

Share the Results and Resources

[Acts 4:32 - 5:11](#)

Sharing the Wealth: Part 2

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. Jesus, you are the Priceless Treasure; you, who was raised from the dead by a God who loves us, and gives us a spirit of confidence and power. May your Word now change us, because of the grace that you sent to us through who you are, and what you've done. And so we pray this, in the name of your Father, with you as the Son, and in the gift of your Holy Spirit to us. Amen.

As you can see in the announcement regarding the finances of our church, we find ourselves in some difficult places. As I begin the sermon, I ask you to prayerfully consider what the Lord is saying to us as a congregation. I know I'm considering that for myself. It is a time, as it was during the Book of Acts, when we are confronted with our deep, latent value systems; a dramatic text where someone—in fact two people—die because they had deceived themselves, and God. This is a dramatic text that gives us a distinct contrast and choice between a good pattern of behavior, in response to God's grace; and one that is killing. We see that grace from God leads us to become people of generosity. There is an intimate connection in the Gospel—particularly Luke's gospel and the Book of Acts—between the grace of Jesus Christ, the power of the resurrection... and our invitation by God, to give generously.

The foundation upon which all things are built is the testimony of the apostles: that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. It is upon that great, powerful statement, affirmation, and experience that life is different for us. We are not the same, in the church, as people are out in the world. The resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, and the word that he speaks to us, call us to think about and reconsider how we perform our work and life; and how we change our value systems. The church is a kind of laboratory in which the Spirit of God says: we would like to see you work this out, so that you can show the power of the resurrection in your daily life together.

We see in the Book of Acts that glimpse of the connection between an earthly church, with all of its flaws, and its understanding of heaven on earth and the power of the resurrection. Because of the grace of Jesus Christ coming to us through his death and resurrection, we are called to live life in common—as in commonly-joined. We are called to live life together; we are not independent agents; we are inter-dependent saints. That is, a common life... a life together... a sharing of all the things and gifts God has given to us, particularly the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And it is a call for us to treat one another well, and to walk together into the future. It is the sharing of life that begins with the sharing of the Good News of Christ. And so the apostles shared their witness: that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead. They did not share alone; they shared together, as a community. Those shared witnesses led to a change of their shared values—those values that called attention to the power of the resurrection. And those shared values changed them, and moved them to a practice of changed life: sharing a life that reflects the resurrection.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in his book, *Life Together*, community is through... and in... Jesus Christ alone. That is the reason we gather. It is the only reason that we are sustained. God binds us together in a common life because of Jesus. The results of the apostolic witness led to some changes of attitude and values. The people gather with one heart and one mind. There is no private ownership—they consider what they have to belong to the others that are part of the community; everything that they have is held in common. There is grace upon them all. And it's not just a little bit of grace—there is abundant, overflowing grace that comes from God, through them, to the world, and to each other. And there is no needy person among them. Those shared results led to a pattern of sharing their resources. Those who owned houses and lands sold them; they laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet. And the apostles took the money, as given, and distributed it out to the needs of the people, as was appropriate. It changed their life pattern.

And that's what's really before us today: how the resurrection power of Jesus Christ changes our life values and pattern... and it's particularly around money. It is probably the most difficult conversation for us, in the American context, and in the church. It is often said to me, "The church spends too much time talking about money and looking at money." And yet, when I see the Gospel and the pattern of the Gospel, I see that the Gospel is continually connected to the effect of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Spirit, and how it impacts our financial life. There is no way to be a spiritual person, and follow Jesus Christ... and not have almost daily examination of our monetary value.

Now two cases in point are given to us in the Book of Acts: Barnabas, the "son of encouragement;" and the other, Ananias and Sapphira—a married couple, who performed their pattern of life with deception. It is life together at its best...and life together at its worst. This very visceral, and dramatic, awe-inspiring, and fearful developing moment, leaves the church wondering what is happening. In extreme positive and in extreme negative...encouragement of good action, and the confrontation of bad action... and affirmation, and accountability; joy that is in the shared life...and fear for those who lead a double life.

