't think it's what the rest of the Bible teaches. But it would be an equally grave mistake, a very grave mistake, for us to think that a congregation like ours should not be deeply, deeply convicted by a passage like this.
[17:56] And to actually be thinking, well, we should actually be leading in this ministry. In terms of our relationship to our other congregations, we should be leading in this ministry. And so you want to know, do I have the gift of giving? Well, by virtue of the fact that you're in this congregation, there's probably a good chance that you have the gift of giving.

So let's not make either mistake here. Now say you're sitting there and you're convicted, and you say, okay, yeah, I think I need this. Where do you find the source for this radical generosity?
Well, first of all, it comes from having one heart. Look again, verse 32. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.
So the believers were united in heart and mind. The literal word is actually soul. United in heart and soul. It's like this inner unity. And it's this oneness of heart that then enables them to reckon their possessions as being at the disposal of everybody at need.
If you go, so I've spoken about the Westminster Confession of Faith. There's two other documents that Presbyterians like to hang on to and talk about a lot. And that's the other one is called the

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Westminster Shorter Catechism.
[19:08] And then for the really spiritually mature people, there's one called the Westminster Larger Catechism, which is just much longer. But it's the same stuff. And these two catechisms are set up in a question and answer format, and they're supposed to help you learn the theology that's in the confession of faith.

And there's a long section in the Larger Catechism talking about the duties that come out of obeying the Ten Commandments. It's actually a beautiful vision of Christian ethical behavior.
And I love how question 141, that's how long it is, we're not even at the end yet. Question 141 concludes. So the question asks, what are the duties required in the Eighth Commandment?
That is, thou shalt not steal. And the answer, it gives us this long list of duties that naturally flow from believing that God's law, His moral law prohibits theft.
But at the very end, the Westminster Divines who put this document together, they write this. An effort is to be made by all just and lawful means to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others as much as our own.
[20:22] So how do you keep the Eighth Commandment? Thou shalt not steal? That's how you keep it. Make an effort by all just and lawful means to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others as much as your own.

Christianity has within it this constant impulse to improve the estate of others. It's built into the system. It's part of what it means to be a Christian. Love your neighbor as yourself.
That's what Jesus says. Do nothing out of self-ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others.
That's what the Apostle Paul says. That is the default position of the Christian. And so in a world of injustice, in a world of greed, in a world of excess, in a world of scarcity, in a world of people ruthlessly building their own personal economic empires, the Christian comes along and he says not, how do I multiply this to make the most of it as I possibly can for myself?
In fact, I would go so far as to say you violate the Eighth Commandment when you don't have that disposition towards your material wealth and means.
[21:46] Friends, let's not forget that God owns everything. Psalm 50. I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens.

For every animal of the forest is mine and the cattle on a thousand hills. Everything belongs to God. And yet in his providence, he gives you a tiny little corner of it to steward.
A tiny little bit of wealth for you to steward. Towards the benefit of others. That's what it means to not reckon your possessions as your own, like they're doing here in Acts 4.
And you're only ever going to get that mindset if you are of one heart with other believers, according to Acts 4. Now this is not a generic unity.
It's a oneness of heart around something very specific. When the New Testament talks, and it does this a lot in different places, but when the New Testament talks about believers being of one mind or one heart or one soul, it means something very specific.
[22:57] So listen to the Apostle Paul. This is Philippians chapter 2. That's the quote that I just mentioned that Paul said about being, looking out for the interests of other people. Listen to this quote now, but listen to it within the context that it comes.

This is Philippians chapter 2, verse 1. Paul says, There's that unity again.
This is not generic unity.
This is not even the unity of purpose that you might find in something like a sports team or a club that meets together around a specific hobby. This is unity with Christ.
Sharing in His love. Sharing in His grace. Sharing in the salvation that He brings. It's the oneness of heart that we as believers share together in Christ that is the source of generosity.
[24:21] See friends, Christianity is an inside-out religion. That repeated emphasis that you find in the New Testament on the heart, on the soul, on the inner workings of being united with Christ in the heart, and therefore with each other, that tells us that Christianity is an inside-out religion.

That salvation comes from a change on the inside, and then it works its way outwards. You see, because I think so often we behave the other way around.
We behave in such a way that demonstrates that we think that human well-being and character formation works the other way around. It works outside in. That we're largely a product of our

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environment and things happening outside of ourselves.
So you want happiness? You want to grow as a person? You want to grow in your generosity? Well, you've got to work on the exterior of your life. And then hopefully the interior will follow.
Now, we probably would never verbalize it crassly like that. But we so often seem to behave that way. If I get a new job, my life will be more stable.
[25:30] Then I'll be able to contribute more. If I had more money, I'd have more peace of mind, and then I would have more to share with other people. If I can just get my debt under control, then I'll become a more generous person.

That is outside-in thinking. If I can improve the quality of my external life, financially and professionally, well, then my inner life will get better.
But all over the New Testament, the emphasis is on the inside. On the heart. On the soul being united to Christ and therefore to each other.
And so that emphasis says, no, no, no, no, no, that outside-in is wrong. That is not how we work. Faith is not outside-in, it's inside-out. And you know this to some extent. Because you know that outside-in doesn't actually work.
You know that because you've seen people. You've seen countless examples of people who rearranged the furniture on their external lives, exactly the way that they wanted it to be, and yet, on the inside, they actually failed to change.
[26:41] We've seen extravagantly wealthy people be unbelievably stingy. Ebenezer Scrooge. Charles Dickens is a Christmas Carol.

