

November 10, 2019 ~ Ryan Perz

**Acts 4:32-5:11**

**Generosity and Great Fear in Mission**

Intro: Being a church family means that we get to see each other at our best and our worst. There are joys in seeing God work— salvations, marriages, children, grandchildren, prayer for healing, people deployed on gospel mission. There are also some really dark times we see each other in—depression, disappointment, prolonged seasons of unanswered prayer, wayward children, sickness, death.

Our best moments are when we obey God out of a gospel-rich heart.

And our worst is when we live under the curse....*and our truly worst moments are when we are very self-absorbed in sin and lack the fear of God.*

These two stories, back to back, show the people within the church at their best and worst.

The account is put side by side to give a positive example of godliness and example to fear the consequences of sin.

**1. Positively: Hearts overflowing with generosity (4:32-37)**

- What does it look like when we are at our spiritual best?
- Is it when the songs are just right on Sunday morning, and the preaching did not put you to sleep?
- This is a summary statement that is overwhelmingly positive. It's similar two 2:43-47—it showcases the unity, purity, love and generosity of the church.

That's what happens when the gospel takes root in people's lives.

1. Unity of heart and soul (v32).

- This is not a small number, but all the believers in the Jerusalem church. It's a mega church, and growing.

I've heard that the bigger a church gets, the harder it is to keep unity. More people means more diversity of options, more cliques can form. By Ch 6 we see that. But here the experience is positive.

- The church in Acts is described as being one in heart and soul. Heart and soul is often the way the Bible describes total loyalty and devotion (e.g. Dt 6:5—the way we are to love the Lord God).

When we have a total loyalty to God, our attitude is that our life is not our own.

Similar with our loyalty to others. We don't see our stuff as merely our own. We may own it, steward it, but we know there is more out there than just consuming for self.

“They had everything in common” —this is not encouraging a political or economic philosophy; it simply shows the commitment that believers had for each other.

- This is not forced redistribution. It was loving generosity *when needs arose*.
- Wealthier Christians could sell property and help someone in need.

It's simply living out the command of Jesus (Lk 12:33)

<sup>33</sup>Sell your possessions and give to the needy.

## 2. Powerful proclamation (v33)

- It's important to see that proclaiming the truth of Christ remains a *priority*.
- Even though the fellowship was deep, the church *did not turn inward*.

A church that has deep fellowship and love for each other does not have to turn inward and become ingrown. The ideal is to have both. Deep love and sacrificial care, but also bold witness and evangelism.

The key: great power and great grace...both are the enabling of the Spirit.

## 3. Willing sacrifice that meets needs (34)

- Liquidating your property was not a requirement for church membership.
- There were groups that did have this standard. For example, the Essenes lived like that. Other monastic groups throughout church history have also. To be a part, means you sold everything—withdraw from everyone and usually lived in the desert.

This is not what is in mind, rather:

- It's a reflection the *family of faith* ideal laid out in Dt 15:4,

<sup>4</sup> But there will be no poor among you; for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess—

Take note that the command in Dt. is grounded in God's grace. He has redeemed a people and promised them an inheritance, so they are to live with open-handed generosity.

One figure stands out: Joseph. Instead of the nickname Joe, he gets one that reflects more of his character: Barnabas, son of encouragement. This is where he really encourages us in the area of sacrificial generosity.

Illus:

A few weeks ago someone who came to our house made this small comment about our living room: "your tv is kind of small for this room." I didn't think much about it at the time.

Friday, I was at a store and saw that a larger size TV upgrade is actually not all that expensive. So, I spent the evening researching what brands are best for 2019. Then I woke up on Sat for time in the Word, and almost immediately this hit me: "is my heart moving in the Barnabas direction?" I was also praying for Sudan that morning. The average Sudanese family lives off around \$200 *per year*. I can't imagine a Sudanese Christian telling another that his TV is too small for his room. Upgrading TV size for me right now would not move me in the Barnabas direction.

Now, I'm not trying to bind anyone's conscience on the size of the TV you own; there are people way more godly than me who own a larger TV. I don't think it would be a sin to upgrade.

*But was is going to move me in the "Barnabas direction?"*

The Barnabas direction is when our hearts gets unraveled around self and move in the direction of sacrifice for others. And like all growth in Christlikeness, the bigger decisions are made by faith because smaller decisions have been made along the way for a long time.

The Barnabas direction is not really credited to Barnabas, but the Lord Jesus who by giving up his life, modeled sacrificial generosity.

