Gospel Generosity
True Community
Acts 4:32-5:11
Pastor Josh Black
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Give or Die!

In November, I preached at The Bridge Church and Brandon preached here. I assigned him a basic text for the Christian life—take up your cross and follow Jesus. He assigned me the story of Ananias and Sapphira—a passage about giving and extreme church discipline! Are there any topics more difficult to preach on? Especially as a guest preacher! Gee thanks Brandon, I thought to myself. What do you want me to title this sermon? “Give or Die!” Or how about “Give It All or Die!” Well it turned out to be a great text. In fact, I liked it so much that I’ve decided to use it as my main text this morning. But my sermon title isn’t “Give or Die!” It’s “Gospel Generosity.” And I hope you’ll see why this is a more appropriate title.

Generosity as Koinonia

For the last month we’ve been talking about biblical community or koinonia. Two weeks ago, we said koinonia can be defined as sharing. We share with other people the blessings we’ve received from the Lord for their good. And we share in the blessings others have received from the Lord for our good. This is how we become more like Jesus. Koinonia is integral to discipleship. We learned that we’re called to share with one another spiritual blessings, including spiritual gifts and spiritual truths. This morning we’re going to see how koinonia also involves sharing material blessings with the body of Christ. This is actually a prominent way that koinonia is used in the New Testament. Therefore, generosity is critical for us to understand and apply if we’re going to experience biblical community as a church.

Acts 4:32-5:11

32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus,

5:1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 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. 3 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? 4 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 men but to God.” 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. 7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” 9 But Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the

1 Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.
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 and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

This is the Word of the Lord.

This passage refers to koinonia in two ways: koinonia is a relational reality; this is the foundational theological truth. And koinonia involves generosity; this is the general application. To divide our time this morning, I want to look at these two aspects of koinonia in this passage. Then I want to consider a few specific applications. As a part of our application section, I’d like to invite Jim Gustavson to come up and share what he’s learned about generosity throughout his life.

A RELATIONAL REALITY (4:32a)

Let’s start with the first aspect of koinonia. Koinonia is a relational reality. Now, I realize that we’ve covered this topic for the last four weeks. You may be sick of hearing about it. But it’s the foundational truth for all koinonia. The New Testament never talks about the activity of community without the reality of community close at hand. This passage is no different. Our experience of biblical community must flow out of and be motivated by the reality that we are the family of God because we are in Christ. So I want to briefly highlight this one last time this morning.

In verse 32, we read, “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.” In the early church, the activity of generosity came out of the reality that they were of one heart and one soul. Believers have fellowship with God, heart and soul. Therefore, believers have fellowship with one another, heart and soul. We are the household of God. That’s why the early church was willing to share with one another everything they had. Fellowship is not primarily an activity; it’s a relational reality. The activity of fellowship comes from the reality that we are all a part of the family of God in Christ, through the Spirit.

GOSPEL GENEROSITY (4:32b-5:11)

Now that we have the foundation laid, let’s start building some walls. Let’s look at the second aspect of biblical koinonia. Koinonia involves generosity. This is the main aspect of fellowship drawn out in our passage this morning. Again, let me read verse 32. “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.” That word “common” in Greek is koinos—it’s the root of koinonia. Generosity is a manifestation of the relational reality of fellowship. Throughout the New Testament we see this picture of koinonia. In Romans 12:13, Paul calls Christians to “contribute to the needs of the saints.” That word “contribute” comes from the root koinos. In Romans 15:26, Paul says “Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.” Again, the same word. In 1 Timothy 6:18, Paul says, “They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share…” The word share comes from the root koinos too. Koinonia is a relational reality. But it’s also a practical activity. We’re called to be generous with others in the body of Christ. We’re called to share with the saints. Have you ever thought about

2 1 John 1:3 establishes that our fellowship with one another flows out of our fellowship with the Father and the Son. Acts 4:32 establishes that our fellowship with one another flows out of our fellowship with the Holy Spirit (cf. Ezek. 11).
giving as an act and requirement of fellowship? If we love God we’ll love others in the church. And if we love others in the church, we’ll be generous and share what we have with those in need.