He's not a fictitious character. He's real. We've seen him. As I speak about that, some of you can think of people that you know, family members, friends, people you work with that are like that. Despite being a man of significant wealth, Dickens describes Scrooge's inner life this way. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheeks, stiffened his gait, made his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice.
It's possible to impressively arrange your outside life and yet be dead on the inside.
If you want to be radically generous, you need that change that comes from the inside. You need this oneness of heart that the believers all share together here in Acts 4. Where do you get it from?
[27:56] Where do you get it from? Well, you get it from the one mission that the church is called to. Here's the last point, the one mission. Did you notice that right in the middle of this description of radical generosity, Luke slips in a line about the ongoing mission of the church in verse 33?

With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerful at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.
So even though the focus here is clearly on this radical sharing and generosity that is happening in the life of the church, Luke won't let us take our eye off the big picture. The one mission of the church, to bear witness to the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.
He's like, don't forget about this. This is all happening within the context of this one big thing that the church is all about. And that is where the oneness of heart comes from, that produces radical generosity.
Because you have a group of people here who have been radically changed by the resurrected Jesus, and so that produces radical action in them and in their lives. They were dead.
[29:08] But the resurrected Jesus made them alive. And so now they use their wealth to bring life to other people. They had hearts of stone.

But the resurrected Jesus gave them hearts of flesh. So that their hearts now united together might be free from stone cold stinginess.
They were lost. And in desperate, desperate need. Need for so many things. Need for forgiveness. Need for cleansing. Need for righteousness.
But the resurrected Jesus stood in their place, fulfilled their every need. And so now, they create a community where there are no needy people among them.
That's actually quite a stunning statement in verse 34. Did you see it? There were no needy persons among them. It's actually a reference back to the Old Testament.
[30:09] It's a reference back to Deuteronomy chapter 15 verse 4. It's a longer section where Moses is standing before the nation of Israel. They're about to go into the promised land. And what he does is he actually, in part, paints a picture of what a nation living under God's perfect, beautiful law might look like as they go into this promised land.

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And one of the things that God built into the Old Testament civil law to keep people from falling into sort of unescapable poverty was a system of debt cancellation.
Listen to how this is explained in Deuteronomy 15 verses 1 to 5. This is Moses speaking, and he says, At the end of every seven years, you must cancel debts.
This is how it is to be done. Every creditor shall cancel any loan they have made to a fellow Israelite. They shall not require payment from anyone among their own people, because the Lord's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed.
You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your fellow Israelite owes you. However, there need be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you.
[31:30] If only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. But they never obeyed.

For long, long parts of the history, they ignored God's law. And so instead of experiencing blessing in the promised land of their inheritance, they faced war and they faced famine, and they faced poverty with the rich continually exploiting the poor.
No debt cancellation. But here, fast forward to the New Testament, in Acts chapter 4, Luke is telling us something remarkable. You see, by describing the early church as not having any needy persons among them, which is a clear reference back to Deuteronomy 15, there shall be no poor among you, he's telling us this.
He's telling us that in the resurrected Lord Jesus, the Lord's time for canceling debts is being proclaimed. That's what he's saying. The Lord's time for canceling debts is being proclaimed in the resurrected Jesus.
The lawlessness that led to Israel plunging into war and into famine and into exploitation, that lawlessness that fuels our greed and our selfishness and our dishonesty, our idolizing of money, that lawlessness has been dealt with.
[32:54] Christ canceling our debt. When on the cross, he cried, it is finished, and then gave up his life, he canceled our debt.

It's a statement you find at the bottom of a transaction document. It is done, it's completed. And how do we know it actually worked? Well, here's the proof, Acts chapter 4.
All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's grace was so powerfully at work in them, in them all, that there were no needy persons among them.
Look at the community. Look at the community that debt cancellation produces. Look at the quality of life that it produces. Friends, your heart being melted by the debt-cancelling, cost-bearing, life-giving work of the resurrected Lord Jesus is the only sustainable source you will ever find for radical generosity.
You want to be that person? That's where you go. That's the only source I can offer you. That's the only thing that's going to overcome that inbuilt need to hoard your wealth.
[34:16] That inbuilt desire to covet what other people have got. That greed. That need to build something bigger all the time. The debt-cancelling of Christ.

Don't look somewhere else for it. Don't think you can engineer or coerce radical generosity. And as a church, as the Union Chapel, to the degree that we are able to be of one heart and soul committed to the one mission of our resurrected Lord Jesus, we, I think, will begin to see that radical generosity here.
We'll actually start to see it. We won't just read about it from 2,000 years ago. We'll see it and taste it and experience it. And I want to say this to you. I have seen it. In 12 years of pastoring here, I have seen people time and time again engage in radical generosity as their hearts have been united with the radically generous love of Jesus Christ.
Some of you have seen it. Some of you have been part of that. Some of you have experienced that. As we prayed for the deacons earlier, I could have told you stories stories of incredible radical generosity.
Let's pray that the Lord would grant more of that to us. Change each of us and change us as a church. Let's pray now. Our Father and our King, our Savior, we have been the recipients of radical generosity at the cross of Christ.

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[35:58] We have been given a gift beyond anything that we can comprehend. The forgiveness of sins, life eternal with you.

May we see and savor that generosity. And may it not only save us, but may it transform us into being radically generous people ourselves.
Help us to be constantly re-evaluating the wealth that you have given us to steward under the lens of the gospel, under the lens of our one mission of proclaiming the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.
Father, make us a generous church. May Acts 4 be realized here in our midst, Lord, we pray. Lord, I pray for any person who sits here this morning who doesn't know the radically generous love of Jesus, who maybe feels like they're listening to this whole conversation from the outside.
I pray that they would see their need, their need for a Savior, and that they would run into the arms of radical love. have mercy upon them, we pray.
[37:11] We ask this all for Christ's sake and His glory. Amen.

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