**Generous Fellowship**

Acts 4:32-37; 5:1-11

In this section we see ***the best and the worst of the early church***. The account of Ananias and Sapphira is at the same time one of the most difficult to understand in the book of Acts and one of the clearest examples of Luke’s honest and straightforward presentation of **history**. If you were writing the story of the early church, ***would YOU have included this little incident?*** Or would you have been tempted to clean it up or leave it out? Luke did not hide this event or try to downplay the seriousness of it. He included it as an important reminder that where God is at work, Satan will try to get in there and mess things up.

**Barnabas** - An Inspiring Example

**Ananias** - A Sobering Warning

**You** - An Opportunity to Reflect

First we will look at Barnabas and the generosity of the early Christians. Then we will contrast that with Ananias and the hypocrisy of some in the early church. Finally, we will end today with an opportunity to reflect, which will lead us to the Lord’s table together.

First, the inspiring example! Barnabas embodies **three characteristics** of the early Christians.

**Barnabas - An Inspiring Example**

* **Love** for One Another

“Now the full number of those who believed were of ***one heart and soul***.” Acts 4:32

We know theologically that as those who have been **united with Christ** we are, at the same time, ***united with each other***. Jesus is the head of the church and we are His body.

**All of us together** - all believers, from all time, all over the world - we all form ONE BODY. Jesus does not have a million separate little bodies like yellow gibberish talking minions. Jesus has one, single unified body, and each of us makes up a cell in that great organism.

It is one thing to know this to be true biblically - we are one body. But it is something else to feel it and value it and treasure it in our hearts. The early believers came together in a miraculous and unprecedented unity - a unity of HEART and SOUL. This is more than just friendly affection, this is ***deep and sincere love for one another!***

The best example I can think of this is **Bible Camp**. Hopefully most of you have experienced something like this when you get away for a retreat or conference. But going up to camp for the summer, like I did in high school and college - you enter a different world; a magical place.

At camp, you all have ***a common mission*** - to serve the campers. You’re in a common place, literally sleeping in a simple bunk house, eating the same government surplus cafeteria food. I remember my first night at camp as a sophomore in high school and being brought down to the cellar of the kitchen where a senior counselor showed me the boxes of single serving cereal. It was like stepping into paradise. “This is just open? We can just come down here any time?” He sort of winked at me like, “Now you’re in the family. It’s all ours.” You’re working together, sweating together, sharing the gospel together - and you experience a special kind of love and unity there.

The early Christians were having a sort of ***camp / conference experience*** as thousands had come to Jerusalem for the Passover and most of them had just stayed. It was typical back then to stay for a month or two - an extended religious vacation. But this time they all stuck around because it was such a magical time of worship, fellowship and mission. ***Who would want to leave?***

The radical sharing we will see in a minute was **becoming necessary** because so many of these Jewish believers had come from out of town. Normally they would stay with family members, but after one month became two, and two months became six, no doubt arrangements had to be adjusted, especially for those who didn’t get along great with their in-laws.

The mindset among the believers was ***unified***. **We are a family**. We take care of each other. They were “one in heart and soul.” There was no outsider. There was no one left out or neglected. From old to young, from rich to poor, from the most educated to simple fishermen and farmers, they were all family. They were united in heart. And that unity of heart expressed itself in faithful stewardship, the second characteristic of the early church.

**Barnabas - An Inspiring Example**

* Faithful **Stewardship**

“No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.” Acts 4:32

Believing that they were one in Christ, a family, they applied that with the conviction of **STEWARDSHIP**. A steward is a manager, not an owner. The owner of a property hires a steward to oversee his property and staff in line with the desires of the owner. As a steward, your goal is to please the OWNER and accomplish the goals entrusted to you.

This was the mindset of the early church. Knowing they were one in Christ and feeling united in heart, it was natural for them to embrace the commitments of stewards so that *“No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.”*

Isn’t this a remarkable reality? This gathering now included ***THOUSANDS of believers***. It was not just a few dozen, like it started. Now they were a thriving, bustling mega-church in Jerusalem - not doubt including rich and poor, white collar and blue collar. But NO ONE felt their possessions were their own. They all shared everything they had.

