

Future Church

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Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 0 0] Please turn to Acts chapter 4. As I said, this is really the sort of third message along the theme of the future of the church and the kingdom of God.

So in Acts chapter 4, we're going to begin at verse 32, and then we're going to read through to Acts chapter 5, verse 11. Okay, so Acts 4, verse 32, finishing at 5, 11.

Now hear God's word. Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and 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 lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

[1 : 1 6] And laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who is also called the apostle Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

But a man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property, with which 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 have contrived this deed in your heart?

You have not lied to men, but to God. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last, and great fear came upon all who heard it.

[2 : 3 0] The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. 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 have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.

Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in, they found her dead, and 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. Please, if you make your way again back to Acts chapter 4 and into chapter 5.

As I said, this message is sort of the third part in thinking through the kingdom and thinking through the future of the church.

[3 : 49] You might remember, or you might not, that my sabbatical studies was on this very subject. And one of the conclusions that I came to, given that if everything remains the same, which I don't believe that it will, you know, God is moving forward.

But I also believe that history repeats itself, and so what the church goes through in the future could mirror very closely what the church went through in the past. It's very hard, given that God's will is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven, to work out how many years it will be before Christ returns.

You know, I'm not a guessing man, and it's not something that I want to enter into, but it's not going to be quick. You know, I just, and I think that that's spelled out in the New Testament, that especially to the Thessalonians, Paul is having to remind them, look, go back to work.

Go back to work. There's lots to be done. Go back to work, and make sure you're busy, ready for Christ's return. So what will the world look like in 5,000 years' time?

You know, what will the world look like in 10,000 years' time? Well, we don't know, but we know that history is always going to move in that direction. And one of the things that I feel is going to happen to the church, and is already happening in parts of the world, is that the church is going to become poorer.

[5 : 14] And I think that's for the benefit of the church. I think one of the devastating things that happened in the West was that the church became rich.

And when the church becomes rich and it has money, sometimes people don't have the discerning nature to work out the difference between what is the work of money and what is the work of the Holy Spirit.

And they're unable to figure out which is which. Last year, 2017, was the first year of the demographic cliff. And what that means is this, is that those people who lived through the baby boom years and are still living, born in the baby boom years and are still living, are either just coming into retirement or have been in retirement for a number of years.

And most of the money that supports missions around the world comes from that group of people. And missionaries now rely on legacies more than they do regular giving.

Because the regular giving of people in work are unable to give in the same way because the pressures of daily life is so much greater. Well, if you skip forward then 15 to 20 years, 25 years, when all of those people have gone to glory, then their money goes with them.

[6 : 32] Their money technically doesn't go with them. But it doesn't come to the church. It ceases. Ceases. Now, we don't rely on money. We rely on God. But God works through the means that are available to all in the world.

And so it could just be that the future church is very similar to the early church where pastors become tent makers.

That's not ideal, but that may just be called for. And bivocational ministry may be required of all future ministers. It would depend on where you are in the world and money and so forth and so on.

But the pattern seems to be that history is going to repeat itself. The church, again, might just experience great poverty. The church here in Jerusalem went from being a church that was able to help other churches to then becoming a church that needed to be helped by others in a very short amount of time.

And it doesn't take much, does it, you know, for a few wealthy people to, you know, pass away and for something, some kind of tragedy to happen. And suddenly everything changes.

[7 : 46] You know, we've even seen that it's in family life where the wife and the husband, they have a couple of children and everything is going wonderfully well.

And then all of a sudden the husband loses his job and then suddenly things become incredibly hard. Well, the church goes through exactly the same kinds of patterns.

The danger here for us today is to see the work of God only in terms of salvific terms, only in terms of someone's personal salvation, as if the rest of the stuff doesn't matter.

And I want to argue that actually the rest of the stuff does matter, that we need to make sure that as a church we address things biblically and not that's the way that we've always done them.

And that requires that we have to read the scriptures carefully and then we have to apply them where we are carefully. But of course, we're in a situation like this where not everybody, though they read the same Bible, comes to the same conclusions.

[8 : 54] And that's the difficulty. You know, it's no good for a pastor to stand at the front of the church and say, I believe the Bible, because it doesn't tell a thinking congregation anything.

Because ten pastors could stand up and say, I believe the Bible. But what you really want to know is what do you believe the Bible teaches? See, the real issue is interpretation.

The real issue is how do we arrive at the correct understanding of what God is saying and therefore what God wants us to do? And this is spelled out in Corinthians.