In our passage this morning, we’re given both a positive and negative example of giving. The positive example is seen in Barnabas’ giving. The negative example is seen in Ananias and Sapphira’s giving.

**A Positive Example**

Let’s start with the positive example of Barnabas. We’re told he was a Levite and a native of Cyprus. We also know that he was a land owner. That’s why he was able to sell a field. The proceeds of this sale were then laid at the apostles’ feet and distributed to those in the church who had need (vv. 35-37). His example teaches us a couple of things about koinonia and gospel generosity. First of all, we learn that there’s nothing wrong with having wealth. But also that Christian’s shouldn’t view their possessions as belonging to them (v. 32). We belong to God and so do our possessions. When you see your possessions as belonging to God, it will be easier to give them away. The other thing to point out is that Spirit-filled koinonia crosses social and cultural barriers. Barnabas was from Cyprus, not Jerusalem. So he’s different culturally. He was also a wealthy land owner. Barnabas was an upper-class man. Those who owned land in the first century were probably in the upper 5% of all people. There was a great gulf between the rich and the poor in the first century, even more so than there is in our day. But the gospel bridges the gulf of color, culture, and class! We learned this in our first week in this series. So often our community is based on social activity or social status. But that’s not Christian community. Christian community is distinct because it doesn’t unite around color, culture, or class. It doesn’t unite in cliques around special interest, or occupation, or life-stage. It unites around Christ, the one who has brought down the wall of hostility between different people groups.

Christ must be the common and dominate denominator of our community if our community is to be Christian community. Barnabas is an example of this. He exemplifies biblical koinonia and gospel generosity because he gives to those in need in the body of Christ. He’s rich, but he gives to the poor in the church of Christ. He’s from Cyprus, but he gives to those in the church at Jerusalem. He’s a religious leader, a Levite, but he gives to the common man in the church of Christ. Christ was the common and dominate link between Barnabas and those in need. He gave to those who were his family in Christ. The relational reality motivated the gospel generosity.

My daughter Hattie has busted open her chin three times and needed stitches all three times. Each time I was at work when she was injured. I stopped what I was doing, went home, and took her to get stitches up. Does that make me a super dad? Was that an act of charity? No, that’s family. That’s not an act of charity; that’s an act of relationship. The relational reality we have in Christ should lead to gospel generosity.

Our koinonia is intended to bring glory to God because it reflects something of who God is and what he’s done. God has reconciled us to himself, both Jew and Gentile. God was generous in giving his one and only Son. The one who was rich became poor for our sake (2 Cor. 8:9). He laid down his own life for our sins on the cross. He has made us one with God! When we show gospel generosity to those in the church who are in need, irrespective of color, class, and culture, but because of Christ, we glorify God.
A Negative Example

We've seen a positive example of giving. Let's now look at a negative example. Ananias and Sapphira are a contrast to Barnabas. At first glance, they did everything that Barnabas did. They sold a piece of property and laid it at the apostles’ feet to be distributed to the poor in the church. But there was a difference. They held back some of the proceeds of the sale and kept it for themselves. Now that in and of itself wasn’t wrong. Look at verse 4. They had the right to own land (v. 4a) and even the right to keep back some of the proceeds from the sale (v. 4b). This teaches us that giving a certain amount isn’t required. If you want to learn more about this, you can listen to my sermon titled, “Is Tithing a New Testament Command,” from April 12, 2015. Giving is a voluntary act. In 2 Corinthians we learn that we are all called to give as [we] have decided in [our] heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7). So what made their actions sinful? They lied about it. But not only that. They lied to God, the Holy Spirit (vv. 3, 4). They tested the Holy Spirit (v. 9). Instead of their heart being filled with the Holy Spirit and bearing the fruit of the Spirit through generous giving, Peter says, their heart was filled by Satan (v. 3). They weren’t serving the family of God; they were serving their desire to be famous for giving. They were deceitful because they wanted to be seen as spiritual. That’s exactly what Satan does. He deceives and he acts for his own glory. That’s why their actions were sinful.