And the way that worked was not a formal, structural, sign your assets over with a vow of poverty type of system. It was a spontaneous, relational, Spirit-led system. And this is where **Barnabas exemplified** what God was doing in those believers.

**Barnabas - An Inspiring Example**

* Faithful **Stewardship**

“Thus Joseph, who was also called… Barnabas… sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” Acts 4:36-37

The apostles had gotten to know this Joseph and gave him the nickname Barnabas, which means son of encouragement. We will see in **Baranabas’ interactions** with ***Saul***, how Barnabas was one who believed in people, he loved people. He was an encourager. Barnabas and Saul brought ***John-Mark***, Barnabas’ cousin, on their first missionary journey and John-Mark freaked out and left part way through. As they prepared for another mission, Barnabas - wanting to give Mark a second chance, wanted to bring him along. But Saul felt Mark was not reliable for a strenuous missions trip. And both men felt so strongly on this point that they parted company and formed two missions teams.

You get ***the heart of Barnabas*** in these stories. He is the one who went to find Saul when all the other believers were scared of the Pharisee who had hunted them down and had many Christians executed. But Barnabas was a man of faith and a lover of people - so he went and found Saul to encourage him, to train him and to get him started as a gospel worker.

Here in Acts 4 we meet Barnabas for the first time and what we see is him leading the way among the believers by **selling a field** and bringing the proceeds of the sale to the apostles for their distribution among any who had need. Barnabas was concerned for the believers in the church who were struggling. Levites did not usually have land, but somehow the Lord had blessed Barnabas with some property, which he happily sold in order to bless the church family.

Barnabas was a faithful STEWARD. He did not consider that field to be HIS OWN, but considered it a resource to use for the whole church family. So it was natural, when he heard there were some believers who were hungry or needing shelter, that he use what he had to help address that need. And it was not just Barnabas, **many of the Christians** were doing this very thing, as we see in the third characteristic of the early church:

**Barnabas - An Inspiring Example**

* Sacrificial **Generosity**

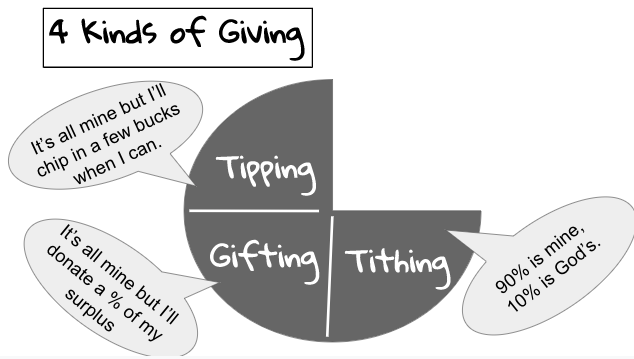
“There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them…” Acts 4:34

This is ***not just people giving of their surplus***. This is not just, oh, we need a few extra bucks for the weekly offering. This is people taking out of their retirement. This is people selling off significant portions of their net worth.

Think of **what LAND meant** to the Jewish people. This was your identity, your legacy - your land! The Israelites had allocated the promised land, parceling it out to the twelve tribes. And for generations the rule was that you had to sell it to someone in your tribe or if not, that your family members would buy it back for the tribe as soon as they could. You kept your land - it was a part of you.

Look at this graphic for **four kinds of giving**.

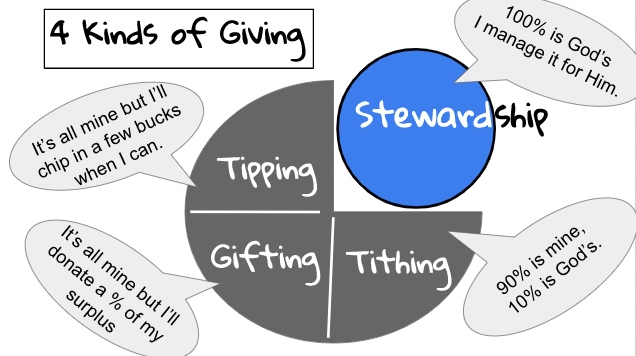
**Four Kinds of Giving**



Many approach charitable giving like they do any form of tipping. If they are really impressed by an appeal or cause, they’ll chip in a few bucks. Religious people usually ratchet this up from irregular ***“Tipping”*** into regular ***“Gifting”*** but the mindset is still the same - “It’s all MINE but I’ll give some of it FOR GOD or for charity or for whatever.” The point is - it’s MINE and, if I feel like it, sometimes, I’ll give a little.