(2 Cor 8:9)

<sup>9</sup>For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

We can just call it the gospel direction. Friends, is your heart moving that way? Are your decisions on how to spend money, time, talent and hobbies serving you, or serving others?

## **2. Other hearts obstructed by greed and deceit (5:1-11)**

- We now move to the polar opposite as we see two hearts obstructed by greed and deceit.
- Lest we make too much of people's names, Ananias is Hebrew for "gracious" and Sapphira is Aramaic meaning "beautiful".

The picture is anything but..

But what is gracious and beautiful is that God will preserve the purity of the church through an act of judgment; God preserves the integrity of the community

This story has parallels to the story of Achan in the book of Joshua (Josh 7). In Joshua, there is victorious progress, but then through greed and deception, Achan keeps back what should have been devoted to God. Luke uses the same word "kept back" that is in the Greek translation of the OT in Josh 7:1. It's a dark interruption in an otherwise positive story when we see someone at his worst.

- It's really important to see Ananias and Sapphira as a clear warning.
- It's not normative to see people die at the moment of sin, but the point is we are to tremble at God's holiness.
- I know some have the question: were they saved?
- The text does not give us the answers, rather it says—*you don't want to be in their shoes, do you?*
  
- Now the sin of Ananias and Sapphira is not that they gave a small amount, but that they deceived the church. They did not understand the consuming holiness of God in his church.

Several things were going on in their hearts:

### 1. Self-first attitude

- Throughout scripture are warnings about self-first attitudes. Perhaps the most memorable comes from a short account in Jeremiah 45:5

It's a short story with a strong lesson. Barruch was the prophet Jeremiah's scribe. He was carried off to Egypt during the Babylonian exile and he was complaining. This may have been learned behavior from Jeremiah, who knew how to complain (Jer 15:10) cursing the day of his birth.

The Lord brings his word to him (Jer 45:5)

<sup>5</sup> And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.

As we will see, this couple sought great things for themselves.

### 2. Allowing Satan a foothold—the actions are attributed to Satan

- This is all too familiar to Peter. He saw this up close and experienced it with Judas's betrayal (Lk 22:3—the activity of Satan) and also Peter's own denial, when he was sifted by Satan (Lk 22:31).

Peter probes the heart by asking with one word (5:3), "Why?"

Sin blinds us

—To the fact all sin is against God, even the smallest lack of integrity.

—Sin blinds us with the short-term gains but forgets the long-term consequences.

### 3. Deceit laced with pride

- There was something more than just deceit.

The sin probably has two angles on it— greed, and a desire to *gain a reputation before others*.

This couple wanted to look generous without really being generous. They wanted credit for great sacrifice that was not really great.

**\*\*They were “seeking great things for self”.**

But before we are quick to pass judgment, let’s think of our own hearts. How common is it for us to want a good reputation before others? The world we live in, in one sense is no different than 2000 years ago. There was still social pressure that people put on themselves. Churches can be places with huge social pressure that we put on ourselves. Only one thing is required: *living with purity and integrity before God.*

Also, we need to see the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Lying to the Spirit is lying to God (v3-4). The Spirit is not a force, but a person, the 3rd person of the Trinity.

Sum: what is the main takeaway?

The deadly consequences of sin? Warning against unchecked greed? Satanic attack?

It seems the *main takeaway* is found in the words “great fear” (v5, 11).

- This is the first time the word “church” appears in Acts (v11), and it’s linked to *walking in the fear of God...and great fear may just be our greatest need in the church today.*

Almost weekly there is some news that breaks that some well-known Christian falls away from the faith or commits some scandalizing sin.

*Where is the simple fear of God’s holiness in our church culture?*

Conclusion:

In my previous church there was a family who had an outbreak of lice one summer. When word got out, one church member said in a moment of overreaction, “lice is my greatest fear.”

Really? More than finding out you have stage 4 cancer? Or your husband was accidentally killed at work, or that your children all reject Christ? Head lice is your greatest fear? A nit comb and shampoo take care of it.

But it’s a good question: what is our greatest fear in the church? Our text points our hearts in the right direction. Our greatest fear should be that we would treat Christ and his church casually. Our greatest fear should be compromising purity in our lives. Our greatest fear should be that we have the potential to walk down the path of lying and deceit.

Our greatest fear needs to be a Holy God who is a consuming fire, who can and will purify his church.