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Grace and Judgment

Acts 5:1-11

Intro: Last week we concluded [ch4](#) by observing the picture Luke has painted for us that provides a glimpse of the daily life and ministry of the early church. He explained how the church was experiencing a unity of mind, of will and of purpose. They were in agreement emotionally and theologically. This unity was subsequently expressed in their generosity in giving for the needs of the church body. This giving was voluntary and sacrificial but was not seen as a burden because the believers, new and old, recognized that God had first been generous to them. More importantly, even after Peter and John had been arrested for healing and preaching in Jesus' name, the apostles were still able to give witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ – with great power.

After giving us this general statement about the mindset and daily ministry activities of the church; Luke goes on to share a specific instance of this mindset and how it assisted the overall body of believers. He presents “Exhibit A” in the person of a man named Joses. Joses was his real name but the apostles began to call him Barnabas, apparently because he was such an encouragement to them and the church. We don't know much about Joses' previous life other than he was a Levite and he was from Cyprus. We will learn more about this man as we continue our study of [Acts](#) as he is mentioned another 24 more times in this book and another 5 times in several of the epistles. In fact, it is this same Barnabas who will encourage Paul early in his ministry for the Lord; which was a blessing for all believers.

Luke doesn't include this blurb about Barnabas so that he could simply introduce a new character into the story. Luke is painting this ideal picture of the church in harmony with Barnabas as the exemplary figure of that in order to provide a backdrop for the disharmony that would soon appear as the result of the great deception of Ananias and Sapphira. Luke is setting up a picture in contrast between the great sin recorded in [ch5](#) and the sweet harmony of the church in [ch4](#). The sin appears so suddenly and is so out of character from what we know so far of this church that it is nothing less than shocking. But, although this church was seeing God work in marvelous

ways through it's individual members, it was not a perfect church.

The literary contrast Luke provides is important but there is also another subject that's important for us to be clear on if we are going to fully understand what's happening in [ch5](#). That subject is biblical giving. Last week I made the comment that there are several reasons cited for why many Christians do not give to the Lord but they all boil down to either a lack of knowledge or a lack of trust. If this is the case then it would behoove us to turn to God's word to see what it has to say about the subject of giving. I will admit that our text today does not necessarily deal with the topic of giving but the critical events of the text occurs within the environment of giving: Barnabas' proper giving in contrast with Ananias and Sapphira's improper giving.

If you're out there just tuning in and are saying to yourself, "Here we go again; another full court press for money!" Let me assure you that is not the case! There will be no plea for donations at the conclusion of this message; no promise of abundant blessings showering down upon you in accordance to your small contribution. That's not how biblical giving works. In fact, if you're out there and you have never accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord you need to know that Jesus doesn't want your money – He wants your heart. If you are currently unwilling to give your heart to Jesus then you could give all your worldly possessions to a church and it wouldn't do you any good. There's no one on earth that can afford to pay the required price for salvation so it's a good thing Jesus paid it for us.

Now, if you are already a believer, God already has your heart but what He really desires is to have more of your trust. He wants His children to trust Him in every area of their lives; to trust that what He has said in His word is true, to trust His word enough to submit to it, to obey it and to see the growth in faith and power to serve that result from walking in His truth. That's what God desires from His children and part of that process involves biblical giving so it is necessary that we take just a few minutes to discover what God has instructed us concerning this topic.

Part of the confusion that surrounds biblical giving stems from the fact that many Christians don't have a balanced view of money. The spectrum of knowledge on giving falls between 2 extreme views. In the early days of the church, some came to believe that in order to be truly spiritual and live holy

lives, you had to be poor. So, more than a few individuals took a vow to relinquish all material possession, sold all they had and gave it to the poor. Although this concept of money has fallen out of favor with most Christians today; it has unfortunately been replaced with the extreme opposite view.

The popular view among many churches today is that those who are truly spiritual and live holy lives will be rich. This teaching has become known as the “prosperity gospel.” Teachers of the prosperity gospel believe God wants all of His children to be rich and healthy. Thus, any problems with money or health can be traced back to sin. This is bad doctrine – no, this is horrible doctrine! This teaching is horrible because it feeds the greed of those who spew it out and inflames the desires of those who drink it in. And, when it is finally revealed as a false doctrine in normal daily life – it causes those who’ve been burned by it to shun church and think poorly of a holy God. The Bible never says God wants all His children to be rich. Instead, it gives warnings to the rich ([I Tim 6:17-19](#)).