But why does God give them such a drastic consequence for their sin? Why were they struck down dead? As we’ve seen, it wasn’t because they didn’t give the full amount of the sale. In 1 Peter, the church is referred to as a chosen people, a holy nation (1 Pt. 2:9). We’re called to glorify God as we reflect something of his character and the gospel. When God’s people don’t live as a set apart people and won’t repent, they must be put out of the church. Ananias and Sapphira were each given a chance to repent and tell the truth, but they refused. When people refuse to repent in the church, we must treat them like unbelievers (cf. Matt. 18:17), we must put them out of the church, we must purge the evil from our midst (1 Cor. 5:13). When we don’t deal with unrepentant sin in the church, the glory of God and the good of God’s people is at stake. This is why we must not be afraid of church discipline when it’s needed.

Now I’ll admit that what we see in Acts 5 is a little more drastic than church discipline. God struck Ananias and Sapphira down. We don’t see as drastic of measures taken today. But the principle is similar. I think the reason God took drastic measures was to show the early church early on just how seriously God takes unrepentant sin and that he insists on his church being holy. And this drastic measure worked. We’re told twice that the church was filled with fear (vv. 5, 11). They saw how serious the call to holiness was. They saw how serious the need to reflect God’s character and Christ’s generosity was. They saw how important fellowship was in the body of Christ. God’s reputation is on the line and the good of God’s people. We need to see the same things today.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

We’ve learned a number of principles about gospel generosity today. We’ve seen that our fellowship is primarily a relational reality. We don’t simply do fellowship; we have fellowship. We are the body of Christ and the family of God. This relational reality leads to practical action, to gospel generosity. We’ve seen that our fellowship with one another in the church is not based on class, color, or culture, but having Christ in common. We’ve seen that generosity is voluntary, not compulsory. We’re called to give cheerfully what we’ve decided in our heart. We’ve seen that generosity involves caring for those in the family of God; it’s not for our fame or reputation. We’ve seen that koinonia and generosity are for the glory of God and the good of God’s people.
From Principles to Practices

These are the principles that we’ve learned. Now I’d like to take a few minutes to give a few practical applications on how to give. Some of these come from our passage this morning. Some of them come from other passages.

First, Christians should give generously. I wish this point was so obvious that I didn’t have to say it. But the fact remains that there are a lot of Christians who do not give anything at all and many more who give very little. The Bible is clear. A maturing Christian, who loves God, loves the church, and loves the lost will give generously. That’s why in our membership covenant we commit to give generously to the church.

Second, we should give to support the mission of the church. The main example of giving we see in Acts is giving to the poor in the church. But the rest of the New Testament shows us that there are others things we’re called to give to as Christians. Jerry Bridges draws out a number in his book. I want to simply mention a couple this morning. We’re called to give to missionaries, like Curt talked about last week. And we’re called to support pastors. In Galatians 6:6 we’re told to “Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.” In 1 Corinthians 9:11, Paul says, “If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?” “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” In short, our giving goes to supporting the whole mission of the church. That involves ministers, missionaries, and those in need in the body. When you give to the general fund at First Free, you’re giving to all of these things.

And that brings me to my third application. Our giving should be primarily to the local church. In our passage this morning, we see that Barnabas and others laid their money at the feet of the apostles and then the church distributed the money to those in need (cf. Acts 6:1ff). There’s nothing wrong with giving directly to other Christians we know have needs or giving to other ministries. But as a general practice, I think most of our giving should be directly to the church, and then let the church distribute that money to the various needs in the body. At First Free, the congregation as a whole approves a budget that is designed to fund the mission of the church. And in approving the budget, the congregation commits to fund that budget. Then the congregation tasks the elders and trustees and staff to distribute that money faithfully. It only makes sense that our giving would be primarily to the local church.

