

Family Matters

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[0 : 0 0] So we're back looking at our series in the book of Acts and as you know the book of Acts records the growth of the church and so many amazing things happen in the book of Acts and in the early church. So we read about the Holy Spirit coming in power, we read about astonishing signs and wonders, we read about exponential church growth, we read about genuine, loving, real, deep Christian community and it makes people say things like, well wouldn't it be wonderful if we were part of the early church or wouldn't it be great if the things that happened back then in Acts were happening in the church today? And I guess believers say these things because, well, they would just love to experience it all. Non-believers might say these things because they think, well, it'd be far easier for people like me to believe if we saw these kinds of amazing things today. Well, the question is, do you really want to go back to the early church? Having just read our reading today, did you see what happened? Ananias and Sapphira, God's judgment came upon them and they were killed on the spot because of their sin. And so Acts gives us a realistic picture of the church. Luke, the author of Acts, gives us the story of the church, warts and all. And he has no desire to paper over the cracks, as it were, or to airbrush out all the flaws, because what we get in our reading today, Acts chapter 4 verse 32 to chapter 5 verse 11, is the good, the bad, and the ugly of the early church. And so we see this, the positive, the positive being the result of the Spirit's work in the church. And we also see the negative, the negative being the reality of Satan's wrecking in the church. And that has always been the pattern for the church, and it always will be.

And so we need to get this so that we today respond in the right way. So I'd like us to look at three things this afternoon. First of all, we'll look at the result of the Spirit's work in the church, which is generosity. Secondly, the reality of Satan's wrecking in the church, which is hypocrisy.

And then thirdly, we'll look at the response for us. So first of all, the result of the Spirit's work in the church. And this is chapter 4 verse 32 to 37. Just look back earlier in chapter 4 to what happened after the believers prayed. Verse 31, after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. And then again, verse 33 of our reading, with great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And so the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ was proclaimed, the coming of the Holy Spirit filling believers to go and tell the world about Jesus. But also, we read the end of verse 33, that God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all. So what's the evidence of God's grace at work in the early church? What did it look like? Well, it's generosity. Verse 32, all the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. Now, because they were a loving family, united around the gospel of Jesus Christ, people were clearly more important than possessions. And that's something that we know in theory, people are more important than possessions. But when it comes to the bit, are those people more important than the possessions that I have? To the extent that I'm willing to give up my possessions in order to help those people? Because this is the kind of radical generosity that was expressed in the life of the early church.

They really did love and care for one another. It is so radical, just listen to it, verse 34 and 35. And there was no needy person among them. For from time to time, those who owned land or houses, sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Now, that is a beautiful picture of what the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ does in individual believers' lives and what it does corporately in the church. But this is not some kind of Christian communism where people were forced to put everything in some kind of big communal pot, and then it was all just dished out to everybody. No, this was church membership, not in the sense that you hand over your bank account details, the title deeds of your house, your car keys, all your possessions, whatever. No, this was not compulsory giving because people still owned private property, people still had possessions, but the point is they were generous with what they had, so they voluntarily gave when they saw others who were in need. And notice, it wasn't just disposable income that they were giving.

It wasn't money that they had lying around the house that they decided to share. No, the generosity involved the sale of their land or their property so they could free up money to then give that money away. So it was giving from capital, not merely income. And this takes generosity to a whole new level, doesn't it? I mean, it's easy to give what you can spare, or at least it's easier to give what you can spare. But to sacrifice your security for others who are in need is radical generosity. And yet that is how radical the gospel of Jesus Christ is. That is how it changes a heart. It turns us into givers instead of takers. Because God's generous grace towards us, when it sinks deep into our hearts, will then overflow in generosity towards others. And this generosity is a mark of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives.

[7 : 21] When the Spirit filled God's people in the early church, this is what happened. Radical generosity. And it's so down to earth and practical. And so we're given Barnabas as an example of this generosity. Listen to his introduction, verse 36 and 37. Joseph, the Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, he was called Joseph, but notice the apostles gave him a nickname, which proves it's okay to give people nicknames. Barnabas means son of encouragement. In other words, they called him Mr. Encouragement. Because what characterized Barnabas in his life and how he operated within the church was the fact that he was an encourager. He encouraged other people. And what a great way to be known in the church as the encourager, the son of encouragement. And it made me think, well, I wonder what we are known for in the church or what would we like to be known for? Would it be like Barnabas, our encouragement of others? Or maybe we are more like Gary, the grumbler? Or perhaps Louise, the loudmouth? Or Andy, the argumentative? Or Gloria, the gossip? Or Liam, the lazy dog? Or Isabel, the invisible? Because she's never there. Or Frank, the freeloader? Who's only there for what he can get. Or Helen, the hurtful? I had to stop there because it was quite hard working out imaginary names without mentioning any names in the congregation.