This is spelled out in Hebrews. Hebrews says, look, come on. You should be on solid food by now, and I'm having to keep you on milk because you're nowhere near where you ought to be. Elsewhere it says you ought to be teachers by now, but you're still in need of teaching.

Paul says to the Philippian church, which is my favorite line in probably the whole of New Testament scripture when it comes to humor and sarcasm. Paul says this. Okay, if you don't see it my way, fine.

[9 : 55] But God will reveal it to you. I think that's a wonderful statement. I don't think any other pastor could get away with saying that. But the closest I can get to it is this, that we both serve God.

And you do it in your way, and I do it in his. Okay. Okay. A little bit harsh, I know. But that's the kind of thing that Paul's saying. Okay, we both serve God.

Okay. You seem to be doing it in your way, and I seem to be doing it in his. And that's the crutch here. That's the thing that we have to get clear on. What does God actually want?

Well, there's a couple of people here who don't seem to be understanding the work of the Holy Spirit within the congregation of God's people. They don't seem to understand, or even if they do, they are grieving the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of their contribution that the Spirit works equally through the lives of the people.

So the generosity may be in different measures, but the generosity will look the same. Jesus' dress is this, you know, to the disciples with the lady who just put in a couple of pennies, as it were, but she outgave everybody else because of the way that she gave, and that she had nothing left.

[11 : 11] She had nothing to buy her daily bread with. She gave her last. And that's not what's being addressed here, but the attitude and the motivation of why a person would do that is being addressed, and these two people, Ananias and Sapphira, to put it simply, don't seem to care.

And God deals with people like this. Here, he ends their lives. A good friend of mine was a minister on the world, and he said one day he was going through a series preaching on these type of things, and there's a guy in the congregation, never had, never seemed to have anything wrong with it, and just dropped dead.

Just dropped dead. We're all going to go that it was a health issue. But how many of us are going to go, well, what if God took him?

And again, our problem, our problem is not understanding whether or not God could do something like that. Our problem is interpreting whether or not that was God, or whether or not that was a medical condition, or whether God used the medical condition to bring it about.

It's very, very difficult. Very, very difficult. But the thing that is clear is that God does deal with his church on a daily basis. So let's get into the summary here. The church has clearly been transformed.

[12 : 36] There's a people transformed by the gospel. They've received the grace of God, and the Holy Spirit is dwelling in the lives of believers, and therefore dwelling in the lives of the church.

And therefore, there's not only a uniformity happening, but there's a definite unity here. Needs of people in the church are being addressed by those who have no needs, or rather, they have the means to address the needs of other people.

And this, of course, is a work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit allows people to be able to evaluate what's happening in the church, move accordingly, so those who have are able to help those who have not.

And this, by the way, I know that we live in Scotland, but this is not socialism. This couldn't be anywhere close to socialism. You know, or even Marxism, you know, controlling the means of production in order to control the means of distribution.

It's not even close to that. These people who have these things own these things. It's theirs. They've worked hard for it. They then own it. But because of the work of the Holy Spirit, they now begin to distribute what they don't need, or what they can, you know, afford not to have, sell it, and then give the proceeds to those who have need.

[13 : 59] And the only reason a church would do that, as we read here, is if a church is of one heart and soul, and where no one said that what they had was their own, even though it was their own, but now they're considering what they own in a different way, but they had everything in common.

In other words, what happens is the grace of God transforms your idea of ownership. It's not that it's not your own. It's not that you haven't worked hard for it, or that God expects you to work hard so that you can then give it to other people.

That's not what's being said here. Rather, what's being said here is that what you have, that if you see a need, you will address that need if you're able to meet it.

And that's the grace of God at work in the life of the church. There are two people here, however, who ruin the whole thing, this situation, Ananias and Sapphira, by keeping back some of the money.

They sold some, and they kept some money back, unlike Barnabas, who sells the field and lays the proceeds of the field at the apostles' feet. They have it all. In other words, what he's doing at this point is by giving it away, he no longer has any form of ownership over it.

[15 : 18] So he doesn't consider it his own, but it is his own as long as it remains in his possession. But the moment he gives it away, it then becomes for the benefit of all who have need.

I've got children. Yeah, but he gave it to me. Yeah, but I didn't give it to her to keep. Yeah, but, okay. And you have this back and forth of, well, children are very, how do you work out the difference between borrowing it if it's sweets?

He borrowed my sweets, and now there's only four left. Well, sweets is not one of those things you can borrow. Okay? So you have to learn these things. There are some things which can be transferred back and forth, and there are other things which get consumed, like money, which can.

Once it's spent, it's gone. And Barnabas would have understood that. Ananias and Sapphira sell a field, keep some of the money, and give some of the money away.

