

Generous Giving & Gospel Integrity (Acts 4:32-5:11)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 September 2024

Preacher: Evan Alexander

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. If we have any children that are going to Children's Church, they're being dismissed right now. Children's Church goes up through the third grade. So we're thankful our children have that opportunity.

Speaking of children, my two-year-old, just about every time that I've been in the car with him recently or gone anywhere with him, whether it be the backseat of my truck or the aisles of Walmart, that he has been adamant on singing his favorite song at the top of his lungs. He has no sense of volume, especially in public places, and that always terrifies me to go out with him. But his favorite song recently has been Say Yeah, Yeah, Yeah, Yes to VVBS, which, as you likely could guess or might be aware, that's a song from Vacation Bible School that we sang three months ago.

That he's still singing at the top of his lungs everywhere we go, every time we get in my truck, he's like, VBS! And I'm like, not again. It's a great song, don't get me wrong, but you know, you just kind of think these things are going to be phases.

My favorite song will come and go, like Vacation Bible School music, as great as it is during their week. It's a little old after a few months after that. So you just think these things are like phases. As parents, you really hope these things are phases, whether it be the terrible twos, the three-nager phase, the four-nado.

[1 : 15] You just expect these things are going to be phases that they go through and you get out of and survive. If you're married, you likely understand that the newlywed or honeymoon phase, that little time where you're madly in love, newly married, nothing wrong with your marriage whatsoever.

But if you're like my wife, she quickly realized that being around me 24-7 is much more different than just dating. My coworkers like to make fun of me because I'm constantly singing, humming, making sounds of all sorts throughout the day.

And I'm sure that's very annoying from the top stairs of my office down below me. I'm sure it's annoying hearing me in the hallways. But you know who's stuck with me? My wife. Honeymoon phases end.

There just comes a point where these phases, they come and go. And so as we as a church are working through the book of Acts, the first couple of chapters are incredible, right? The first couple of chapters, Jesus commissions, the disciples, the Holy Spirit descends, Peter preaches, and thousands are saved.

They're going amongst the streets. They're preaching the gospel. People are being miraculously healed. There's persecution for sure, but they're fighting against it being bold. The first few chapters are incredible to read.

[2 : 29] But if you're like me, you're almost reading with a bit of realistic skepticism. Is this too good to be true? Will it last? Is the other shoe about to drop?

Because as great as the story starts in Acts, most Christians I know have a different experience with church than what we read in the first few chapters of Acts. You know, we read of the clear presence of God, miraculous healings, absolute unity amongst all the people.

Yet most Christians that I've ever met, their experience with other Christians in the church has sometimes been of disagreements and fallouts and drama and burnout to where if you're coming into this with your own perspective of church, you can kind of read, it's great to read what's happening, but is it going to last?

Is it merely just a phase? Will the church survive? And so we kind of come to the end of chapter four and getting into the chapter of five, we finally get to see a little bit of a glimpse into the real tension the church is facing on the inside.

But before we navigate that tension, I just want to say as clear as I can from the beginning, that if you're wondering if the church will survive, if the church will persevere, if the church will live, know this, the movement of the church that we've been reading about, it's not merely a phase, it is an act of God.

[3 : 52] Because God is in control and his mission cannot be derailed, it will continue, despite forces outside of the church like persecution, and even sources inside of it, like hypocrisy and drama.

So let's jump back into the story this morning and continue our study, starting in chapter four, verse 32. We'll read the whole passage and then navigate through this text today with two primary gospel principles that I think kind of put things in perspective for us.

So Acts chapter four, let's begin reading in verse 32. Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart, one soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of land or houses, they sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

And they laid it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, he sold a field that belonged to him, brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

[5 : 09] And here's where the story gets interesting. Chapter five, verse one. But a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property. And with his wife's knowledge, he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

But Peter said to Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you've contrived this deed in your heart? You've not lied to man, but to God. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last.

And great fear came upon all who heard of it. Now the young man rose and wrapped him and carried him out and buried him. And after an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

And Peter said to her, tell me whether you sold the land for so much. And she said, yes, for so much. But Peter said to her, how is it that you've agreed together to test the spirit of the Lord?

[6 : 20] Behold, the feet of those who buried your husband are at the door and they will carry you out. Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And when the young men came in and found her dead, they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. Now I bet so, right? You read through this passage and the tone has shifted from the unity and the healings and the great acts of God that have been happening to where now we're seeing some judgment.

