

Acts 4:32-5:11

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. It's good to see you all this morning. Thanks for braving the snow to come out on this Reformation Sunday to worship the Lord and hear from his word. Well, we're continuing our series in the book of Acts this morning. We're looking at Acts chapter 4 verse 32 through Acts chapter 5 verse 11. That's page 773 if you want to follow along in the Pew Bible. Acts starting at chapter 4 verse 32. We've titled our series this fall, When God Builds His Church.

The Reformers had the rightly biblical belief that the preaching of the word of God builds the church, that it's the gospel that gives rise to the people of God.

So we're studying the book of Acts this fall, not just because we see there God actually doing this work, but we pray that God will continue to do that work in our midst as we read and study and as we proclaim this word.

So before I read this passage for us, let's pray that God would speak and God would build His church. Father, we come to your word this morning, longing to hear a word from you.

God longing to hear the gospel once again, that we are righteous in Christ.

[1 : 5 5] So God, would you send your Holy Spirit to speak to us and to draw us near this morning. For Christ's sake, amen.

Acts chapter 4 verse 32. Let me read this for us. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them, for from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, and put it at the apostles' feet.

And it was distributed to anyone as he had need. 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.

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge, he kept back part of the money for himself, and brought the rest, and put it at the apostles' feet.

[3 : 1 8] Then Peter said, Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and kept back for yourself some of the money you received for the land?

Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men, but to God.

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, carried him out, and buried him.

About three hours later, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, Tell me, Is this the price you and Ananias got for the land? Yes, she said, That is the price.

Peter said to her, How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also. At that moment, she fell down at his feet and died.

[4 : 2 6] Then the young men came in, and finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

In our passage this morning, Luke puts before us two incidents, two examples, as it were.

First, we have Barnabas. Luke tells us that he is given a name. He's given the name Barnabas, son of encouragement. And this episode in our passage becomes the beginning of his story.

If you read on in Acts, you'll see that Barnabas becomes a key player in the spread of the gospel. But second, we have Ananias and Sapphira. They, unlike Barnabas, try to get a name for themselves by pretending to be more generous than they actually are.

And this episode, sadly, shockingly, becomes the end of their story. So you see the comparison.

[5 : 34] One, given a name. The other, trying to get a name. One, a beginning. And the other, a tragic ending. And it all swirls around this practice of laying money at the apostles' feet.

Which is Luke's way of saying that they gave the money to the apostles to distribute to the needy members of the church. Luke says, all the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time, those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, and put it at the apostles' feet. And it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

Now, this isn't the first time that Luke describes the early church as a radically united and generous community. At the end of chapter two, you'll remember Luke wrote, all the believers were together and had everything in common, selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need.

There was something that these men and women had experienced that completely revolutionized how they considered their material possessions.

[6 : 47] Something had happened to them such that they would voluntarily sell a piece of land or a house or some other possessions in order to give it freely to those in their midst who were in need.

And it happened to such an extent that Luke could honestly say there were no needy persons among them. It seems hard for us to imagine.

Hard for us to imagine a church where there are no needy persons. But just think what that must have been like. Everyone was taken care of.

No one fell through the cracks. And when we understand Jerusalem's economic situation in the first century, we see all the more how powerful this must have been. Historians tell us time and time again that political unrest and food shortages and famines, they all took their toll on the city.

It was not an easy place to live. In addition, many residents in Jerusalem were transplants from other parts of the... And they found it very difficult to find work and earn a living.

[7 : 51] And what's more, a lot of elderly Jews actually came to Jerusalem to live out their latter years. They would move to Jerusalem, the holy city, to die. And of course, these elderly Jewish men and women were very dependent on others for their material support.

We actually see a glimpse of this a little later in Acts, in Acts 6, where a number of widows are dependent on the church for their daily sustenance. But even in the midst of these conditions, even in the midst of conditions where they would have been occupying the temple or what have you, even in the midst, something unlocked a movement of radical generosity among the early Christians.

And when we read this in light of the whole Bible, we see that this is exactly what God promised would happen when His people experienced His covenant blessing.

Deuteronomy 15.4 says of Old Testament Israel that they were to be a community where, quote, there were no needy persons. In fact, Luke seems to be deliberately calling this passage to mind in Acts 4.34, as if to say that the promise of Deuteronomy was now finally finding its fulfillment.

God's people were at last living in the freedom and generosity that God had all along said they would. They were finally being this picture of what God had intended humanity to always be like.

[9 : 26] But what had changed? What made this group of men and women so free to share their possessions with each other? Nothing like this had ever happened in Israel before.