Now, there's a few lessons to learn here. Here's what I think the first lesson is. That the Holy Spirit allows people, or rather gives people the ability, to be discerning and be able to evaluate true need.

[16 : 31] I think that's what's happening here. The Holy Spirit enables people to evaluate true need within the church. And what I mean by that is, is that when a person comes under the power of the Holy Spirit, in terms of true conviction, and where the person's not grieving the Holy Spirit, they're able to evaluate what they need to get by on a daily basis.

And they're also able to evaluate that a family of 10, okay, or a family of four, which they may not be, need a whole lot more to get by on a daily basis.

And so the Holy Spirit seems to be able to work through the church, enabling people to see need. But in order to see need in other people, you've first got to be able to see your own need.

In other words, it's no good if you sold everything and then gave it to those who were in need, because guess who's in need now? All you're doing is transferring who's in need the most.

Okay, so that's not what's happening here. And so the Holy Spirit seems to enable people to evaluate need, their own need, what they can get by with, and what they don't need to get by.

[17 : 44] And then, of course, the needs of others who really have need in real terms, whether it be food or housing or a number of other things. So the Spirit creates generosity in the church by creating or giving the church the ability to evaluate need.

In other words, I can do without this. I can sell that second car. I can't give the money away. I can do without that, and I can give it to someone who has need.

And that's how the Spirit works. It also addresses your wants, but the issue here is need. Now imagine it this way around.

If Barnabas sold the field, but it was his source of income, what is he doing? Well, he's simply putting himself from a person who's able to help others in need to putting himself in need himself.

So if the field was a source of his own income, in other words, it brought his wage in on a yearly basis, and then he sells that fee, then he gets rid of his source of income, unable to help anybody else long-term, and also unable to help himself.

[18 : 51] So he then goes from being a person who can help to being a person in need. There's an issue there. That's not what's happening. The people who are selling things are not selling things to the point where they are completely damaging their own economic stability.

That's not what's happened. It may be a little bit more of a struggle to get by, but that's perfectly fine if you're going to help someone else out in need. Ananias and Sapphira sell a field.

Now, if they sold a field, then they could afford to sell it, you might think. Barnabas could certainly afford to sell the field and not have to worry about it because he gave all the money away, which means that he can get by without having to own that field.

And the reason is because Barnabas understands that it's not said here, but it's said in the Sermon on the Mount, it's said elsewhere in Scripture, that there has to be amongst God's people an economic solidarity.

There has to be an economic solidarity. It doesn't mean that everybody earns the same, and it certainly doesn't mean that everybody has the same. But what it does mean is that there has to be an economic solidarity by which the church takes care of the people in need.

[20 : 15] That's crucial. Absolutely crucial. It's not about evenly distributing wealth so that everybody has the same. That's not what's happening here. Rather, what's happening here is the distribution of wealth to address need.

And that's crucial. So there has to be, within the future of the church, an economic solidarity. There just has to be, as there was in the early church.

The Spirit enables people to evaluate. That's one of the lessons, key lessons. What about Ananias and Sapphira then? Well, it's often the case that most people think that their sin was actually the sin of trying to appear generous or more generous than what they actually were.

In other words, they sold a piece of property. They kept some of the money back, but in giving some of the stuff that was left, they are giving the impression that they're giving the full amount of the property that was sold.

And so the thing that, the sin that's being addressed here is the sin of appearing to give when you don't actually give. Or rather, the appearance of giving more when you're actually giving less.

[21 : 30] Could that be it? It could be, couldn't it? It could be that the thing that they were concerned about was just giving the appearance, and that's why Peter comes down on so hard on them.

But it seems unlikely for this reason. It's the way Peter answers Ananias which poses the problem. If you do interpret it that way, that Ananias and Sapphira's sin was a sin of claim, claiming to be more generous than what they actually were, then you've got a bigger problem.

And here's the bigger problem. Because nobody has to sell anything. You can just keep it all. Right? Nobody's under, it's a voluntary act of grace that you sell anything in the first place.

So Ananias and Sapphira didn't actually have to sell the piece of property, they could have kept it. And they wouldn't have been in sin if they did cave there. They wouldn't have been participating in an economic solidarity.

They would have been, you know, out of fellowship with the wider fellowship. They wouldn't have truly have been growing in grace and fullness and helping one another out. But they wouldn't have committed the sin that they committed here if they kept hold of the property.

[22 : 45] And so if you think that this is just about the claiming to be more generous than what you actually are, then you've got a bigger problem. Because what doesn't get addressed here is the fact that you can hold on to as much as you like and never give it away.

