

The NT Church – “Not to be Trifled With”

Acts 4:32 – 5:11

It's not a **rare thing** to hear someone say, “Man, I wish our Church was like the New Testament Church.”

And, I understand where the feeling comes from. The thought that the NT Church was nearly perfect..., pristine..., filled with signs and wonders; the miraculous hand of God working on what seemed to be a regular basis; at times seeing thousands come to Christ.

Man, who wouldn't want that!

But we need to also remember that the First Century Church was a church under great persecution. Persecution that came from a multiple of sources:

- The Jews didn't like the Christians because they were rocking the status quo. They declared that Jesus Christ was the Jewish Messiah and the Jews had missed Him.

If the story of Christianity were true, then the Jews – particularly the leadership – were guilty of not only missing the Messiah, but of being directly responsible for His murder.

- But, the Romans didn't like the Christians either. To the Romans the Christians were nothing more than atheists because they failed to believe in the plethora of gods worshiped by the Greco-Roman culture (not to mention their failure to worship Caesar). Theirs was the religion associated with the worship of Jupiter, Juno, Mars, etc.

It was believed that Christians were also a political problem. They wouldn't swear allegiance to Caesar. During the late 1st century and on into the 2nd, there was a time of great political instability. Rome was continually obsessed with the fear of either insurrection from within or invasion from without. The Christians couldn't be trusted.

What started out as an inconvenience for the Jews and a curiosity for the Romans, soon became a thorn and a threat to stability. Persecution soon followed. And as the persecution came;

- Individuals were shunned by their families;
- Christian businesses and tradesmen lost their income;
- And poverty became the norm, rather than the exception.

There is a tremendous amount of biblical and extra-biblical resources available to verify the condition of the Church in the later 1st and on through the 3rd century. Yet, even in the midst of the trials and struggles, the Church grew. It would seem that the Church... the true Church grows best when it is under pressure.

As Christianity grew in the area of Jerusalem, the persecution took its toll on individuals and families. This is the condition of the Church as we continue on in Acts 4, beginning in verse 32. We find that some are facing great financial loss through persecution, while others are considering the financial blessings they still had as **an opportunity to bless and assist others who were struggling.**

But, there are **other issues** that we see growing at this time: even in the midst of persecution, we are going to see that some within the Church are still hanging on to pride, greed, and jealousy; and along with that, lies and deceit.

It wasn't enough that the Church had to deal with issues from outside the Church. It was also having to deal with issues INSIDE the Church. Turns out, the NT Church wasn't as perfect and pristine as we might like to think:

Acts 4

³² Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all.

The statement Luke made in verse 32 (*the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed*

was his own, but they had all things in common) was general and reflected the **Church as a whole**. But we will soon find out it wasn't all inclusive of the entire group within the Church.

Yet, even in the midst of the exterior persecutions and even with internal struggles, **the message of the cross and the resurrection, and the hope of the Gospel continued to spread with great power**. The vast majority of the Church drew closer and closer together as the world and even their families turned against them.

³⁴ 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, ³⁵ and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.

Here we find the Church taking the teachings of Jesus to heart, in a real and very practical way.

Back in chapter 2:44-45, Luke gave us a preview of what he's sharing here –

⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

So now, those of you who wish to have a NT Church experience, this next week you need to go out and sell your lands and your houses, all your possessions and goods and place all the proceeds in the offering bag next week.

Amen?

Let's close in prayer...

No, hold on. Don't run out thinking you've walked into some sort of a cult or something. I really don't believe that is what the Lord is calling us to do.

What we see here is the heart of people, being led by the Holy Spirit of God to deal with a very real and pressing need within their Church community.

What Luke is showing us here is, the heart of the people realized and acted upon the fact that **all that they had was the Lord's** and the Lord could do **anything He wanted with any of it**.

But you know what? Isn't that the same attitude
we should have even today.

Are we today, a people who willingly give of our selves – **our time, our talents and our treasure**, all for the glory of God and the furtherance of His Kingdom? Or are you the type of person who strives and strives for more, in order to build up for yourself bigger and better barns. We need to remember what happened to that farmer who determined he could never get enough.

It's back in Luke's **Gospel** record where we find the parable of Jesus about the selfish farmer –

Luke 12

¹⁶ Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. ¹⁷ And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' ¹⁸ So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry."

²⁰ "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' ²¹ "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

The man's **success wasn't a sin**. The sin was the **attitude and usage of his success** – spending it all on, or keeping it all for himself. **It was still all about HIM!** I kind of wonder, as Luke is sharing the events here in **Acts**, if maybe he was reminded of those words of Jesus from his Gospel record.

We can be **so tied to things, wealth, and comfort** that we totally miss the needs of those around us and the plan of God for our lives. Our blessings then actually become a chain around us. We become bound by pride, greed and selfishness. It's our **pride and greed** then which become the motivators of our life, **rather than the Spirit of God**.

We are going to see this played out right here in Acts, as Luke shares two different events; showing the difference of individual hearts –

Acts 4

³⁶ And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is

translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus,³⁷ having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Simple story. But it's here where we are introduced to Barnabus:

- This is the same Barnabas who befriends Saul of Tarsus, who later becomes the Apostle Paul.
- This is the same Barnabas who goes to Saul in Tarsus (Acts 11:25), encouraging Saul in his faith and introduces him to the other Apostles.
- This is the same Barnabas whose relative John Mark joined with him and Saul in their first Missionary journey.
- And this is the same Barnabas who stood toe-to-toe with Paul in the issue of using John Mark once again in missions work (Acts 15:39).

