

The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: All Things in Common; Ananias and Sapphira

Acts 4:32-5:11

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 4:32-5:11 sets two portraits side by side: the radiant generosity and unity of the early church, embodied in Barnabas, and the deadly hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira. What is doctrinally at stake includes the nature of true Christian fellowship and voluntary giving, the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit (to lie to the Spirit is to lie to God, 5:3-4), the holiness of God, and the seriousness of sin and pretense within the church.

The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on the severity of God's judgment and the holy fear it produced. Teach why God acted so decisively, the holiness of God and the danger of hypocrisy at the foundation of the church, while balancing this with the grace available to the genuinely repentant. Also clarify that the giving was voluntary, not a forced communal system (5:4), guarding against misreading this as compelled communism.

Yet aim at the heart. This passage searches our motives like few others. Help students examine the pretense in their own walk, treasure integrity before the God who sees all, and learn from Barnabas the joy of open-handed, sincere generosity. The goal is a people whose devotion is real, not performed.

Question 1

Student Question:

Luke says the believers were of one heart and soul, sharing everything so that there was not a needy person among them (vv. 32-35). What does this reveal about the unity and generosity that the gospel produces, and how is this sharing different from a forced or compelled system?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Luke paints a picture of extraordinary oneness: of one heart and soul. The gospel had bound these believers together so deeply that they no longer regarded their possessions as merely their own. Love overflowed into open-handed sharing, and the result was that no one among them was in need.

This unity was spiritual before it was material. It flowed from shared faith in the risen Christ and shared experience of His grace. People who have been forgiven the same great debt and adopted into the same family naturally begin to hold their possessions loosely for one another's sake.

It is important to clarify what this was not. This was not a forced communal system, and it did not abolish private property. As Peter will say to Ananias, the property was his to keep or sell, and the proceeds were his to give or withhold (5:4). The sharing was entirely voluntary, prompted by love and the Spirit, not by compulsion or law.

Help students see the beauty and the challenge. The gospel still produces this kind of unity and generosity wherever it truly takes hold. A church that is of one heart and soul, where members genuinely care for one another's needs, is the natural fruit of grace received, not a utopian dream.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual unity (one heart and soul) as the fruit of the gospel (v. 32)
- Voluntary, love-prompted generosity rather than a compelled system (5:4)
- Private property assumed, not abolished, in the early church
- Care for the needy within the body as a mark of true fellowship
- Generosity flowing from shared grace and family love

Discussion Prompts

- What produced the deep unity and generosity of the early church?
- How do we know this sharing was voluntary rather than forced?
- Where do you see this kind of one heart and soul fellowship today?

Question 2

Student Question:

Barnabas, the son of encouragement, gave generously and would go on to build up many others (vv. 36-37). Encouragement and generosity are gifts every believer can offer. Who in your life needs encouragement right now, and how could you be a Barnabas to them this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Luke introduces Barnabas here with a name that captures his whole character: son of encouragement. He gives generously, and throughout Acts he will keep showing up to encourage and believe in others, welcoming the newly converted Saul when others were afraid of him (Acts 9:27) and giving young John Mark a second chance (Acts 15:37-39).

Barnabas reminds us that encouragement is a ministry, not a personality trait reserved for the naturally cheerful. The New Testament repeatedly calls all believers to encourage one another and build one another up (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25).

Invite students to think of specific people who need encouragement, someone discouraged, lonely, struggling, or simply overlooked. A word of affirmation, a note, a phone call, an act of generosity, or simply showing up can be life-giving.

Encourage one concrete act. Whom could you be a Barnabas to this week? In a world quick to criticize and slow to bless, the church desperately needs people who specialize in lifting others up for the sake of Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Encouragement as a ministry for every believer (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Barnabas as a model of generosity and believing the best in others
- Building one another up as a command (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- Generosity and warmth as expressions of love

Discussion Prompts

- Who has been a Barnabas in your own life?
- Who around you most needs encouragement right now?
- What is one concrete way you could build someone up this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Ananias and Sapphira were free to give any amount, yet they lied about giving everything in order to appear more devoted than they were (vv. 5:1-4). What exactly was their sin, and why is hypocrisy, appearing more spiritual than we truly are, so dangerous?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

It is crucial to identify their sin correctly. Their sin was not keeping back part of the money; that was entirely their right. Peter says plainly, while it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? (5:4). They were under no obligation to give all or even any of it.

