



First Baptist Church At The Villages

SERMON SERIES: REDISCOVERING CHURCH (8/9/2020) •

STUDY TITLE: OPPOSITE SIDES OF COMMUNITY • ACTS 4:32-37; 5:1-11 •

FOR USE 8/9 THROUGH 8/15/2020

MAIN POINT

Authentic Christian community leads to the sacrifice of yourself and your things.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

When you hear an especially catchy song, do you find yourself singing along, humming, tapping your foot, or something else?

What song makes you want to sing along with the music?

What kind of music most resonates with you?

Pharrell Williams's song "Happy" swept the nation and hit number 1 on the Billboard charts in 2014. From the catchy beat to the fun lyrics, the song delivered on its name. When we hear songs like that one, it's hard to resist the impulse to tap our feet or sing along. Music has a way of tapping into our emotions and altering our moods. In Acts 4 and 5, we find the early Christians acting as if by impulse, too. Led by the Holy Spirit, these believers demonstrated sacrifice and deep love for each other when someone had a physical need. Their concern for one another moved them to action, even to the point of giving up their own possessions to help those who lacked the basic necessities.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| READ ACTS 4:32-37.

This passage gives us a clear glimpse into the daily lives of the early church. The early Christians were so unified in spirit that Luke described them as being “of one heart and mind” (v. 32). Their lives were marked by generosity and selflessness. When someone in their midst had a physical need, someone stepped up to make sure it was met. We’re given one tangible example of their love for each other in verses 36-37. Barnabas, widely recognized for his encouraging nature, sold a piece of land and gave the proceeds to the apostles who would distribute it as needed. It’s important to note here that the act of giving one’s possessions was not a requirement for the early church, but rather an act of kindness left to the discretion of the giver. Barnabas freely gave for the benefit of others. When people gave, the apostles would use the proceeds to attend to the known needs.

What words or phrases would you use to describe the community of believers and their actions in these verses?

Think of examples when have you seen church members care for each other’s physical needs.

When have you had an opportunity to help meet a physical need of someone in your church? How did it impact your relationship with that person?

| READ ACTS 5:1-4.

Like Barnabas, Ananias and his wife Sapphira also sold some property and placed proceeds from the sale “at the apostles feet” (v. 2). However, Ananias sinned when he kept a portion of the money for himself while claiming to have given the entire amount of the proceeds to the apostles. The plan was a deceitful one in which Ananias pretended to give all the money from the sale of his land when he in fact kept some for himself. Ananias wanted the appearance and recognition of having given sacrificially. The Holy Spirit revealed this plan to the apostle Peter who quizzed Ananias on his motives.

How did Ananias’s and Sapphira’s transaction compare with Barnabas’s?

What can hold us back from giving in a sacrificial way?

What was at the heart of Peter’s words in verse 4? How would you summarize his comments?

| READ ACTS 5:5-11.

Peter uncovered Ananias's lie. In a shocking moment, Ananias "dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard" (v. 5). Peter did not kill Ananias, nor did he call for his death. However, scholars consider this event to be one of divine punishment. Entangled in the scheme as well and without knowing that her husband was already dead, Sapphira backed up her husband's lie in verse 8 when Peter questioned her about the financial gift. Just as Ananias had, Sapphira "dropped dead" (v. 10). The couple sought recognition and the appearance of generosity, yet their hearts were focused on deceit.

Since we know several of the early Christians owned personal property and gave to others in need voluntarily, Ananias and Sapphira were free to give any amount of their money they chose. Their sin was not the act of keeping part of the money, but rather lying about giving the whole amount. Their scheme represented a disunity of spirit and threatened to weaken the testimony of the young church.

What are some consequences of deception and greed you've seen in the church today?

What steps can we take to prevent greed and deception from taking root in our own hearts?

What does this passage teach us about God's desires for His church?

APPLICATION

Identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to your own life.

