

Reverent Generosity
Acts 4:32-5:11 on November 1, 2020
Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

Please read Acts 4:32 through 5:11 before going further in this transcript.

We're continuing our journey through the book of Acts. Today, we encounter a section of verses that address the topic of GENEROSITY. As the early church enjoys the unity and oneness of their gospel mission, it produces in them a gospel-empowered generosity. One particular follower of Jesus, named Barnabas, leaves us a helpful example of reverent generosity. But some other followers of Jesus, named Ananias and Sapphira, leave us an example of pretend generosity. Despite their participation in the early church, we find a rather shocking and disturbing story that reveals their greed and their hypocritical plan to pretend to give more than they were actually giving. As we walk through this story together, let's learn from the early church about REVERENT GENEROSITY.

Please open your Bible to Acts 4:32. Acts 4:32 flows right out of where we ended last week's message. Last week we talked about speaking the word of God boldly. This shared mission of declaring the gospel, led the early church to become an incredible community of faith.¹ The description of this faith community begins in Acts 4:32, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had." One thing that we DON'T find in this description is any kind of obvious greed or hoarding. We don't find a combative struggle over "what's mine is mine!" and "what's yours is yours!" Instead, we find a refreshing picture of oneness of heart and mind; of sharing EVERYTHING with each other.

Right away though, many of us may be wondering, "well... what exactly did this mean? How did this actually work?" Are we talking about living in an all-out commune, where everyone LITERALLY owns EVERYTHING EQUALLY?² Are we talking about some kind of Christian socialism or communism? What EXACTLY was going on here? What Acts 4 is talking about, is a voluntary generosity toward fellow believers. This voluntary generosity was radical, God-honoring, and grace-empowered.³ In other words, we shouldn't jump to any conclusions that this practice was somehow mandatory for everyone in the church. This wasn't apostolic overreach, but rather an OVERFLOW from being genuinely "one in heart and mind." People's own personal, private property, continued to be just that, their own personal, private property. We can decipher this pretty clearly from Peter's question in Acts 5:4, "Didn't it belong to YOU before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at YOUR disposal? ..." The key to Acts 4:32 was their heart attitude, "...No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own...." In other words, it all belongs to God; we are merely temporary stewards. John Stott says it this way: "Although in fact and in law they continued to own their goods, yet in heart and mind they cultivated an attitude so radical, that they thought of their possessions as being available to help their needy sisters and brothers [in Christ]."^{4 5 6}

Acts 4:33-34 goes on to explain, "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them...."⁷ In other words, even as they continued to powerfully share the gospel with the LOST, God's grace was also powerfully at work in their love for ONE ANOTHER. The impact of the gospel was both outward AND inward! The early church was being transformed by the message they preached. The truth and power of God's grace was making them into a community...

¹ Acts 4:32 is a continuation of what we learned back in Acts 2:44-45, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." "This was a VOLUNTARY sharing to provide for those who did not have enough for the ESSENTIALS of living." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1829 footnote on Acts 2:44.

² See discussion by John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990 pp. 107-108.

³ Not only was it voluntary, but it was sporadic "from time to time" (verse 34).

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990 p. 107.

⁵ Many of us probably already feel this way about our own immediate family members. For example, we don't usually tell our own kids, "hey, this house belongs to your mom and me. This isn't YOUR house!" Even though their name isn't on the paperwork, our house belongs to our kids. However, I will admit, my wife and I like to joke around with our kids once and a while and quote the Cosby Show to them, "your mother and I are rich; YOU have nothing!" 😊

⁶ When we think of it like our earthly families, a lot of this teaching on generosity makes more sense. Those of us who are enjoying the deeper relationships in smaller settings like our Life Groups understand this even more clearly. "Like a family, [the early church was] willing to give up personal possessions to meet the needs of one another." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2225 footnote on Acts 4:34.

⁷ Consider also Deuteronomy 15:4, "However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you."

