

Give all to God
Acts 4:32-5:11

Luke 16:1-16.
Matthew 6:19-34
Responsive Psalm 115:1-11

This morning we will be looking at the last half of chapter 4, and will be going into chapter 5 as we read through the account of Ananias and Sapphira. We have seen in this last 4 chapters the blessing of the Holy Spirit, it's work in the new birth and the spread of the gospel. This week will be seeing another aspect of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and that is a sense of community, and a God given concern and love for one another. So let us read our passage this morning starting at verse 32, of chapter 4 and reading to verse 11 of chapter 5.

One of the first things that we need to sort of get out of the way to really understand this account, is that it was not as some believe where everyone sold and gave up everything that they had. This was not a creation of some sort of commune where everyone gave up everything and lived together. Rather it was an understanding that the needs of the fellow Christians outweighed the importance of personal possessions. Those who were in a position who could help out those in need, did so by selling property, or possessions to help provide for those who were struggling. This is an important distinction to make because we could easily look at this passage and use it for a justification to start up some christian communes, to separate ourselves from the world, and to live together in harmony...or at least that would be the intention but such communes never work as intended.

These of the early church shared in a time of great harmony, putting the value upon loving each other over their own personal success of status. This passage stands as an example of the ideal of how the church is supposed to operate, how the Christian is supposed to operate. These people here in Acts esteemed each other as brothers and sisters, they opened their homes to each other, helped in providing for each others needs. I don't remember what book it was that we were studying at the time, but we did touch on this subject before. The Christian mindset to money and possessions should be based in understanding that all that we have has been given to us by God. Our Jobs, our possessions, our health, our families. If we are to believe in the sovereign God of scripture, we know that none of what we have has come by our own merit, but rather it is God who has allowed us to have it.

Therefore our mindset should be that like what we see here in the early church. Now this account here in acts focus largely on the financial side of things, but there are many other ways that this principle also applies. It is not just a generosity in helping those who are financial need, but it also is an expression of generosity in hospitality toward one another. Being an encouragement toward one another, making ourselves available for each other for prayer, taking our time to spend with each other, getting to know each other, truly loving and caring for each other despite our differences because ultimately God should be working through us to do so. It is only through such that we can really know each others needs, or how we are to be an encouragement, or a blessing to each other. We should strive to be an intentional community, to work to grow together in faith, and love.

Another thing to mention, is notice here that it says in general terms, that all those who owned houses or lands sold them and brought them to the apostles for distribution. It would seem that this was done rather privately, not being largely celebrated. Such giving was done out of pure intention of the heart, out of a love and concern for those in need. There was no seeking personal glory or recognition for their donation.

This is the exact opposite of what we see in the world. The rich boast of their giving, they seek fame, glory, and recognition. I am always reminded of this when I see things such as park benches or plaques with the names of a person or people who donated money toward the making of a park, or attraction.

Sometimes I wonder if they would yet donate if they were not giving honorable mentions, if there was no personal glory being portrayed. We have celebrities like Oprah, who people look up to and brag about how much she gives, and how generous she is...and she has built an empire upon that. It served her, it served her purpose, it was done only for the glory and praise of herself. But this is not the example we see here, Just as we talked a bit about last week, it is less about the action and more about the intent of the heart, it is more about where that action comes from than the action itself. The world celebrates the action, draws attention to the thing being done, heaps praises upon those they deem generous or worthy...but I will tell you now, a few dollars given out of genuine love for a friend, or a brother or sister in Christ is of more value than the millions given to charities celebrated by the rich.

God doesn't judge merely on the actions committed, God is not deceived, he knows the heart, he knows the intention, this was the lesson that Jesus was teaching in Luke 21, as he compares the actions of the rich scribes, to the poor widow. He says, "Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts." They seek attention, they seek to be noticed, and to be recognized and praised by the people. They want their generosity to be known, they want their apparently holiness to be seen..but look what he says, "They devour widow's houses, and for a pretense make long prayers These will receive greater condemnation."

If one was to look at merely the actions of these scribes, in many ways they would appear pious, but the reality is their heart is full of deception, and pride. Then verse 1, of 21, in Luke, says, "And he looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and he saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites." Essentially this poor widow put in 2 pennies, an incredibly unnoticeable amount, in the grand scheme of things, in comparison to what the rich were giving, it was of no value. But look what Jesus says, "Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; for all these out of their abundance have put in offerings for God, but she out of her poverty put in all the livelihood that she had." The message here, is that it isn't the amount, as much as it is the motive or the intent. He does not scold the rich for not giving enough, nor does he praise them for they are merely doing as they ought, there is no real sacrifice in their giving as they are giving of their abundance, but this poor widow, out of a love for God gives of all that she has.

This passage has been abused by pastors and churches who encourage that all peoples should be so inclined to give. In essence preying upon the poor, and the naive. Growing up I remember the church that we were attending had a special speaker come in and he was talking about giving, and he was promoting the idea of a pledge of faith. That you tell God what you will give that is beyond your means and God will provide it. That is not the teaching or purpose of this account of the widow, and that is not the purpose of this account in Acts.

It is missing the entire point, if you are giving of a tithe, or of service to the church and are expecting some sort of return or recognition then your motive and purpose is wrong. If the pastor, or elder, or teacher is telling you that you are obligated to give, and to sacrifice to the church, and begins to guilt trip, which by the way usually becomes the topic when there is a big expansion or expense, then he too is missing the point of giving.

