

# Heart Matters

## LESSON 4



### Topic

Servant attitudes

### Theme

Selfless, sacrificial attitudes and actions on the part of God's servants cause growth in the church.

### Desired Learner Response

The learner will determine whether his attitudes and actions are contributing to growth in his church.

### Materials

• Resources 1, 2, and 6

### Scripture Focus

Acts 5:1–6:7

### Summary

Heart attitudes of several early church characters are the focus of this lesson. Three separate episodes set heart attitudes in contrast and provide encouragement to have a selfless, sacrificial heart of service to God.

### Outline

#### I. Servants with a Selfish Attitude (5:1–11)

- A. The selfishness was serious (5:1–10)
- B. The discipline was swift (5:11)

#### II. Servants with a Sacrificial Attitude (5:12–42)

- A. The apostles' influence expands (5:12–16)
- B. The apostles take a stand (5:17–42)

#### III. Servants with a Selfless Attitude (6:1–7)

- A. The situation: Neglected widows (6:1)
- B. The solution: Appoint Spirit-filled servants (6:2–7)

### Memory Verse

*"And [the apostles] departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for [Jesus'] name"  
(Acts 5:41).*

## GETTING STARTED

### Reasons People Lie

Have the learners list reasons people lie (e.g., to avoid danger, to keep from getting in trouble, to make themselves look good). Have the students suggest which reasons they think are especially serious.

**ASK:** What would you think of a person who lied to make himself look good? (Q1)

**ASK:** Why might you think that type of lie was especially bad? (Q2)

In this lesson, we will study two servants of God who lied to make themselves look good. We will examine the heart attitudes behind their lies as well as the heart attitudes of several other servants of God. This lesson should encourage you to have a sacrificial, others-focused heart for the Lord.

### Help Wanted

Suppose our pastor makes an announcement that three widows in the church need someone to do their grocery shopping and lawn care for them.

**ASK:** What would be your first reaction to such an opportunity?

**ASK:** What should your response be?

How we respond to opportunities to serve God reveals a lot about our hearts. The lesson for today will examine the hearts of some of the servants in the early church. We should be challenged to serve God selflessly and sacrificially through our study.

## SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

### I. Servants with a Selfish Attitude (5:1–11)

In no way did Luke idealize the first church. He recorded what may have been the first public sin by church members and its resulting discipline within the church.

#### A. The selfishness was serious (5:1–10)

**READ:** Acts 4:36, 37. **ASK:** What attitude did Barnabas show by his actions? (Q3) *He showed a selfless, caring attitude. He wanted to meet the needs of those who lacked.*

Barnabas had a genuine concern for his fellow church members. He recognized that he had the ability to supply for the needs of those who lacked. He was not alone. Many believers in the church did the same (4:34, 35). It appears they did so out of Spirit-filled hearts and therefore to bring glory to God.

Ananias and Sapphira were among those who sold property and land and gave the money to the church. But the couple's actions betrayed their wrong atti-

tudes. God's glory was not the motivation behind their good deed.

**READ:** Acts 5:2–4. **ASK:** What did Ananias and Sapphira reveal about their hearts when they lied about the sale of their land? (Q4) *They revealed their hearts were selfish. They selfishly wanted to keep some of the money from the sale of the land while also getting applause for giving all the money to the church.*

Ananias and Sapphira weren't as interested in helping their fellow believers as they were in helping themselves. They loved applause, even if they didn't earn it. By angling for a pat on the back, they turned spirituality into something they acted out rather than something the Spirit created in them.

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not that they failed to give all of their funds to the church but that they misrepresented themselves and the amount of their gift. Ananias and Sapphira tried to reproduce, or manufacture, the Spirit's work. Most likely they wanted to appear as spiritual as Barnabas.

In reality, the couple rejected the true nature of the church. They treated the church simply as a human institution. When this couple lied to the church, they had actually lied to the Holy Spirit (5:3). By attempting to deceive the church, Ananias had lied to God. The spiritual unity of the church does not reside in acts of human benevolence or riches. Rather, spiritual unity derives from what Christ has done through the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Peter appealed to the person of the Spirit as he confronted Ananias (5:4).

