

NAME RECOGNITION

ACTS 4:32-5:11 OCTOBER 23, 2019

There are certain names that, when we hear them, immediately remind us of a particular event in the life of the individual. The name itself becomes *redefined* to include the memory of some episode the person was involved in, be it famous or *infamous*. Rosa Parks. John Wilkes Booth. Tonya Harding. Sully Sullenberger. While there is much *more* to these people than the incidents they're famous for, we'll always remember them for the fateful days that sealed their place in history.

In our text tonight, we're introduced to 3 remarkable characters. Two of them have only 1 scene on the stage of Scripture. The third will become a major player in the spread of the Gospel and will, eventually, be numbered among the Apostles. Though their legacies couldn't be more different, their entrance into the story have a lot of similarities.

We begin in verse 32 of chapter 4.

Acts 4:32 - ³² Now the large group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one said that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common.

The communal unity that we read about back in chapter 2 was still continuing. Persecution hadn't stalled the Church. Acts is the story of how *nothing* could stop the Church. Soon, as the opposition intensifies and becomes lethal, the believers *will* be scattered throughout the Roman empire. But for now, things were continuing as they had since Pentecost. Luke continues his description in verse 34.

Acts 4:34-35 - ³⁴ For there was not a needy person among them, because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, ³⁵ and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed for each person's basic needs.

Luke is speaking in general terms here, because, in just a moment, we'll see an example of a married couple who *did not* feel quite the way that's being described in these verses.

What's important to note is that this remarkable arrangement of communal living was not a *purposeful* initiative of the Apostles. It wasn't a program they had enacted or a law they put in place. This wasn't communism, where it's wrong to hold private property and the rulers control everything.

Instead, what was happening was that there were thousands of Christians who were living together, many of them foreigners away from home, and, as we would expect in, there were people with needs. People needed food. People needed shelter. People needed helps of one kind or another. As those needs arose, the Holy Spirit would speak to the heart of *other* individuals in the Church, and *those* individuals would take it upon themselves to help. That often meant they would sell some home or property so that the proceeds could be used for ministry when it was needed.

The Apostles weren't getting up and saying, "It's wrong for you to own things. You need to divest yourself of all your wealth, that's the way you prove what a good Christian you are." In fact, in a few verses, Peter is going to *affirm* private property. The Apostles also weren't standing up and saying, "Ok, we're doing a fundraising campaign. Everyone who has something to sell, sell it right now!"

No, as needs came to light, the Holy Spirit led individuals to share and provide and pour out generosity. The Christians there in the Church did not *limit* their generosity, but truly did bear each other's burdens. We'll see in a few passages that they established a daily feeding program. Later on we'll meet a Christian woman who busied herself making clothes for those that needed it. We teach our kids "sharing is caring," right? Well, it's not just true for kids, it's true for adults too. Especially Christians, because we are *commanded* to bear one another's burdens. We are *commanded* to be generous with what we have, using our own physical resources to meet the needs of others.

Now, three times in our verses we're going to see the phrase "laid...at the apostles' feet" referring to Christians giving money. We're not exactly sure how this worked, but based off context and seeing how the story plays out, it seems that it was, *in some way*, publicized or done in the open. When people gave, others knew about it and talked about it, and this arrangement ended up being a terrible temptation for two of our characters tonight: Ananias and Sapphira.

We try to be sensitive when it comes to criticizing Bible characters. It's almost always unfair. So, what I'm about to say isn't meant as a knock on them. But, as I've talked about before, there are lots of people who say that we just need to *copy* what the first century church did and that, if we *did* that, the Church today would be as pure and powerful and free of trouble as it was then. First of all, the first century Church had *many* problems, because *every* church has problems! Second, it seems that this method they had for receiving public offerings was a bit of a holdover from their Jewish traditions. That's what we see the Pharisees doing, right? Jesus criticized it. In fact, when instructing His disciples, He specifically told them they *shouldn't* give publicly in that way or to receive the praise of men. "Don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing," He said.

So, why was this public contribution happening on the Apostles' watch? If we're being frank, as you read the book of Acts, it doesn't seem like they were very involved with the *administrative* details of the Church at all. When a complaint is brought before them about inequality in the distribution of meals, they don't really get involved. They say, "Ok. Go figure it out." When revival breaks out in Samaria, it's not because the Apostles had launched an effort to reach the people there. It happens because of the *Holy Spirit* and then the Apostles say, "Let's go check it out."

