



Acts: The Church Unleashed: Session 3

Acts 4:32-5:11

Here is a great video resource of the story of Ananias and Sapphira:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2_BYNC5-1M

Introduction

Why should Christians, more than anyone else, care about human society? (View the Quotes/illustrations section for a Christian perspective on society)

Have there been times when it seemed like the church overlooked humanity? (Becoming an inward focused church-instead of sharing the gospel)

Have there been times when it seemed like the church over-emphasizes humanity? (Focus on consumerism in the church)

How should a healthy view of caring for humanity relate to the call to be generous? When have you experienced the generosity of others in your personal life? How did it motivate you to seek to show generosity to others?

The Bible is clear that the world is a place of abundance, and it calls us to a life of joyful generosity in response, whether that is with our money, our possessions, our time, or our very lives. (Go to the Quotes/Illustration section to find a supplemental story to introduce today's passage).

Generosity should be a defining characteristic of the church because God is generous. The Father gave His Son. The Son gave His life. The Father and the Son gave the Spirit. And the Spirit gives the followers of Christ hearts of generosity. The Spirit works through these hearts to bring unity to the body of Christ through their loving support for one another. Greed is contrary to who God is and invites His judgment. The Holy Spirit of God helps us distinguish between generous and greedy giving.

Context: In Acts 4, these new Christians now found themselves part of a new family with brothers and sisters in Christ. Thus, if someone had a need, they responded with radical generosity. Emphasize that love for the family of God is the centerpiece of the passage. We need to ask ourselves how we've made space for that kind of generosity with our own resources for the sake of other Christians.

1. The Spirit strengthens the church in unity and generosity (Acts 4:32-35).

Have a volunteer to read Acts 4:32-35.

32 Now the entire group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common. 33 With great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them. 34 For there was not a needy person among them because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed to each person as any had need.

It's important not to misunderstand what was happening here. This isn't a call to poverty, and it isn't a demand for Christians to sell everything they have and give the proceeds to the poor. In fact, it isn't a demand at all; it's an invitation.

Have there been times when you have felt guilted into giving? Why is giving obediently different from giving through guilt?

Generosity is a fruit of God's grace, something that an individual should feel compelled to do from their own hearts (2 Cor. 9:7). While in one way this understanding liberates us from any legalism around giving, it simultaneously heightens our expectations for giving. Because generosity flows from the heart, it is a tangible way of seeing the condition of the heart. This is why Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21).

We give to what we love. The picture in Acts 4 is of a church united by the Spirit and motivated by love for one another to radical generosity. Not generosity in general, not motivated to poverty, not disgusted by money or wealth, but motivated by a love for their brothers and sisters in Christ to give sacrificially.

Love for the family of God is the centerpiece of the passage. We might be shocked and scandalized by the radical steps these believers took, but we should be more stunned by the love that motivated them. When we examine our own lives, we should ask how we've made space for that kind of generosity with other Christians. In the body of Christ, we are all now brothers and sisters, and when a family member has a need, it should inspire the family to respond with love, care, and radical generosity.

Why might biblical stories and examples of radical generosity make us nervous?

Why is generosity in our American culture such a problem for the church? (Due to our higher incomes compared to the rest of the world, we tend to hold on to more of our income rather than to see how it can be used by the Lord).

What would a life of radical generosity in the church look like today?

2. The Spirit distinguishes between generous and greedy giving (Acts 4:36–5:2).

God is always more concerned with the heart behind our giving than the gift itself. Joyful giving, whether it's a lot or a little, whether it's all we have or just a portion, is something that God delights in. By contrast, reluctant giving, constrained giving, or giving that's meant as a display of our own righteousness—a way to impress the people around us—reveals the heart as well. It reveals a heart that is unmoved by grace, or a self-interested heart.

Have a volunteer to read Acts 4:36-5:2.