Barnabas was called the "son of encouragement." Barnabas was Joseph of Cyprus—a Levite. And he was nicknamed the same name that the Holy Spirit is given by John in the Gospel of John: paraclete Barnabas is the one, like the Holy Spirit, who comes alongside other believers; he doesn't stand over against them; he comes to be with them, as Jesus is with us, as the "Immanuel." Barnabas has learned early on in his discipleship that, to follow Jesus, is to be a person who is encouraging to those that are struggling to follow Jesus. He came alongside to help... to be an advocate... to encourage... to comfort... to confront. He did not come against the other believers; he did not come with its own agenda; he came bearing the Spirit of God to each and every other person. And as he comes, he demonstrates to us the model that we are all called to in Jesus Christ. That is the model of being like the Spirit of God, who empowers us, so that we can come alongside of each other and help each other during particularly visceral, difficult, and complex times. My question for us today is (and I include myself in this question): How are we practicing the pattern of the Spirit, to come alongside and encourage each other in following and practicing the Gospel? When we see Barnabas, we see some patterns about generosity that strike us with a vivid call to action. Barnabas calls us to be people of generous giving. He sold a piece of property and

he gave the entire proceeds to the apostles. He did it voluntarily. The undercurrent reality of this text is that nobody is making Barnabas, (or Ananias and Sapphira) do anything. No one is looking over their shoulder or holding a gun to their head; they are called voluntarily into the spirit of giving. We also see in Barnabas' life, that there is a commitment to be in community with other believers—not to be separate, and to hide or isolate—but to be invested and to come alongside. We see in Barnabas' life a commitment to honesty and transparency: I am doing what God is calling me to do. I am selling my property and here's all the money. I'm putting it in front of the apostles, who will distribute it. A little parentheses, is that, the pattern of apostolic authority—where the congregation brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet—is an act of worship that we imitate every week in this church. As the ushers bring the offering forward, the money that has been given is placed in front of the chancel at the altar of God; it is, in a sense, placing it at the apostles' feet for distribution.

We also learned from Barnabas that there is an accountability in what he does: everybody knows it; everybody sees it; and everybody celebrates it. There is also, in Barnabas' style, a discipline: it is planned; it is specifically engaged; and it is accomplished. It is a part of his intentional practice of his Christian life in the resurrection. And it is very visible.

Now this contrasts our American pattern of life—where we treat money as our personal and private business. I don't think you can see evidence of that in the gospels or in the Old Testament. One of the things that challenges me here is that: the sense of monetary realities are that the church's business is the peoples' business; however it's up to each individual person to choose what he or she might be willing to do voluntarily.

Now this is strongly contrasted with the example of Ananias and Sapphira. In a rather devastating moment in the life of the church, these two people die, on the spot. I doubt whether that has ever been reproduced in other parts of history, so we're not going to try to apply that here as a general parameter for people who don't give properly. 'Give or die'—that's not the message here. However, what is important is that the impact of their example has to do with how they do it: they are people who have entered into an intentional deception. They have deceived themselves; they have deceived each other; they have deceived the church; and they have deceived... as the apostles put it, "buried"... God, himself. They lied; and they lied together. In a sense, what happens is that they betray the power of the resurrection: they betray that God really hasn't died, in Jesus Christ; and then was lifted up; and that heaven is not in control of things. They are living as if Earth is still in control, and they are going to live by earthly value systems.

The power of the resurrection affirms the good; and, in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, confronts the evil. And that's the way it is in our life today. The Spirit will come in and affirm the things that are done in the open... and voluntarily... and with visibility. And it will challenge the things that are done underneath visibility... and in private... and in deception. We stand against the Holy Spirit when we lie to ourselves... when we lie to one another...to the church... when we lie to God. And regarding wealth and money, there is a moment here where the Apostle Peter says: you have given over to the pattern of Satan regarding the issue of money in your life. You've allowed Satan to take over, and Satan is the one who has drawn you to make this drastic error. Rather than give voluntarily, you have felt coerced or manipulated. Rather than give worshipfully, you have given for personal recognition and control. Rather than give generously, you have given miserly and cheaply. Rather than giving encouragingly, you have given with criticism and hostility. You have protected yourself rather than given to the congregation.