In this case, the *tradition* of the Jews seems to have influenced the way that the Church collected their offerings and it not only *wasn't* the way that Jesus had instructed, it also created an environment where jealousy and selfish-ambition could become a temptation.

So what *were* the Apostles doing at the time? Go back to verse 33.

Acts 4:33 - ³³ And the apostles were giving testimony with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them.

They weren't busying themselves with trying to set up a utopian church or to lead a revolution. They were doing what they had been called to do and that's be fishers of men. They were preaching the same message and many people were getting saved, thanks to the powerful grace of God.

Acts 4:36-37 - ³⁶ Joseph, a Levite and a Cypriot by birth, the one the apostles called Barnabas, which is translated Son of Encouragement, ³⁷ sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Some people are so well known by their nicknames that their birth names are all but forgotten. Wild Bill's real name was James Butler Hickok. Plato wasn't actually named Plato, that was a nickname. His birth name, it's believed, was Aristocles.¹ If you would've asked me last week what Barnabas' *given* name was, I don't think I would've come close. *And I'll probably forget in a couple weeks.* He's forever known to us as the "Son of Encouragement." A man who was a faithful source of comfort, edification, and grace. A man who embodied this nickname the Apostles had given him.

The Bible is big on nicknames. It's something God likes doing. He renamed Abraham. He renamed Jacob. He renamed Simon. And He's going to rename you and I in eternity. Revelation 2 says He'll give each of His people a white stone with a new name and only you and He will understand.

Barnabas hadn't been a Christian long, but he was already so fruitful and active in the ministry that he had won a nickname. At some point, some need arose and he took it on himself to sell a field so that the money could be used to help out. He gave it all.

Sometimes people will say that it was *wrong* for Barnabas to own a field. That his selling of it was an act of repentance. They cite the fact that he was of the tribe of Levi and, they say, Levites couldn't own land. But that simply isn't true. While it *is* true that Levites were not given an *allotment* of land under the Mosaic system, there is no specific restriction saying they can never own *any* land. In fact, God *commanded* Jeremiah, himself a priest and Levite, to *buy* a field from his cousin and that it was his *right* to do so. It's in Jeremiah 32. We don't need to assume Barnabas had done something wrong here. Instead, we should be *encouraged* by his wonderful generosity, which is the *point* of Luke using him as an example.

What's more generous: To sell a field that, in reality, is illegal for you to have and then launder the money through the church? Or to sell a field that is rightfully yours, but out of the overflow of the Spirit inside you, you decide to give it up so someone *else* can be blessed? Barnabas serves as a bright example of the selfless spirituality in the life of a Spirit-filled Christian.

But, then comes chapter 5. As Marlin says when the angler fish appears, "Good feelings gone!" The church is about to have a real bad day.

Acts 5:1-2 - But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. ² However, he kept back part of the proceeds with his wife's knowledge, and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Ananias and Sapphira are our other 2 new characters. They get one scene, and it's a sad one. Apparently, they had seen the response of the people to the generosity of Barnabas and others like him and they wanted to get in on the accolades. The lure of notoriety and prominence can drive a person to do shocking things. In the case of Ananias and Sapphira, the plan was simple, the "crime" seemed victimless. Who's to know? And, what would be the big deal even if they *did*?

Acts 5:3-4 - ³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds from the field? ⁴ Wasn't it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn't it at your disposal? Why is it that you planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God!"

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato#Name>

Peter here demonstrates what is called the “word of knowledge.” God gave him insight into the actions and thoughts of Ananias and his wife, exposing their sin.

Peter reminds us that sin, of any size or sort, is an affront to God. They thought they were pulling a fast one to get a few extra Likes on their latest post, but to God, sin is not a trivial thing. It is abhorrent and offensive to Him. We need to remind ourselves of that.

Acts 5:5-6 - ⁵When he heard these words, Ananias dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard. ⁶The young men got up, wrapped his body, carried him out, and buried him.

What if everyone who told a lie today was struck dead by God? A 2002 study by the University of Massachusetts found that 60% of people couldn't go 10 minutes without lying. And that the average among *that* group told *three* lies in that period!² So why was it such a big deal that Ananias and Sapphira did this?

Well, there are a lot of speculative reasons. One is that they may have become influential leaders in the fledgling church, which would've caused a lot of problems. Another suggestion is that God was working to protect the absolute purity of the Church.