But here as Luke introduces Barnabas for the first time in the book of Acts, Luke doesn't make him out to be some sort of ***Super-Saint***. The simple reality is, apparently he had a piece of land. It doesn't say it was his **only piece** of land or his **best piece** of land. He simply had a piece of land and sold it *and brought the money and laid it at the Apostles' feet*. He very possibly had other land and probably a house.

It does not say that he sold everything that he had.

However, in the context of this event and the next, it would seem that for whatever amount he sold the land for, he gave the **full amount** to the Apostles to disperse as they saw the need. To put it in today's frame work, he could have had a piece of property – sold it for \$15,000 and gave \$15,000 to the Church; perhaps it was a certain share of stocks – sold it for \$1,500 and gave \$1,500; or an item he sold on Ebay – sold it for \$500 and he gave \$500 ... whatever it was, **he saw the need around him was greater than his need to maintain ownership of this particular possession.**

Whatever he sold it for, he had already determined in his heart that the proceeds, **all of the proceeds** would go back to the LORD through the ministry of the Apostles.

Great attitude, great heart, and
God was honored through his action.

Now we move on to the second situation. A similar action, but a **totally different heart and completely different results.**

Acts 5

¹ But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. ² And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

There is no doubt as we look at the whole story that Ananias and his wife Sapphira had seen the actions of Barnabus and others. Perhaps they had **heard the words or at least the whispers of praise** for those who had so selflessly given of themselves for the benefit of others.

They had a possession which they were able to sell. Again, Luke doesn't say that this was their only piece of land or valuable possession. He doesn't even say how much they sold it for. But somewhere in the mix, either before they sold it or after they saw the amount that it sold for, **both husband and wife determined that they would lie about the amount.**

At this point in time it was still within their ability to say, *"Hey Peter, we sold this possession for \$20,000 and we would like to donate \$10,000 to the needs of the Church."* That was **absolutely no issue.**

But we find that that is not the case.

Apparently, they ***pretended to sacrifice***
the entire amount to the needs within the Church.

And at this point in the formation of the Church, **God would not have it – to hold back a portion was not the problem...** but to **lie** about it, particularly in order to **gain some sort of favor or praise from man...** that **was** the problem.

³ But Peter said, "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? ⁴ 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."

Can you see? It's not about the amount, it's about the lie!

It appears that as soon as Ananias set the money before the Apostle Peter, that the Lord gave Peter a **Word of Knowledge**... *something he could not have known about prior.*

There's **so many dynamics going on here**. Apparently there were others from the Church there as Ananias *brought a certain part and laid it at the Apostles' feet* – verse 6 tells us there were at least some *young men* in the room where this took place. And in verse 2, clearly his **wife was in full agreement with this plan of deceit**.

As Peter said these words to Ananias, can you imagine **this man's heart coming up his throat?** Peter cuts to the chase: *"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?"*

Somehow, somehow Ananias' scheme had been found out.

And **now everyone knows**.

Peter makes it very clear that **he had a choice...**, *"You could do with it whatever you wanted."* But, because of the **sin of pride, envy, greed, and jealousy**, Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be looked at as **spiritual and giving, without being either**. And so they purposed in their heart to **lie**.

Peter asked Ananias, *why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...?* I believe the answer to that question it is very clear: **Satan received permission to fill Ananias' heart, when Ananias didn't allow his heart to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit.**

The consequences of Ananias' sin was swift and severe –

⁵ Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. ⁶ And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.

Yeah, I guess there would be **great fear...**

So, now, who here **really** wants to be a part of the NT Church?

Let me ask you real quick... don't respond to me, respond to God... the offering you gave today, was it truly a sacrificial gift to the Lord, or was it simply tipping God?

*Aren't you glad that the Lord doesn't
deal with us in the same way today?*

Peter said, *"You have not lied to men but to God."* And don't forget, as we've shared earlier, Ananias wasn't alone –

⁷ Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹ 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." 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. ¹¹ So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

Can you just imagine the scene here for a moment? Sapphira comes into the assembly and every eye is on her... she's probably thinking, *"Hey, their all looking at ME now!"* But she doesn't get it. She's thinking they're all impressed with her sacrifice, but in reality **they're all watching to see if she is going to drop dead or not.**

Peter looks at her: *"Hey Sapphira, how are you doing today?"*

Sapphira: *"Oh my Brother Peter, since Ananias and I made that BIG sacrifice God has just been blessing and blessing us. I just never realized that serving and sacrificing to the little people would be such a blessing."*

The people's eyes got bigger!

Then Peter looks at her in a way that probably surprised Sapphira.

"Tell me Sapphira, did you and Ananias sell the land for so much?"

I'm sure there had to be a bit of a **nervousness coming over her smile...** and a bit of bewilderment, wondering **where this conversation was headed.**

At this point it **could have gone either way** for Sapphira, **God and Peter** were giving her a **chance to repent and be honest**.

"Yes, for so much," she boldly says.

At that point there had to be a sadness and weariness that came over Peter. It would be the similar to that feeling you and I would get when we **know our child did something wrong... we have undeniable proof**. But they still look us straight in the eye and say, "No Daddy, I didn't do it." A sadness and weariness of a parent that knows they must now discipline the wayward child,

⁹ 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." 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.

Three hours later, yeah, they just had enough time to bury her husband and now, just as she's had time to hit the floor, *the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband.*

What a great sorrow..., but what a great time of amazement as the people of God realize, **God is serious about His Kingdom's work**. God is serious about the integrity of His Church.

Can you imagine if the guy they sold the property to had heard about what happened? If they had gotten away with it, he would have rightly figured, "Oh those Christians, they're a bunch of liars and cheats." But, since God brought judgment, he would be thinking, "This God of theirs, He has real power! He is not to be trifled with"

*¹¹ So **great fear came upon all the church** and upon all who heard these things.*