Music can motivate us to get moving, but it's no equal to the Holy Spirit. Consider the sacrifice and the authentic community of the early believers as you assess your own involvement with other Christians this week. When we seek out the Holy Spirit's guidance, He shows us where and how to respond to the needs we see.

What is your first response when you sense God leading you to give of your time, money, or effort? If it's not what you'd like it to be, ask God to soften your heart to His leading.

How is God calling you to give sacrificially for someone else?

What's one current need in your church that you can help meet? How can you, along with those your Community Group, demonstrate the kind of sacrificial giving we see in Acts 4:32-37?

PRAYER

Close your time in prayer. Thank God for the sacrifice He made by sending Jesus to die for your sins. Ask Him to open your eyes to opportunities you'll encounter this week to set your own priorities aside and participate in authentic community that demonstrates Christ-like love to others.

COMMENTARY

| ACTS 4:32-37

4:32-33. The opening two verses are almost identical with 2:43-44, only in reverse order. Together they characterize the community life as marked by four things: their unity in mind and heart (v. 32a), their sharing of their possessions (v. 32b), the power and witness of the apostles (v. 33a), and the grace of God, which rested upon them (v. 33b). The overarching concept was their unity, their being "one in heart and mind," their fellowship in the Spirit. This served as the basis of their sharing of their possessions. The latter is described in two ways. First, "no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own." The picture is one of unqualified sharing, of not claiming owner's rights, of saying "what's mine is yours." The second expression is "they shared everything they had." The Greek literally reads "everything was in common with them." Taken by itself, this could refer to shared ownership; but in conjunction with the first expression, it also refers to a practice of freely sharing one's goods with another.

Many interpreters have seen Luke's description of the Christian practice here as reflecting Greek ideals, particularly in such phrases as "one mind" and "all in common." The Greeks shared a common myth that in primitive times people lived in an ideal state in which there was no ownership but everything was held in common. Some attributed such a practice to the Pythagoreans, and Plato envisioned his ideal republic as one devoid of all private ownership. It is doubtful such a utopian ideal was ever realized among the Greeks, but for some Greeks communal ownership was a major part of their dream of a "Golden Age."

More common than this myth was the Greek ideal of friendship according to which true friends held everything in common and were of "one mind." Aristotle is reputed to have defined a friend as "one soul dwelling in two bodies." Such expressions became commonplace and are found in Roman writers such as Cicero as well as the Hellenistic Jew Philo. Luke's description would have evoked an immediate response in his Gentile readers. What they esteemed as an ideal had become a reality in the young Christian community. They were of one mind, for they shared freely with one another, truly common both in soul and in means. The main business of the

community was, of course, the witness for Jesus; and this the apostles continued to do “with great power.” This power likely refers to their continuing performance of miracles, a further testimony to God’s answering their prayer (v. 30; cf. 5:12-16). “Much grace was upon them all,” primarily in God’s blessing on their lives and witness. On this note Luke’s general summary of the Christian life together ends. He then turned to a more thorough discussion of one particular aspect of their common life—their sharing of goods.

4:34-35. If verse 32 depicted the Christian sharing in terms of Greek ideals, verse 34a sets forth the Old Testament ideal: “There were no needy persons among them.” This is the ideal God established for Israel. According to Deut 15:4f., Israel was to keep God’s commands; and God would bless them; there would be no poor among them. There is evidence that in New Testament times the text of Deut 15:4 was seen as a reference to the ideal final times when Israel would be fully faithful to the law and there would be no poverty in the land. The Christians saw themselves as the people of God of the final times (cf. 2:17), they were experiencing God’s blessing (4:33), and they were striving to realize the ideal of a people of God with no poor among them.

Verses 34b-35 depict the means by which they sought to realize this ideal. Those who had lands or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds, and lay them at the apostles’ feet. The proceeds were then distributed to the needy among them. But what of the practice of laying the proceeds at the apostles’ feet? The gesture was one of submission to another. At this point the Twelve were the representatives appointed by Christ as the foundation of the true people of God. The submission was not to them but to the one they represented. To lay one’s gift at their feet was to offer it to Christ. The apostles certainly did not consider this an enviable role. They were all too glad to turn the responsibility over to others (cf. 6:2).