We're seeing some clear punishment from God. And a fear was beginning to fill the church. And while we'll get to chapter five in just a moment, I want to spend the first little bit here focusing in on the example of the church at the end of Acts 4.

Because I believe if we kind of understand what's going on in chapter four, it gives us a platform to understand chapter five all the more. So in chapter four, we see some incredible things that are happening. Everyone who believed was of one heart and soul.

They had all things in common and many were selling their fields and homes to meet the present physical needs of their neighbors. And it's a great reality to read of the church back then. But what does it mean of us today?

[7 : 33] Does this passage mean that I should sell all of my possessions and give them away? Does this passage tell me that it's wrong to have good things? Well, whose needs should we really be trying to meet?

What needs are actually genuine? How do we really navigate these things? What does this passage really mean for us today? And while all those questions are really important questions to work through, practical applications, I wanna fight against something this morning inside my own heart.

I wanna fight against the temptation of my own heart to jump straight to limiting the generosity for myself that I feel burdened to feel. You know, my flesh wants to approach this passage and it wants to immediately start to dissect things of like, all right, this passage is primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive, right?

It's merely describing the actions of the church and God's people during this time and in this situation rather than prescribing it for all of us today and throughout all time.

You know, my flesh wants to jump at this passage and start to really look at, well, this was generosity amongst Christians, right? Like, it's just brothers and sisters in Christ meeting the needs of other brothers and sisters in Christ.

[8 : 42] There really wasn't a compulsion to meet the needs of everyone in the world, just the select few that already are a part of the church. My flesh wants to jump straight to the aspect of this passage that says that the giving was voluntary.

This isn't something that was mandated by the apostles. This is not some sort of church-sanctioned socialism that's happening. Like, I want to look at this and say it's voluntary. It's not something that all Christians had to be a part of.

It was just something they got to choose. And my flesh wants to just jump straight at those questions and try to limit the generosity that I feel burdened to feel for myself. But recognize this, if my heart is jumping straight to this list of caveats and this list of excuses, trying to figure out who I actually have to show compassion to and who I have to be generous to or not, then I'm missing the point, right?

Look, all of these are clear. Those are things I believe to be true. I believe this passage to be primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive. It is generosity within the Christian community. It was completely voluntary.

But if my heart is jumping to this spot where I'm trying to figure out, well, who do I actually have to be generous to? My heart's not in the right place. And I would argue that if yours is there, then you're probably in a place with me.

[9 : 55] There's a clear gospel principle that comes out from the last part of chapter four. And that's that we must value people over possessions. We must value people over possessions.

And if there's an inclination of my heart to put possessions over people, I've missed it, right?

There's a lot of things that really have to come into play here. There are a lot of other biblical principles that we have to take into account in order to form a, I guess, a comprehensive understanding of stewardship.

But if I miss this point that I need to value people over possessions, my life will not resemble the church of Acts chapter four. My life will not be in right standing with God. And so there's something we have to wrestle with even from this description of the early church is do we value people over possessions?

David Platt in his book, Counter Culture, reminds us that as Christians, our greatest wealth is found in the gospel itself. For God has saved us from our sins and has given us new life with him.

More importantly, Jesus Christ himself said in his sermon on the mount, that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And so if I'm reading this text and I'm really finding the murkiness of trying to figure out who do I have to show compassion to, who do I have to be generous with, then perhaps my treasure is not in the right spot.

[11 : 16] Perhaps my greatest treasure isn't in the gospel, maybe it's in what I own and what I have for myself. That's the crux of what we're struggling with here. We see a radical display of generosity in the DNA of the early church.

And this demonstrates that they clearly had a greater compassion and held a greater value on the lives and needs of the people around them than they did on their material possessions.

And this concept really makes zero sense if the Holy Spirit's not in it. That's why it's a gospel principle, right? This isn't something that's easy for us. It's not the natural tendencies of our heart to value people over possessions.

I would imagine that if someone were to have a near-death experience, that what they place value on would change, right? These people who have these stories where they almost got killed in a car

wreck or they almost went through this situation where they lost their life.

There are these situations where people have these near-death experiences and all of a sudden, they start to value people more. They start to place a lot more value in the relationships they have, the family dynamic that they are a part of.

[12:21] They put a little lesser of a grip on their possessions and are more generous. People who have a near-death experience often have a different outlook on people and possessions and relationships than the normal person does.

