

Sharing Love

Bible Background • ACTS 4:32–5:11

Printed Text • ACTS 4:32–5:11 | Devotional Reading • 2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-10

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXPLORE the Jerusalem church’s practice and witness of communal sharing, REPENT of any idolatrous attachment to material goods, and CREATE a plan to increase our giving for the common good.

In Focus

Ann had grown up in a family with little money, but in college, she met Jim, a man from a well-off family. Ann and Jim got engaged a couple of years after they graduated and planned a modest wedding in Ann’s home church. The night before the wedding, Ann and Jim held a dinner for their families following the rehearsal. The food was fine, everyone got along just fine and it looked like the start of a great relationship between two families. When it came time for the parents to give speeches toasting the bride and groom, Jim’s father ended his speech saying, “It’s so wonderful to see our two very different families joined—one rich, one poor—through the great love of Ann and Jim. To Ann and Jim, may you have a long and happy life together.” As Jim’s father sat down, Ann smiled and said to her father-in-law-to-be, “That was a wonderful speech—but I have to say, I’ve never considered my family poor.” Jim’s father immediately apologized, “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” Ann’s mother chimed in, “Here at this church, none of us had a lot of money, but we always shared what we had. When twenty different families come in and share what they have, everyone feels rich.” Jim’s parents left the rehearsal dinner that night with a new understanding, that wealth could mean something more than money, and to rethink their biased beliefs about people.

How does your church family share its resources?

Keep in Mind

“I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.” (Luke 10:36-37, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Gave up the Ghost (v. 5) *exepsychen* (Gk.) — Literally “breathed out”; died

B. Church (v. 11) *ekklesia* (Gk.) — The people of God gathered as a convened assembly

Say It Correctly

Ananias. an-a-NIGH-as

Barnabas. BAR-na-bas

Sapphira. suh-FIE-ra

KJV

Acts 4:32 And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.

33 And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.

34 Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold,

35 And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.

36 And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus,

37 Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

5:1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession,

2 And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

3 But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?

4 Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.

5 And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things.

6 And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.

7 And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in.

8 And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much.

9 Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out.

10 Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.

11 And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.

NLT

Acts 4:32 All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had.

33 The apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great blessing was upon them all.

34 There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.

36 For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means "Son of Encouragement"). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus.

37 He sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles.

5:1 But there was a certain man named Ananias who, with his wife, Sapphira, sold some property.

2 He brought part of the money to the apostles, claiming it was the full amount. With his wife's consent, he kept the rest.

3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, why have you let Satan fill your heart? You lied to the Holy Spirit, and you kept some of the money for yourself.

4 The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished. And after selling it, the money was also yours to give away. How could you do a thing like this? You weren't lying to us but to God!"

5 As soon as Ananias heard these words, he fell to the floor and died. Everyone who heard about it was terrified.

6 Then some young men got up, wrapped him in a sheet, and took him out and buried him.

7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

8 Peter asked her, "Was this the price you and your husband received for your land?" "Yes," she replied, "that was the price."

9 And Peter said, "How could the two of you even think of conspiring to test the Spirit of the Lord like this? The young men who buried your husband are just outside the door, and they will carry you out, too."

10 Instantly, she fell to the floor and died. When the young men came in and saw that she was dead, they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

11 Great fear gripped the entire church and everyone else who heard what had happened.

The People, Places, and Times

Barnabas. Barnabas means “son of encouragement” in Aramaic. This was the name given by the apostles to Joses, a Levite from Cyprus. Barnabas was an early convert to Christianity. His character and faith soon brought him into a position of leadership in the church. When Paul was first converted, many of the believers were afraid to accept him. Barnabas eased their fears by speaking to the church on behalf of the apostle. Barnabas was one of Paul’s companions during the early part of his ministry. Levite. The Levites were the priestly tribe of Israel. All of Israel’s priests are descended from this tribe. However, there is a fundamental difference between priests and Levites. All priests come from the tribe of Levi; however, not all Levites can become priests. They must be descendants of Aaron. Priests are consecrated and were the only ones that could minister at the altar and enter into the holy places. Levites were purified and were set aside to help the priests in performing their duties.