I am not saying this to belittle the importance of giving, but I am pointing out the reason for giving should always come from a heart that is doing so out of a love for God, and for the local body. We are not bound by some law that says that we must give as some will teach, but instead I believe it is even deeper than that. Much like the mosaic law verse the new covenant law which is written on our hearts, it really goes to a heart issue. And honestly, that can be a harder thing to deal with than to just follow some idea of a rule because you believe it is the right thing to do. I take a stance on tithing and giving to the church much like Vic did. It really is little concern to me, for the reality is that such a decision is between the individual and God. IT really is a heart issue, if your heart is with the body then you will be willing to give of yourself, not because it will merit you any benefit, but purely out of love for one another.

This is why we have the section in our constitution for church leadership when it comes to giving, it is not a law per say, but rather it is a test of faithfulness, and a test of the heart. If one is not faithful in the least, how can one be expected to be faithful in greater things? As we all know, and all believe here, just like with everything else in the Christian faith, and the life of the believer it all must flow from a new heart, it stems from the new covenant, which is the law of God written on our hearts, which God himself has enabled in us to keep and that is, ... to Love the lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.. and to love your neighbor as yourself. And I think that is the point of Ananias and Sapphira. It was deceitful, they sold their land to look pious and to not be outdone by others...yet kept a portion to themselves. They were not truly willing to give, their motive was for their own glory, their own purpose. As Peter said in verse 3, of chapter 5. "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 sold was it not in your own control?"

He didn't need to sell it, or when he did, he wasn't obligated to give it either. But out of a selfish and deceitful heart he plotted, and lied and as Peter said, "You have not lied to men, but to God." God does not merely judge upon our actions, but the heart. And that is what Peter points to here when he confronts Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie?" The action flows out of the heart, in the case of many in this account we see generosity driven by love and concern for one another, but in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, their motive was one of selfishness, seeking not the helping of those in need, but rather to make themselves appear as ones being generous and pious. Really, it is exactly the same from the Judaisers, as we read already, they seek the best seats in the synagogues, they pray loudly to draw attention to themselves...it is a false piety, a false humility, and a false generosity.

It really sets up the idea of giving to honestly be a complicated issue. For if Peter would have stood up and said, "there are many among us who suffer and who are in need, and there are many among us who God has granted by his grace an abundance. Let us all vow to give 10% of our means so that we may be a help to one another in brotherly love." In many ways it would have completely changed the entire purpose, for many would do so, and many would have done so joyously, and some begrudgerly, but again it would have been putting forth a law, or a commandment. Even though the purpose would be of pure intention, the whole point is that what we see here in acts is that God has granted for a time a sort of Christian ideal among these believers. IT says, they were of one heart, and of one soul, and what we see is an example of Christians doing as the should...living not for themselves, but for one another.

This is what we are called to do....we are not called to this faith and then left to our own selfish desires seeking our own needs. In fact all of scripture points to the fact that we are to be a sacrificial people, putting the needs of others before ourselves for the sake of the gospel. And this isn't just about monetary giving, albeit that is one part...but as with most things, it is about the outflowing from the heart. And honestly, giving a portion of the money we earn from the jobs that God has allowed us to have is easy in comparison of truly giving of ourselves, of giving of our time, of giving of service to the needs of others. As James said, "True and undefiled religion is this, To show up to services faithfully every Sunday, and to give %10 percent of your wages.....no, of course not, he says it is to visit the orphans and widows in their trouble. It is easy to take 2 hours out of your week to be here, it is easy to drop a bit of money in the offering box....but to meet people in their needs? To visit the sick, to care for the widow, to give of ourselves....that is hard.

And I will confess, that this is a hard struggle. It is easy for me to give a little in the offering box every week, but I struggle and fight my own selfish desire to spend my time doing something else rather than to do the study and prep work that is required to deliver a sermon every week. I say this to illustrate the point I am trying to make today....So many people want to make giving tithes and offerings the point of such passages that we have read today, but the real point is that a heart that loves God, and that loves his people will not only be faithful in giving of their means, but also of their person. And again I ask, if one is not able to do the easier thing, then how will one be able to do the more difficult? As Jesus said, "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much, and likewise who is unjust in what is least, is unjust also in much."

In this account of Ananias and Sapphira it is not just a simple matter of their giving, but it was the fact that they had plotted, and lied in their heart to do this thing. They were not robbing those who were there, the people were not worse off because of their lesser gift, the true issue was of the heart. In plotting such a thing they were seeking to rob God, not of monetary value as some might argue, but glory. They were seeking their own with little regards to the needs of others, their gift was born out of selfish motives taking advantage of what was going on to elevate themselves. If there is one thing that God will not stand, is to be robbed of his Glory. The early church was in the midst of great blessing, the people having a fervor for God, having been filled with love and compassion for one another, and here comes these 2, who seek to take advantage, to seek their own glory in the midst of God's, and God made an example out of them. He will not be mocked, nor will not allow his Glory to be taken.

So what is our take away from this passage this morning? The main points as it were. Well, to start, it is a lesson in giving, not of just in monetary support, nor in just service, but of truly giving one self to the ministry of God. How ever that may manifest itself in your life. It is To be open and willing to do that which God sets before you, even if it is a sacrifice, even if it is a struggle. The Christian is not to be like Aninias and Sapphira, and only pledge a half measure to God....God has given his life so that we may live, and like wise our lives are to be a living sacrifice unto him. He has given us all, should we not also strive to give him all in return? Is that not really what it is to be a Christian? We are to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, and soul...with every single part of our being, willing to give all to him, for the truth of the matter is, we have nothing without him.

We are to be generous with all that God has given us, as were these believers in Jerusalem. We are as Christians to be of one heart, and one soul..nit together in the love of Jesus Christ. In all things God must be the main thing, he must be the purpose behind your giving, he must be the purpose behind your service, and in doing so and being faithful in all these things you bring glory and honor to the Father through the ministry of grace that is given to you. Seeking not our own glory, but only concerning ourselves with God's.