But can I remind us something as followers of Christ? That we haven't just had a near-death experience. We were dead and Christ made us alive. Christ didn't change our hearts.

He gave us a new one altogether. Like each of us have to reconcile that there was a point in my life where I was destined for a place called hell because of my cosmic treason and rebellion against a one true, holy, perfect, almighty God in heaven that's above earth where I'm at.

And I was against him and I was deserving of a place called hell. Yet Christ loved me in my sin enough to give his life for mine and give me life and forgiveness in his name. And not only has Christ done that in giving us a new heart, that new heart has now been filled, thanks to Acts chapter one and two, with the Holy Spirit that starts to change our outlook on community and gospel living. The gospel changes us. The gospel is good news for us because it changes our lives so much. And I recognize some other principles that every good and perfect gift comes from the Lord, right?

[13:38] James 1, 17. I recognize that God often rewards the hard labor, the toil that we put in. He often rewards our labor with fruit to be enjoyed.

I recognize and understand that God's heartbeat for us is that we'll have life and have it abundantly from John 10, 10. But what good is it for us to have an abundance of scraps beneath our table for our neighbor to be dying down the street?

What good is it for us to have an abundance of scraps beneath our table while our neighbor dies of hunger? That's the story of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke chapter 16, right?

Jesus tells this story of a rich man who dies and Lazarus, he dies as well. They both die and the rich man is in hellish torment while Lazarus is in everlasting peace.

Turns out the rich man never placed his faith in God. His riches, his status, his worldly goods were insufficient to bring him eternal peace. And his cries from hell were for the salvation of his brothers, yet his cries came too late.

[14:46] What's the primary description of this rich man that leads us to the assumption that he has no relationship with God? It's that the rich man feasted in abundance while Lazarus, his neighbor, famished and died.

How we value others, whether or not we value others, these play a part of the picture of whether or not we're actually genuine followers of Christ or not.

Simply put, the works of our faith demonstrate the validity of it. So looking here, this passage, it may not be prompting each of us, it may not be an explicit command for each of us to sell our homes and land, but it does show us something very clear that when the Holy Spirit came into the lives of the early church, something was different about them.

They began to value people over possessions. Which brings us to the question today is, do we? When it comes to the things that we have, do we have things or do things have us?

Do we look at the ones around us and place a value on their lives to where we would be willing to meet their needs if possible or given the opportunity? Do we value people over possessions?

[16:04] Dustin Edmonds, the husband of the lady who did the prayer prompt earlier, Dustin Edmonds and I teach a group on Wednesday nights called Rediscover Church, and we're looking through some basic questions about the church.

We're kind of working through those on Wednesday nights. And one of the questions that's come up the last few weeks is, is it really necessary for Christians to gather together? Is it really necessary for us to worship together, to come to church?

Beyond that, is it even necessary for us to join in membership? These are questions we've been working through, and it sparked a real question for me, and that's how did these early Christians in Acts chapter four, how do they know about these needs around them anyway?

Did they have some kind of like Facebook marketplace kind of thing where they saw all needs and they met a need and hashtag blessed and all? It wasn't like these things were happening where they were posting it around.

How did they figure out the needs of those around them? They knew the ones around them. They gathered together in close-knit Christian community, and they knew about the needs because they knew one another.

[17:07] And going back to the question that kind of sparked from that, is it necessary for us to gather together? I say absolutely. One of the unavoidable realities is that in order to genuinely care about others and care about people, you have to be involved in each other's lives.

Casual church attendance and nominal affiliation with the church doesn't cut it. It doesn't give us the exposure to one another where we're able to actually meet the needs of those around us.

Now, I would actually argue that most of the New Testament writings, particularly in the epistles and the letters, most of that is we're not able to live it out apart from Christian community.

To love one another, to mourn with each other, to rejoice with each other, to encourage one another. These can only be done when you're with one another. And so I would, as your associate pastor of discipleship, a shameless plug here, if you're not involved in some form of small group community at church, you miss out on so much.

I believe as we look at this early church in the book of Acts, most of them met in homes or smaller communities. So I believe the closest that we can sometimes get to the community that we read about in the book of Acts is when we gather together in Sunday school classes and midweek life groups because that close-knit gospel community is the only context in which we get to know one another well and value people over possessions.

[18:33] And so if you're not involved, I really want to encourage you to seek that out and try that out because that is such an important part of being able to live out the example of the early church. The gospel was at work in the hearts of this early church and it prompted them towards a close-knit gospel community where the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ were recognized and met by other brothers and sisters in Christ.