What made the difference? Well, we can begin by confidently saying what it wasn't. It wasn't that God was now giving them whatever they happened to name and claim.

There's not a hint of the prosperity gospel here. No, this was sacrificial giving. People's needs were met because others were willing to sell what they owned.

They were willing to bear the cost of the other's need. But we also see that this radical elimination of need was not made possible through community rules.

There's no compulsion to give here. No one was obligated to act in this way. There was no pressure to do it. In fact, Peter tells Ananias in verse 4, didn't the land belong to you before it was sold and after it was sold?

[10:26] Wasn't the money at your disposal? In other words, Peter is saying, Ananias, you didn't have to sell your land and even after you did, you didn't have to give any of the money to the church. It's not as if the picture of the early church we have here was an enforced form of proto-communism.

Rather, their giving was completely voluntary. But they were so struck by a new reality that as Luke says, no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own.

Although they owned it, they didn't claim or consider it merely theirs for their own sake. Their mindset had totally changed. Now what would cause such a deep change?

Luke tells us in verse 33, with great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and much grace was upon them all.

You see, the heartbeat that is pulsing through these early chapters of Acts, the heartbeat that's pushing blood through the veins of the early church, that's pounding in the chest of these men and women like they had just danced through the streets or run through the fields, is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

[11:50] We see in verses 33 and 34 how the resurrection of Christ sets off an unstoppable sequence. First, the apostles testify to Jesus' resurrection. Second, they experience God's grace pouring down upon them.

And third, they start meeting one another's needs through radical sacrificial giving. It's like a chain reaction that can't be stopped. Jesus' resurrection, God's grace, giving.

Now let's take just a few minutes to tease this out. And I think we can see how it all connects if we move actually backwards through the three elements and start with their generosity.

Think with me. What would free you to be that generous? What would make you so utterly free to view your money and your assets not as something to be hoarded for yourself, but as gifts to be shared with others in need?

What would do that? What if you had found a source of pleasure deeper and more lasting than anything money could buy?

[13:10] Something that made a vacation to Hawaii seem like a drive through Missouri. You ever driven through Missouri? You know what I'm talking about. It's not fun.

Anybody here from Missouri? What if you had found a source of security more stable and sure than anything money could buy?

Something that made the most successful 401k, who's actually got one of those, something that made the most successful 401k look like a children's piggy bank. What if you had found a source of favor more meaningful than all the status or respect that money could buy?

What if you had found the favor of God himself? The source of all good things, the creator and sustainer of the universe. What if you knew that God smiled upon you and promised you that not a hair would fall from your head without his total loving care?

What if he poured his very spirit into you, filling you with the delight of his presence and sealing you for an inheritance in the glory of the world to come? You see, if we really knew God's grace, it would have to make us generous.

[14:45] We wouldn't need money to make us happy or secure or important. Rather, we would see money simply as a gift to be used to bless others and glorify God.

But what of God's grace? The second element in this chain reaction. How do we know this favor rests upon us? We haven't been all that generous after all.

We've taken the gifts he's given us and used them for ourselves. We've sought our pleasure and security and what money can buy and we've held God at bay.

We haven't thanked him as we ought. We haven't loved him as we ought and behind it all is the troubling fact that one day we will all die. Without a doubt, God is the source and fountain of life and yet no matter how much money we have, we're all headed for death.

Doesn't that simple fact prove that we're disconnected from him? If God is life and we're destined to die, doesn't that prove that we need to be reconciled to him?

[16:01] it seems then that we live not under God's grace and favor but under his curse. But what if God came to us?

What if he took the curse of death in our place? What if he emptied himself of all his eternal wealth and became poor so that we in our spiritual poverty could become rich?

What if in his death we saw the debt of our sin being paid? And what if in his resurrection we saw the power of God saying, I'm making all things new?

If we see Jesus as our crucified Savior and our risen Lord, if we entrust ourselves to him, then we can know that despite our sin and death, the riches of God's grace are lavished upon us.

Our risen King Jesus stands at the Father's right hand not just to rule and to reign but to ensure that we too will stand before God forgiven and free.

[17 : 19] The resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Do you see how it set a fire deep within this community that had to be expressed in radical sacrificial generosity?

Having received such lavish grace from our King Jesus, how could we not in turn be generous?

Having been secured a place in the everlasting kingdom, how could we not give away what we own here and now?

And Barnabas becomes for us an excellent example of what happens when the reality of Jesus' resurrection and grace take root in someone's life.