Their sin was the lie, the pretense. They wanted the reputation of complete devotion, the admiration that Barnabas received, while secretly serving themselves. They conspired to appear more generous and more spiritual than they actually were. This was calculated hypocrisy, a performance for the praise of people.

Hypocrisy is dangerous because it is a lie at the very heart of our relationship with God. It substitutes appearance for reality, reputation for righteousness. Jesus reserved His sharpest words for the hypocrisy of the religious (Matthew 23), because pretense hardens the heart and deceives both others and ourselves.

Help students see how subtle this sin is. We may not sell property, but we are all tempted to appear more prayerful, more generous, more godly than we are, to curate an image while the inner reality lags far behind. The story of Ananias is a warning to every one of us who would rather look devoted than be devoted.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The sin as hypocrisy and lying, not the withholding of money (5:4)
- Freedom in giving, with no obligation to give all (5:4)
- Hypocrisy as substituting appearance for reality
- Jesus' severe warnings against religious hypocrisy (Matthew 23)
- The deceptive, hardening nature of pretense

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it important to see that their sin was the lie, not keeping the money?
- What is the difference between being devoted and merely appearing devoted?
- Why is hypocrisy so dangerous to the soul?

Question 4

Student Question:

Ananias and Sapphira wanted to look more devoted than they really were (vv. 1-2). Where are you tempted to perform spirituality, to appear more prayerful, generous, or godly than you actually are? What would it look like to close the gap between your image and your reality?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the sin of Ananias into our own hearts. The temptation to perform spirituality is nearly universal. We want to be seen as devoted, and that desire can quietly pull us toward pretense.

Invite honest self-examination. Where do I curate an image, posting about my faith while neglecting it in private, speaking as though I pray more than I do, appearing generous in public while gripping tightly in private, presenting a polished self while hiding the struggle? The gap between image and reality is the breeding ground of hypocrisy.

Closing the gap can move in two healthy directions: either becoming in reality what we pretend to be, by actually growing in prayer, generosity, and obedience, or being honest about where we are rather than projecting a false self. Both are better than the lie.

Encourage students that God is not impressed by performance and is not fooled by it either. He desires truth in the inward being (Psalm 51:6). There is great freedom in dropping the act, confessing where we really are, and pursuing genuine growth before the God who already sees us fully and loves us still.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universal temptation to perform spirituality
- The gap between image and reality as the seedbed of hypocrisy

- God's desire for truth in the inward being (Psalm 51:6)
- Freedom in honesty before God rather than projecting a false self

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to appear more godly than you are?
- What gap exists between your public image and your private reality?
- What would it look like to close that gap honestly this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Peter told Ananias that he had lied to the Holy Spirit, and that he had not lied to men but to God (vv. 3-4). What does this exchange reveal about the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit, and about how fully God knows our hearts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This passage is a clear testimony to the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit. In a single breath, Peter says Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit (v. 3) and then that he lied to God (v. 4). To lie to the Spirit is to lie to God, because the Holy Spirit is God. The Spirit is not an impersonal force or influence; He is a divine Person who can be lied to, grieved (Ephesians 4:30), and resisted.

This fits the broader teaching of Scripture on the triune nature of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons sharing the one divine nature. The Spirit is fully God, active in creation, in inspiration, and in the life of the church.

The passage also reveals how fully God knows our hearts. The scheme of Ananias and Sapphira was hidden from the church, but not from God. Through the Spirit, Peter saw straight through the pretense. Nothing is concealed from God; all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:13).

Help students feel the weight of this. We never sin merely against people or merely in private. Every sin is ultimately against God, and every hidden thing is open before Him. This is sobering, but for the sincere heart it is also comforting: the God who sees all also loves us and invites us to live honestly before Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The deity of the Holy Spirit: lying to the Spirit is lying to God (5:3-4)
- The personhood of the Spirit, who can be lied to and grieved (Ephesians 4:30)
- The triune nature of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- God's complete knowledge of the human heart (Hebrews 4:13)
- All sin as ultimately against God

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage show that the Holy Spirit is a divine Person, not a force?
- What does it mean that lying to the Spirit is lying to God?
- How should God's full knowledge of your heart shape the way you live?