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus by birth, the one the apostles called Barnabas (which is translated Son of Encouragement), 37 sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

5:1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. 2 However, he kept back part of the proceeds with his wife's knowledge and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

There's a familiar story here, and one that many of us can identify with on some level. (Be prepared to contrast the motivations in giving between Barnabas and Annanias.)

What are some blatant similarities/differences between Barnabas and Annanias?

Joseph, more popularly known as Barnabas, moved by the gospel and by his love for the church, chose to sell a field he owned and to give the money to the apostles for them to distribute to those in need.

We can imagine that there was some kind of applause or at least acknowledgment for what was genuinely and certainly a generous action. This recognition, whether it came from the apostles or the disciples as a whole, was what subsequently motivated Ananias. It was not that he wanted to *be* generous but that he wanted to *be seen* as generous.

When Ananias laid their gift at the apostles' feet, the problem wasn't that they held back a proportion of the profit but that they presented it as if this were the whole value of the parcel they sold. (We'll see this clearly in verses 3-9 below.) So the issue was not the amount they gave or the amount they withheld; it was their dishonesty. Notice that Jesus condemns giving in relation to religious performance (Matthew 6:1-4). The lie revealed the truth of Ananias and Sapphira's hearts—they weren't giving out of generous hearts but greedy ones, and their greed wasn't simply material, it was also spiritual. They wanted to give so that they would be seen as radically generous. They wanted the praise of the crowd.

What are some ways dishonesty might creep into our giving? (ref Matthew 6:1-4)

How can we guard ourselves against dishonesty in giving?

This is exactly what happened with Ananias and Sapphira's gift. Their lies were birthed from a selfish desire either to compete (perhaps with Barnabas) or a selfish desire to impress the apostles and disciples. Their giving was decidedly not born from generous hearts eager to love God and serve His church. As a result, their gift didn't bring life; it destroyed it.

For us, their story invites us to examine our own motivations in how and why we give:

Are we giving with joyful hearts? (2 Cor 9: give with a cheerful hearts)

Are we giving in response to God's goodness to us? Or are we giving to ensure our names show up on the right lists?

Are we generous because we're joyful or because we want to *display* generosity?

To return to an earlier theme, the difference between Barnabas and Ananias was their sense of what kind of world we live in. Barnabas had a sense that the world is abundant; he could share what he had with confidence because he knew that all he had came from God and that he could rely on God and God's people for his needs. Ananias lived in a world of scarcity; he didn't

just cling to his wealth, he grasped for adulation and applause. Grasping at money and fame, Ananias soon found that he would have neither.

How can reflecting on the gospel of Jesus lead us to joy in generous giving for the benefit of others in need?

3. The Spirit judges and purifies the church (Acts 5:3-11).

What happens next to Ananias, and later Sapphira, is rather shocking:

Have a volunteer to read Acts 5:3-11.

3 “Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds of the land? 4 Wasn’t it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn’t it at your disposal? Why is it that you planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to people but to God.” 5 When he heard these words, Ananias dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard. 6 The young men got up, wrapped his body, carried him out, and buried him.

7 About three hours later, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 “Tell me,” Peter asked her, “did you sell the land for this price? ”

“Yes,” she said, “for that price.”

9 Then Peter said to her, “Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.”

10 Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in, they found her dead, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband. 11 Then great fear came on the whole church and on all who heard these things.

Ananias was confronted for his deception, and he dropped dead. His wife did too. Some might think this was a harsh punishment, but it was a sign of the depth and severity of their sin, and ours too, for that matter. This wasn't about an accounting error, and really, it wasn't about money at all. It was about the unity of the family of God and how sin violates the trust, intimacy, and communion of His family.

Because of the gospel, these Christians were living sacrificially and generously and enjoying the fruit of that generosity. For those with more than they needed, they got to take joy in giving to others. For those in need, they got to take joy in having their needs met.