And because at the end of the day, they valued people over their own possessions, they met needs one another. As we continue in this passage into the fun part of chapter five, we start to see what happens in our hearts when we actually pursue influence over integrity.

Luke intentionally writes this next bit in a way that contrasts the generosity of Barnabas with the greed of Ananias and Sapphira. Look again at verse 36 and we'll read the first few verses of five.

Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, so his nickname was son of encouragement. That's a really good nickname, all right? The apostles called him Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus.

Well, he sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. There's the generosity of Barnabas. But if you're taking notes in the scripture journals or if you're just trying to figure out how this connects, the first word of chapter five is a very influential word, but it's a hinge word, a conjunction, a word that pivots the story here.

[20:02] But a man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property. And with his wife's knowledge, he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

So we enter into chapter five and like I said, that word but's almost like a hinge on which the door of the church is opening up and we've seen the unity on the outside, but the door is hinging open and we get to see a glimpse of what's happening.

And what exactly is going on in this church? Well, there's this couple. They conspired together that they may deceive others and receive praise. They sought influence and praise at the expense of their integrity.

They likely saw Barnabas. You know, that guy that we grew up, we graduated high school with him, that guy named Joseph, they call him Barnabas now because he's just such an encouraging person. They changed his name. They look at Barnabas with some favor.

Barnabas is a really cool guy. He's like the backbone of Christian community. We see the praise that Barnabas is getting. We see the praise that the unnamed people of the church are getting for selling their fields and homes and laying it down at the apostles' feet.

[21:11] They're getting all of this accolades. They're getting all this praise and we wish people saw us like that, right? So what do they do? They make a plan. They plan to sell their field, their property, and bring the proceeds of the church to the church, lay at the apostles' feet, as if they're giving it all, but it's not, is it?

It's just a portion. They sought influence and praise, yet they went about attaining in a way that was sinful. And the reaction here seems pretty harsh, right? This is not an easy passage to read. The reaction seems pretty harsh. Peter tells Ananias, Satan has filled your heart. Like you are a, you're a worker of the enemy right now. Satan has consumed and filled your heart. And Ananias and his wife end up losing their lives. So if we sit around and think that God doesn't care about how we reflect him and the church to the world around us, we are vastly mistaken. Because God takes that very seriously. One commentator says it this way, the same spirit that gave the community its growth also maintained its purity.

[22 : 23] The same spirit that gave the community its growth also maintained its purity. Last week, Pastor Brett, he shared the story of the disciples in the boat with Jesus in Mark chapter four.

We all know the story, right? The disciples and Jesus are in the boat. The storms come and the disciples are freaking out. And the story ends with this display, this picture that who is this one that even the wind and waves obey him.

They needed a fear of someone. They needed someone that was bigger than the waves. They needed someone that was bigger than their fears. They needed someone that was bigger than their persecution because if they didn't fear God more than man, they would not live bold.

They would not live for Christ. And so that story reminded us that a fear of the Lord must be higher than our fear of man because otherwise we won't live for God.

That was last week. Well, this week we see exactly what it looks like for someone who has no fear of the Lord whatsoever. Ananias and Sophia represent a type of churchgoer that has no fear of God.

[23 : 28] The type of churchgoer that comes to the altar and says, Jesus Christ is Lord yet continues to live for themselves. The type of churchgoer that seeks to build their own empire instead of the kingdom of God.

The ones that pray, my kingdom come, my will be done instead of thy kingdom come, thy will be done. And what we see in this passage is that when there is no fear of God, God will intervene. God does something terrifying in this passage and that same hypocrisy we see from Ananias and Sapphira is the same type of hypocrisy that affects the church today, right?

This is not something we're immune from. This is not something that we are void of. This is a struggle that we ourselves must wrestle with and making sure that that hypocrisy doesn't infect our lives as well.

And so looking at this passage, we see that hypocrisy. Oh, God may not strike us dead for lying about our giving, but there comes a point where God will prune the branch that bears bad fruit, where he will pluck the weeds, he'll remove the rocks, he'll remove any obstacle to his gospel mission and work flourishing.

[24 : 37] There is a need for each of us to value integrity over influence. There's a need for each of us to value integrity over influence, the type of integrity that makes it to where we don't bow down to Nebuchadnezzar even if it means a fiery furnace, the type of integrity that means that we keep on praying even if it means a lion's den, the type of integrity that keeps our eyes fixed on the cross even if it means sure persecution, the type of integrity that means we meet the needs of those around us without expecting praise for ourselves.