But the point is, what would your nickname be? What would my nickname be? If here is Barnabas, generous, generous, encourager, that's what characterizes him and his life, what would characterize my life or your life in the church family here? You see, Barnabas is mentioned because he would become significant in the early church. In fact, I think every church needs people like Barnabas, disciples whose lives are characterized by being an encourager and by being generous. And so as we apply this to ourselves, it's worth asking, well, what's the evidence of God's grace at work in my life? How has the gospel of Jesus Christ transformed me? Because when the gospel changes our hearts, we ought to become givers, generous givers, rather than selfish takers. Givers to God's work and to God's people, giving our resources, giving our encouragement. And when we do that, it is going to be costly in one way or another, isn't it? It will involve a level of sacrifice. And perhaps that's why we're often cautious about giving too much or being too generous because we don't want it to impinge upon our comfortable lifestyle.

We don't want to lose out anything for ourselves. Listen to what John Calvin wrote in his commentary. He said, we must have hearts that are harder than iron if we are not moved by the reading of this narrative.

In those days, the believers gave abundantly of what was their own. We in our day are content, not just jealously, to retain what we possess, but callously to rob others. They sold their own possessions in those days.

In our day, it is the lust to purchase that reigns supreme. You see, he's talking about making sure that I look after myself and I get what I want.

[11 : 38] But what we do with our possessions really indicates what we truly worship. Remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So how generous we are with our money indicates what our hearts truly worship. So these early believers weren't forced to give.

They gave because they wanted to. They wanted to support God's work and God's people. There was no compulsion. It was voluntary.

And that is the best way to give, isn't it? Because we want to. Where we see the need and we willingly respond. Better to want to give than to be made to feel guilty for not giving or for not giving enough.

Because if we give out of guilt, well, it's a short-term fix, isn't it? But it won't last. It won't be long enough. Because if generosity doesn't flow out from our hearts, it's no good.

[12 : 51] And yet it's not just about money here. Although it certainly is about money here. Because if we are rich in anything, then we're to be generous with whatever we are rich in.

Whether it's our time or our talents or our treasures. Because there's always going to be needs in any church family. And the needs will be of various kinds.

So some people will need money because they want to make ends meet. Some people will need friendship because they're lonely. Some people will need encouragement because they're down.

Some people will need support because they're weak. Some people will need a shoulder to cry on because they're sad. And so we'll want to be generous with what God has given us for the benefit and the blessing of the rest of God's people.

Because belonging to Christ's church means that we are part of a family. And so if you're part of this church family and you're in need and you don't receive when you're in need, then surely there's something wrong.

[14 : 05] Or if you're part of this church family and you don't give what you have to help others who are in need, then surely there's something wrong.

So can you see how the result of the Spirit's work in the church is generosity? It was then and it ought still to be today.

It's a mark of the Spirit's work in our lives as individuals and corporately as the church. So that's the first point. The result of the Spirit's work in the church is generosity.

The second point is the reality of Satan's wrecking in the church. And that's hypocrisy. And so the point is whenever the Holy Spirit is at work in the church, in God's people, well, Satan will also be working too.

And we see how Satan is active here in this reading. So already in Acts, we've seen Satan attack the church from the outside through the religious establishment.

[15 : 12] He does that in chapter 4 earlier. And now in chapter 5, we see him attacking the church from the inside through the sin of the people in the visible church.

So look at verse 1 and 2, chapter 5. 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, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Now perhaps Ananias and Sapphira quite like the kudos that Barnabas got for his encouragement and his generosity. And say they quite like the idea of having this reputation of being generous givers too.

And so what they do is they sell their property and then they keep some back in order to get the status. But when we're told that Ananias kept back part of the money for himself, it doesn't just mean he kept hold of some of it.

It means to embezzle, to steal, or to misappropriate. And it's interesting because the same word for kept back is an uncommon word, but it's used for the story of Achan in the book of Joshua, in Joshua chapter 7, which is actually an incident that closely parallels this one, where Achan also died because he kept back some of the treasure from Jericho, which was supposed to be all dedicated to God.