We're told that Barnabas' original name is Joseph. He's a Levite from Cyprus, probably a fairly wealthy dude. And the apostles are so impressed by his love for others that they give him a new name, Son of Encouragement, Bar Nabas.

He sells a field, he brings the money, and he puts it at the apostles' feet. Here's a guy who's been changed by Jesus.

[18 : 31] Now what are some of the lessons that we learn from Barnabas here? First, as we've seen, his giving's voluntary. It's not forced. So friends, when the offering plate comes around, give because God puts it in your heart to give.

Don't give out of guilt or to impress the person sitting next to you. If that's how you feel, keep your money. God's got plenty of it. Rather, we give as an act of gratitude for God's grace.

Give with a joyful heart because Jesus has promised you a place in the kingdom. Give because you want to love other people and meet their needs. Don't give out of guilt.

Give out of gratitude. Second, what's the second thing we see from Barnabas' example here? We see that Barnabas' giving to the needs of others is through the apostles. They're putting this money at the apostles' feet.

Instead of giving the money directly to people in need, he gives the money to the apostles so they can then give it to the needy. In other words, he gives you a central fund, that can then be distributed.

[19 : 45] Now, why in the world is that important? It's actually pretty good practical practice. Here at Trinity, we have what's called a deacon's benevolence fund that does just that. It's a way for us to pool our resources together to help those in need in our midst.

Now, why is that good practical wisdom? A couple reasons. First, it unavoids sort of an unhealthy sense of obligation that a receiver can develop towards a donor.

I mean, imagine if Barnabas, a pretty wealthy guy, a Levite from Cyprus, were just to give a big chunk of change to a poor Jerusalemite.

You know, what would happen is probably that that person would show Barnabas gratitude, but eventually he would start to feel inferior in their midst. Right? He would feel so indebted to Barnabas that this sort of unhealthy relationship would kind of develop.

But you see, in the Christian family, we shouldn't regard wealthy brothers or sisters as any worthy of more honor than those who aren't wealthy. In Christ, we are all heirs of the kingdom. And so a central fund helps to kind of waylay this problem of inferiority and maintain a healthy sense of equality in the church.

[20 : 56] Quite a practical, good reason. Second, why a good central fund? If the administrators of the common fund are wise and faithful stewards of the money, this will ensure that the money is used responsibly.

Look again at verse 34. Luke tells us that the money was distributed to anyone as he had need. But you know, it often takes time and wisdom to discern what the real needs are in a situation.

That's why experienced deacons are such a blessing to the church. And that's why if we have experienced deacons and experienced members of our congregation helping to distribute a centralized fund, we can make sure that the that we're meeting the right kinds of needs with the financial help.

But also that we're caring for whole people as well. That we're not just sort of meeting surface needs, but really caring deeply for people. So a centralized fund and utilizing something like that in a church helps us to be as effective as we possibly can in meeting the physical needs of a congregation with as much wisdom and insight as possible.

Now, as we think about giving, that doesn't mean that we should never give individually to help each other out. Of course we should. In our relationships and friendships, in our small groups, we should constantly be praying, Lord, how can I use the gifts you've given me to bless and meet the needs of those you've put in my path?

[22 : 21] The Benevolence Fund is one important way for us to do that, but it's not the only way. We can be giving to one another in this generous way. So from Barnabas, we learn the importance of voluntary giving and the value of a central fund, but also in these two short verses, we see the right kind of humility that ought to be expressed in our giving.

These are short, unassuming little verses, aren't they? You'd almost miss them if you were just kind of reading through Acts all at once. And one doesn't get the impression that Barnabas made a big deal out of his generosity.

In fact, there isn't much for Luke to tell us about Barnabas at this stage, and that's a good thing. His giving is generous, but it's also discreet. There's no big show involved.

But for Barnabas, this is just the beginning, as we've said. He gets a new name, and in the chapters to come, we'll see that God has an important part for him to play in the early life of the church. But when we turn to Ananias and Sapphira, we see that you see just the opposite.

God's judgment falls on this couple, and their story comes to an end. And in this story, we learn not just about the generosity of the church, but also its integrity.

[23 : 47] The problem with Ananias and Sapphira, after all, isn't that they didn't give all of the money to the apostles, but that they lied about it. They said they were giving all of it, when in fact, they were only giving a part.

And the lie they told was not merely to the church, but you've lied to the Holy Spirit, Peter says in verse 3. Or as he puts it in verse 4, you've not lied to men, but to God.