### **B. The discipline was swift (5:11)**

In addition to revealing the two elements of Ananias and Sapphira's hypocrisy—misunderstanding the church and trying to manufacture spirituality—the discipline of these two church members reveals something else: God indeed judges sin.

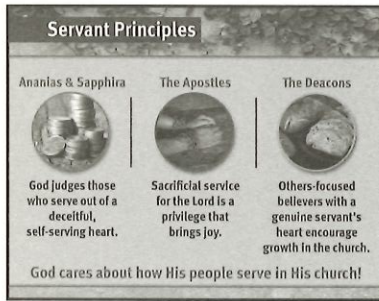
**READ:** Acts 5:5, 9, 10. **ASK:** What do you think your response would be if you witnessed the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira? (Q5)

Since the church was in its infancy stage, the obvious judgment came immediately. God may have performed this judgment as an act of apostolic judgment. Elsewhere Paul exercised apostolic judgment when he blinded Elymas the magician (13:8–11). The essential point is that the early church learned that the Lord judges sin in His church.

Even though God rarely deals with sin in the church today as He did in Acts, believers should not assume that He does not judge sin. God does continue to judge sin in the church. At times that judgment can result in the death of a believer (1 Cor. 11:28–30; 1 John 5:16).

God's discipline of Ananias and Sapphira resulted in great fear coming upon the whole church. The idea of fear communicates reverent respect and awe.

**ASK:** Why does a genuine respect for God help a believer maintain a true servant's heart? (Q6) *A person who genuinely fears God recognizes that he can't fool God with hypocritical spirituality. He lives in light of God's estimation of his service and seeks to please Him. He won't be satisfied with façade spirituality.*



**RESOURCE:** Display resource 6. Review the principle we can learn from the account of Ananias and Sapphira: God judges those who serve out of a deceitful, self-serving heart.

## II. Servants with a Sacrificial Attitude (5:12–42)

### A. The apostles' influence expands (5:12–16)

**READ:** Acts 5:12–16.

God manifested His power of blessing (3:1–26) and judgment (5:1–11) through the apostles. Notice how Luke emphasized that the miracles occurred through the apostles' hands. These miracles functioned to authenticate the apostles and their calling to lead the church (2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4). The apostles continued to minister within the temple area.

While the church continued to grow, and while people desired Peter to heal the sick, they exhibited great respect for the work of the Spirit. Some people were afraid to associate too closely with the apostles. The statement “and of the rest durst no man join himself to them” (Acts 5:13) probably refers to other hypocrites or unbelievers. These other hypocrites had most likely heard about Ananias and Sapphira and decided to stay away.

God manifested His power of judgment and blessing through more than just the apostles' hands. Verse 15 reports that the sick waited to be *touched* by Peter's shadow. Luke did not actually say that Peter's shadow healed the sick, but certainly the implication exists. Some commentators argue that the townspeople were too superstitious and believed that Peter's shadow contained some type of magic. The possibility of this view exists, since some ancients associated magic with shadows and since the townspeople had great fear and respect for the apostles. Luke reported in 5:16, *They were healed every one*. The people's attitude and Luke's report suggest that Peter's shadow did indeed touch and provide healing.

People from several cities brought their infirm to the apostles (5:16). The mention of *a multitude out of the cities* illustrates the spreading news of the church and gospel. All who came experienced healing. That healing was not select or gradual. The sick people were healed instantly and completely. The apostles' scope and influence began to expand.

**ASK:** What attitudes could the apostles have developed if they had taken their eyes off God to focus on themselves instead? (Q7) *They could have become proud and sought recognition. They could have become selfish and demanded they be compensated for their work.*

**ASK:** What happens to the value of our service when we begin to serve for selfish reasons? (Q8) *It loses true value. God can still bring results from the service, but we personally will not receive God's blessing or reward.*

## B. The apostles take a stand (5:17–42)

The genuineness of the apostles' service was soon confirmed as the Jewish religious leaders sought once again to keep them quiet. They imprisoned Peter and John in the *common prison*, or public jail, where everyone could see their imprisonment (5:17, 18). Ironically, this meant that everyone also later learned of their release.