Most Americans give less than 2% to charity. Sadly, most church-going Americans are in that same range. Evangelicals do a little better, averaging more like 3-4%. The result of this typical approach is that believers who **TITHE** often think we have reached the pinnacle of Biblical generosity. But the truth is that the tithe in the Bible was always considered ***a STARTING POINT, not an ENDING POINT***.

Plus, the ten percent contribution was the **OLD TESTAMENT standard** - the expectation from the Law for God’s people who had not been transformed by the gospel and did not have the Holy Spirit. The New Testament standard is the sacrificial generosity of a steward.



This is a whole **different KIND of giving**, because the mindset is totally different. Most people, and even most Christians, stay in these other three quadrants because deep down we believe that what we have, what we earn is OURS and we can do with it whatever we darn well please.

And when it comes to giving, most of us ***give out of our ABUNDANCE***. We have a little extra and we take some or all of that EXTRA and write a check to the church or a missionary or some other worthy ministry. But the giving that is celebrated in the Bible is not out of abundance but out of poverty. Jesus pointed out the widow who took her last nickel and threw it in the offering and said, “All those religious leaders who make a show of publicly putting in large financial gifts - they all gave out of their wealth. But this poor widow just put in everything she had to live on!” That is New Testament faith. That is ***Gospel-fueled generosity***.

These believers in Acts 4 - we don’t know their full financial situation. Some of them, most likely, were giving out of their abundance. But some of them were giving sacrificially - joyfully ***adjusting their own lifestyle*** to bless others who had less.

That’s the question for us.

* Are we willing to ADJUST our lifestyle?
* Are we willing to actually SACRIFICE when we give?

[Center for Faith and Work; Giants for God]

**R.G. LeTourneau** is like the Barnabas of the 20th century church. With only a 7th grade education, he taught himself engineering and built a manufacturing business that produced many of the earth movers that helped win World War 2 and build the highways that knit the United States together. LeTourneau eventually held 299 patents!

But before he became a successful inventor and businessman, R.G. had ***a crisis of faith***. His sister was a missionary and she challenged him to get serious about his relationship with Jesus. So R.G. attended a revival and re-committed his life to the Lord. In that moment, the 30 year old man thought that meant he had to become a missionary or preacher. But R.G. had a wise pastor who told him, “God needs businessmen as well as missionaries and preachers.”

So LeTourneau decided right then to be GOD’S businessman. He dedicated his business to the Lord and said, “God is my business partner.” Though, he joked, God was getting “a pretty sorry specimen as a partner.” This was true as all R.G. brought to the business at that time was a pile of debts. And the year was 1919. The Great Depression was right around the corner. In 1927, just before the whole economy collapsed, R.G. had a big construction job that went bad and left him $100,000 in debt. ***$100,000. In 1927.***

He hired an accountant to help him manage his funds and repay the debt - and the first thing the accountant did was flag his annual commitment to give ***$5,000 to his church for missions***. The accountant said, “Well, you certainly can’t do that this year.” But R.G. was adamant. God was His partner. He had committed that money and would not back out of that commitment.

It was that year that R.G. shifted his business plan from being an earth moving contractor to manufacturing and **selling earth moving equipment**. Within five years his company began to flourish - even when most other companies, now in the Great Depression - were going under.