4:36-37. Luke concluded his treatment of the early Christian sharing with two specific examples—one to be followed (Barnabas) and one to be avoided (Ananias and Sapphira). Barnabas sold a field and placed all the receipts at the apostles’ feet. Of more interest to us are the little details told about Barnabas here. Luke had a way of taking characters who played a major role later in the book and introducing them early, but only briefly and in passing, as is the case with Barnabas here. His name was Joseph, and he was given the nickname Barnabas by the apostles. This was not insignificant in itself because the granting of a nickname was often seen as a sign of respect. (Compare Jesus giving Simon the nickname of Peter/Rock.) He was the encourager, the advocate, the paraklete par excellence of all the characters in Acts. When the Christians in Jerusalem shied away from Paul after his conversion, Barnabas interceded and introduced him to them (9:26f.). When Paul refused to take Mark on his second missionary journey, Barnabas took up for Mark (15:36-39). When the Christians of Jerusalem became

concerned over the orthodoxy of the Antiochene Christians in their witness to Greeks, Barnabas again served as intercessor, saw the gracious work of the Antiochene Christians, and encouraged them (11:20-23). Indeed, 11:24 well sums up the portrait of this “Son of Encouragement”: “He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.”

We also learn that Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus. Levites were officials in the temple cultus, subordinate in rank to the priests. Prohibited from offering sacrifices and barred entrance to the holy place, they served in such capacities as policing the temple grounds, keeping the gates, and providing the music at sacrifices and on ceremonial occasions. According to ancient provisions (Deut 10:9; Num 18:20, 24), Levites were not supposed to own land, but that no longer seemed to apply in Barnabas’s day.

We are not told where the field was located, whether in Judea or his native Cyprus. Nothing was made of Barnabas’s Levitical status in Acts. He may never have served as a Levite. Such service was in no way compulsory for one of Levitical lineage. Just how strong were Barnabas’s Cypriot roots we also are not told. Luke simply said here that he was a Cypriot by birth. His family may have moved to Jerusalem when he was quite young, and it is in and around Jerusalem where we find Barnabas active in the early chapters of Acts. On the other hand, it is probably not by chance that Paul and Barnabas’s mission work together began on the island of Cyprus.

| ACTS 5:1-11

5:1-2. 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.

5:3-4. Apparently, the Holy Spirit revealed this deception to Peter. The Spirit had created unity in the church and was now offended at its rupture. We are amazed to discover that Satan can fill the heart of a Christian, especially since Luke uses a verb for fill which also appears in Ephesians 5:18.

Peter faced up to the responsibility much in the way he did in chapter 1 when explaining the Judas suicide. We see immediately that the sin lay not in failing to give all the money, but rather in pretending to do so. The basic issue here was lying, not only to the church but to the Spirit.

5:5-6. In this case the death resulted from sin, but the Bible reminds us that immediate death does not always occur. In the early verses of John 9, the disciples concluded that the blind man

must be suffering because of his sin or that of his parents. Jesus reminds them that neither is the case, “But this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life” (John 9:3). God sees what happens in our hearts; and when hidden sin threatens to thwart the church’s ministry, he may choose to deal with it severely.

5:7-10. The young attendants had buried Ananias and returned in three hours, quite possibly a record for first-century Jewish funerals. Amazingly, Sapphira came in with the same story, and it was *deja vu* all over again. Sapphira’s narrative offers nothing new. In neither case did Peter pronounce a curse of any kind. Peter explained the sin, but God took care of the judgment.

5:11. The death of Ananias and Sapphira brought two results: fear in the church and fear in the city. As tempted as we might be to push this story into some dark corner of early church history, that would be a tragic mistake. It deals with money, greed, and deceit—all very popular problems in today’s church. Deceit, disunity, and duplicity always undermine the Holy Spirit’s work and always erode the effectiveness of the Christian community.