

"What a Healthy Church Looks Like"

Acts 4:32-5:11

In Acts 4, Peter and John were arrested for claiming that a dead man (Jesus) healed a man born lame (Ch. 3) through them. The religious leaders (who were responsible for putting Jesus to death) hate any talk about Jesus, especially that He rose from the dead and is now speaking through and doing the miraculous through His disciples.

When Peter and John are arrested and asked to defend their speech and actions, Peter clearly states that it was by Jesus' Name that this man was healed, "whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead" and that in Jesus' name alone is salvation found. Somewhat taken aback by Peter and John's boldness, they command them not to speak about "this Name" anymore. They threaten them but don't harm them and release them. The apostles gathered, praised God and prayed that God would continue to give them boldness to communicate Jesus' message and that God would cause more miracles. God affirms their prayers by shaking the place.

So the Apostles passed their first threat with flying colours. Instead of being afraid they are emboldened to keep sharing Christ. But Satan does not give up so easy. If he can't be victorious from outside attacks, he tries an internal attack. The early church is going great which makes the enemy unhappy. If we're doing something right we can expect there to be trouble somewhere along the line.

Ch. 4:32-5:11 is one section. In 4:32-37 we see a church growing in unity and mission. Everyone was willing to do their part to meet the needs of the community of faith. Some even sold their houses or land and gave it to the apostles to use where they saw it needed to be used. We are given an example of this from Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, who we know better as Barnabas. Barnabas will play a key role in Acts and Luke introduces him here.

But 5:1-11 introduces us to a couple in the church named Ananias and Sapphira who also sold land and gave the money to the apostles, except that they lied about the amount and kept some for themselves. Why did they do it? Because they wanted people to be impressed by how much they gave and wanted the attention that Barnabas got (not that he was looking for any).

Peter, by Holy Spirit insight, confronts them and says flat out that their lie is because they listened to Satan and not to the Spirit. They agreed together to lie about the money wanting to get attention while at the same time wanting it for themselves. This was a crucial moment for the early church. If Ananias and Sapphira got away with this how would that affect the entire church? Barnabas would become a prominent leader in the church. Would Ananias and Sapphira have as well, had their sin not been found out? What happens when self-centered people get involved in the life of the church?

So we have two very opposing portraits of believers here that show us the right way to live and the wrong way to live. In 4:32-37 we see a picture of believers who are loving God and when we love God we love people and seek to help them. In Ananias and Sapphira however, we see believers who love self more than God and we see what we lose when self is the focus and not God. Jesus summarized the commandments when He said

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

How do we get to the spiritual place in our life where we're ...

Loving God Leads to Loving People **(4:32-37)**

... like we see in vv.32-37? The text points out a few key points that will get us there individually and corporately.

³²All 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. ³³With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. ³⁴There 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 ³⁵and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

"All the believers were one in heart and mind" echoes back to Acts 2:42,

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

This has been going on consistently because they were growing Spiritually. We'll love God more and as a result love people more when

We're learning everything is by grace (vv.32, 33b)

We're saved by grace, not by our own goodness. We're uniquely created and gifted by grace and all that we have been blessed with is also by God's grace. When we see what we have is not through our own power, intelligence or goodness, we hang onto it loosely and understand that God intends for us to use our wisdom and resources to help people. And through their continued spiritual growth they saw this together; '*all were one in heart and mind*'. They agreed on their mission and purpose because they had a united God-centered vision of the world. They didn't claim their possessions for themselves, they instead claimed that God has blessed them with them in order to help others out.

But we can't develop that mindset if we we're not growing spiritually through greater understanding of God through His Word. I think this is what Peter means in 2 Pet. 3:18 when he commands us to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ; to Him be glory both now and forever.' The more biblical knowledge we have, the more we should understand how undeserving we are to be shown God's love and grace at all. The more we see everything is for God and Jesus' glory we can see how God wants us to bless our world so that God gets more glory. This is why our vision here is to share the joy of God (His message) as we work together (one mind and heart) to glorify God. And we get greater joy in doing that than living to please self.

Look at the end of v.33: , *and much grace was upon them all.*

'Much' grace is the word mega or great just like the first part of v.33, with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Great grace was upon them from God receiving His favour because they were of one mind and heart that everything was for God. As they

were growing in knowledge they were understanding God's grace more and showing much grace to each other.

We'll love God more and people more because

We're committed to sharing God's truth (v.33a)

³³ *With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,*

The prayers after their arrest for more boldness (v.29) were answered. Thousands of people were getting saved. When we're spiritually maturing in grace and knowledge of the Lord, we will be burdened for the lost and be looking for ways we can invite more to follow Jesus. The great power was not in the apostles' skills but in the Spirit. When we're of one mind and heart in Christ to see Him and His Father glorified, then sharing the message that brings people eternal hope and present joy will come naturally. Each of us are uniquely created with skills and Spirit-given gifts to communicate the gospel as we should. I like to use Paul's prayer in Eph. 6:18 as a way to pray for our own individual way of sharing the gospel:

¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. [or as I ought to]

That last phrase 'as I should/ought' can be taken as something we know we should do, but also we can take it as, as 'I ought' in the way I do it according to God's giftedness in my style. Which is very freeing because none of us saves anyone. God does that. Which means He can use any of us in the way He created us and takes our fumbling attempts at sharing His Word and can make disciples from that.

And this of course is another way we'll show we're loving God and people:

We act when the Spirit prompts us (vv.34-37)

Acts 4:34 tells us that from 'time to time' those who had houses or land were led of the Spirit to sell them because they heard there was a need in the church community. Notice it says simply that they brought the money from the sales. Doesn't say each one gave all the money from the sale only that they gave the proceeds. Could mean all of it. Could mean the profit. Doesn't specify. Nor does it say everyone or all the time. From time to time, as needs arose. Barnabas is mentioned because he's going to become a leader in the church.