With that background to his life and business commitments, is it any wonder that R.G. immediately agreed with his wife’s suggestion that they **give away 90%** of what they earned and find a way to live on only 10%? We hear that and think it’s crazy! Impossible! But for the LeTourneaus it was ***the obvious and natural progression*** of their commitment of faith as business partners with Jesus. Here is how LeTourneau said it:

“The question is not how much of my money I give to God, but rather how much of God’s money I keep for myself.” R.G. LeTourneau

Like Barnabas, LeTourneau saw the church as a unified body that he was called to support as he was enabled by the Lord. He saw himself as a steward of all that God had entrusted to him. He did not own it - he simply managed it on God’s behalf. This led him to give sacrificially and become an inspiring example of faith and generosity. Now we must turn the corner to more briefly see the counterexample of Ananias.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Barnabas** | **Ananias** |
| Love of Others | Love of Self |
| Faithful stewardship | Personal ownership |
| Sacrificial generosity | Attention-seeking hypocrisy |

Where Barnabas and most of the believers were united in heart and focused on loving and serving the whole church family, Ananias and Sapphira were focused only on themselves. Where Barnabas saw himself as a steward of God’s resources, Ananias saw his possessions as his own. And where Barnabas gave sacrificially for the good of others, Ananias gave selfishly, under false pretenses, just to make himself look better. Here are **three** **lessons to learn** from the sobering warning of Ananias and Sapphira. Here was a couple in the early church - apparently Christ followers, though we can’t really know their hearts. They had a piece of property, and as other believers (like Barnabas) were doing, they sold the land and brought the proceeds to the apostles.

But unlike Barnabas ***they did not bring the full amount***. Now, Peter makes it clear later that there was nothing wrong with bringing only part of the profits from the sale. They were completely free to give as much or as little of the proceeds as they wanted to. They didn’t have to give anything at all!

The sin involved here was **not PROPORTION but DECEPTION**. Had they brought half of the money from the sale and said, “Here is half of what we got for this land,” Peter and the apostles would have thanked them profusely and praised the Lord for their generous gift. But look at the language in verse 2.

**Ananias - A Sobering Warning**

* **Satan** is active even in the best churches

“With his wife’s full knowledge he **kept back** for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it.” Acts 5:2

That phrase ***“kept back”*** means “misappropriated” or ***“stolen”*** and it only appears one time in the Old Testament - in the story of Achan. Right after Joshua led the Israelites to conquer Jericho - in the midst of their first major victory in the promised land, one man (Achan) disobeyed the clear command to devote everything to destruction and kept some of the loot for himself.

For one fancy robe, 200 silver coins and **a gold bar** weighing a pound or two - Achan rebelled against the Lord and put the whole nation in jeopardy. They lost 36 men killed in the attack against Ai - 36 - because of the sin of one man - Achan. Achan’s selfishness, his greed, his desire for these items cost 36 women their husbands, 36 mothers their sons, 36 or more children their fathers.

When he should have destroyed everything in Jericho, Achan “kept back” a few items for himself. He STOLE them. In a deliberate parallel, right after the great victory of Pentecost and the rapid growth of the early church - in the midst of their unified generosity of caring for one another there is one man who “kept back” some money for himself. Peter confronts this sin immediately and directly.

**Ananias - A Sobering Warning**

* **Satan** is active even in the best churches

“Why has Satan so filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds…?” Acts 5:3

Peter knew the **deceptive strategies of the devil**. Remember how Jesus rebuked Peter saying, “Get behind me Satan! You don’t have in mind the things of God but the things of man!” When Jesus was explaining his plan to suffer and die for the sins of mankind, Peter tried to correct him. But Jesus saw in Peter’s objection the subtle and dangerous influence of the devil - a temptation for Jesus to take the easier way, the path of less sacrifice and suffering.

Now, we cannot know if Ananias and Sapphira were “true believers” or not. If they were, then this could not be demon possession for a Spirit-filled Christian cannot be possessed by a demon like a non-believer can. But even a born-again believer can be attacked and deceived by the devil - and we are foolishly naive if we ignore the dangerous reality of **our enemy** who “prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.”

**The devil is active** even in the healthiest, fastest growing churches. If you think otherwise you haven’t been involved in church very long. I would say the healthier and faster growing a church is, the more it draws Satan’s attention. In my 20 years of ministry I have seen around half of my pastor friends knocked out of ministry. Half. Wives who ran off and abandoned their family. Pastors who burned themselves out. One is in prison for physical involvement with a teenage girl. One could’ve been prosecuted for stealing over $10,000 from the church over the course of several years.