And that's not true, is it? That hoarding, storing up for yourself on earth, is the very thing that Jesus tells us not to do. He says, send it ahead. You're allowed to store up treasure, but only in one place, Jesus says.

Okay? Don't store it up on earth, store it up in heaven. Send it all ahead. And so it's a different type of treasure that makes it into heaven. So the issue of holding on to it has to be addressed here.

It seems that the answer then, if you look in chapter 5, verse 4, is found in the words of Peter. Verse 4. While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?

Well, yes, it remained his own. And after it was sold, here's the point, and after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?

[23 : 56] No. Understand what Peter's saying there. Please, really understand what Peter's saying there. Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man, but you've lied to God.

So this isn't, it seems, about appearing generous before men. Because the lie is not pointed out as a lie towards men, because you can't get away with God with anything.

You can appear to be generous with men, because men don't always pick up on the subtleties. But Peter's very, very clear that his sin was not actually against the congregation, though it was.

It's actually against God first and foremost. And let me try and address this in a slightly different way. Was it a lie? If it was a lie, which it was, what kind of a lie was it?

Now imagine it this way. I'm Ananias. Okay? And I'm trying to give you the impression that I'm being more generous than what I am. Could I do that? Well, of course. As long as you don't find out how much the property was in the first place.

[25 : 00] Or, because if you do, and then you'll be able to work out through a check and balance that, hang on a minute, you sold it for that much and you've only given this much, where's the rest of the money gone?

Right? So it's easy to check it out. But what if Ananias had a different kind of issue? What if Ananias had a need all of his own? Okay?

What if he had a need? And he figured out that if he sold this piece of property, he could pay off the small debt that he owed and then give the rest of it to the church?

That would be legitimate. That would be legitimate, wouldn't it? You couldn't imagine God coming down hard on that, that he's addressing need, but he's addressing some of his own debts first.

And God expects us to pay our debts. We're to be no man's debtor. So that would be a fulfillment of Scripture, not against Scripture. So if it was the case that Ananias kept some back in order to pay a debt, that wouldn't be a problem.

[26 : 01] So there must have been another reason why he kept some back. Because if he kept it back for the reason of paying a debt and God says that we're to be no man's debtor, that would have been a God-honoring decision to be able to distribute it in that way because he's paying off debts.

The issue is, however, what's the lie? I don't think, though I think it can be included, that he may just may have wanted to appear more generous than what he actually was.

That can happen, can't it? You know, it can happen where people say things in church, in church members meetings, and in other groups of other kinds that they've, you know, they just drop it into conversation and somehow all that they're doing is giving you the impression of just how generous that they have been.

Okay, okay, we can all agree that that can happen, but it seems to me that what's really happening is verse four, Peter seems to understand it, that while it was his own, it was his own, but the moment he sold it, it was at his disposal.

In other words, he didn't need it for anything else. He didn't need it for anything else. And so the sin that Ananias actually commits is the sin of not actually giving at all.

[27 : 29] He says he's going to give, he sells the field, but he doesn't actually give at all. What he does is he shares in a self-serving way.

He shares because he sells the property, which he can afford to do because it's at his disposal, which Peter fully understands. But as he sells the property, now he shares it.

He shares the money. So he's not addressing need, he's just sharing. It's a self-centered sharing because he's getting some before he gives anything to anybody else.

And that's the sin. That's the sin here, is that he's lying to God because he seems to have had somewhere along the line a change of heart. That though he's, perhaps it's a bit of a mimetic rivalry, and you've heard me say about this before, the imitative problem of the 10th commandment, you know, do not covet.

Well, covetousness can come out in jealousy. You know, you put one child into a room with 10 toys, he can play with any one of those toys that he likes. You introduce another child, which toy do you think he'll want?

[28 : 42] Yeah, you all know. And the reason you all know is because you all know that that covetousness kicks in. He's going to want the toy that the other child is playing with, even though there are nine other toys, and thus breaking the 10th commandment.

The child is breaking the 10th commandment. And that mimetic rivalry, that imitativeness, happens in the church all the time because they've done it, I must be seen to be doing the same.

And it's an act of covetousness, it's an act of mimetic rivalry, but it's so subtle that so many people don't actually see it. And maybe that's what Ananias has happened, that everybody else is doing it.

I don't want to be the odd one out. I don't want to be the only one to not have sold something, but I don't really want to sell it, so what I'll do is I'll sell it and I'll keep some for myself and give some. Well, that may be reading into it a little bit too far, but it's entirely plausible, isn't it, that that could actually be what's happening.