Between these 2 extremes is the Bible and in it, God allows some Christians to be rich, some middle class and some poor. The concern of Scripture is not what financial level you are but what your attitude is towards what you have. The Bible is also concerned with your stewardship of the financial and material blessings God has given to you. Good stewardship is viewing your possessions as being at the disposal of God and not just to be consumed on your own selfish desires and pleasures. The rich, middle class and poor can all have an improper attitude towards wealth, viewing their money and possessions selfishly.

But, what does the Bible say about giving? It actually says a lot – more than we have time for today. In fact, it’s been documented that Jesus had more to say about money than He did about heaven or hell. The passage that gives us the clearest picture of biblical giving is found in [I Cor 16:1-2](#). This is proper, biblical giving in a nut shell. In it, Paul lays out 4 basic truths about biblical giving that actually make it possible for any believer to participate in it.

1) Biblical giving is an act of worship. The church met on the 1st day of the week to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus and the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. This offering was not to be seen as a duty to be performed but as a sacrifice to be presented to the Lord. Giving is an act of

worship to the resurrected and ascended Lord.

2) Biblical giving should be systematic. The implication is that these believers were to give on the 1st day of every week. Obviously, not everyone gets paid on a weekly basis but most everybody does have an income of some sort. What Paul is instructing is that, if the income is regular so should be the giving. Small gifts given consistently over time have a greater impact than a random large gift. Stewards are required to be faithful - that means consistent. If you are a believer then you are a steward. We belong to God and all we have belongs to Him as well; we just handle it for Him. The question is how do we handle God's blessings?

3) Biblical giving should be personal. Paul, speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, expected "each" member to share in the offering, rich and poor alike. Anyone with an income was privileged to participate in sharing to help those in need and all would share in the blessing. What if someone chose not to participate? God's will would still be done, the ones in need would have their needs met but these would have missed out on partnering with God in resolving it.

4) Biblical giving should be proportionate. God never demands a flat fee; he never presents an unattainable goal to His children. How can each person give systematically, no matter what their income is? Your giving should be proportionate to your income. Paul's referring to a percentage of income but he doesn't specify what that percentage should be. Paul is not so much concerned with the mechanics of giving as he is with the heart behind the gift.

It's true; the church doesn't know the motivations behind any of the offerings it receives but God does. You might say, "But it all spends the same, right?" Yes, if you're just talking about making the budget; but is that what is best for the church? The church does need to make its budget and does need to meet its financial responsibilities. But, which scenario is best: having a church full of fat wallets or a church full of hearts like the poor widow in [Luke 21:2](#)? Giving that's centered in God's grace isn't a duty or obligation; it's an act of worship from a willing heart offered to a God who loves us with all His heart. With this thumb-nail sketch on giving now in our minds, let's look at our text.

1-6 – I've heard of being slain in the Spirit but this guy seems to have been slain by the Spirit. What gives? Again, we must look back to the end of **ch4**. Why were so many people selling their property and giving it to meet the needs of the church? Well, as has been mentioned, the church had some rather pressing needs. There were a lot of new converts in Jerusalem who weren't from there and wanted to stick around and learn more about their new faith. There's possibly another factor as well. Before He left, Jesus had told His followers that Jerusalem was going to be overthrown. Maybe many of them took this to heart and realized that all their real estate holdings wouldn't do them any good when that happened. They might have decided to sell them while they still had value and use them for the Lord's work now. This idea can't be proven but it does help explain the mindset of the church if it is true.

Regardless of the reason, the fact still remains that Barnabas didn't have to sell his property. It didn't even make sense from a human perspective. But, he wanted to see the kingdom of God advance so he sold his field, took the money and laid it at the apostle's feet. It is likely this act that caused the apostles to bestow upon him the new name of Barnabas: Son of Encouragement. Maybe they called him "the Encourager" because of the way he acted.

Sadly, there were 2 people sitting on the other side of the church who noticed what was going on and wanted to be acclaimed like Barnabas. It was Ananias and his wife Sapphira. They were probably thinking, "I wish people would praise us like that. Look at all the attention that guy is getting. Wouldn't it be cool to be thought of as an Encourager by our friends?" So, they decided to sell their piece of property and do the same thing. The problem is, they wanted to be seen in the same light as Barnabas by the apostles and the church but they were not like Barnabas at all. They may have appeared to be on the outside but inwardly, they were of a completely different character.

