

Sharing the Wealth, Scene II

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Acts 5:1-11

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Synopsis:

When we withhold from God, we do not experience joy, we experience need and want. We enter into a discussion of scarcity. Our need and want affects not only ourselves but also the whole community.

Intro: powerful living goes hand in hand with gracious giving. Jeff told us last week that giving starts with all of us. We need to have an attitude that our things, our very lives, belong to God. And that together we are to encourage and help one another grow in our commitment to God through our offerings of all kinds. But just as there are good examples there are also bad ones, and today's story fits into the latter category. Why? Maybe as a precaution, maybe as a reminder of God's protection from evil, maybe as a call to be the best we can be, not just for public eyes, but as we stand before our Lord.

Let me start off by telling you, I don't like to preach this passage. I don't know anyone who does. In fact, as I did my research I learned that this passage gets less preaching time than nearly all other passages, including a lot of the Old Testament. If asked which are the ten scariest passages, this would be #1 in my list. It makes me anxious. I wish the story of Ananias and Sapphira weren't in the Bible because it sure seems to make God and his fledgling church look bad. What's worse, it's stewardship season, and that makes us all shift uncomfortably in our seats. Why?

Surprisingly we find that two card carrying dues paying born again Spirit filled Christians drop dead in church. That's the kind of problem that could really discourage membership, not to mention pledging.

Still, we believe that God's word is inspired and useful for instruction and inspiration in our lives. So let's look again at this story. There is, first of all, jealousy in this household of faith. And with the jealousy comes deceit. And at the root of it all, is pride. If last week's word of warning was "mine" then this week the warning word is "me, me." Slide: *Self worship fractures community.*

Let's recap: Ananias and Sapphira join this first Christian church in which everyone is filled with grace and the believers have things in common so that no one will be in want. Their security is in God. Barnabas takes the lead and sells all he has to share with the community. He becomes a role model and encouragement for everyone. A & S want in on the prestige, they are jealous of the attention he is getting. So they sell property and commit it to the community. But then they lie and keep back some. They are putting their trust not in God, or this tight knit community, they are working it out themselves. "Me, me."

There's more underneath. We would say there is nothing wrong with their withholding money from the sale of the property. As Peter plainly says, the property is their before and after the

sale. So they are under no obligation to sell it in the first place, or to bring it all afterwards. But Luke selects a unique word to describe the offering. The Greek word he selects means that A & S 'misappropriated' or 'stole' the offering. Some scholars say that they must have had an agreement to give and then went back on it. But even that is not what gets them in trouble. It is the hypocrisy of pretending in public that they were generous. In order to gain a reputation to which they had no right, they told a brazen lie. Peter identifies this as allowing Satan, the great deceiver, to fill their hearts. ["Me, me"]

[Alternative illustration] I read in the paper yesterday about William Reed Brock. Mr. Brock was arrested in Fallbrook while driving a Ford pickup with personalized firefighter license plates and a bed full of fire equipment and clothing. Unfortunately he is not a firefighter; he is on probation for a drug offense. He could easily have been mistaken for one of the good guys, but his intentions were questionable enough to cause the police to pick him up. Just as Mr. Brock had deceived the checkpoints and was in a position to do damage to others, so Ananias and Sapphira's story is one that reminds us God would not tolerate deception in His church. The sad part is that they are the ones most deceived. Slide 2: *Self worship is self deceit.*

Many readers are offended by what looks like the severity of God. But there is another lesson in this story. First of all, death wasn't an accident. It happened twice. It is clear that no one counted on that. And both were guilty, one a man and one a woman. This reminds us of Adam and Eve. It is a temptation of all humanity to worship ourselves over God.

In fact, we could take a look at the original story of human sin in Genesis 3 and discover parallels. For temptation comes for us all, and if we are to live in power and grace we must face it down by trusting in God and not ourselves. [Not me me, but Lord, Lord.]

To begin with, the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was *initiated by Satan* (Acts 5:3); and that is a serious matter. If the Enemy of God cannot defeat the church by attacks from the outside as we saw in the persecution in Chapter 4, he will get on the inside and go to work. What better way than through our treasure, our security, our money. The great deceiver gets to work on Ananias and Sapphira just as he went to work on Adam and Eve. [explain] You and I think we are in control, yet there are powerful forces that would sway us from God's best.

