

The Book of Acts

Lesson 8: All Things in Common; Ananias and Sapphira -- Acts 4:32-5:11

It is one of the most beautiful pictures in the New Testament. Luke says the whole company of believers was of one heart and soul, and no one claimed that anything he owned was his own; they shared everything they had. There was not a needy person among them, because those who had lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds to be distributed to any who had need. Grace had so gripped these people that their possessions had loosened in their hands. The gospel had created a family.

Luke gives us a name to put on this generosity: Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles nicknamed Barnabas, which means son of encouragement. He sold a field and laid the money at the apostles' feet, no fanfare, no strings, just an open hand and a willing heart. Barnabas will reappear throughout Acts as a man who gives, encourages, and believes the best in others. He is what the generous, unified church looks like in a single person.

But then the camera turns, and the scene darkens. A man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira also sold a piece of property. They too brought a gift and laid it at the apostles' feet. The only problem was the lie. They kept back part of the price for themselves, which was entirely their right, but they pretended they were giving it all. They wanted the reputation of total devotion without the reality of it. They wanted to look like Barnabas while quietly serving themselves.

Peter saw straight through it. Ananias, he said, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? You have not lied to men but to God. And Ananias fell down and died. Three hours later, Sapphira repeated the lie and met the same end. Great fear came upon the whole church. This is a sobering, holy moment, and it forces every one of us to ask a hard question: is my devotion real, or am I only pretending?

Group Discussion: Ananias and Sapphira were free to give any amount or nothing at all; their sin was pretending to give everything while secretly holding back (vv. 5:3-4). Why do you think God dealt so severely with hypocrisy at this early moment in the church's life, and what does it say about how seriously He takes pretense among His people?

Personal Reflection: Barnabas was known as a son of encouragement, a man whose generosity and warmth built others up (vv. 36-37). Who has been a Barnabas to you, and whom could you encourage or give to this week in that same spirit?

Read Acts 4:32-5:11

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Samuel 16:7, the Lord looking not on the outward appearance but on the heart; Matthew 6:1-4, doing righteous deeds for God rather than to be seen; Joshua 7:1-26, Achan's hidden sin at a foundational moment for Israel; Ephesians 4:30, the warning not to grieve the Holy Spirit; 1 John 1:8-9, the promise of forgiveness for those who confess their sin