[16 : 51] But this was more than just Ananias and Sapphira keeping some money back for themselves. Satan is involved. Look at verse 3 and 4. Then Peter said, Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?

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

So Peter tells him he was under no obligation to sell the property in the first place. And because it's his property, he was under no obligation to give all of the money for the sale.

So what he was guilty of was dishonesty and deceit. And Peter says twice that Ananias lied. Yes, he lied to the apostles, but he lied.

To God. And that's how serious this was. And underlying all of this was hypocrisy. Because here were Ananias and Sapphira, part of the church, and yet they were pretending to be something in public that they weren't in private.

[18 : 18] And that's what hypocrisy is, isn't it? It's putting on a show. It's wearing a mask. It's pretending to be something that you're not. And yet they didn't succeed in fooling Peter or the apostles, and they certainly did not succeed in fooling God.

And so what is interesting here is whilst there's this obvious contrast between the two incidents, so the generosity of Barnabas and the other believers contrasted with the dishonesty of Ananias and Sapphira, that's one contrast.

But there's a far deeper contrast here that relates to the heart. And I think this is significant. Did you notice this in chapter 4, verse 31 and 32?

The believers who were filled with the Holy Spirit speak God's word and were one in heart and mind. They were one in heart and mind.

Contrast that with chapter 5, verse 3, where as Peter comes and he asks Ananias, how is it that Satan has filled your heart? And then the question Peter asks in verse 4 is better translated as, why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?

[19 : 37] For some reason the NIV misses out the word heart in verse 4. But the point is each of these incidents is about the heart. So seen positively, first of all, in generosity, and then seen negatively in the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

And the focus is on the heart because, of course, God sees our hearts and he knows our hearts. And so that's where the challenge of this passage comes to each of us.

Because when it comes to living out the Christian life, we can pretend to be something in public that we aren't in private. We can pretend to be generous when we aren't.

We can pretend to be committed when we're not. We can pretend to be holy and pure when we're not. We can put on a good show and yet behind the curtain of our lives, it can just all be lies and deceit.

And so we can be guilty of hypocrisy too. And we may be able to deceive others. And we may even be able to deceive ourselves.

[20 : 52] But there's no way that we can deceive God. Nothing is hidden from God. He knows exactly what we're like. And it's clear that this kind of hypocrisy is offensive to him.

And it's also dangerous in his church. And so while we might think that what we do doesn't really affect anyone else apart from me, in actual fact, what we do gives Satan the opportunity to attack God's church.

Because Satan loves to wreck lives and wreck churches. He loves to attack the unity of the church and to disrupt the good work that God is doing.

And so even better if Satan can use people inside the church as his instruments. And that's why we must take these verses as a real warning.

And be sensitive to the reality that we can unwittingly end up being used as Satan's instruments.

[22 : 02] And we can end up doing his work for him. We can be co-workers in his wrecking project. And it could be through deceit.

It could be through dishonesty. It could be through division. It could be through disruption. It could be through dissatisfaction. It could be through discouragement.

And yet we need to be alert to the reality of Satan's wrecking in the church through hypocrisy.

So that's the second point. The first, the result of the Spirit's work in the church. Secondly, the reality of Satan's wrecking in the church. And so thirdly, well, the response for us.

What should our response be? Well, it should be the same as the response of the early church, which was, you notice, a healthy fear. Look at verse 5.

[23 : 02] And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. And then again, it's repeated, verse 11. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

No wonder great fear seized the whole church. If a man and his wife dropped down dead today in this building, I'm sure great fear would seize the people in this building.

So the fact that this great fear seized everybody, the fact that it's mentioned twice, indicates that this is how our response should be to the work of God and his church.

Because what happened clearly tells us you can't mess about with God. Whether you call yourself a Christian or not, you can't mess with God.

And so let's just look at four points of application as we close. They'll be up on the screen. The first, take sin seriously. Ananias and Sapphira lied to God.

[24 : 11] And their sin was so serious that God's swift judgment instantly killed them. And so their story surely warns us just how offensive our sin is to God.

Sin is serious. Sin is serious. Sin is serious. So we should never think that what we do doesn't matter. Or we should never be so blasé when it comes to sin.

Because if we are, then it proves we have not fully grasped the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because the gospel is Jesus died on a cross.

He was punished for our sin. And so if we take our sin lightly, it means we haven't really understood the depths of God's love and justice.

And that's why we can't tolerate sin in our lives or in the church. And of course it doesn't mean that we will all be perfect and we will all be free from sin.