LIKE NO OTHER!⁸ One author puts it this way: “the fullness of the Spirit is manifest in deed as well as word, service as well as witness, love for the family as well as testimony to the world.”⁹ Jesus said it this way in John 13:34-35, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Love for one another is meant to be a distinguishing mark for Christ-followers. This was true for the early church, and this still holds true for E-Free Bemidji. A significant part of our Christian testimony to the watching world, is how we care for one another. As a church community, we are for each other, we are with each other, we are following Jesus TOGETHER. In other words, there is a DIRECT connection between our confession of the gospel and our practice of generosity toward one another.¹⁰

Acts 4:34-35 goes on “...from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.” At this point in time, the early church was up to ~5k households!¹¹ This was not a small little country church congregation. So it makes a lot of sense why the money would be entrusted to godly leaders, who could then carefully distribute it to the WIDE range of needs.¹² Acts 4 ends with the godly example of Barnabas, Acts 4:36-37 tells us, “Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.” His real name was Joseph, but the apostles called him by his nickname, Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement.”¹³ And what an encouraging thing it is, when someone sets a good example of Reverent Generosity for the rest of us. HOWEVER, this does seem to be in stark contrast with other verses in the Bible like Mt. 6:3-4, where Jesus said, “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret....”

So, how do we reconcile these two ideas? Many of us Christians today prefer to keep our giving confidential. In fact, that is the practice of our church. People’s tithes, offerings, and other special gifts are kept between them and God. But as we read through Acts 4-5, it seems that the believers in the early church didn’t seem particularly bothered by public acts of giving. In fact, even as we read further into Acts 5, we’ll see that apparently this was the common practice. Believers would PUBLICLY bring the money to the apostles. Now granted, we aren’t told the actual amount that Barnabas gave, just that it was whatever money he got for the field that he sold. But there’s nothing in the text to suggest that God didn’t approve of Barnabas’ gift, or that he was looked down on by his fellow believers, for giving this money publicly. In fact, as Luke is writing the book of Acts, he uses Barnabas as a good example of giving, in order to set up a contrast with the bad example of Ananias and Sapphira. Therefore, as we will soon see: **the motivation behind our giving and the attitude of our hearts, is of far greater importance than how public or private our giving is.**

Now apparently, Barnabas’ public act of Reverent Generosity, inspires others to want to give generously as well.¹⁴ And that’s a good thing! What’s not so good, is the way that Ananias and Sapphira go about their giving. Rather than Reverent Generosity, they display pretend generosity. Acts 5:1 begins,¹⁵ “Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of

⁸ The immediate context seems to suggest a focus on “NO needy persons among” just the believers, not among all of their unbelieving neighbors. However, other verses, like Galatians 6:10 which says, “...as we have opportunity, let us do good to ALL people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

⁹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990 p. 106.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 9:12-13 talks about how the generosity in the church is... “...overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.” 2 Corinthians 8:7 says it this way, “But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—**see that you also excel in this grace of giving.**”

¹¹ It would have been incredibly difficult, for one person, to keep track of all of the many needs of believers throughout Jerusalem.

¹² Especially because this involved significant dollars, the early church built in accountability and checks/balances. For example, 2 Corinthians 8:20-21 notes, “We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man.”

¹³ Barnabas later becomes a vital ministry ally with the Apostle Paul. Read more in Acts 9:27; 11:22-26; 13:1-4; 15:37-39.

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 9:2 says, “For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.”

¹⁵ Before jumping into Acts 5, let’s be thankful for the honesty and integrity of God’s Word. One reason we can be thankful for this disturbing story of Ananias and Sapphira, is that it clearly illustrates that the early Christians didn’t try to suppress the truth. They reported things the way that they happened. When Luke wrote Acts, he didn’t try to hide the unpleasant and embarrassing details. This gives us assurance that Luke has recorded the history of the early church for us, the way it really happened. As John Stott puts it, “it was not all romance and righteousness.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990 p. 109.

property.” At this point, everything appears to be fine. This married couple sells some land. It was their private property, and they had every right to sell it. They were under no apparent obligation to give ANY of the money to the church. As we discussed earlier, gifts to the church were VOLUNTARY; something that some people CHOSE to do from time to time. Acts 5:2 goes on, “With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet.” Even at this point, everything still appears to be fine. There wasn’t any rule that said 100% of the proceeds HAD to go to the church. For that matter, NONE of it had to go to the church. As we mentioned earlier, Acts 5:4 says that the land belonged to them. It was their personal property and the money from the sale was at their disposal. In other words, there’s no obvious reason to think that they couldn’t have kept back a portion of the money for themselves.