Background

Luke notes at the beginning of Acts that his first book, which we know as the Gospel according to Luke, was an account of all that Jesus “began to do and teach.” This statement suggests that the book of Acts is to be understood as a book that is fundamentally about Christ’s continuing work in the world through his body, the church. In Acts 4:32-37, the focus of the narrative in Acts shifts from a focus on Peter and John to a focus on the new Christ-following community. At this point in the story, Peter and John have just been released from the custody of the Sanhedrin and they have told the community of faith about God’s faithfulness to them in the midst of political persecution. This then sets the context for what is recounted in these verses, specifically the fact that the believers shared all they had with each other. As we witness the generosity of the community of faith, we also witness the heightened stakes of the first years of the Church in the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11. In each of these narratives, the reader is encouraged to consider the fact that the communal life to which Christ calls those in union with Him is a radical one.

At-A-Glance

1. Gospel Generosity (Acts 4:32-37)
2. Holiness vs. Hypocrisy (5:1-11)

In Depth

1. Gospel Generosity (Acts 4:32-37)

Acts 4 begins with the imprisonment of Peter and John. This is typical of what the new Christians would face. Following the death of Jesus, the early Christians were persecuted and often treated as outcasts from their Jewish community and family. Despite the persecution, the church community is described as a Spirit-filled, praying, loving and united community. That unity is shown economically through the sharing of goods. In the first few years of the church, followers of Christ voluntarily sought to meet one another’s needs because they recognized that they were, in a real sense, united with one another in their faith in Christ. The giving is not merely a one-on-one meeting of needs but a giving to a common pool under the authoritative wisdom of the apostles, who would then distribute according to need. This reveals both the generosity of this community and their trust in their Christ-ordained leadership. The context of this early church community is important to keep in mind here. Most importantly, they are a model of sacrificial giving. They give because their identities are rooted in the sacrificial giving of their Lord, Jesus Christ. As Jesus graciously gave His life for the forgiveness of sins and as Jesus graciously took on human flesh in order to save humanity, so also the community of faith is

encouraged to give sacrificially to one another and to those in need. In those terms, this is not a suggestion, but rather an imperative. If the church is to be the body of Christ, they must exhibit the sacrificial love that Christ showed and commanded.

How should today's church view the actions of the early church? Are we supposed to live communally now?

2. Holiness vs. Hypocrisy (5:1-11)

In the Garden of Eden, sin was met by expulsion. In the wilderness after their emancipation and exodus, when the covenant people of God grumbled against their Redeemer, they were punished with wandering until the resistant generation died. At these pivotal moments in the history of God's covenant community, the stakes are extremely high and it is a constant biblical theme that the Spirit of God holds His community to a high standard. After a beautiful example of gospel generosity, we are given a terrifying account of heinous hypocrisy. Ananias and Sapphira are not struck dead for mere stinginess. After all, contributing one's goods to the apostles was a purely voluntary act. Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead because they lie to the apostles and the One from whom the apostles received their authority, the Spirit of Christ. Peter explains this (Acts 5:3), reminding Ananias that there was no obligation to give. Ananias lied in order to appear generous. This hurt the faith community and the Holy Spirit would not let that stand. The text ends with the first reference to "the church" (Gk. *ekklesia*) in the book of Acts. From this point forward, this is the term used to describe the people of God, placing them in continuity with God's Old Testament *ekklesia*, the Israelites. God's standards do not change throughout the Scriptures, but the resources that He has given His people have increased. The greatest of those gifts have been the giving of His own Son and His own Spirit.

What prompted Ananias and Sapphira to lie? Do we see such hypocrisy in the church today?

Search the Scriptures

1. How is the unity of the Christian described (Acts 4:32)?
2. What types of items were sold to support the community (4:34)?
3. How is Barnabas described (4:35-36)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Contrast Barnabas with Ananias and Sapphira. What makes the difference?
2. What examples have you seen of Barnabas like generosity in the church?

Liberating Lesson

This text drives home the fact that the Christian life is not an individualistic one. The community's sharing of goods reminds us that when our brothers and sisters suffer, we suffer. The Scripture reminds us of our commitment to the needy because we are a covenant community of God. This does not mean that Christians do not have the joyous opportunity and responsibility to serve those outside the church, but it does mean that meeting the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ ought to proceed from our hearts without controversy. This means that those among us who are poor, widows, orphans, single mothers, immigrants and all who are marginalized and oppressed must be lifted up. Here one can hear echoes that resonate with the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, often translated, "I am because we are." In the body of Christ, individual and communal identity cannot be separated. The bond that connects us is not merely our common humanity, but even more deeply, our union with Christ. The call then is to concretely love our neighbors, especially our Christian neighbors. That is how the world will know us: by our love.