The angel of the Lord went to the jail and freed the apostles, telling them, *Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life* (5:20). This message had an authoritative ring, indicating the essential importance of the gospel message.

**ASK:** How does calling the gospel the words of this life help you understand why the apostles were so devoted to sharing it with the world? (Q9) *The description gets to the essence of the gospel. The gospel gives life, and is therefore the most important message one could ever share.*

Obedying God, Peter and John returned to the temple and taught. The high priest and others, having heard of the apostles' release and present location, sent for the men. Again the Sanhedrin commanded them not to speak in Jesus' name. Notice how the council avoided the actual name of Jesus in 5:28 by simply saying *this name* and *this man's blood*.

**READ:** Acts 5:29. **ASK:** What does the apostles' response reveal about what they believed about God? (Q10) *They believed He was their supreme authority, that He was worth dying for, and that He could protect and deliver them from any person or situation.*

Peter, not fearing to use Jesus' name, referred to Jesus as the exalted *Prince and a Saviour*. Peter also said that through Jesus, repentance and forgiveness were available to Israel (implying that the council members, too, could receive forgiveness) (5:30, 31).

**READ:** Acts 5:32. **ASK:** How did Peter describe his ministry? (Q11) *He, with and through the Holy Spirit, is God's witness to Jesus' provision of salvation.*

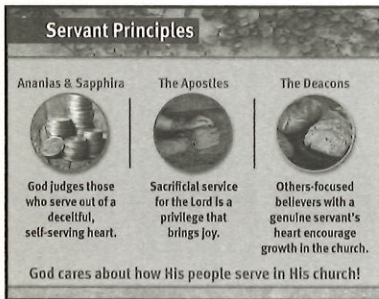
Peter's words moved the religious leaders to begin plotting how to kill Peter and the rest of the apostles (5:33).

In Acts 5:34 the voice of reason spoke up. Gamaliel, a member of the Pharisees, advised the council to take a moderate view. He used examples of other messianic leaders who came to nothing without interference from the Pharisees (5:35–37). But in contrast to Jesus (5:31), those two leaders died and remained in their graves. Gamaliel rightly concluded that if the current work of the apostles was of God, there was nothing the Pharisees could do to stop it (5:38, 39).

Although the Pharisees were the minority of the council, the council accepted Gamaliel's advice (5:40). But they didn't let the apostles off easy. They beat them and commanded them not to speak of Jesus anymore.

**READ:** Acts 5:41, 42. **ASK:** How did the apostles respond to their beating? (Q12) *They rejoiced to be counted worthy of being beaten for the cause of Christ and kept preaching on His behalf.*

**ASK:** Summarize the difference between the apostles' approach to ministry and Ananias and Sapphira's approach to ministry. (Q13) *The apostles were genuine and sacrificial while Ananias and Sapphira were hypocritical and selfish.*



**RESOURCE:** Display resource 6. Review the principle we can learn from the account of the apostles' ministry, arrest, and release: Sacrificial service for the Lord is a privilege that brings joy.

### III. Servants with a Selfless Attitude (6:1–7)

#### A. The situation: Neglected widows (6:1)

Luke's narrative shifts back to life within the early church. At first this episode appears trivial when compared to the Ananias and Sapphira episode and the Sanhedrin incident. However, the very nature of the New Testament church lay at stake. Grecian-speaking widows (or Hellenistic widows) were being ignored. The early church placed priority on the more conservative Jewish widows.

**READ:** Acts 6:1. **ASK:** What could have happened to the church had it not handled the situation correctly? (Q14) *Grecian widows would have been further alienated from the church. Their murmuring and discontent probably would have grown and spread. Soon animosity and distrust would have divided the "Grecian" Jewish believers from the "Hebrew" Jewish believers.*

Two types of Jews made up the early church: Jews living inside Israel and Jews living outside Israel. Many of those outside Israel spoke Greek and used the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint). Many of these Greek-speaking Jews were less orthodox in their religious practice of Judaism. Hence animosity existed between these two groups in Judaism and, apparently, in the early church as well.