The need for integrity remains. Imagine if I have a neighbor who is going through a really tough time. I just think about the people around me and if I were to imagine that a neighbor of mine was going through a really tough time, I just think of someone who might be working through a nasty divorce, someone who's on the verge of losing their jobs, spiraling into depression, just really struggling with life.

They're struggling to make ends meet. So my wife and I, Kristen, we go to Quality Foods, we load up a whole cart full of groceries and toiletries, we know he's struggling so we want to meet the need of our brother, we want to meet the need of our brother in Christ, our neighbor.

So we pack all the things from the car, get it in my truck, we drive over to his house, we walk up to his door, we knock on the door and he opens the door to me live streaming the whole thing.

Hey guys, it's Evan, Pastor Evan from the church, I just really want to meet a need of a friend who's been struggling right now, I just want you to see how awesome I am, God's been really great to me, I want to meet the need of someone else because I'm awesome, God's blessed me and I just really want you to see my friend he's struggling, so if I were to all of a sudden take that moment, right, where I'm doing something good, inherently good, but I'm doing it so that I look better to other

people, and if you don't live stream, just imagine if you did something really generous and you called into the Toccoa Record or WNEG just to get an article about yourself, right, well I just imagine, we all know there's something inherently wrong with that, something that is seemingly good, all of a sudden is pretty sketchy and selfish, so the same type of integrity is needed for us today, right, because oh, we may not, you know, live stream an act of generosity, but sometimes our heart is not quite as motivated by Christ-like compassion for my neighbor, sometimes my generous giving is motivated by the year-end tax credit I get for my generous contributions, sometimes the motivation for me to do something generous is not in Christ-like compassion for my neighbor, it's for the profile picture I get of us in our matching t-shirts serving the orphans in Africa, it's all of a sudden the thrust is on me getting influence rather than maintaining a life of integrity, and that's a problem, right, you see the same

[27 : 26] God that brought growth in this church was also going to seek to purify it, so we kind of come back to that initial question that I posed for each of us, when I started to ask, will the church last?

Is this merely just a phase? Well, I think there's something to be seen in this passage about an answer to that, because even Peter here, he's demonstrating integrity, he confronted the lies when he could have slipped it under the rug, he gave Sapphira a chance to repent and do the right thing when he did not have to, and it's not uncommon to hear stories of weak church leaders in today's culture.

It's not uncommon to hear stories about pastors who fall into moral failures, either of abuse or adultery. It's not uncommon for ministries and churches to be closing their doors due to scandals and absolute hypocrisy that comes out in the open.

There's a problem in the local church today that if we look at these situations, there's some discomfort as people leave the church, people are hurt, and ministries and churches seem to fail, but much like the story of Ananias and Sapphira here, we must understand that God will vindicate the holiness of his great name.

He prophesied as much in the Old Testament. Ezekiel chapter 36, verse 23, God says, and I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you've profaned among them.

[28 : 54] And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. So is this movement of the church merely a phase?

Will it last? Can it withstand the opposition from the outside and the hypocrisy that contaminates it from the inside? Will this continue or will it fail?

Our world is more broken than it's ever been. The church seems to be full of hypocrites. If pastors fall into moral failure, can the church still be a place of hope and gospel community? God will ensure that it is and that it always will be.

Want to know how I know? Because God works in passages like this. The uncomfortable passages, the ones that make us really not want to preach this passage, the ones that calls us to kind of stir in some uncomfot.

God makes sure that we do not get to a place where we fail to represent him to the world around us. And when that starts to be the case, God will vindicate the holiness of his great name.

[30 : 04] We can be sure of that. So maybe you're sitting here today and you've lost some trust. Maybe you look at the world around us, you read the articles, you see the stories, and you grow uncomfotable because the church is full of broken people.

The church is full of hypocrites and sometimes led by those. Will the church prevail? Will it continue? Well, the answer's already been written. This book doesn't just go through Acts, it actually goes to the end of the story.

There's a passage in Revelation chapter 19 where we see the end of the story. And if we have a question on whether or not it will prevail, we can just look to the end and see where it's already written and we can be comforted in that.

Revelation chapter 19, I'll read this very short passage then we're almost about to close. Verse 6, Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, Hallelujah, for the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. It was granted her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and pure.

eiseiseiseiseiseiseiseiseiseise