

## **Heart-level Unity**

Acts 4:32-5:16

I'm going to read a series of True/False Statements about how we here at Faith should conduct ourselves. If you are our guest here today, feel free to listen in on this little pop quiz.

1. Since I am just one person in a rather large church, the health of the church is not affected by whether or not *I* walk with God.
2. When it comes to giving to the church and serving in the church, my attitude is irrelevant; the only thing that matters is *that* I give and serve.
3. When it comes to others in the church, it doesn't matter what I think about them. The only thing that matters is how I *treat* them.

This morning's passage suggests that all three of those statements are false. Today's passage makes clear that God sees and cares about the human heart. The heart that you bring to this church matters.

I say that because of how Luke describes a threat to the unity of the church in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem was very large and yet they had incredible unity; they were 5,000 persons strong (Acts 4:4) and yet they were of "one heart and soul." And when two people entered in and had a different heart, God responded in a fierce way. He dealt with them in order to protect the unity of the church.

As we work our way through this passage, let's allow God to show us anything in our hearts that might get in the way of what he wants to do here at Faith.

### ***A Picture of Heart-level Unity in the Church. (Acts 4:32-37)***

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.

Because these believers were "of one heart and soul," they treated each other as family. "If I have something that you need, it's yours." They had everything in common. This wasn't a rule that the apostles made; this was a spontaneous expression of generosity. As well, we read in verse 33:

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.

The apostles, Jesus' official spokesmen, were faithful and powerful in bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus. And God poured out his grace "***upon them all***"; experiencing the blessing and help of God was the norm (not the exception).

In verses 34 and 35 we have tangible evidence of the grace of God at work:

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.

They weren't merely giving from their income; they liquidated assets and gave the proceeds. We see here a pattern that Luke will repeat twice in this passage. Those who owned "lands or houses" (plural) 1) sold them, 2) brought the proceeds of that sale, and 3) laid the money at the apostles' feet. By giving the money to the apostles, the wealthy were demonstrating a spirit of humility and submission. The result of their giving was that "there was not a needy person among them." The entire believing community had their needs met.

Luke gives a specific example of a landowner who followed this pattern of giving.

36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Luke gives us these details about Barnabas because he will figure prominently in later chapters of Acts. But the main thing we're told is that Barnabas 1) sold a field, 2) brought the money, and 3) laid it at the apostles' feet. He was one of the pure-hearted, humble, generous people who was loyal to Jesus and who wanted to help take care of others in the church.

Luke gives a beautiful picture of heart-level unity that every church in every culture should strive to imitate. The details will look different across the world and down through the centuries, but the elements are the same. With a common commitment to the gospel, we view the church as a family. We legitimately care about each other so much that we do whatever it takes to make sure that everybody is cared for both spiritually and materially.

In this context Luke tells us about a threat to the unity and the purity of this infant church in Jerusalem. In Acts 5 Luke records an incident that reveals:

***God's Zeal for Heart-level Unity in the Church. (Acts 5:1-11)***

In contrast with Barnabas, Luke tells us about a couple named Ananias and Sapphira. Their actions looked identical to Barnabas' actions, but their hearts were very different.

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.

Did you notice how these two broke the pattern we saw in chapter 4? They added a step. After they sold a piece of property, they "kept back some of the proceeds," and then they "brought only a part" of the proceeds and "laid it at the apostles' feet." As we'll see in verse 4, the issue wasn't that they only gave some of the proceeds; the issue

was that they lied and said they had brought all of the proceeds from the sale of their property.

At this point, you might wonder, “What’s the big deal? Why does it matter that they lied? Their money could still do a lot of good for a lot of people.” The big deal was (and is) that **God cares about the human heart**. He doesn’t only care about what we do; he also cares about the **motives** of what we do. Whereas the believers were “of one heart and soul” (4:32), Ananias and Sapphira had a very different heart.

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?”

Apparently God had revealed to Peter Ananias’ motives. Instead of being “filled with the **Spirit**,” “**Satan** had filled [Ananias’] heart.” Consequently, he had “lie[d] to the Holy Spirit” by saying that he had brought the entire proceeds of the sale when he had held back some for himself.

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 man but to God.”

Ananias didn’t have to sell his land. And once he did sell the land, he could do whatever he wanted with the money: he could have kept it all, given it all, or given part of it. But he “contrived” in his heart to deceive the apostles by saying that he was bringing the entire proceeds when he wasn’t. In verse 3 Peter had said he was lying to **the Holy Spirit**; here he restates himself by saying, “You have not lied to man but to **God**.” The implication is that the Holy Spirit is God; the Holy Spirit is divine.

God’s judgment was swift:

5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.

That’s shocking, isn’t it? No gentle correction, and no opportunity to repent. He was struck dead on the spot. Whatever we think about this, we should never accuse God of being unjust. I think we wrestle with this because we don’t understand **how precious the church is to God**. The church was bought/redeemed by the blood of Jesus; he paid an infinite price for the church.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul reminded the believers in Corinth, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” Luke’s simple point in recording this incident is to emphasize that **God is zealous about heart-level unity in the church**.

Ananias and Sapphira embodied what Jesus warned against in Matthew 6 when he said not to give to the needy in order to be praised by men (Matthew 6:2-4). Ananias found out the hard way that God really does see and care about the human heart.

Consequently, “. . . great fear came upon all who heard of it.” (See also Acts 2:43; 9:31; 19:17.) This is a healthy “fear of the Lord”; people understood that since God is zealous for his church, you should be very careful how you enter into and relate to his church.

6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

Next Luke records that the same fate awaited Ananias’ wife.

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.”

Luke is obviously paraphrasing here.

9 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.”