Application for Activation

Individual application of this passage is rather simple and yet one of the hardest things for many of us to do. Money is often an indication of one's priorities and for the people of the early church, there was clearly the recognition that their money was not to be used just for their own pleasure, but rather it was a resource that God could use for the uplifting of their brothers and sisters. So the call then also goes out to each Christian to consider their finances in the light of the grace that they have been shown in Christ. What kind of generosity

does that call you to? This call applies to the individual and the community. As you consider your role in your family, in your church community, in your city, and in your country, what kind of steward are you being? In the light of Christ's sacrifice and the high stakes of the Christian life, we must devote ourselves to prayer and communion with each other and with our God to make good use of the resources that He has given us to be beacons of His gospel in His world.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Acts 4:32–37; 5:1–11

4:32 And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. 33 And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.

Luke gives a general description of the life of the early Christians in Jerusalem. Verses 32–33 showcase the community life of the early Christians as marked by four things: their unity in mind and soul (v. 32a), their partnership of ownership (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 fellowship in the Spirit (cf. *koinonia*, *koy-no-NEE-ah*; Acts 2:42). The unity of the believers and the sharing of their possessions provide more clear and ample evidence of the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit. The latter is described in two ways. First, “neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own,” that is, “no one claimed that any of their possessions was only theirs.” The picture is one of unqualified sharing, of not claiming owner’s rights, of saying “what’s mine is yours.” It was a partnership of ownership. Though the Sadducees had reacted violently to the preaching of the Resurrection, the early believers continued to preach it for it was the Resurrection that validated Christ’s sacrifice for sin (cf. Romans 4:25). Recognizing the crucifixion without the Resurrection will leave us with no Gospel to preach. A further significant description of the early believers is that great grace was upon them all. God’s grace, present in abundant measure, made the early believers gracious in attitude and action, in word and work.

34 Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, 35 And laid them down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.

One proof of God’s grace among the early believers was the love and generosity within the new community. Such love, created by the Holy Spirit, prompted and enabled some believers to help those in need by selling their properties and placing the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. The proceeds were then distributed to the needy among them. The practice was wholly voluntary. It was neither compulsory nor universal, but at that time

it was a way for the early Christians to share with those who had less or nothing at all. There was no transfer of ownership, no control of production or income, no requirement to surrender one's property to the community. They sold their property and brought the proceeds to the apostles as needs arose. There was not a requirement for the abolition of private property, as conclusively demonstrated by two facts in the context. First is the example of Barnabas in vv. 36–37. His sale of the property would hardly be a sterling example if the surrender of property were obligatory. Second is the example of Ananias and Sapphira. Peter clarified for Ananias that his sin was in lying about his charity. The land remained his to do with as he pleased; he was under no obligation to give the proceeds to the church (5:4). The money was his to use as he wished. The early Church practiced extreme, genuine, consecrated stewardship. That is still Christ's demand of those who would be His followers.

36 And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, 37 Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Luke concluded his treatment of the early Christian sharing with two specific examples. In verses 36-37, Barnabas sold a field and placed all the receipts at the apostles' feet. Not much detail is provided about Barnabas here other than that he was a Levite from Cyprus. According to the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 10:9; Number 18:20, 24), Levites were not supposed to own land, but that no longer seemed to apply in Barnabas' day. Indeed, Jeremiah, a priest, owned land (Jeremiah 32:6–15). Though his birth name was Joses, he had acquired the nickname Barnabas, presumably for his outstanding abilities to offer “consolation” or encourage to others.

5:1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 2 And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost and to keep back part of the price of the land?

If Barnabas, as portrayed in the preceding verses, was a positive example of the community's sharing, the story of Ananias and Sapphira provides a sharp contrast. Ananias, whose name means “Jehovah is gracious,” in collusion with the wife Sapphira, acted contrary to his name. They too sold a piece of property, pledging the proceeds to the community of believers. But they held back part of the proceeds; and a terrible judgment followed, resulting in both their deaths. The use of a rare Greek verb (*nosphizomai*, *nos-phi-DZO-mai*, v. 2) to describe his action in holding back part of the money is striking. It means to pilfer, to purloin, to embezzle. Peter knew that Ananias' gesture was a lie and confronted him with his duplicity (v. 3). We are not told how Peter knew it was an incomplete sum. They were the community of the Holy Spirit, and in this community, they placed all their trust, found their identity and their security. But this was not so with Ananias. His heart was divided. He had one foot in the community and the other still groping for a toehold on the worldly security of earthly possessions. To lie with regard to the sharing was to belie the unity of the community and the Spirit that undergirded that unity. That is why Peter accused Ananias of lying to the Spirit. Like Judas, Ananias was motivated by money (cf. Luke 22:5). But in filling the heart of one of its members, Satan had now entered for the first time into the young Christian community as well.