Don’t think you are exempt. The devil is a wolf, looking for any sheep who is weak or sick or who strays away from the flock. Ananias and Sapphira serve as a serious warning for all of us - especially about the dangers of **MONEY**. Satan is active. Two:

**Ananias - A Sobering Warning**

* The Heart is **Deceitful**

“Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” Acts 5:4

Satan was involved, but ***Ananias and Sapphira chose this*** - they made this plan in their own hearts. Ananias in particular is held responsible for this choice. He saw what others were doing and thought, *“This will put us in a good light. We don’t have to give the whole sale, we can pad our wallets a little and still make the church newsletter for this month. It’s a win/win! We get some extra cash, and the church gets another hero, like Barnabas. He’s not the only one with some property to sell. He shouldn’t get all the press!”*

The fact that Ananias and Sapphira were both struck dead immediately **seems excessive** to our modern ears. But let’s remember that the believers in Jerusalem in those days were much closer in their cultural experience to Joshua and Jericho than they were to 21st century America. They all knew the story of Achan and they knew that he was executed by stoning along with his entire family and even their livestock. Stoning seems barbaric as a form of execution but the point of it was the men of the whole community were in agreement and together carried out the sentence of death.

In ancient Israel the law was clear - if there was sin in the camp the leaders had to ***“purge the evil from among you.”*** Israel was called to be holy, set apart as an example to all other nations. And Jesus clearly warned his followers about “the yeast of the Pharisees” which was hypocrisy. Jesus knew how deceitful the human heart is and warned his disciples that “a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.”

***If you let a little hypocrisy take root in a church, it will spread.*** This is why Peter dealt with Ananias so immediately, so directly and so severely. God was protecting the early church from the dangerous contamination of hypocrisy. The sin of Ananias was the sin of lying to the Holy Spirit. By lying to Peter - in bringing a false amount to “lay at his feet” Ananias was lying to God. And that deceitfulness had to be dealt with. Here is our final warning:

**Ananias - A Sobering Warning**

* Hypocrisy destroys **Community**

“He fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.” Acts 5:5

As I’ve said, just because something happens in Acts doesn’t mean it is normative for us today. **The church was brand new and therefore vulnerable** and God was protecting the purity of the church family. He was also reinforcing ***the authority of Peter and the apostles***, making it clear that if you dishonor Peter, you dishonor God; if you lie to Peter, you lie to God. The apostles were entrusted with very serious authority over the early church - before long they would start writing Scripture. So it was essential that all the believers knew who had the authority of an apostle - and who DID NOT.

It’s entirely possible that Ananias saw himself as **a future competitor for Peter** or at least for Barnabas. Why was he so concerned to impress everyone? What was his real agenda? Might he have split the early church? Might he have had plans to draw off followers after himself?

Only God knows the heart. It’s important that ***God is the one who executed Ananias and Sapphira***, not Peter. Peter was clearly led by the Spirit to confront this sin. But Peter did not carry out the sentence - he witnessed the immediate death of Ananias and discerned the same would happen to his wife unless she confessed their sin, which she did not do.

**An Opportunity to Reflect**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Barnabas** | **Ananias** |
| Love of Others | Love of Self |
| Faithful stewardship | Personal ownership |
| Sacrificial generosity | Attention-seeking hypocrisy |

So as we see the inspiring example of Barnabas and the sobering warning of Ananias, it invites us to reflect on our own hearts.

* How is your heart? Are you focused on loving others or, if you’re honest, are you more focused on yourself?
* How do you view your money and resources? Do you see them as your own or as belonging to God and you simply manage them on His behalf?
* If someone did an audit of your spending, what would they conclude about your heart? “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Our spending reveals our hearts.

Are we church-focused like Barnabas or self-focused like Ananias? Are we faithful stewards like Barnabas or American materialists like Ananias? Do we give sacrificially in ways that force us to adjust our lifestyles or do we only give when we happen to have an abundance so we can give and it won’t really hurt?

As we come to the Lord’s table today it’s an opportunity to examine our hearts and to invite the Lord to “search me and know me; see if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in your everlasting way.”

Let’s pray.