>>> Something else must be going on here...

In Acts 5:3 Peter calls him out, “...Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?” All of a sudden, in the span of just one verse, we go from someone voluntarily selling their OWN personal property and keeping some of their OWN money, to learning that it was all a lie. We also learn that Satan is at work.¹⁶

>>> Something else must be going on here...

Admittedly, we’ll need to read between the lines a bit. There are at least two possibilities. One possibility is that Ananias and Sapphira were taken captive by the sin of greed. Perhaps they had pledged that 100% of the proceeds would go to the poor, and then PRETENDED that that was what they were really giving. In other words, they had STARTED with good intentions. They’d either made a vow to God or a pledge to the church or some kind of a public statement that they wanted to do what they’d witnessed Barnabas doing.¹⁷ He had inspired them! The only problem was, that after selling the land and holding the money in their hands, their greed got the best of them and they went back on their promise. They started thinking about all of the other things that they could use that money for. This scenario seems even more plausible when we look at the question that Peter asks Sapphira just a few verses later. Acts 5:8 says, “Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” “Yes,” she said, “that is the price.” This is a bold-faced lie. Sapphira knew it, somehow Peter also knew it, but MORE IMPORTANTLY, the Holy Spirit knew it. Ananias and Sapphira had conspired to test the Spirit of the Lord, and they paid for it with their very lives.¹⁸

Another possibility is that Ananias and Sapphira were taken captive by the sin of vanity. Perhaps there had never been any vow at all. Maybe they had never even really considered, giving ALL of the money to help the poor. But the PLAN, all along, was to make themselves APPEAR to be generous, just like Barnabas.¹⁹ Maybe they conspired together, thinking something like this: “let’s make sure that the details of the sale are private. No one needs to know how much we ACTUALLY sold the land for. That way, we can get FULL CREDIT for donating ALL of it, but actually keep a big chunk of the money for ourselves.” In other words, their own pride may very well have led them into hypocritical showmanship. They desired to look good; to gain personal glory for their pretend generosity.²⁰ They may have even been jealous of the accolades Barnabas had gotten.

Well, whether it was one of these two possibilities, or maybe something else entirely, Ananias and Sapphira got caught!²¹ “God judges them severely. Their sin is not the small amount of their gift or the

¹⁶ Despite the powerful movement of God’s Spirit among the early church, their enemy Satan was also at work. Consider 1 Peter 5:8 where Peter writes, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” In John 8:44 Jesus describes the devil this way, “...there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” Proverbs 12:22 says, “The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy.” You see, as believers, we aren’t just representing our OWN name, we are representing the name of JESUS. The name that is above all other names; the name by which we must be saved. The name and reputation of Jesus is at stake in the words and conduct of His followers. And so, “the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira was not allowed to spread.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990 p. 105.

¹⁷ See discussion by John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990 p. 109.

¹⁸ In contrast, Malachi 3:10 urges us to test the Lord.

¹⁹ One might picture someone holding a thick wad of \$20 bills in their hand. It’s so thick that they can barely hold onto it. Only, this thick wad of bills is actually all \$1 bills except for one \$20 bill on the outside.

²⁰ “They wanted the credit and the prestige for sacrificial generosity, without the inconvenience of it.... Their motive in giving was not to relieve the poor, but to fatten their own ego.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990 pp. 109-110.