The truth is, however, he's not actually giving. He's serving himself. And that's the line. Somewhere along the line, he has had a change of heart.

[29 : 53] Now, Peter knows that if he is to trust God, he has to trust in the means of God. And so Ananias is dead, he's taken away, and Sapphira, his wife, turns up, and he asks her exactly the same question, and here's the brilliance, giving her the opportunity to repent, giving her the opportunity to come clean.

She doesn't know, but giving her the opportunity to say, well, actually, no, we sold it for this much, but we only give this much. And she doesn't. She goes right along with the lie, and God takes her life as well.

You know, God will not be mocked. God will not be mocked. And God deals with his people.

What is God actually dealing with, though? Is he dealing with sin? Well, I think he is dealing with sin. But I think the thing that God is really careful here with, and he wants us to understand it, is that he's actually dealing with the very thing that can destroy the unity of the church.

It's not just about dealing with two people's individual sin. Yeah, okay, that needs to be dealt with, but the thing that really needs to be protected is the wider body, and that their unity and uniformity cannot be damaged by people being allowed to mock God and get away with it.

[31 : 17] And so God not only removes the sin, but he removes the very thing that can cause disunity within the church. Why? Because the tenth commandment is a serious one. Mimetic rivalry is so powerful and so true that God wrote it in one of his commandments, thou shall not covet.

But the trouble is, we just think that that's wanting what somebody else has, but it's much more than that, so much more than that. God has been mocked, and God has taken their life.

Here's the exhortation as we close. There are two main considerations, I think, to understand here. The first is that God expects the community to look after the poor, those in need, but not at the point of your own making yourself poor.

There has to be a way of helping others without you ending up in that position yourself, or else you then be at the mercy of others.

And the church can go through highs and lows in the same way a congregation can go through highs and lows. In fact, the reason why the church gets rich and poor throughout the generations is because the people in it become rich and poor throughout the generations.

[32 : 32] The church here in Jerusalem at one stage was wealthy enough to help other people in its own church, but then at another stage, if you read on to Acts 11, they are now in need of help from other Christians in other places because they don't have the resources themselves, the highs and lows of life.

But here's the thing we really need to understand, that you're God's temple and God dwells in you. This is how Paul puts it in Corinthians.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.

There, that explains Ananias and Sapphira. That explains what happens there. That there, that what they did was actually an act of trying to attempt to destroy the temple of God.

That's how serious it was to God. We may not see it as serious as that, but that is how serious God saw it. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him for God's temple is holy and you are that temple.

[33 : 51] Here's the conclusion then. History has a funny way of repeating itself. Not just because people don't learn the lessons of the past, but because sin is present in every generation.

Covetousness is present in every generation. And generosity is also present in every generation. And so the thing for the church to realize is that in order to be the kind of community that God actually wants us to be, then we need to understand that our level of contribution needs to be great.

And what I mean by that is, is that too often in the Western world we measure a man or woman status by the job that they do and how much they earn. But it's interesting throughout Scripture that the thing that God is really concerned about is whether or not you're a contributor or you're just a layabout.

And a contributor is not someone who doesn't just contribute financially. Okay, some people can't contribute financially, but they can still contribute. And so in the church of God, everyone is expected to contribute.

But everyone can contribute in very different ways. Last week, I was with a very poor church. Very poor church. And in an area where they don't have the kind of social benefits that you have in this country.

[35 : 17] You just don't have it. And so the issues that you have is that in a church like that, how are you going to look after each other when you can't go to a government and a government isn't going to give it to you?

And you can't go here because you're not going to get handouts in that. Well, suddenly, the poverty of the church allows them to read Scripture in such a way where you begin to see that God has already answered these.

And God, in His grace, is able to take care of His people always. This is why He says, don't worry about tomorrow. Don't, just don't worry about it. God is more than capable of taking care of every one of us.

But the issue here is this, that when the Spirit is at work in the congregation, what begins to happen is a healthy evaluation of your own need and the needs of others.

A healthy evaluation of your own needs and the needs of others. There becomes an economic solidarity. It doesn't mean that you all have the same, but what it does mean is that you begin to address the true needs in the church.

[36 : 18] I'll finish with this. If what happened here happened in this church, would we recognize it? it. It's very difficult, isn't it?

Because now we're back to the interpretation issue. But it would be fair to say that God deals with the purity of His church throughout the generations.

The thing that we must concern ourselves with is that our endeavor to be of one heart and of one soul and not grieving the Spirit within the community of God's people. And with that, I'll finish.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.