

Truth for Today

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The first attempt at sharing, the first evil and the first discipline

Sharing everything with my wife and four children has been one of the most enjoyable experiences of life I've had over the past 25 years. As parents, my wife and I have tried to bring up our children in an atmosphere of love, care and trust for the equal benefit of one and all. At times this has involved discipline, the training and admonition of the Lord, as Ephesians 6:4 puts it. This has included correcting any wrong, but it has usually meant encouraging the good. As a result the unity of the family has been maintained.

We continue our series: "The first page of Christian history" this morning with a study from Acts 4:32-5:11, entitled "The first attempt at sharing; the first evil and discipline." It's an account of the experiences of God's new family as their life together unfolds itself, the good and the bad.

At this point in the narrative it is immediately noticeable that Luke moves from showing the outward effect of the Gospel preaching with Holy Spirit power, to the internal conditions of the first company of Christian believers. It is interesting also to notice that the passage ends by describing them as "the church" for the first time.

The church was formed on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon these believers. By that one Spirit they were all baptised into one body, united to Christ their Head in heaven. They were not just a group of people united by some common cause or interest, but like a human body they were members of the Body of Christ, lovingly joined to each other. Such living links began to show themselves in their corporate life, especially in the face of emerging opposition, which was described in last week's talk on the first 31 verses of Acts chapter 4. This opposition brought about much suffering and hardship for believers as they were cut off from the Jewish communities in which they lived.

Our passage begins with the words: "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul". This togetherness started on the church's birthday as Act 2:42 states: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Their new life was directed by the teaching of the apostles so that "...fear came upon every soul...", Acts 2:43. Day after day they found their practical life and society with the apostles. The spiritual fellowship they experienced showed itself in a wonderful material fellowship. So much so that it was true to say: "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart," Acts 2:44-45.

Sharing together is the first prominent feature of the internal life of this vibrant community in Acts 4:32: "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common." They had a single corporate consciousness, caring for, and sharing with, each other. Its source was the resurrection of the Lord, the new life which they had in Christ Jesus. They proclaimed it to all: "And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." Acts 4:33. But it was **grace** that enabled them to act and share in this way, so the verse continues: "And **great grace** was upon them all."

We often admire and desire the power for witness which was so evident in the early church, but we tend to overlook this other essential ingredient which was necessary to sustain them in having all things in common. Paul concentrates on this grace of God in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 when he urges them to show this same care, one believer for another. We may not be able to copy the early church today in holding all things in common, but like the Corinthians we are called to show diligent, liberal, cheerful consideration for fellow saints, in the knowledge that: "...God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work." 2 Corinthians 9:8. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." 2 Corinthians 8: 9.

The equality that God intends by such actions was actually seen to the full here in Acts 4: "Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need." verses 34

and 35. This is the more excellent way of love!

Not only were the apostles the administrators of the money, but they also found in a believing Levite called Joses a man who was careful that his deeds matched his words. He was a wealthy landowner from Cyprus who brought all the proceeds from selling this land to the apostles for the relief of the needy in Jerusalem. He purposefully donated it all to the Lord, and set a fine example for others to follow.

When we look at Barnabas, as the apostles nicknamed Joses, we discover that he always lived up to this name, "Son of Encouragement". (This meaning is given in Acts 4:36). In Acts 9:27 we find that he was the first to include Saul in the Christian company at Jerusalem, when the others were afraid that Saul was not genuine: "But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus."

Then Barnabas was sent by the church from Jerusalem to the outpost of Antioch: "When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad and **encouraged** them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord." Acts 11:23-24. His concern for building up this church was such that he recognised the need for a gifted teacher to help them. He had seen this potential in Saul. The story continues in the following verses, Acts 11:25-26: "Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." Finally, from chapters 13-15, we learn that Barnabas worked alongside Paul on his first missionary journey, encouraging his gift further by active support and with gracious words of advice.

There is a great need for the ministry of encouragement in today's church. We need men and women who, filled with the Holy Spirit, will encourage believers in the same way that Barnabas did at Antioch - Christians who see latent gift in others and seek to develop it, as Barnabas did with Paul; and who themselves are faithful, outstanding examples for others to follow.

What a contrast Ananias is to Barnabas! This is highlighted by the opening word of Acts 5: "**But**." Ananias did not live up to the meaning of his name, "The Lord is gracious"! God had certainly been very gracious to him and his wife by providing land for them to possess. They then had the opportunity to reflect this grace, by giving the sale proceeds to the apostles' distribution fund. However, whilst they wanted to be publically recognised for sharing with others, at the same time they secretly planned to retain some funds for themselves. Their plot was both deliberately selfish and dishonest.

It was uncovered by the Holy Spirit through Peter. First he confronted Ananias who, as husband, was the more responsible partner: "... 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.'" Acts 5:3-4. The lie came from the Devil, the father of lies, whom Ananias had allowed to take over his heart. Ananias sinned against the Holy Spirit who, as we have seen, was in control of the early church.

