

## **Generosity: A Matter of Life and Death**

By [Mike Glodo](#)

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Our series on conversations on the book of Acts continues with Acts, chapter 5, I'll read the first 11 verses.

But a man named Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge, he kept back for himself some of the proceeds, and brought only a part of it and 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 for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man, but to God." When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened, and Peter said to her, "tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out immediately." She fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in, they found her dead, and they carried her out, buried her beside her husband, and great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard these things.

This is the Word of God.

Will you pray with me?

Lord, may You open our eyes to understand by your Spirit what you did and how you have testified to it through your inspired writer, so that we might learn as those upon whom the end of the age has come, not to grow faint, but to persevere in hope and faith. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Probably about 10 years ago now, I received an email from a good friend who's been in ministry a long time. Great pastor, been well trained at a noteworthy, trustworthy seminary, and his email indicated some distress about this passage that we just read.

He said, "Help me understand what's going on here. This isn't how Jesus does things."

I wasn't surprised by his question, because some years earlier, I had read the very first pages of Moses Silva's book. *Has the Church Misread the Bible?*, and Silva there recounts a widely broadcast sermon where the preacher, a notable preacher, said this was a case of spiritual abuse by Peter, that Peter became power hungry and exercised his apostolic authority in a way that was contrary to God's purposes, a bully pulpit, if you will.

But I would say there's no indication in the text that finds Peter culpable for what's happened. Furthermore, if Peter was being a bully, then God was the parent of a bully standing by.

What do we do with this? I mean, it's so tempting, if you're a pastor and trying to meet budget, to want to preach on this, or this is a great building fund kickoff text, but it does present some challenges for us as we live under the new covenant and we understand that it's by God's grace we have come into right standing with him.

A passage like this shows us how quickly an exemplary-only approach runs aground when we read the book of Acts while we're supposed to follow the good moral examples in the New Testament narratives, and we're supposed to avoid the bad examples. For sure, if we're only doing what we see then there's not much to commend itself here, unless we still live in such a time that people die for not giving their full pledged commitment to the church.

So, what I'd like to do this morning is to look more deeply at what actually is happening here, what Luke is intending here, and so see, ultimately, that generosity, which is the subject here, that generosity is a matter of life and death. And also see, perhaps along the way, how we can learn to read, not just from an example level, but also from the standpoint of what is God doing uniquely historically in this unique and peculiar moment in the coming of the Kingdom of God,

First of all, I'd like us just to look at the immediate context, and we'll understand why what Ananias did was grievous. In the preceding context, you have this description of the church as one, heart and soul. That's in 4:32, they have everything in common, and in verse 33 with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them.

There was no need to make Jerusalem great again, because God was doing great things. The word mega, is sprinkled throughout here. This is a momentous moment in the history of the church in Jerusalem, and a general practice developed. We're told in 4:34 that people were taking land and houses that belonged to them, selling them and giving the proceeds to the poor, so that no one had need among them, a remarkable description, and as a consequence, the people throughout Jerusalem, we were told later, at the text following our text, that the people held them in high esteem. People thought highly of the church because of the way they were tending to one another's needs.

And in particular, there are about four different verbs that we find describing Barnabas that are the same verbs used in describing Ananias. These verbs are: "sold", "brought", and "laid," and laid is repeated a couple of times. And so we're told Joseph, who was also called Barnabas, sold a field, brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. Well, those same verbs are used to describe what Ananias is doing. Ananias sold, brought, laid, but unfortunately, he kept back. That's a key verb we're going to examine more closely in a moment.

The behavior of Ananias is set in contrast to Barnabas, who earns the nickname Son of Encouragement. The incident itself begins with you, Greek students, was with a death. There's a disjunctive particle, a contrast. So, it's not just a chi that can be a bat, and in verse one, "but a man named Ananias." What really happened?