Ananias and Sapphira wanted the credit for their giving. But judgment came because they pursued their own glory rather than God's, their own good rather than the church's. The discipline we experience may not be as severe as Ananias and Sapphira's (we should certainly hope not), but sin always has consequences, and the pain of those consequences is one way that God purifies and shapes us.

This happens on both large and small scales. Big, earth-shattering relational sins like adultery have obvious consequences, but less obvious and more subtle sins—white lies, greed, lust—take their toll as well. Their consequences—lost trust, lost health, lost desire—are all invitations to repent and be transformed by the Spirit of God.

In the church as a whole, this works in much the same way. Throughout the New Testament, we see examples of Christians being called to confront one another in their sin and, if one is unrepentant, to disassociate from them (see Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5). When this is a Spirit-guided process, it is one of both great seriousness and great joy, especially as it leads to sinners

walking in repentance. The church deepens its purity as it listens to the Spirit, grows in conviction over its sins, and is healed of them by His power.

What do the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira say about the purity of the church? How do they compare with the story of Achan in Joshua 7?

How does this story reflect how God views our generosity?

The Bible says that God desires obedience more than sacrifices, what does that look like in your life?

Conclusion

We live in an abundant world, as seen in the lavish way God made the world and in the way He pursues and provides for His people—whether a ram in a bush, a lamb at Passover, or manna in the desert, and of course, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In this abundant world, giving somehow yields *more* than keeping does (2 Corinthians 9:6-11).

What is one action that you can take as a group to reflect generosity for others?

As our supreme example, in giving away His life, Jesus became exalted above every name (Phil. 2:5-11). In following Jesus, we're invited to do the same, not clinging to what we have but giving it away, becoming a servant, and allowing God to multiply it for His good and glory in His church and in the world around us.

Challenge your group members to write down a step to take this week to be more generous (examples include beginning to tithe, finding a place to serve, meeting the needs of someone coupled with the gospel).

The Holy Spirit's presence in our lives should inspire such radical generosity, transforming our hearts to mirror Jesus' own so that we don't cling to what's "ours" by rights but give it away to those in need.

Pray as a group for the Holy Spirit to guide in our lives ways that we can reflect generosity to others.

Quotes/Illustrations

Social Concern

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the Spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends, Christians should be ready to work with all men of good

will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth (Mic. 6:8; Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Thess. 3:12).

Opening Illustration:

In early 2016, Hamdi Ulukaya, founder of the Chobani Yogurt company, made front page news with a business decision. The company had recently experienced raging success, riding the wave of protein-rich fad diets that made Greek yogurt more popular than its ordinary siblings.

To celebrate the success, Ulukaya called together his company's employees and announced that he was giving 10 percent of the company's stock to be distributed amongst them. If the company ever goes public or sells to someone else, the stock will be incredibly valuable. If the employees retire or leave, they can sell their stock back on their way out. The result is that some of these employees—working a blue-collar manufacturing job at a dairy company—will be millionaires.

Contrast this with the story of Martin Shkreli, the CEO of a pharmaceutical company, who raised the price of a medication from \$13.50/pill to \$750/pill. Shkreli was universally loathed for this decision. And yet, it was perfectly legal and permissible.

These stories awaken our own inner compass for what is right and what is wrong. But to be more specific, what separates Ulukaya and Shkreli isn't just their character on display in their business decisions; it's their sense of the kind of world we live in. What should we expect from the world? And how should we act as we go about our business in it?

For Ulukaya, the world would seem to be an abundant place, and the proper response to success, wealth, and thriving would be extending it to others, especially to those who made the success possible. For Shkreli, the world would seem to have a scarcity of resources, so the more one can acquire the better, no matter the cost. In other words, it might destroy your reputation to raise the price of a drug 5,000 percent, but if it makes you rich, then it is worth it.

How might you expect these two business leaders to view the world differently and live differently from each other?