But God cannot be deceived like men are, and He will not be mocked. Next Peter interviewed Sapphira: "Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter answered her, 'Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?' She said, 'Yes, for so much.' Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.'" Acts 5:8-9. She also had sinned. Being aware of the intention of her husband, she had actively co-operated with him to test the Holy Spirit.

This first evil in the church's history met with the direct judgement of God. Deceit, arrogance and vain glory brought instant death for them both! "Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last ...And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him."

Acts 5:5-6. And verse 10: "Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband."

This first discipline in the history of the church demonstrates that God will not at any time tolerate evil in His presence. The church is the House of God by the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 2:22 and 1 Timothy 3:15. Psalm 93:5 plainly states: "Your testimonies are very sure; Holiness adorns Your house, O LORD, for ever."

The action of dealing with evil in this way is similar to when it first occurred amongst God's people in Old Testament times. During the wilderness journey, in Numbers 15:32-36, the first Israelite to break the law of the Sabbath day was stoned to death. So also was Achan in Joshua 7:18-26 for the first act of covetousness when the new generation of

the children of Israel entered Canaan.

The power in witness and brotherly care of these first believers could only be maintained in the power of the Holy Spirit. Being holy, He exposed the evil of hypocrisy in Ananias and Sapphira. Judgement must always begin at the house of God. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are." Later in 1 Corinthians, 5:11-13, he prescribes the method of dealing with gross evil: "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner - not even to eat with such a person ...Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person.'"

Then in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Paul lists all the evils for which this severe kind of discipline must be applied: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, will inherit the kingdom of God." God will not have evil in His kingdom. (It was pointed out in our first talk on Acts that a prominent theme in the book is the kingdom of God, the sphere where men own the rule of God over their lives).

The main lesson for us today is to fear God in the same way as these disciples did when the news about the judgement of Ananias and Sapphira was made known. Acts 5:11 repeats a statement of verse 5: "So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things." A healthy respect for the holiness of God and His house will keep us from falling into sin.

Lying to the Holy Spirit showed that covetousness was in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira - their motive was to keep some of the money for their own selfish use, Acts 5:3. But the apostle Peter introduces two very important principles for Christianity in verse 4: "While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?"

The first principle is that every one of us is responsible for resisting temptation. The apostle James puts it this way in his epistle: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren." James 1:13-16.

The second principle is that Christians are responsible to God for all that they have from Him, whether it be money, as here, or time, possessions, gifts or talents. We are asked to be faithful with all the things which He has bestowed upon us: "... it is required in stewards that one be found faithful ... until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God." 1 Corinthians 4:2-5.

We should also notice that Peter identifies the source of the sin which was in the hearts of this married couple: "...Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit..." Acts 5:3. Satan continually opposes the work of God. As a roaring lion he had failed to prevent the testimony to Christ in chapter 4. His efforts through the prohibitions of the Sanhedrin court had the opposite effect. The apostles declared that they would obey God not man, and the Holy Spirit enabled them to speak the word of God with boldness. He tries once more, but again fails, when he now attempts to corrupt the testimony from within. We need to be aware of his craft: "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." 2 Corinthians 11:3.

As our talk draws to a close, the challenge for us is, as always, to apply these Bible principles now, in the twenty first century church! Just like in a natural family, in the Christian family there will always be the need for care and control. In some ways that need is even greater than ever-remember what the Lord said to the church in Laodicea: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent." Revelation 3:19.

Many of the Lord's people today face poverty or hardship. It arises either from the circumstances of their lives, such as in war-torn or third-world countries, or where there is drought and famine. Sometimes it is because they face opposition and persecution for their faith in Christ. Others are "poor" as a result of forsaking all for His Name's sake. Let me encourage you this morning to continue your efforts to share what you possess with other believers. I am sure that you will experience great joy by giving and receiving practical fellowship. "And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith." Galatians 6:9-10.

In addition, we need to be reminded that evil so easily finds its way into the Christian community. Remember that

Satan is always active. We need to be on our guard and to act in those orderly ways we have mentioned from 1 Corinthians. By necessity our study has concentrated on the severe aspects of discipline. However, if we use the illustration of a natural family again, in the normal course of family life these are very rare occurrences. Many other ways are used by parents to discipline their children. So, too, for church fellowships there are many ways advised from Scripture. They range from exhortation and admonition to warning, shunning and public rebuke. These actions, if applied in godly fear and brotherly love, enhance and advance the common life of the fellowship.

Let's pray.

God our Father we thank You for the privilege of interacting with fellow believers in the body of Christ in the practical fellowship of caring and sharing, and in discipline. Help us to follow the example of those in the early church, who managed to do this to Your glory. For these things we require the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, to be with us all. Amen.

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