Well, most commentators will focus on the lie, Ananias' lie. And so if you can die from lying, we're all in trouble. And well, it's an aggravated lie, because it's a falsification of the Spirit. And that may have something to do with the unpardonable sin, which I understand to be a belief in attributing the works of God to man. What's behind it, what's the occasion?

Well, the occasion is withholding what had been pledged to provide for the needs in Jerusalem. There's this remarkable unity and mutual independence of the Barnabas and the Ananias stories as a working out of what were previously told about this mighty work of God the Spirit in reaping this remarkable unity of Heart and Soul.

Think of it - because of the poverty and the riches of those who were of one mind that God is doing great works. In other words, this is not a case of two reservoirs being of equal level, this broad generic equity being the source of great glory to God. But rather, what's bringing great glory to God is the inequity and how God's people are responding to it.

We have to go farther back to really understand this. What's the root of Ananias' sin? And a key word is now misomy, the Greek word meaning "to keep back." And as Doctor Lanier will no doubt tell you, the Septuagint uses the very same

word in Joshua chapter seven. In Joshua 6, the Israelites successfully conquered Jericho by not raising a sword, but by raising torches and seeing God work.

In Chapter Seven, they storm Ai, but Achan holds back some of the spoils of the victory at Ai, and as a result, Israel has a disastrous subsequent encounter, which they lose, and it's discovered what Achan had done. Now, what's going on there, back in Joshua? First of all, we have to understand holy war in relation to the cultic sacrifices. There's this pattern of when God comes near, which he had his glory, dwelt among the tribes of Israel, from Sinai all the way to the conquest when the glory is in their midst, righteousness is vindicated and rewarded. Sin and uncleanness are purged and punished.

But Israel's motive in holy war was not self-enrichment. The spoils of holy war were to be devoted to destruction haram. But there's a key text in Deuteronomy 13 that connects haram devoted to destruction with Olam, which is whole burnt offering. In other words, those things devoted to destruction and holy war were actually being offered as offerings to God.

Now, back then, priestly worship was a dangerous occupation, not just a dirty job, but a dangerous job. We find that Nadab and the Abihu came, they mess up, as we sometimes say, they mess up this idea about bringing their own fire. But instead of God accepting the fire they brought, they became the fire. They became the offering. And there's this dynamic in the Old Testament, that if somebody brings an offering that's not acceptable, they become the offering, either the substitute, the token is consumed, or else the false and untrue worshiper is consumed, in order that Israel might know that all that they had and all that they would receive was from the Lord, rather than from the enrichment of conquest.

The Canaanites were devoted to destruction. Now, how does that help us here? Well, the story of Ananias maps very clearly onto the story of Achan. It tells us essentially that by holding back part of the proceeds of the sale of the land, Ananias was holding back something that belonged to the Lord, and so Ananias himself became the offering. And so we can say generosity is a life and death matter.

Why did Ananias do this? We're told that the Satan had filled his heart, but he's held culpable for it, so he can't blame the devil. But what we can see is that, especially in Luke-Acts 2 volume work, we can see that Ananias has the mind of the Pharisee who stood and said, "I thank you I'm not like the public." And he was like the scribe who sat in the front seats at the synagogue and ate widows' houses. He was like the stewards of the vineyard, who wanted to seize from God the vineyard and claim it for themselves. He was nothing like little Zacchaeus, who not only took all of his wealth and made it clean, but devoted it to the generosity that he exercised toward God's people.

Putting that all together, let me say it this way: There's a very prominent theme in Luke, where the Lord is coming back to his temple. The rightful owner, the one for whom the temple was built, returns to render an account of the stewardship of that temple. And as we know, that stewardship is given over to those who will produce fruit. Now that Acts is a continuation of the story of now God going out from his temple to the nations. It's like the whole structure of the book of Zechariah, where the Lord returns, but the Lord just doesn't stay. He goes to the nations to gather from the nations, peoples, and the way in which the New Testament Church was doing, that was the work of God going to the nation.

