

# TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

*SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD*

By Steve Zeisler

Two of the objections most often voiced to Christianity are that Christian people are hypocrites and that they are greedy. We make claims about the gospel and its power to change lives, to break the hold that the love of money has on human hearts, but very often we fall short of the claims we make. These themes are before us in the text we'll study in this message, Acts 4:32-5:11.

What we have been doing is using our imaginations to examine the lives of these folks in the historical record and learn from them. But I wonder what it would be like if some of the first believers were transported to our time and place. Certainly they would be impressed with technological advances. But if they were to look at the quality of our Christian life compared to their experience, I'm sure their hearts would be broken. They would be astonished, for instance, that we have special speakers and retreats in order to learn basics like how to pray, have meaningful worship, and care about the poor. It would be amazing to them that a church would be known as a preaching church, or a missions-minded church, or a church with fine small groups, or a church that is sensitive to seekers, or a church in which signs and wonders are evident, because for them all these things were intertwined in the whole experience of God's love poured out on his people and their expression of love back to him. They would surely scratch their heads at how much of a struggle it is for us to be united, to be genuine in community, to go deep in our relationships with one another.

We left off in the last message (Discovery Paper #4745) with a public prayer of the church after Peter and John had confronted the Sanhedrin. Verse 31 says, "And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness." Then in verses 32-35 we have another description of what it was like to be part of that community.

## One heart and soul

**And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need.**

This description is reminiscent of chapter 2, in which church life of this sort is described for the first time. Both descriptions center on generosity, the freedom the believers had to give away their money for the sake of Christ and the needs of the people.

There are differences between the end of chapter 2 and this text in chapter 4. The differences have to do with how settled and thoughtful their expression was. In chapter 2 everything was happening for the first time. The Spirit descended upon them, the three thousand were gathered in one day in the birth of the church, and they were devoting

themselves to teaching and worship and prayer. They were spontaneous in their enthusiasm for one another. They were in each other's homes. They would meet the needs of the poor spontaneously, without any thought or effort.

It was a bit like falling in love, if you will. Falling in love is a magnificent thing. I commend it. There's no effort involved; life is filled with excitement and wonder. That was clearly the experience of the early church. The beauty of the life of Christ expressed in them was breathtaking every day. The phrase that controls the description of the church in chapter 2 is that they were *filled with awe*.

The controlling phrase in this text, which describes the church some time later, is that they were *of one heart and soul*, or one heart and mind. This is a description of people who are not just discovering something about each other, but have walked together long enough to love with intention.

But both in the initial spontaneity of these believers and in the more mature expression they arrived at, the striking characteristic evident was generosity, freedom from control of their lives by material goods.

We need to be clear that what we see here is not communal ownership of things, although it may look that way at first glance. Each family retained ownership of whatever they came into the church with. But there was a new recognition of and commitment to the reality that the things over which they had control were not their own. The position taken throughout the New Testament is that we are stewards or managers of what is owned by God. Our responsibility is to find out what the owner would like done with the things he has given us control of, and to make choices in agreement with what he has in mind. When these believers started regarding their things as belonging to God, they became free to expand the use of their things for the needs of other people.

Most believers can't make a one-time choice to divest themselves of things and be done with it. Stewardship rightly understood is not a one-time accomplishment. You must make choices today and tomorrow and the next day to ask, "Lord, am I listening to you?" You must be alert to new opportunities that come. Daily this responsibility requires faith, prayer, and attentiveness to God. You have to review decisions you've made, ask the advice of others, seek the insight of the Lord. The responsibility of stewardship, if you let it, will make you mature in faith.

We might also observe that ordinary believers who had means were well acquainted with folks in need. There was no distance between the people who had things and the people who didn't. There is too much insulation in our culture between the well-off and the poor. Many in this congregation can go for a long time, commuting to work and back again, being entertained, attending church, without encountering anyone who has needs any greater than their own. But isolation makes real love impossible.

Finally, it's helpful to observe that the apostles were given the responsibility for distribution. In the next couple of messages we'll discuss further the role of the apostles in the early church. It was critical on many levels. But a simple point we can make here is this: There was wisdom and guidance given to distribution. Often people who identify a financial need have other needs that are much more important. The wise thing to say to them might be, "Your need is not really just for money. You need to change the way you think about life. You need encouragement and hope and discipline." The wisdom of the apostles in distribution prevented abuse and immaturity in the recipients.

In 4:36-5:11 we're going to consider two stories. Remember, with more than five thousand families in the church now, there was abundant life—outreach, miracles, learning, and growth. Luke picks out these two stories to tell us of the general experience in the church.

## **Character-forming choices**

**And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means, Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.**

**But a certain man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God." And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came upon all who heard of it. And the young men arose and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they shall carry you out as well." And she fell immediately at his feet, and breathed her last; and the young men came in and 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.**

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is so stark and unexpected, and its outcome so terrible, that I want to explain the point of it before we even look at Barnabas. The lesson is found in the statement Luke makes twice: "Great fear came upon all who heard of it." The choices Ananias and Sapphira made led to their death, but they were not damned for what they did. They are surely in heaven. They weren't rebels against God, they were weak in their expression of their relationship with God. But the Lord decided to end their time on earth as a one-time warning issued to everyone who would hear about it that these were serious matters. This story is very much like the story of Achan in the Old Testament. There the whole nation suffered because of a choice he made, and Achan's execution led the rest of the Israelites to take seriously the issues that were at stake in that setting (Joshua 7). Periodically God will step into human affairs at an important time and do something to cause everyone to stop and listen. There is no evidence that this couple had minor children or that anybody else suffered hardship because of their death. It was time for them to go home in order that others might come to a holy fear of the power and righteousness of God. We'll look at the story in more detail in a moment.