As an aside, these verses point us in the direction of the deity, the Holy Spirit. In Peter's mind, the Holy Spirit and God are one and the same. And of course, lying to a holy God is serious business. Now what in the world must have been going through Ananias' mind to think of such a thing? That's Peter's question, isn't it? Why would he want to give some money and lie and say he was giving all of it?

Well, the best I think we can tell is that he wanted to make a name for himself. And Sapphira? He wanted to have a reputation for being a really generous guy without actually paying the cost for his generosity.

[25 : 07] He'd heard that Barnabas got a new name. Well, hey, that sounds pretty good. Maybe we could get a new name, too. And so this episode becomes a test of the church's integrity.

Will it be a place of honesty and openness or will it succumb to the pressure of greed and lies? It's quite amazing when you think about how honest Luke is being here in his account.

You know, he didn't have to include this episode of Ananias and Sapphira. He could have actually whitewashed the whole thing. Skipped over it. left it out.

But instead, not wanting to sacrifice historical accuracy, he puts it in. He's not afraid to show the early church warts and all.

And he included this episode as a reminder and a warning for us down through the ages. So what we see here is that hypocrisy was the earliest internal spiritual battle that the New Testament church faced.

[26 : 17] This is the first thing that's going to try to rip them apart from the inside out. And hypocrisy is still with us today.

You don't need me to tell you that. You see, Satan wants to make the church a beehive, swarming with hypocrisy. For then he knows that the gospel will lose its credibility in the world.

Because then, no matter how sweet we tell people the honey is, they're not going to reach out and grab it for fear of getting stung. So God's judgment falls on Ananias and Sapphira in such a decisive way because God wants to make abundantly clear, right from the start of the church, that nothing but death will come from their actions.

Hypocrisy is the road to death, individually and corporately. Corporately, just imagine if Ananias and Sapphira had been given a pass on their deception.

Imagine if Peter had just let them slide. They were giving money to the church, after all. I mean, you know, cut them a break, right? Don't you see that the church would have quickly lost all of its unity, all of its credibility.

[27 : 41] Fellowship depends on trust, on faithfulness, on honesty. This would have torn them apart from the inside out.

I don't know, perhaps you've been hurt by a church experience in the past. I'm not naive. I know places that go by the name of church can be pretty rough places.

Perhaps the sting of hypocrisy is still a sore wound in your soul. I want you to see from this passage that God is utterly opposed to whatever wrong you experienced.

He cares deeply about hypocrisy and he cares deeply about you. And the story of Ananias and Sapphira is a complete no to that sort of activity.

And let me suggest that what you experienced was not authentic Christianity, but a counterfeit. So let me encourage you, don't abandon Christian community.

[29 : 01] Trinity. No, it's not perfect. You won't find a perfect church. Trinity certainly isn't a perfect place. I can assure you of that. Because I know that at least one person here isn't perfect.

And that's me. And I'm sure I'm not the only one. And that's why we need to be a part of community that values honesty.

That values honesty and integrity as much as the early church did, as much as we see it in action here. We need people in our lives who will lovingly point out our sin so that we can repent and walk more and more in line with the freedom we have in Christ.

Now this doesn't mean we should always be jumping all over each other, looking how we can sort of cram our fists down one another's throats or something.

Jesus, after all, tells us to remove the beam from our own eye before trying to get the speck out of our brother's eye. And in speaking of all this, John Stott, I think, very helpfully writes, it's a good general rule that secret sins should be dealt with secretly, private sins privately, and only public sins publicly.

[30 : 25] Only John Stott could write a sentence that terse, but so helpful. He goes on, churches are also wise if they follow the successive stages taught by Jesus in Matthew 18.

You see, in that passage, Jesus gives a healthy procedure for approaching a wayward brother or sister. First, he says, go one-on-one. Lovingly raise the issue in private. If that doesn't bring about repentance, go with one other person, just two of you.

Go together. Try to plead with them. And if that fails, then bring the matter to the elders of the church. But the goal in all of this isn't shame or judgment, but repentance and restoration.

We speak to one another in love. We gently and lovingly correct one another in the hope that we'll all draw near to Christ.

Even church discipline, even the removal of a member from membership has its ultimate aim in the restoration of that person.

[31 : 31] It's meant to hopefully wake them up and bring them to see the seriousness of their sin. And in fact, it's a way of maintaining loving integrity in the church.

Because if our life doesn't match our confession, then the most spiritually healthy thing for us is that this be pointed out. Is it any wonder that people look at the church and see it as completely inauthentic?

I wonder, does anyone know you close enough to really be able to speak into your life in this way?

Do you have a trusted brother or sister who would actually tell you when you're in the wrong?