- [25 : 17] Because that's impossible. And it doesn't mean that there's no place for those who have failed or sinned in the church. The church is a hospital for sinners.
- Where triage happens. It is not a museum for saints. Because the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ means that we find forgiveness.
- Not to persist with our sin. But in order to battle against it. So that's the first point of application. Take sin seriously.
- The second is take Satan seriously. I think people often dismiss the devil too easily. Seeing him as a bit of a joke. Kind of figure with tight red tights on.
- Pointy tail. Pitchfork. Horns. All the rest of it. And yet the devil is no joke. He's God's enemy. And he's the enemy of God's people.
- [26 : 16] And so he will do all he possibly can to attack God's church. Even if it means using those within the church to do his wrecking work.
- And that is one of his sly tactics. Is to subtly attack from within. Because that's how he can do great damage. I love C.S. Lewis' book The Screwtape Letters.
- And early in the book Screwtape says to his junior demon. He says one of our great allies at present is the church itself.
- He's saying the church is a great ally in our work of seeking to destroy God's work. And so for us let's never think that we are somehow immune to Satan's wrecking work here in Christ Church Glasgow.
- He will love hypocrisy. He will love deceit. He will always love to see people being divisive and seeking to disrupt and destroy.
- [27 : 24] So that's the second point of application. Take Satan seriously. The third. Take the church seriously. The church is God's means of accomplishing his salvation plan for this world.
- So the church is God's plan A. There is no plan B. So what we do as a church matters. Well all that we do matters. And so the church isn't a club where we can come and go as we please.
- It's a family where we are known and loved and cared for. And where we know and love and care for others. As it says here we are to be one in heart and mind.
- So we'll see the needs of others and seek to meet those needs. Like Barnabas. And we may need to confront one another on issues of sin.
- Like Peter did with Ananias and Sapphira. Because the spiritual health of our church and every single member matters.
- [28 : 31] And so this incident here shows us why church discipline is necessary. Because God is no less concerned about his church today than he was back in Acts chapter 5.
- So take the church seriously. And then fourthly, take God seriously. These events really are reminders of just how dangerous it is to take God lightly.
- Remember Ananias and Sapphira died on the spot because of their sin. And so you might wonder well does this mean that God judges in the same way today?
- Well it may not be exactly like this. But God can bring his judgment anytime he wants.
- In any way he wants. The writer to the Hebrews says it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.
- [29 : 34] And listen to Jesus. He said but I will show you whom you should fear. Fear him who after your body has been killed has authority to throw you into hell.
- Yes I tell you fear him. And so we must take God seriously. And never underestimate his judgments.

And so the right response here is a healthy fear. And we'll get this if we have discovered forgiveness for our sins. Through faith in Jesus Christ.

But if we don't take God seriously. Then we have got every reason to fear. Because we face something far worse than physical death.

Because the time will come when we'll be exposed for who we truly are. On the judgment day. The curtains will be drawn back. There will be no more pretending.

[30 : 36] No more hypocrisy or deceit. Because God sees and knows our hearts. And God's judgment for our sin will be separation from him forever in hell.

And so while God takes our sin seriously. At the same time his love for us is also serious. How do we know?

Well because he sent Jesus to die on the cross. To bear the judgment for our sin. Jesus took our sin on himself.

So we could be set free from God's punishment. It was so that somehow God could destroy all sin and all evil. Without destroying us.

And so the good news of Christianity is. That we are all so flawed. That Jesus had to die for us. And yet we are all so loved.

[31 : 40] That Jesus was glad to die for us. And when we get both of those. And we understand them. And we grasp them. And they sink into our hearts.

Well they lead to a right fear. And reverent awe of God. And yet also a confidence in God at the same time.

Because we know that God accepts us. Not on the basis of anything that we have done. But he accepts us on the basis of what Jesus has done for us.

And when we truly get that. And it changes our hearts and transforms us. Then the overflow is a life of generosity towards others.

It also means that we can let our guard down. We don't need to pretend we're anything we aren't. We can't pretend we're something we are not. Because the ground at the foot of the cross is level.

[32 : 44] And we all need to go there for forgiveness of sin. And when we receive that forgiveness. It transforms us. In the here and now.

But transforms us forever. And as it does that for each member of the church. Then that picture of love and care and generosity.

And lack of pretense. Should be a beautiful picture. That's put on display for the world to see. The frequency. The remains. For themat resumes.

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