What can we learn from the positive example of Barnabas at the end of chapter 4? One lesson, which we really learn from both stories, is that every choice you make has consequences. Barnabas' choices led to something beautiful. I hope you fall in love with him before we're done studying the book of Acts. He was understated, subtle, thoughtful, loving. He caused beauty and righteousness to grow in other people. He made a choice to be generous at the beginning, and eventually his whole life became a thing of encouragement of selflessness and generosity, leading to his being nicknamed "Son of Encouragement."

We become what we choose. Actions become patterns, patterns become conviction, and conviction finally becomes character. Not only do the choices we make form us, but they also influence others. Everybody around us is altered, challenged or given hope, by the choices we make. So it's important to take seriously the opportunities we have and how we will pursue them.

Now let's consider the negative example of Ananias' and Sapphira's choices. There are some important things for us to learn here as well.

## **Hypocrisy and unbelief**

For various reasons, pastors occasionally have the privilege of hearing life stories, and more than once I've heard somebody say that a very hard experience in their life changed them utterly. One will say, "I had a drinking problem that I wouldn't face until my niece was driving drunk and had an accident in which she was paralyzed. She'll never walk again." Another will say, "I was sexually promiscuous until my friend got AIDS, and that shook me from the way I was living and made me consider who I was and what I was doing." That's why this story of Ananias and Sapphira is here. The issues we are dealing with are important.

Let's look carefully at what happened, especially at the two different questions Peter asked in verse 3 and verse 9. To Ananias Peter said in verse 3, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the price of the land?" Now, Ananias and Sapphira clearly were under no compulsion at all to sell their property. In fact, that's exactly the argument Peter makes: "It was yours to do whatever you wanted with. You are the steward of it. You've been given the responsibility before God to decide about it. The church is not in charge of this. There's no apostolic commandment to sell all your property. You could give a portion of the price of the land and keep a portion of it."

But what they could not do was misrepresent themselves. Peter asked, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie?" The problem was that Ananias was a hypocrite. He wanted the reputation of generosity. He wanted to be known as someone who responded to his stewardship responsibility as a thoughtful, caring, generous soul who gave without any hesitation the things that might bless another. But he didn't deserve that reputation.

What is it about us that makes us want to claim things that aren't true of ourselves? Why do we long to be regarded as something we are not? Probably there are two answers. Most of the problem is interior to us. We wish we were something we are not. We'd like to be known for having qualities that aren't true of us. We'd like to be well thought of, praised, included, cheered.

The other answer is that the community can inadvertently create pressure to perform. What happens to people who sell their property but aren't free in faith yet to give all of the proceeds away? Suppose Ananias had said, "I've sold this property. I'd like to be able to give all of the proceeds away, but this is the best I can do." Do we give people permission to follow their own consciences and to grow in faith over time without being judged along the way? Too often church cultures encourage hypocrisy and deception.

To Sapphira Peter said in verse 9, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test?" The idea behind that question is this: "You have convinced yourself that God either doesn't notice or doesn't care what you are doing. You've decided to test either God's oversight of his church, or his righteous standards." That's another challenge for us. Why do we sometimes treat God as if he were inadequate, as if we could pull the wool over his eyes and get away with sin?

Ananias was questioned about their desire to fool the congregation, Sapphira with their determination to test God's authority. Both of these choices were foolish and brought about judgment.

Consider two applications of these stories.

### **How free are we?**

The first regards whether we will learn to not claim the things we have as our own. We have no right to believe that they exist to serve us, to provide for our security, to pamper us, or to glorify us. We need to learn that what we have is owned by God.

Oneness of heart with other believers promotes godly stewardship. A Spanish phrase familiar to most of us is on point here: “*Mi casa es su casa*, my house is your house.” It’s a way of saying, “You’re welcome here.” Beyond the welcome of hospitality is the generosity of dispersing our goods to benefit those in need as God leads.

Frankly, it was easier for me to see money come and go when I was younger. The closer I get to retirement, the greater pressure there is to think about monetary assets as a source of security. Trust in God and faithful stewardship have grown more difficult with age. But the truth remains: all things belong to the Lord and bold faith is wiser than self-serving caution.

The second point of application for us to consider is whether we give fellow believers permission to struggle. What about people like Ananias who want a reputation for doing well, but fall short in their actions? If someone admits to struggle, are they disregarded, set aside, or loved less?

Ray Stedman in his commentary on Acts said this:

“The minute [Ananias and Sapphira] pretended to be something they were not—death! When we come to church we put on a mask of adequacy, but inside we are inadequate, and we know it. We are struggling with problems in our homes, but we don’t want to tell anyone about them. We can’t get along with our children, but we’ll never admit it to anyone. The pride that doesn’t want anyone else to know what is going on between husbands and wives, and between parents and children, keeps us from sharing. We come to a service, and put on a mask that says everything’s fine! Everything’s wonderful! Somebody asks us how things are going. ‘Great, great! Fine!’ ‘How’s everything at home?’ ‘Oh, wonderful! We’re having a wonderful time!’ The minute we say that and it’s not true, we die. Death sets in. Soon that death pervades the whole church.” (1)

Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.... No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and mammon [riches]” (Matthew 6:21, 24). If the gospel isn’t strong enough to break the love of money and the fear of rejection, then it is not true. In these stories there is a challenge to us. It’s possible to be like that beautiful early church. Let’s go that way. We have the potential of seeing God do again in our own time and place what he did among the first Christians.

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## NOTES

(1) Ray C. Stedman, *When the Church was Young*, © 1970-71, 1995, Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, CA. This series is currently available on the PBC web site:

<http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/acts/>

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[Back to Index page](#)

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