Question 6

Student Question:

Ananias and Sapphira forgot that their scheme, hidden from the church, was fully known to God (vv. 3-4). How does living before a God who sees everything, including our secret thoughts and motives, change the way you handle the hidden areas of your life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The tragedy of Ananias and Sapphira is partly a failure of awareness. They acted as though God did not see, as though pleasing the church were the same as pleasing God. But God saw it all.

We are prone to the same forgetfulness. We manage our outward reputation carefully while neglecting the hidden life God sees fully, our private thoughts, our secret habits, our true motives. Invite students to consider the difference between the self they present and the self God knows.

Living before the all-seeing God, the truth the older writers called living before the face of God, is meant to be steadying, not terrifying, for the sincere believer. It means there is no point in pretense, because God already knows; and it means our hidden faithfulness, the prayers no one hears, the temptations resisted in secret, is fully seen and valued by Him (Matthew 6:4, 6).

Encourage students to bring their hidden areas into the light. What would change if I lived all of life, even the private and unseen parts, as fully known and fully loved by God? Such awareness produces both integrity and intimacy, an end to pretense and a deepening trust in the One from whom we have nothing to hide.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living all of life before the all-seeing God
- The folly of pretense before One who already knows
- Hidden faithfulness seen and rewarded by God (Matthew 6:4, 6)
- God's omniscience producing both integrity and intimacy

Discussion Prompts

- What hidden areas of your life would you handle differently if you remembered God sees them?
- How is living before an all-seeing God steadying rather than only frightening?

- What would change if you lived as fully known and fully loved by God?

Question 7

Student Question:

Peter reminded Ananias that the property and the money were entirely his to give or keep (v. 4), making clear that the real issue was the heart, not the amount. What does this teach us about the motives behind our giving and service?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter's words shine a light on motive. The money was never the issue; God did not need it, and Ananias was free to give any portion. What God weighed was the heart behind the gift. The same act, laying money at the apostles' feet, was beautiful when Barnabas did it and deadly when Ananias did it, because the difference lay entirely in the motive.

This is a searching truth. God sees not only what we do but why we do it. Two people can give the same amount, serve the same way, or say the same prayer, and one be pleasing to God while the other is mere performance, because God looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

The right motive for giving and service is love for God and neighbor, the desire to honor Him and bless others, not to be seen, admired, or thought generous. Jesus warned against doing righteous deeds to be praised by people, which forfeits the reward of the Father (Matthew 6:1-4).

Help students examine their own motives without becoming paralyzed. The goal is not to wait for perfectly pure motives before doing good, but to keep returning our hearts to the right reason: that God may be glorified and others genuinely loved, rather than that we may be noticed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God weighing the heart and motive, not the amount (v. 4)
- The same act pleasing or displeasing based on motive
- God looking on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7)
- Righteous deeds done for God rather than for human praise (Matthew 6:1-4)
- Love as the right motive for giving and service

Discussion Prompts

- Why was the same gift beautiful in Barnabas and deadly in Ananias?
- What motives most often creep into your giving and serving?
- How can you keep returning your heart to the right reason for doing good?

Question 8

Student Question:

The same act of giving was lovely in Barnabas and deadly in Ananias because of the heart behind it (vv. 36-37; 5:1-4). When you give, serve, or worship, how much of it is for God's eyes and how much for the approval of others? Where do you sense God refining your motives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the issue of motive deeply personal. We rarely act from a single pure motive; love for God and desire for approval often mingle in the same act. The call is to grow in offering our worship and service genuinely to God.

Invite honest reflection. When I serve, do I quietly hope to be noticed? When I give, do I want others to know? When I worship, am I aware of God or of those around me? These questions are not meant to induce guilt but to expose the heart so it can be refined.

God is patient with us here. He does not demand instant perfection of motive but invites us into a lifelong refining, gradually loosening our grip on human approval and fixing our hearts on Him. The more we treasure His approval, the less we crave everyone else's.