Barnabas gave his gift out of thanksgiving to God and concern for God's people. He was honest about it. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be treated the same way Barnabas was treated, but they were not honest. They sold the property, saw the money and then kept back part of it for themselves while giving the rest, pretending to give it all. Even if it hadn't been in their hearts before, the evil hypocrisy was hatched.

They knew the sale price was unknown to the church. They could keep back part of it and no one would be the wiser. “They’ll think we’re just like Barnabas.”

The name Ananias means God is gracious because he soon found out that God is also holy. Peter, in his response to Ananias, acknowledges 3 things concerning his hypocrisy. The least important was the right of ownership. This isn’t something Peter made up, the right to ownership was in the OT. The 8th commandment says, “You shall not steal.” In order to steal, you have to take something that belongs to somebody else, something they own. Peter acknowledges that Ananias didn’t have to sell his property and after he sold it, he didn’t have to give it all to the Lord. The problem wasn’t that Ananias didn’t give everything he had, but that he pretended to be giving it when he was actually holding some back. The problem was his hypocrisy and lying, not that he owned property. He was part of the church, and falsehood destroys the fellowship within the church.

Next Peter points out Satan’s role in this. Peter didn’t instinctively surmise Satan’s activity, he was acting as the mouthpiece of God; speaking by Holy Spirit inspiration and as such, he hit the nail on the head! Satan was outraged by what was happening in this Christian fellowship. He hated the generosity and unity they were enjoying so he tries to destroy it. Understand, Satan didn’t make him do this; he planted the idea but Ananias chose to act on it.

What should Ananias have done? [Jam 4:7](#) says, “Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” Some try to resist the devil without first submitting to God, then they realize that the devil doesn’t flee! He runs over them like a tank because he’s more powerful than they are. We only stand when we first submit to God; only then do we stand in God’s strength. It’s only because of God and His strength that the devil flees.

Finally, Peter points out that Ananias hadn’t sinned against him or the church; he sinned against God! Peter informs him that the sin he committed was of great concern to God! Most of us go through life thinking that what we do is unimportant but, no matter what we do, it matters to God and it matters to other people. Everyday we are faced with a multitude of choices and every choice we make is slowly turning us into either a heavenly creature or a hellish creature. They turn us into creatures that are in

harmony with God, other people and ourselves or they turn us into creatures who are in a state of war and hatred towards God, others and ourselves. Humans are eternal beings. The choices we make matter eternally, they matter to God. They should matter to us...

7-11- Luke tells us in vs2 that Sapphira was in full knowledge and consent to this fraud and to make matters worse, when she arrived on the scene, she repeated her husband's lie. I'm sure Peter was just as surprised as everyone else when Ananias keeled over dead but when Sapphira came in spouting the same story, he probably thought, "well, it figures!" Note that Peter never made any pronouncement of judgment on either of them, he simply confronted them with their sin and they fell down dead. They simply could not live in the atmosphere of purity that existed in the church in those days.

What do we learn from this episode? 1) There's no perfect church, not even the church of the apostles. Since this is the case, we need to pray for our congregation. We should pray that God would empower us to do better, to protect us from the influence of Satan and that He would preserve us in our faithfulness to Him

2) How do we effectively submit to God? Through daily prayer and Bible study. It's only through these disciplines that we become truly submissive to God's will because it's in Scripture that God has expressed His will

3) We presume greatly on God when we assume that there is always time to repent, time to get right with God, time to get honest with Him. Any such time given by God is an undeserved gift that he owes no one! We should never assume that it will always be there.

Why did God strike these 2 dead for what seems like a minor infraction? If you consider the cases of Nadab and Abihu; Achan and Uzzah; each of whom were either struck dead by God or condemned to be executed by Him, we notice that each of them occurred during a time of important new beginning for God's people. Right at the start of each time period, God established how seriously He considered the purity of the relationship of His people to Himself.

God is not indifferent to His people's sins. This may be why Peter would

later write in his 1st epistle (4:17) “For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” Peter knew the church in his day wasn’t perfect and God judges sin. But, as we will see next time, it was this judgment of God against sin in His people that was the seeds of revival in this church. 😊