Fourth, we should give regularly. In our passage this morning, we see the church giving to the poor who are in need. In another passage that speaks to a similar action, we learn that the Corinthians were called to put aside money on the first day of the week and store it up so that it could later be distributed to the church in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:2). If we give regularly to the church, the money will be there when it’s needed. And giving on Sunday morning is an act of worship. We receive an offering every week to give you a chance to give regularly as an act of worship. Another way you can give regularly is through using our online giving option or mobile giving option. We’ve been talking about that for the last number of weeks. One of the benefits of this new giving option is you can set up recurring gifts. You can also use the mobile giving app to give during the offering each Sunday. Regardless of how you give, regular giving is a principle that we should apply.

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JIM GUSTAVSON INTERVIEW

To help us understand how to apply what we’ve been learning this morning about generosity, I want to invite Jim (Gus) Gustavson to come up and share a little about what he’s learned over the years about giving. Gus has served as an elder in this church for years. In addition to his service as an elder, Gus has done a lot of financial counseling in this church. In fact, a number of years ago, when Maggie and I were struggling financially, Gus did some financial counseling with us. That led to a long-term friendship. I’ve learned so much from Gus over the years. And I want you to be able to glean some of his wisdom as well.4

Pastor Josh: Gus, you spent all of your professional life as a CPA and a partner with Arthur Young. So you obviously know a lot about finances. But you became a Christian as an adult. How did your conversion change your view of money and generosity?

Gus: Before, I gave reluctantly. After, I gave cheerfully as an act of worship. I started reading the Bible immediately, which I hadn’t done to any great extent before. In 1 Chronicles it says that “everything in the heavens and earth is yours, O Lord.” I hadn’t thought about that before, but it was a major principle and realization to me. God wants us to share what He has given us in time, talent and treasure. The change in attitude arose out of a personal relationship with Christ and the realization of what he had done for me. It was a heart change.

Sometimes my wife Nancy and I struggled with giving, as we had a growing family and the checkbook wouldn’t stretch far enough. Then we started planning ahead and budgeting our giving following God’s command to give our first fruits. Opportunities kept increasing so we had to be more purposeful in our giving. Then Crown Ministries came along and we were involved in Crown for several years. This really expanded our horizons. We learned a lot through Crown about stewardship in general, and improved our discipline in all of our spending. These things became so important. Nancy shared her time with others throughout our marriage and I did some sharing. Retirement provided the opportunity to really devote my time to ministry which has been a blessing.

Pastor Josh: As I mentioned earlier, you’ve done a lot of financial counseling over the years. What have you found to be the biggest obstacles to generosity in the church?

Gus: It’s a matter of the heart and putting our relationship with God first. Sometimes we just don’t trust God to provide our needs as He says he will. (Faith increases giving and giving increases faith.) Sometimes people seem to lack the desire to please God and follow His Word regarding generosity. Sometimes people have the desire, but just don’t know how to go about fixing the problem. Sometimes it’s a “want it now” attitude that puts other things ahead of God.

Pastor Josh: A number of people in the church want to be more generous, but they find themselves stuck. Maybe their bills make it impossible to give what they would like to give. What advice do you have for people who feel stuck?

Gus: Seek God first (“Seek first the kingdom of God,” Matthew 6:33). Make generosity a priority (enjoy God’s generosity to you, and then share it with others). Seek counsel (Compass Ministry is a good source). And budget your time and treasure. Generosity isn’t an act: it’s a way of life (read Chip Ingram’s “The Genius of Generosity”). Generosity is life overflowing with care and concern for others—a brilliant way to live.

4 This is a condensed manuscript of Josh’s interview with Gus. You can hear the full interview by listening to the sermon online.