We read there were no needy persons among them, because every time a need arose, someone prompted by the Spirit was led to give. And we could take this as an opportunity to talk about ways we should give our money to the work of God but that's not really the focus here. If anything the focus should be, does anyone have a need that we're not aware of? How can we meet that need with the resources we have at our disposal or by appealing to the church family to respond to the Spirit's prompting? It's always cool to see how God works that way. Whether it's a financial need, shoeboxes, disasters in our country, Gideon bibles for a foreign people group, water purifiers for desert areas, etc. It's a real blessing to give towards meeting the needs of those God directs us to.

But not every believer loves God and people the way God desires. We all struggle to let go of self. Now we're introduced to a married couple in the church, Ananias (whose name ironically means 'God is gracious') and Sapphira (whose name means beautiful), yet both of them did not live up to

their names. Both of these people will lose their life in a dramatic judgment from God because God was not going to allow deceitful dishonesty to creep into the church, which had just started. God didn't bless Joshua with another victory after Achan stole some treasure from the destruction at Jericho, until the sin had been pointed out and removed. So here, the same idea. The church could not advance and grow if this sin was not dealt with. So how do we apply this to ourselves? I think we look at it from the perspective of how

Love for Self Leads to Loss of Blessings **(5:1-11)**

If we want ministry to go only our way, if we want the attention in ministry then we will lose out on so many blessings. What kind of blessings did Ananias and Sapphira throw away because they wanted to impress people? They lost the blessing

Of modelling a Christ-like marriage (vv.1-2)

We read that they conspired together to lie about how much money they sold their property for which they were to give to the church. What other things did they conspire on? This was not a marriage of 'oneness' in God but we're in it for ourselves. A biblical marriage Paul points out is to model Christ.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. [Eph. 5:31-33]

When Christian couples are one in heart and mind, growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, looking to glorify God together, we model how much Jesus loves the people of God. Mutual respect, sacrificial love and servant attitude. We could have read that Ananias and Sapphira were instrumental in the early days of the church but we do not.

When our focus, even as a believer, is on our self (what we want to do, what we want from the church family, what we don't want to see), we all lose the blessing ...

Of making an eternal impact (vv.3-4)

Peter says they lied about what they kept for themselves. No one said they couldn't keep any for themselves. Everyone has to live. God doesn't command us to give all our resources to Him, only that we give consistently and that we make it available to Him because it's His anyways. Why did they do it? Because they saw how everyone was impressed with Barnabas. They wanted the attention. They wanted to please people. Jesus challenged us with our resources in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 6:19,

¹⁹ *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

How can we use up our resources during our time on earth so that it is used for eternal investments? The longer we hang on to it the danger it has of clinging to us. Of becoming our security blanket or idol. Imagine what Ananias and Sapphira could have done for the needy, for the church

community or to finance gospel mission projects? But they threw that away because they didn't want to let it go.

Peter confronts Ananias in vv.3-6 and we read in v.5 that when Ananias heard this he fell down and died. Peter didn't announce his death. God did it. Much like God struck down Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's two oldest sons, who presented unauthorized fire before the Lord. Or like King Uzziah who wanted to make a sacrifice but it wasn't his place and God struck him with leprosy. Or Gehazi, Elisha's servant, who like Ananias and Sapphira, lied about wealth that he was given.

What happens when we blow our testimony because of selfish sin? We lose out on the blessing

Of leaving behind a good name (vv.5-6)

[Prov. 22:1] A good name is more desirable than great riches;
to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

And 3 verses later we read, ⁴ *Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life.*

Ananias and Sapphira's names are not remembered because they feared God but because they wanted the applause of people. They wanted self-glory not God's glory. Now we remember their names forever for the wrong reasons.

When Sapphira comes later, not knowing what happened to her husband, Peter gives her the opportunity to repent and tell the truth when he says, *Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"*

God was extending grace to Sapphira. She could have confessed their lie and repented of her sin. And when we don't repent of our sins when God speaks to us we lose out on

The joy of repentance (vv.7-11)

When David wrote Ps. 51, and prayed his prayer of confession to God, he said this:

⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

David missed the joy of his relationship with God. Selfishness and sin had temporarily blocked fellowship with God. He asked for forgiveness. He wanted to know the peace and joy of walking with God. Sapphira had that chance. Even Ananias could have confessed his sin to Peter when Peter said,

You have not lied to men but God', but he didn't.

We have two examples of believers before us. One who simply followed God as the Spirit prompted, another couple who had come to Christ but perhaps because of lack of spiritual growth, failure to connect with the body of believers or who just never grasped what it meant to count the cost to follow Jesus, wanted the 'well done' from people more than God. God shows us what a healthy church looks like here with Barnabas and the majority being of one mind and heart and of the leadership taking sin seriously in the church family. When we fail to grow in the grace and knowledge

of the Lord Jesus Christ, we will be open to the enemy's whispering to our hearts that life is about us and what we want.

So, how do we love God and love people like Barnabas?

- Grow in grace and knowledge. The more we know about God from His Word we see how good He is to us and how undeserving we are to be saved and blessed with good Christian community. The more we grow spiritually, the more grace we should show towards other undeserving sinners.
- Be an encourager and don't worry about being encouraged. We all have our little pity parties now and then but we know when we encourage others we are blessed. Jesus said it's better to give than receive.
- When you are made aware of a need and the Spirit prompts you to act, don't wait and see if others will do it so you don't have to. Give. Serve. Invite. Call. Drop in. Treat others the way you want to be treated.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net