Encourage one practice that refines motive, doing a good deed in secret, giving without telling anyone, serving where no one will thank us. Such hidden acts retrain the heart to act for God's eyes alone, and there is deep freedom in living for an audience of One.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The mingling of motives in our acts of service and worship
- Lifelong refining of motives toward God
- Treasuring God's approval over human praise
- Hidden acts as training for an audience of One

Discussion Prompts

- How much of your giving and serving is for God's eyes versus others' approval?
- Where do you sense God refining your motives right now?
- What hidden act of service could help retrain your heart this week?

Question 9**Student Question:**

When Ananias and Sapphira fell dead, great fear came upon the whole church (vv. 5, 11). Why did God deal so severely with this sin at the foundation of the church, what does it teach about His holiness and the seriousness of sin, and how do we hold this alongside His grace toward the repentant?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it raises hard questions that deserve careful, reverent handling. Why would God strike two people dead for a lie about a gift? The answer lies in the holiness of God and the critical moment in the church's life.

First, God is holy, and sin is deadly serious. We are so accustomed to sin that we underestimate it, but in God's sight every sin is an affront to His holiness, and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). What is startling here is not that sin brought death, but that it does not always do so immediately. This account tears away the illusion that hidden sin is harmless. God sees it, and He hates it.

Second, this happened at the foundation of the church, a moment of unique importance, much like the deaths of Nadab and Abihu at the founding of Israel's worship (Leviticus 10:1-3) or Achan's sin at the entrance to the promised land (Joshua 7). At such hinge moments, God acted decisively to teach His people the gravity of approaching Him falsely, so that the lesson would mark the church forever. The result was that great fear came upon all, a holy reverence that purified the community.

Third, we must hold this alongside God's abundant grace. This passage is not a picture of how God ordinarily deals with every sin; if it were, none of us would survive. God is patient, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (Psalm 103:8), and He freely forgives all who genuinely repent (1 John 1:9). The severity here is the exception that reveals the holiness underlying the grace. The same God who struck Ananias offers full pardon to every Ananias who will come to Him honestly.

Help students land in godly fear rather than terror. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). This account is meant to sober us, to make us take sin and hypocrisy seriously, to remind us that we worship a holy God who is not mocked. But it should drive us not to despair but to honesty, to repentance, and to gratitude that this holy God has made a way for sinners to be forgiven through the blood of His Son.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The holiness of God and the deadly seriousness of sin (Romans 6:23)
- God's decisive action at the foundation of the church (compare Leviticus 10:1-3; Joshua 7)
- Hidden sin exposed as never harmless before a holy God
- Godly fear as a purifying gift to the church (vv. 5, 11)
- God's patience, grace, and full forgiveness for the repentant (Psalm 103:8; 1 John 1:9)
- The severity as exception, revealing the holiness beneath grace
- The fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10)

Discussion Prompts

- Why might God have acted so decisively at this foundational moment in the church?

- What does this account teach about the holiness of God and the seriousness of sin?
- How do we hold God's severity here together with His grace toward the repentant?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over the whole passage, the generous unity of the church, the encouragement of Barnabas, and the warning of Ananias and Sapphira, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to greater sincerity or generosity, and what is one step you will take this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson into a personal response. The passage holds up both an example to follow, the sincere generosity of Barnabas, and a warning to heed, the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to give generously and sincerely, to encourage someone as Barnabas did, to drop a pretense and live more honestly before God, or to examine and refine a motive.

Keep the focus on sincerity of heart. The thread running through the whole passage is the question of whether our devotion is real. Transformation happens when we choose reality over performance.

Close by reminding students that the same holy God who saw the hearts of Barnabas, Ananias, and Sapphira sees ours, and that He delights to receive and bless the sincere, generous, and honest heart, while graciously forgiving all who come to Him in truth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sincerity of heart as the thread through the passage
- Choosing reality over performance
- Generosity and encouragement as the fruit of grace
- Honesty before God as the path to transformation

Discussion Prompts

- What most challenged or convicted you in this passage?
- What specific step toward sincerity or generosity will you take this week?
- How can this group encourage one another toward genuine devotion?