1. Acts 4:32-35

“The Christian ought to regard all the things that are given him for his use, not as his to hold as his own or to lay up. Moreover, giving careful heed to all things as the Lord's, he should not overlook any of the things that are being thrown aside and disregarded, should this be the case. No Christian should think of himself as his own master, but each should rather so think and act as though given by God to be slave to his fellow brothers and sisters.”¹

—Basil the Great (circa 329-379)

“Believers are never told to *become* one; we're *already* one, and we're expected to act like it.”⁵
—Joni Eareckson Tada

2. Acts 4:36-5:2

“A lack of generosity refuses to acknowledge that your assets are not really yours, but God's.”²
—Timothy Keller

“There would be no needy believers in our communities either if we were as prepared to share our belongings as Barnabas was.”⁸

—Paul Mumo Kisau

3. Acts 5:3-11

“It is [the Spirit] that sheds the love of God abroad in their hearts, and the love of all mankind; thereby purifying their hearts from the love of the world, from the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. It is by Him they are delivered from anger and pride, from all vile and inordinate affections.”¹⁰

—John Wesley (1703-1791)

“God desires to have a holy bride without wrinkle, spot or blemish, holy as he is holy.”¹¹

—Peter Riedemann (1506-1556)

“The unity believers have is a gift from God by the Holy Spirit that comes to those who submit to the Lordship of Christ. It unites people across social and economic lines and is rooted in the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus. The unity of believers in the church leads to a profound reorientation toward worldly possessions. No longer do people think of their possessions as their own. Instead, they think of what they own as belonging to anyone in need.”¹²

—Andy Chambers

Further Commentary

1. Acts 4:32-35

“In sum, this unit testifies to the community’s mutual care and the concrete expression of its unity in the voluntary pooling of resources on behalf of the community. These resources are used for the care of those in need...This meeting of needs is a theme that will surface here and there in Acts. The unity of heart and soul in this community is transparent. Not only do its members declare the word of God powerfully; they also make sure that each one in the community has access to everyday needs. Community life means both mission and mutual care. These occur because people care about one another and the cause they share.”³

—Darrell L. Bock

“One of the most remarkable features of life among the early believers was their unity. This is expressed here in the words they were ‘one in heart and mind,’ a typically Hebraic turn of phrase indicating their complete accord (cf. 1 Chron. 12:38)...This unity, based on the recognition that ‘there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism...one God and Father of all’ (Eph. 4:4ff)—in short, on their mutual love of God—was demonstrated, as it had been from the first, in their readiness to meet one another’s needs, their love of neighbor (cf. 2:44ff).”²

—David J. Williams

2. Acts 4:36-5:2

Further Commentary

“Like Paul, Luke is ever the master of contrast. Immediately following the brief testimony of Barnabas, he tells us about two other Christians who sold property so they could participate in the church’s communal care program. The name Ananias means ‘God is gracious,’ and Sapphira means ‘beautiful.’ This was a joint effort even if the cultural patterns of the time put Ananias first. Luke tells us ‘he kept back part of the money,’ using the verb *nospizo* which means ‘to put aside for oneself.’ Already this narrative reminds us of Achan in Joshua 7:1-26. This couple wanted acclaim without sacrifice and comfort without commitment. They caused the first demonstration of defeat within the ranks since the betrayal of Judas and denial by Peter. The

outward act seemed so appropriate. Notice the identical wording in 4:37 and 5:2: 'Put it at the apostles' feet.' What appeared to be public generosity was actually family conspiracy, but God was looking."⁶

–Kenneth O. Gangel

3. Acts 5:3-11

“We must be absolutely clear as to what Ananias' sin was. It was not casual deception. Rather, he feigned a deeper spiritual commitment than he had. We share Ananias' sin not when others think we are more spiritual than we are, but when we try to make others think we are more spiritual than we are. Examples of Ananias' sin today include: creating the impression we are people of prayer when we are not; making it look like we have it all together when we do not; promoting the idea that we are generous when we are so tight we squeak when we smile; misrepresenting our spiritual effectiveness.”⁹

–R. Kent Hughes