In addition to lying to the Spirit (v. 3) and lying to God (v. 4), Peter says that they had “agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord.” This is reminiscent of the children of Israel “testing the Lord their God” in the wilderness (Deut. 6:6, Psalm 78:41, etc.). The principle illustrated is that **how you treat the church is how you treat God**. [See Acts 9:4 - “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”]

10 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. 11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Again we’re told that “great fear” came upon the church and others who heard about Ananias and Sapphira.

As you’ve probably noticed in Scripture and in everyday life, what happened to Ananias and Sapphira doesn’t happen every day. In the rest of the New Testament we don’t see people in the church being struck dead every time they had impure motives. If he did that today, the church would be much smaller than it is; and those of you who are left would have to find a new pastor on a regular basis.

Actually, when the church follows the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, issues like impure motives are addressed when they surface. We “admonish/instruct one another” (Romans 15:14) and “speak the truth to each other in love” (Ephesians 4:15). In other words, when relationships in the body of Christ are healthy, we actually help each other

turn from wrong ways of thinking and acting. That only happens when we walk in humility and “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21).

But when churches (or individuals within the church) don’t follow the teachings of Jesus and the apostles and impure motives run rampant, the consequences *are* sometimes severe (like here in Acts 5). In 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, for example, Paul is addressing abuses associated with the Lord’s Table. In that day, the church had an entire meal as part of the Lord’s Supper. Those who had status and wealth were coming early, eating all the food, and getting drunk; when the poorer believers showed up there was nothing left. Paul’s comment is that because of their abuses, “many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.” (See also 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.) So we shouldn’t say that God *never* judges people severely in our day.

But Luke wants us to know that God sees our hearts and is zealous for the unity of the church. Having recorded how their pure-hearted loyalty to Jesus and devotion to one another had been preserved, Luke now describes the influence that those inside the church had upon those outside the church.

### ***The Influence of a Church with Heart-level Unity. (Acts 5:12-16)***

I’ll summarize most of what Luke says in this paragraph. He mentions three things.

First, **many were healed**. The apostles continued to perform many “signs and wonders” among the people (vv. 12, 15-16) “in Jesus’ name” (4:30). These miracles met pressing physical and spiritual needs. But they also were “signs” that pointed people to Jesus. Just like a sign on a highway tells you where to turn if you want to get somewhere, these signs told people (both then and now) to turn to Jesus if they want to get to God. [See note #1.]

Second, **many were saved**. In verse 14 we read, “And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. . .” The news about Jesus had credibility because those in the church loved one another so generously; they demonstrated the type of life you can have if you are a disciple of Jesus.

Third, **many others respected them but kept their distance**. In verse 13 we read, “None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.” Among the general population there was great respect for the apostles and the church. But they kept their distance, perhaps out of fear that they too might be persecuted. Or perhaps they were afraid of the God of these Christians who was so powerful and so zealous for his church. Whatever the case, they weren’t ready to become disciples and enter the life of the church.

This is the influence that every church with heart-level unity can have. As Jesus prayed in John 17, our unity is meant to be tangible evidence that God sent Jesus to die for their sins. As in the book of Acts, some will reject the gospel. But some will believe the gospel and become part of the body of Christ. Others will hold us in high esteem and

keep their distance; I know lots of people in that category and hope they believe one day.

But none of this influence is possible without heart-level unity that demonstrates loyalty to Jesus and devotion to other believers in the church.

**Implications.** This passage stresses that **God is zealous about heart-level unity in the church**. If God is zealous about something we should be too. If it really is true that “how you treat the church is how you treat God,” you and I should walk in the fear of the Lord and consider carefully how we conduct ourselves in the church (and in the larger body of Christ). Consider two complementary implications.

**First,** Avoid thoughts, words, and actions that compromise the unity within the church.

Remember that if God hadn't revealed Ananias and Sapphira's deception, nobody would have seen any difference between them and Barnabas. But God knew and cared about their hearts. He didn't want their deception to poison the infant church in Jerusalem. And God knows and cares about our hearts and wants us to avoid compromising the unity of this church and the larger body of Christ.

The last verse in Psalm 19 gets at the heart-attitude God wants us to have:

14 Let the words of my mouth  
and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

It's not enough not to **say** words that are hurtful and divisive. God doesn't even want us mulling over such words in our **hearts**. God wants the meditations of our hearts toward each other to be patient and kind, even (or perhaps especially) when we disagree with each other on various issues.

My encouragement to you this week is to notice your thoughts, words, and actions toward others in the church. Do you daydream more about what God wants **you** to do or about what you think **others** should do differently? With God's help turn away from anything that compromises our unity.

**Second,** Promote heart-level unity within the church. Like the church in Jerusalem, let's seek to be of “one heart and soul.” And like them, let's pursue a type of unity that is expressed in generosity. One Scripture that advocates this commitment is Ephesians 4:1-3.

1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

This week, as you interact with others in the church, take advantage of opportunities to be humble and gentle with others in the church, even those with whom you disagree. And if you've offended someone, perhaps you need to humble yourself and admit your fault.

This past week I was prompted by the Holy Spirit to apologize to someone for some careless words I had spoken. The other person gladly forgave me, and our relationship is fully in tact (and probably stronger). Apologizing isn't my favorite thing to do, but it didn't kill me. And it's 100% worth it when needed because it promotes heart-level unity in the church.

***Since God is zealous for heart-level unity, we should be also.***

Note #1: [Hebrews 2:4 points back to these signs and wonders performed by the apostles as confirmation of the gospel. This doesn't mean that God never does miraculous things anymore, but there was something unique about the signs and wonders in the book of Acts that authenticated (and still authenticate) the gospel. See also 2 Corinthians 12:12. In addition to the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, signs and wonders were prominent in Moses' ministry: Exodus 7:3, Deuteronomy 4:34, Jeremiah 32:20-21, etc.]