This cuts me to the quick; this is a challenge to my deepest value system. As Ernest Becker says, in his book, *The Denial of Death*, it is exactly our preoccupation with money that often encompasses Americans with a sense of immortality. He says money takes on a 'God-like quality'—our ticket to enduring significance in the face of death. While we can't take it with us, we'd surely like to control it in our absence. We put on our dollar bills, "In God we trust." And that may be an irony—for it may be that we really trust our money more than we do the resurrection power of Jesus.

And so today, we are asked to consider and reconsider what the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the grace and power of the resurrection, are calling us to live out differently. It is true that our church is struggling financially right now. There are people with all sorts of views and opinions about that. But I believe that the heart of this concern is an awareness that we need to pay attention to: that we not slip into that which the Devil would have us do—and that is, to enter into deception about ourselves, about our life together, and about our relationship with God. For Jesus did say, "money is a root of all evil." And whenever we enter into conversation, there's a lot of temptation to go to the dark place. We must be cautious—in our pattern of life in this church, and our personal pattern—to not live in the dark side... to withhold... or to attack... or to deceive... or to conspire. We must live into the Barnabas pattern of life, which is: to stand together; to be of one heart and one mind; to encourage one another; to come alongside and exhort one another to a pattern of generosity and life together.

And so it is that this passage speaks to me personally. And there is a hint in the text as to why this is so important. For who are the people who carry out the bodies of the dead Ananias and Sapphira? But the young men who are watching all of this happen in the life of the church—the next generation. Who are the ones who will have to carry out the dead people and the dead patterns of life? The next generation. Who are the ones who learn from our model and our patterns of behavior? They are the children, and those in the next generation. We have a choice of how we model life together; and that choice says, to the next generation, how they should consider living life together.

Recently I talked with a man who had two grown daughters and the man was coming to the end of his life. He was very upset about the state of his family and the health of his daughters. He said to me: "I allowed my sick, controlling wife to destroy the emotional life of my daughters and take all of their rightful inheritance. I stood by and watched her control the family finances and did nothing. I should have paid more attention because, not only was she robbing them of their rightful inheritance, she was more so robbing them of their spiritual health and vitality." And his concern about moving on to the next life was: Would God forgive him for how he hadn't paid attention to the intimate connection between how they, as a couple, had handled their finances... and the emotional impact on their kids?

I was talking with another pastor of another church this past week, as well. They are also struggling with finances. She was telling me the story of a particular young man in the church who had significantly given a tithe of his income—and he lived in another state.

However, he had heard about the church and about their ministry of grace, and he said, "I want to tithe to your church." That tithe paid the important difference between what they were going to have at the end of the year, and what they needed. She asked the young man, "What is it that motivates you to be so dramatically supportive of us at this point in time?" He said, "I watched my parents give 10% of their income when they had very little. And they always said, 'God will provide; everything we have belongs to God. We worship a God of resurrection power, and Jesus means everything to us. We have no other commitments but to give as well as we can.'" And yet, now that young man, of the next generation, is pouring his livelihood into another church.

Let us not make a living that leads to a dying. Let us not make a killing in finance so that it contributes to the dying of our humanity. Jesus said one can gain the world but lose our soul. And so we are confronted, either to be like Barnabas... or Ananias and Sapphira; to live into the power of the resurrection with the new value system, or to die with an old value system that confronts us with the darkness of our own souls. In Jesus Christ, we are risen from the dead, and our life together needs to show resurrection power—which includes generosity.

Let us pray. God of greatness and power, you have poured out grace upon us in the life, and the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. You have given to us everything. Let us be moved to voluntarily give everything to you. What we have is what you have given to us. May you move us, by the power of your Spirit, to become people of generosity, through Jesus Christ. Amen.