²¹ “They had a right to keep back whatever they chose, but to make it appear that they had given all when they had not was sinful.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1833 footnote on Acts 5:2.

low percentage they give; it is their deception. God powerfully preserves his church's purity."²² One author notes: "Love of praise...and love for money led to the first recorded sin in the life of the church. It is a warning to the readers that 'God cannot be mocked'."²³ ²⁴ God chooses to reveal His awesome holiness in such a way that Acts 5:11 concludes, "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."²⁵ On one hand, the severity of God's divine judgment, highlights His holiness and His intolerance for sin. On the other hand, it magnifies His ongoing mercy. In other words, the severe discipline poured out on Ananias and Sapphira reminds the rest of us, of JUST HOW OFTEN God does NOT treat us, as our sins deserve.²⁶ (*Imagine if God was always this immediate with His judgments!*)

The early church didn't let this incident stop the forward progress of the gospel. In fact, Acts 5:13-14 goes on to say, "No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number." In other words, "Because of the fate of Ananias and his wife, no pretenders or halfhearted followers risked identification with the believers."²⁷ They took their devotion to following Jesus seriously. There was no room for pretenders in the early church.²⁸

The early church teaches us at least two things about Reverent Giving. First of all...

1) We shouldn't be generous in order to get praise. The fact is, Jesus Himself did say, "it is more blessed to give than to receive."²⁹ There are many blessings when we practice generosity, but seeking praise from others, shouldn't be what motivates our giving.³⁰ Another thing that the early church can teach us about Reverent Giving is...

2) If God prompts us to give, we should follow through. God has entrusted us to steward the wealth that He has blessed us with. The greed and hypocrisy displayed by Ananias and Sapphira was not only a sin against God, but it was also a sin against the church family. By giving less than what God had prompted them to give, they were providing less help for their fellow believers in need. In other words, if God had prompted their giving so that the church could meet particular needs, then their failure to follow through on that giving, created a potential shortfall in ministry funding. Consider Paul's advice about giving in 2 Corinthians 8:11, "Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it..." Perhaps some of us have had good intentions for a long time now. Maybe we've even said to ourselves: THIS time I'm finally going to start giving to church, BUT... I don't have my checkbook with me right now. I don't carry cash on me. I just haven't had time yet to set up my electronic giving. And on and on we go with procrastination or other excuses. Brother or Sister in Christ, is "your eager willingness to do it" being "matched by your completion of it"? If God's Spirit has prompted us to give, then LET'S FINISH THE WORK! At E-Free Bemidji, let's make sure that we are "becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus," even in the area of our financial giving. ***Just like Barnabas, let's be an encouragement to the ministry of the church through our Reverent Generosity!***

²² *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2225 footnote on Acts 5:1-11.

²³ See Galatians 6:7. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1832-1833 footnote on Acts 5:1.

²⁴ "Compare this divine judgment at the beginning of the church era with God's judgment on Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:2), on Achan (Joshua 7:25) and on Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:7)." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1832-1833 footnote on Acts 5:1.

²⁵ Hebrews 12:28-29 says, "...let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

²⁶ See Psalm 103:7-12, especially verse 10.

²⁷ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1833 footnote on Acts 5:13.

²⁸ If the early church were to give a true and credible profession of faith regarding the resurrection of Jesus, they couldn't have believers in the church lying about money. God was protecting them from lying, or from even "bending the truth a little." The content of the gospel message couldn't afford to be marred by dishonestly and hypocrisy in other parts of their lives. Hypocrisy in the church is SO destructive. Eventually others find out about it and it makes the watching world question the integrity of everything else we've ever said and done. Proverbs 22:1 states it plainly, "A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold."

²⁹ Acts 20:35.

³⁰ Can you imagine if God judged every act of vanity, as severely as He judged Ananias and Sapphira? If every time we did something spiritually hypocritical, God responded this decisively? This room would be empty, and our burial plots would be full. Let's be grateful for God's mercy and patience with us. Let's also be mindful of the fact that we CAN'T lie to God. We're not fooling Him, whether that comes to our financial giving or anything else in our lives.