Warren Wiersbe points out that, Biblically, we see that when God does a *new* thing among His people, He often executed more severe judgment at the beginning. Nadab and Abihu were struck dead because of their sin at the dedication of the Tabernacle. Achan was put to death for his sin at the beginning of the conquest of Canaan. Those instances, like this one in Acts 5, are dramatic and even shocking. But we should remember that's God's *attitude* toward sin is the same.

Acts 5:7 - ⁷There was an interval of about three hours; then his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

Now, I find this immensely interesting. After all their planing and scheming, when it was time to set everything in motion, apparently Ananias had ditched his wife and wanted to get all the attaboys for himself! He wasn't even willing to share them with his co-conspirator! It's sad, the things sin convince us to do.

Acts 5:8-10 - ⁸“Tell me,” Peter asked her, “did you sell the field for this price?” “Yes,” she said, “for that price.” ⁹Then Peter said to her, “Why did you agree 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!” ¹⁰Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in, they found her dead, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband.

She had opportunity to repent, but missed it. It doesn't seem like she was very good at picking up context clues. No one is meeting her eye line. People are usually quiet. As soon as she walks in, Peter asks her a very pointed, *very specific* question. But sin blinds us and she, too, finds herself guilty of what John would later call “the sin unto death.”

Dr. H.A. Ironside wrote:

² <http://mentalfloss.com/article/30609/60-people-cant-go-10-minutes-without-lying>

“What was the offense of Ananias and Sapphira? They pretended to a greater degree of Christian devotedness than they really possessed. That was all; but it was a tremendously evil thing in the sight of God.”³

Acts 5:11 - ¹¹ Then great fear came on the whole church and on all who heard these things.

While the Lord was able to use this terrible situation, we can't help but compare Ananias and Sapphira with Barnabas. They're all part of the same “graduating class,” as it were. Both had resources and opportunities. Through one of them came encouragement, edification, grace, comfort, inspiration. Barnabas would, himself, become an Apostle⁴ and be instrumental in the life of Paul. The other two, well, the only spiritual benefit their story provided is that it serves as a warning to us. The rest was a waste. Their spiritual efforts were wasted because they weren't giving out of generous hearts, but out of jealous pride. Their *physical* efforts were wasted. It would've taken time and work to get their field sold. The money they had held back for themselves was wasted. It may have even been in their pockets that day when they were buried. Their potential reward for actually *doing* something for the Lord was certainly wasted. Of course, their futures were wasted as well.

Even their *names* were wasted. When we hear them they're forever attached to this infamous scene. But their names could've meant so much more. 'Ananias' means 'God is gracious.' And Sapphira means 'beautiful.'⁵ But what could've been a testimony of God's goodness has become a warning of the destruction of sin.

The waste of Ananias and Sapphira extended beyond themselves. Think of the young men who buried them. These poor guys. I doubt they had wanted to spend their day burying two of their Christian friends. It was hard work. Sad work. I'm guessing they would've rather spent their day in prayer and worship and hearing the word taught. Instead, because of sin, *they* had to exert a bunch of effort and energy that was, essentially, a waste. They shouldn't have had to do this job, but because people in the Church weren't walking their walk, these guys had to take a hard detour of their own that day.

In contrast, we have Barnabas. We'll see much more of him as the pages of Acts unfold. But, instead of wanting to be seen as a big shot, he's simply living out his faith, being led by the Spirit, using what he has to minister. And because of that, his name is forever associated with *encouragement*. He wasn't perfect. But he was a growing, dynamic Christian, full of grace and used in all sorts of different ways.

It's clear who'd we'd rather be in the story. And so, toward that end, we have some simple ways in which Barnabas encourages us and Ananias and Sapphira warn us. First: Remember that we are called to bear one another's burdens. This will require actual generosity, not from everyone else, but from us. Second: The goal of our Christian life and participation in the church is not prominence or recognition or accolades, but to glorify God and experience His grace. Third: We must guard our hearts so that Satan doesn't have space to influence us the way he did here. We do that by being filled with the Spirit and by acknowledging how awful and dangerous sin is. Finally: We'd all do well to remember that our lives are full of potential and consequences. We want to spend ourselves the way Barnabas did, not waste ourselves like Ananias and Sapphira.

³ H.A. Ironside *Acts*

⁴ Acts 14:14

⁵ Warren Wiersbe *Be Dynamic*