This is New Covenant conquest waged by the generosity of the common life of God's people. Do you get that? This is how Christians would conquer the world in the power of the Spirit in the name of Jesus by visibly demonstrating a community that did not exist in any such form or degree on Earth. Here's the premise, the kingdom of God is - God brought Christ, brought the spirit realm in which the imminent presence of God brings eschatological Shalom to the followers of Jesus gathered in His name.

The wonderful works of God are continuing in the Spirit-bound unity and Spirit empowered generosity of Christ's disciples. Let me make three quick applications from this:

First of all, recognizing the power of generosity. It's really funny in in verse 13, it talks about all the other people in Jerusalem in the temple area.

None of the rest dared to join them. Wonder why?

Well, they're being persecuted mightily, and they perhaps went to Ananias' funeral. We don't know, but the people held them in high esteem. Wouldn't be wonderful for no one to really want to be part of the Church of Jesus Christ, but to everybody have the highest opinion of them. That's the situation here.

Unfortunately, sometimes Bible believing Christians are known more about not wanting to give away their wealth than their willingness to give it away. Deuteronomy 15, "the poor will always be among you, but there shall never be any poor among you." So open your hand, and we see this in action. This is not in the church planting manuals as a strategy to preach generosity from day one. But it was in the church of Jerusalem - the power of generosity, also the priority of generosity, that it was the first office given in the record of the book of Acts. We don't have elders specifically named until later, but in chapter six, we will have deacons as the first office given, the office devoted to meeting the needs of the needy in the community.

Thirdly, the price of generosity.

There will be people like Ananias and Sapphira who aren't quite so sure. They're not all in. They're not quite so sure that everything they have has been given to them. They haven't yet comprehended Divine Generosity, as the God who so loved he gave.

It's costly, but if you've had dealings with people of wealth, you may have learned this. People with wealth don't take you seriously if you don't talk about money.

We've heard it often said that money is the most frequently addressed subject by Jesus in the in the New Testament. I don't know about that, but I do know that the kind of church that for 11 months of the year says we're not about money, but then in December, gives a budget crisis appeal. Ends up fun saying what they've said. But God puts generosity on the front burner, on the top shelf, because it is the way in which the church shows that it has understood Divine Generosity.

I'm probably going to undo everything I've just said by sharing a story with you. But there's a friend of mine in Kansas City who planted a church and they put up a building in a very visible piece of property, but you couldn't get to it from the main road. There was a big retail shop. There was a very greedy commercial real estate developer who refused to give them just a simple egress into their property. And my, my friend, the pastor for years, had gone to this guy and said, "Hey, can we?" And the guy would say, "No." And so anybody who came to this church would drive around and come in through a neighborhood and come in the back way. It was a real limiting factor. My friend Tom was so frustrated one day he went to see the man one more time, and the man was just immovable about it. And my friend Tom Stubb said, "Someday, God is going to deal with you about this."

Well, a few weeks later, he got a phone call from the man. He says, "I need you to come see me." Tom asked: "Do you want me to meet you at your office?" The man replied, "No, I'm in ICU."

Turns out the man had had a massive heart attack, and was in cardiac recovery, but Tom looked in, and the guy said, "I'm going to give you your egress."

Which would be the opposite of everything I've just said.

It's not a bully pulpit, it's not a threat. It is simply an elevation of an easily neglected duty, an opportunity. We have to do what First Corinthians 12 tells us to do: To make the weakest members the most important people in the church, because they are the means by which we demonstrate the power, the power of the resurrection in our lives, and how God, who gave his only Son, continues to give by the Spirit, through His saints, the one whose apostle later said, "We must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He himself said It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Will you pray with me?

Lord, we are needy. Here today, we are needy so that you might open our hands to give, to be more generous, not just with money, but with time, with praise, with opinions. Lord, help us to see more of who you are as the one who has given us all that we have. But help us also to be bold as we teach and preach and disciple in your church, to speak to your people about the priority of Divine Generosity - for though our Lord Jesus was rich, yet for our sakes, he became poor that we might become rich in Him, in His name we pray, Amen.

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