4 Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.

Peter reminded Ananias that he had been under no compulsion (v. 4). They were under no obligation to give. He did not have to sell his land. Even if he sold it, he still could have retained the proceeds. The act of dedicating the land to the community was strictly voluntary. Once pledged, however, it became a wholly different matter. It had been dedicated to the community. In lying about the proceeds, he had broken a sacred trust. Ultimately, he had lied to God. Ananias' sin was not in his failure to give but in his deception. He betrayed the community and in so doing lied to the Spirit.

5 And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. 6 And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.

Here we find the high price of hypocrisy. The phrase “gave up the ghost” is one word in the Greek, *expsucho* (eks-PSOO-ko), which is literally “breathed out.” Was it from shock from overwhelming guilt and remorse upon the exposure of his sin? Was he struck down by God? The text does not say. The note that great fear came on all them that heard these things would indicate that they at least saw the hand of God in it all. The manner in which his funeral was handled would likewise indicate that divine judgment was seen in the whole affair. The immediate and quick burial also shows the gravity of the judgment. The young men were back in three hours (vv. 7, 10). This was a most unusual procedure. Burials were often fairly hasty in Palestine, but not that hasty, not, that is, except for death under unusual circumstances, such as suicides and criminals—and judgments from God.

7 And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. 8 And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. 9 Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out. 10 Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.

About three hours later Sapphira appeared on the scene. Rather than be honest and tell the truth, she joined her husband in the conspiracy with the funds. She would also join him in death. Peter confronted her about the sale price, just as he had confronted Ananias. In giving an affirmative answer to Peter’s question, she confirmed her guilt by continuing the lie. It is significant to note that in both cases Peter did not pronounce a curse. His questioning of Sapphira left her the opportunity of repentance, and one can probably assume the same for Ananias. Peter’s role was to confront—not to judge. The judgment came from God. But Peter had to lay before her the consequences of her action. She had joined with her husband in “testing” the Spirit of the Lord. This time the expression was not of lying to the Spirit but of testing him, to see how far he would go in his tolerance. Not very far, was Peter’s answer: “The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.” This was the first Sapphira had heard of her husband’s death, and she fell down immediately at Peter’s feet, dead. Peter’s words scarcely sound redemptive. He was fulfilling the prophetic role of the divine mouthpiece, pronouncing God’s judgment on her for her complicity with her husband. She may have died of shock; but if so, it was inevitable, for Peter already knew and informed her that her doom was sealed. One can scarcely miss the irony of the situation. She lay at Peter’s feet, in the place of her money. She had joined her husband in the conspiracy. Now she would join him in the grave.

11 And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.

Sapphira’s story and subsequent death end in the same way as that of her husband (cf. v. 5b): “Great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.” The repetition is not by chance: it is the whole point of the story. By the power of this spiritual presence in its midst, the young community worked miracles, witnessed fearlessly, and was blessed with incredible growth. The Spirit was the power behind its unity, and its unity was the power behind its witness. But just as with God there is both justice and mercy, so with the Holy Spirit there is also his judgment. This is what Ananias and Sapphira experienced. The Spirit is not to be taken lightly. As the Spirit of God, He must always be viewed with fear in the biblical sense of that word: reverent awe and respect. It might be noted that this is the first time the word “church” (*ekklesia*, ek-kle-si-a) occurs in Acts, which denotes the people of God gathered as a convened assembly. The church thrives if it lives within the total trust of its members. Where there is unity of trust and oneness of heart and mind, the church flourishes in the power of the Spirit. The witness of the Church fails where duplicity and distrust exist. We must be careful not to relegate the sin of Ananias and Sapphira to the past. Their sin is no more despicable as that of many professed believers today. We often sing, “All to Jesus I surrender, all to Him I freely give,” but our actions and lifestyle often contradict our confession.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Preparing to Become a Deacon
(1 Timothy 3:8-13)

TUESDAY

Healing Ministry Grows the Church
(Acts 5:12-16)

WEDNESDAY

Church Sharing Plan Enlarged
(Acts 6:1-7)

THURSDAY

Stephen's Ministry Opposed
(Acts 6:8-15)

FRIDAY

Sharing All of Life Together
(Acts 2:42-47)

SATURDAY

Prayer for Boldness and Signs
(Acts 4:23-31)

SUNDAY

Sharing All Possessions | Challenges the Church
(Acts 4:32-5:11)