The central theological issues revolved around the nature of the church. Are all born-again members equally saved and equally united in Christ? The apostles affirmed that regardless of their backgrounds, all believers are equal in Christ. Paul later rearticulated this truth in his epistles (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11, 12). Judaism had over two hundred kinds of synagogues to accommodate various political and ideological differences. Not so with the church. Only one true church exists, so Luke emphasized the unity of the church.

#### B. The solution: Appoint Spirit-filled servants (6:2–7)

**READ:** Acts 6:2.

The phrase "serve tables" in Acts 6:2 most likely refers to an actual place and process for the distribution of food. The Jews (and apparently the early church) had weekly distribution of food for the needy. In Judaism this distribution would normally occur on Friday. Most likely, the early church mirrored this food-distribution process. The apostles simply could not oversee this large ministry, and they wisely delegated the widow problem to seven men from the church.

Having seven highly qualified men assigned to this situation suggests that the

church faced a large and serious problem, requiring excellent men to handle it. These qualifications were essential, since the heart of the conflict involved prejudicial attitudes and handling finances.

**READ:** Acts 6:3. **ASK:** What do the qualifications for these men tell you about what was most important when considering servants in Christ's work? (Q15)

*The heart of the servant and his obedience to and dependence on God were more important than his abilities.*

Interestingly, all seven men had Greek names, and one man, Nicolas, was not even a Jew. He was a convert to Judaism and then to Christianity. The Bible records nothing further about Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, or Nicolas. However, Luke would soon discuss the ministry of Stephen (Acts 7).

These men received their commission from the apostles through the laying on of hands. This practice visibly acknowledged the commissioning and granted some type of authority (13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14).

Serving food to widows may seem like a mundane job for such highly qualified men. But James wrote later on that meeting needs of widows was at the very heart of *pure* religion (James 1:27).

**ASK:** Why would meeting the needs of widows be considered a good barometer of true religion? (Q16) *Serving widows shows a person is willing to help those who can't pay him for his service. It also shows that he is willing to serve God without fanfare. A person who is religious just to get recognized or to make a buck has no time for widows.*

Three errors manifested themselves in the hungry-widows situation: prejudicial attitudes, the suggestion of inequality in Christ (see Gal. 3:27, 28), and opposition to the very nature of the church. The church overcame the problem and moved on.

**RESOURCE:** Display resource 2. Point out Luke's second progress report on the church.

**RESOURCE:** Display resource 6. Review the principle we can learn from the account of the conflict that arose concerning the widows: Others-focused believers with a genuine servant's heart encourage growth in the church.

Christ is building His church through people. As His tools, He cares about not only what we do in service for Him, but also what motives and attitudes we have in our service for Him. God is not pleased or impressed when we serve for selfish reasons.




**Progress in the Book of Acts**

Luke gave regular reports of continued church growth:

2:47	6:7	9:31	12:24	16:5	19:20
"and the Lord added to the church"	"and the word of God increased; and the number of disciples multiplied"	"the churches ... were multiplied"	"but the word of God grew and multiplied"	"so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily"	"so mightily grew the word of God"

Nothing can stop Christ from building His Church!

**Servant Principles**

<b>Ananias &amp; Sapphira</b>	<b>The Apostles</b>	<b>The Deacons</b>
		
God judges those who serve out of a deceitful, self-serving heart.	Sacrificial service for the Lord is a privilege that brings joy.	Others-focused believers with a genuine servant's heart encourage growth in the church.

God cares about how His people serve in His church!

## MAKING IT PERSONAL

### Self-serving Heart?

**ASK:** Do you have a self-serving heart like those of Ananias and Sapphira? If

so, consider the seriousness of such a heart attitude and confess it to God. Ask Him to change your heart. (Q17)

Look for opportunities to serve sacrificially in the Spirit and perhaps even without notice. (Q18)

### Others-focused Heart?

**ASK:** Do you have a sacrificial, others-focused heart like those of the apostles and the men appointed to care for widows? If so, rejoice in the opportunity to serve God. (Q19)

Ask God for His grace to maintain a good attitude and heart for service. (Q20)

### Review Resource

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: Serve with a genuine, sacrificial heart.