This is part of what Christian community is for. To point out the blind spots in our spiritual life. To tell us when we have spiritual spinach in our teeth, as it were.

And this passage also presses us to ask, are you bold enough to be that kind of friend?

[32 : 51] That after prayer and more prayer in the proper way and in the proper time, are you willing to lovingly and patiently go to a brother or sister and say, can we talk?

That's the kind of authenticity that Acts 5 is pointing us toward. Of course, some will read Acts 5 and think Peter was being judgmental, that he was being harsh, that he'd forgotten he was actually a pastor, not a police officer.

But actually, just the opposite is true. Peter wasn't being harsh. Peter wasn't being judgmental. He was pointing out the truth. Luke doesn't say how Peter knew Ananias was lying. Maybe God told him. Maybe he figured it out some other way. But either way, Peter was holding up the truth before him. And the truth was, Ananias wasn't just pulling one over on the church. He was lying to God. And that put him in a very dangerous place. Was it right for Peter to expose Ananias in such a public way?

[34 : 08] I thought about that this week, and I think that we just need to trust the apostles' discernment that Ananias' very public sin called for a very public rebuke.

But what about the fact that Ananias wasn't given a chance to repent? Wasn't that unfair of God? Another good question. But it's not unjust.

And it wasn't unfair. You see, if we could get just a glimpse of God's utter holiness, of the fact that our God is a consuming fire, we would see how serious human sin truly is.

And that to cross paths with our Creator in this way entails nothing but death. God is perfectly within his rights to judge sin as decisively as he chooses.

And this rightly brings great fear upon the whole church. You see, friends, God loves the church so much that he will act to maintain its purity.

[35 : 37] But today, even though God in his kindness relents from such swift judgment, I think we have every reason to believe that the story of Ananias and Sapphira was very much a unique act in redemptive history.

even though that is the case, we still see what God thinks of hypocrisy, of putting on a spiritual facade.

It's death. But what's the remedy? What's the cure for our spiritual hypocrisy? What will allow us to abandon our deceptive attempts to make a name for ourselves?

What will enable us to be spiritually honest? Ananias and Sapphira, as we saw, were seeking a reputation for themselves. They wanted to look good in the eyes of others.

But friends, if you've ever tried that, you know we can never look as good as we want to. Our reputation will never be blameless, so we try to cover it up.

[36 : 55] We devise schemes like the one Ananias and Sapphira tried. We sew our lives together like fig leaves and try to come across as more spiritual and upright than we truly are.

And as long as we're trying to get and fashion and forge and name for ourselves, we ultimately stand in danger of the same judgment.

You see, friends, we need to have a name given to us. But how do we get it? How do we get a new name, a new reputation?

A reputation that isn't our own but can be ours nonetheless? It can only happen when we look to the reputation of the one in whom there was no guile and no deceit.

When we look to the one who always spoke the truth, the one whose actions always matched his words, and yet the one who was crucified as a liar and a blasphemer so that hypocrites like you and me could be rescued.

[38 : 16] All this Jesus has done so that if we turn to him, he will give us a new name. His name. He will give us his reputation, his record as our own.

A reputation that will free us not just from judgment but from all our attempts at deception as well. No longer will we need to look good or devise schemes.

No longer will we need to impress or lie. Now we can finally be honest not just with one another but with God. We can rest in Christ's reputation and know that we're accepted by God.

500 years ago that was the truth that turned Europe upside down and 1500 years before that Luke tells us it turned the world upside down.

Friends, it'll turn your world upside down if you embrace it. to conclude then Luke is showing us here in this passage that the message of Christ creates nothing short of a counterculture.

[39 : 36] That's what we've been getting at. A community where generosity and honesty finally overcome greed and deception. Doesn't that sound nice? A community where love of money gives way to genuine love for one another.

A community where hypocrisy gives way to genuine openness to God and openness to one another. What about you friend? As you look at your life do you see those things?

Are you able to put it away and take it on? Put away the hypocrisy and the greed and finally be free for the generosity and the honesty that God has created you for.

As you look at your life do you see that? Turn to Christ receive his grace and he will make you a part of this counterculture that he calls his body the church.

Let's pray. Father we pray that as we meditate on your word once more God that much grace would be upon us all that we would know once again your fatherly favor towards us in Christ and Lord that we would not presume upon that grace but we would be struck as well with a healthy fear Lord not a fear of servants but a fear of children who love their father and want to please him in every way.

[41 : 38] Jesus we thank you for the name that you've given to us for the reputation for the righteousness that you've given to us Lord may that be our security our comfort our hope into the world to come Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen