

Followers or pretenders

Acts 4:32–5:11

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³²All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had. ³³The apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great blessing was upon them all. ³⁴There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them ³⁵and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.

³⁶For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means "Son of Encouragement"). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus. ³⁷He sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles.

⁵But there was a certain man named Ananias who, with his wife, Sapphira, sold some property. ²He brought part of the money to the apostles, claiming it was the full amount. With his wife's consent, he kept the rest.

³Then Peter said, "Ananias, why have you let Satan fill your heart? You lied to the Holy Spirit, and you kept some of the money for yourself. ⁴The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished. And after selling it, the money was also yours to give away. How could you do a thing like this? You weren't lying to us but to God!"

⁵As soon as Ananias heard these words, he fell to the floor and died. Everyone who heard about it was terrified. ⁶Then some young men got up, wrapped him in a sheet, and took him out and buried him.

⁷About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter asked her, "Was this the price you and your husband received for your land?"

"Yes," she replied, "that was the price."

⁹And Peter said, "How could the two of you even think of conspiring to test the Spirit of the Lord like this? The young men who buried your husband are just outside the door, and they will carry you out, too."

¹⁰Instantly, she fell to the floor and died. When the young men came in and saw that she was dead, they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹Great fear gripped the entire church and everyone else who heard what had happened.

David McChesney was meant to be preaching this week and when he was unable to and I read the passage, I thought great, I could have some fun with this passage, see if we can be like the early church and have a couple of people drop dead because they didn't give enough in the offering!

But as I started reading it a bit more seriously it raised more questions, especially the first bit.

All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had.

I have read that passage so many times, it's a scenario that many Christians envy. However as I read, and reread, it I thought, show me anywhere in the world where Christians are united in heart and mind for more than about a week! And did they share their possessions because they believed, or because they were united in belief.

And is this realistic, are we getting the full picture, I'm not so sure because if we read between the lines already systems have needed to be put in place. See verse 34-35

³⁴There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them ³⁵and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.

If we glance back at Acts 2

⁴⁴And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.

Notice that in chapter 2 they all shared everything, sold property and shared with those in need. But by Chapter 4, only those who owned property or houses, sold them and gave to the apostles for them to control the distribution.

And then by chapter 6

6 But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

What happened to all the believers who were united in heart and mind, what happened to this ideal early church that we are meant to model ourselves on???

Ok so once I got my mind around this a bit and recognised the humanity of the early church, I thought what can we take from this?

Two effects of believing in Jesus

Let's face it, where there is humanity, there is dysfunction, where there is God there is hope. So despite our dysfunction there are two effects to hope and strive for for those who are followers of Jesus. These effects should be that **the heart is loosened in relationship to things**, and **tightened in its relationship to people**. Jesus role modelled that, it really a no brainer.

Believing in Jesus **tightens the heart's relationship to people**—especially other Christians. When you become united to Jesus by faith, you become united to people by love. That is part of what we mean when one of our church statements say 'Love without measure'. We will love people even when it hurts, even if it involves sacrifice, discomfort.

Then comes the other effect as we read on:

³⁴ There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them ³⁵ and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.

There is second effect of trusting in Jesus: first, the heart is tightened in its relationship to people, and second, **the heart is loosened in its relationship to things**. Faith in Christ creates a bond of love to people, and cuts the bond of love to things. That's what prayer and self-denial is about, we love those who

don't know you on the other side of the world that we will give up money for them.

One of Luke's main burdens

Remember it is Luke who is the writer of Acts. The Gospel of Luke and Acts are really just one book, just divided into before and after the death and resurrection.

So if you will read Luke's gospel, you will see that to be **FREE** from the love of things is one of his main messages. And he wants us **FIRM** in our love for people. And he does not believe that you can have both at the same time.

Luke 16:13 "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

Because if your heart is united in love to people, then you will hold loose to things, because things will have value only as a means of loving people.

That's what this story is all about, it's not trying to describe the perfect church. It's a snapshot of a community of people whose hearts have been utterly revolutionized by believing in Jesus. They found themselves freely caring about people, and freely selling land and houses and giving the money to the church for distribution to those with special needs.

The freedom of faith

Luke stresses the freedom from things and this love for people as he continues on in Acts 5 as he tells the story of Ananias.

Ananias had sold a field and deceptively brought part of the proceeds to the apostles and said that he brought all of it. He lied.

Peter in his response suggests that this might be the way you would act if there were some external constraint on you, if this was not a matter of freedom, if there was some kind of rule or law. So he tells Ananias that there are no rules and regulations in the generosity that he sees all about him in the church. These people are acting out of freedom. That's what true faith means— that who a follower of Jesus is all about, an authentic change of heart, so that your acts of love are free—they are what you want to do, not what you feel coerced to do. These people are followers not pretenders.

So Peter says in verse 4: "*The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished.*"

Then he goes on (v.4b): "*And after selling it, the money was also yours to give away.*"

In other words, nobody coerced you to bring any of your money in here. If your heart doesn't tell you bring it, don't bring it.

What Luke is describing for us here in this story is the radically freeing effect of following Jesus. This is the good news of Jesus, this is what the Jews were attracted to. Christianity is not a matter of external conformity to religious expectations, it's not all about rules and regulations. This is an area that the church has failed so badly over the years. The Christian faith is a matter of internal freedom. It is not a matter of force and law. It's a matter of freedom and love. Being a Christian means being changed from the inside out so that you fall in love with people and fall out of love with things.

Two examples of what being a Christian means

And what Luke does to make this real for us is to give us two living examples—Barnabas, a man who really experiences the freedom of faith in Christ; and Ananias and Sapphira, a man and woman who try to pretend when it is not really there.

Barnabas

Barnabas is mentioned briefly in Acts 4:36–37,

³⁶For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means "Son of Encouragement"). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus. ³⁷He sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles.

That's all it says for now. Later we will meet him as the advocate of the new convert Paul (9:27), and the shepherd of the new Gentile converts in Antioch (11:22), and the one trusted with relief for the poor (11:30), and the first partner of Paul on his missionary journeys (13:2), and the advocate for giving John Mark a second chance (15:37).

He shines as one of the most mature, reliable, loveable leaders of the early church. Barnabas' ministry begins with a demonstrated freedom from the love

of things, and a heart for the poor. He sold his field and gave all the proceeds to the apostles. In this story he stands for the way true faith in Christ creates a bond of love for people, and cuts a bond of love for things.

Ananias and Sapphira

Ananias and Sapphira stand for the exact opposite. The reason they drop dead is not because this happens to all hypocrites. For example, it doesn't happen to Simon the Magician in Acts 8:20–24. Obviously we don't know for sure but I seems the reason they drop dead is to give a stunning warning to the whole church that all phony Christians will all end up this way, sooner or later.

God means for his people to fear hypocrisy. He means for us to be afraid of treating the Holy Spirit with contempt. Notice at the end of verse 5, after Ananias had died:

"Everyone who heard about it was terrified."

Then again in verse 11 after Sapphira died,

¹¹Great fear gripped the entire church and everyone else who heard what had happened.

This is the lesson Luke wants us to get: faking faith is a fearful thing.

Where did Ananias and Sapphira go wrong?

1. Did they love their money? Maybe! They made the sale, they looked at all that cash, and they couldn't bear the thought of giving it all away. So they kept some back.
2. Maybe they saw the response that Barnabas got and thought that would be cool. They wanted to look more generous than they really were. They wanted external religious approval. So maybe they had the double whammy of not only loving money more than people, but they also they loved the praise of men—the two almost always go together.
3. They lied. To cover their sleight of hand, and to give the impression of generosity, they lied. If you wanted to make it sound better, they pretended, pretended to be someone they are not. That's the meaning of hypocrisy.
4. And this always comes with hypocrisy—they lied to the Holy Spirit or God. This is mentioned in verse 3 and in verse 4.

How was Barnabas different?

But let's end with our eyes fixed on Barnabas and not on Ananias. How was he different? He was different at every point.

1. He did not love money and things, he used money and things to love people. When he sold his field he did not grieve over all the comforts and pleasures he was giving up. He may have still had those comforts, we don't know how many other properties he had; that is not the point. What we do know is he rejoiced in the freedom of faith. He recognised the good that would be done with his gift and the glory it would bring to Jesus.
2. He did not want to appear more generous than he was. He did not need the praise of men. He had the approval of God. What you saw was what you got. He was real.
3. Therefore he did not lie. He loved the truth. He could be trusted. WE see this in the report of his later influence and leadership. His integrity became legendary in the early church.
4. And finally, he didn't grieve the Holy Spirit. He knew that the Spirit was alive and real in the church. He knew that his every thought was open and laid bare before the Spirit of truth. And he knew that the gift of grace in his life was not the permission of God to keep on loving things, but the power of God to start loving people.

Let's be like Barnabas and not Ananias. Let's be a follower not a pretender.