Second, in both cases, the falling away from God came through *pride*. Satan said to Eve, "You can be like God!" and after the church was praising God for the generosity of Barnabas, Satan must have said to Ananias and Sapphira, "You can get this kind of attention, and why not? You should be worshipped too!" Pride opens the door to every other sin, for we stop being concerned with our character and put more emphasis on our comparisons, our reputation. We have to do more and more just to keep up appearances. We find we need to make ourselves "look good" before others. *Self worship is self deceit.* We seek to gain the world, and lose ourselves.

Illustration about Alison and the firefighter lunches. Saturday 4 pm the firefighters call and tell us that her note of thanks reached one captain at just the right time to encourage him and give him reason to believe what he was doing was worth it. He wanted to meet her. (whole story) Find Alison. Duncan's church or mine. Temptation of pride. Of Self worship. Of Self deceit, even in doing good things for the Lord. Then, this morning we learn that the firefighter and Alison will be on NBC *National News*! "Are you sure it wasn't our Alison?" says Satan.

Third, in both cases, humanity makes the mistake of thinking there are no *consequences*, until it's too late. We have been deceived ourselves. Jesus came to save all humanity from our selfishness. This new church is living the dream, as they say. Yet, for a moment, it seems like the bad news is about to start all over again. So Peter, filled with the Spirit identifies the sin and God acts in power to purify his saints. Everyone is afraid. It is clear that whatever we choose to do, we had better do it honestly. Freely. And without trying to 'work the system.'

Back to Alison and the firefighter. The good consequence of doing right. Her dad's point of view toward Christians, toward the church has changed. He wants to 'join up.' That is good news.

Today's events are more than an illustration—they are good news of God's grace even in the middle of emergency events. Good consequences happen when we choose to obey God's good plan.

Today's Bible story is more than a stewardship story. It is a gospel story, for at the heart it is about the failure of self worship and works to save us. We are deceived by the Great Deceiver when we buy into the idea that our worth can save us, or our reputations, or any of our things. We have certainly seen this over and over again this week. As the great fires consumed everything in their paths, people would say, "We have our lives. We are safe." This is a statement of utter belief in God. Slide 3 *God's grace alone*.

God did not want his church to start out on the wrong foot. They would be tested and tried and needed to both trust God with all their heart and soul and strength, and to trust each other. This was not a time for sin to creep in. In fact, over the years, we have often failed to trust as the early church did. God continually brings his people back. Nearly 490 yrs ago this week, Martin Luther posted 95 points of argument with the rulers of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. He had come to realized that nothing but God and the grace of God was worth trusting. Not reputation, or works, or indulgences purchased for the improvement of the church. He had learned that *grace alone*, as given by God alone saved him. So began the Protestant Reformation which we remember annually on this Sunday. We are saved by grace and not works. Luther had finally given the Lord his whole heart and soul and strength, and God then used it to reform and purify his Church.

We as God's people are called to be reformed and always reforming. Always and again putting our trust in the Lord who saved us from our sin. When we do we tap into power even as we draw together in community. That is the sort of community of believers we are seeking to be here at Geneva. We want to build each other up with encouragement, in service and outreach to others, growing in our trust and knowledge of God. This stewardship season, rather than thinking about what we want to hold back for our own safety, or what we want to give for the sake of Geneva's reputation, let us give our hearts and souls to God. See this as an opportunity to trust God a little more.

You don't have to promise to sell your property just step out in faith and pledge a portion of your daily bread. It would be so great if every person at Geneva pledged--just as the early church did. When we give our tithes and offerings we are more likely to back them with time and with thanksgiving. We create an opening for God to touch us in truth. Be encouraged by Barnabas and not scared by any other story, use whatever gifts and good ideas we have to grow in Christ. That does mean pledging a portion of our personal gain, but it also means joyfully

joining together and not comparing ourselves or feeling bad about ourselves. When we let grace take over, there is no room for pride and self serving.

What is your gift? Use it! What is your passion? Find it! Join in and see what we can do together. It's not about 'me, me' nor is it about 'us, us.' But the Lord, Lord has great plans and if we let go of our pride, our temptation to figure it all out, we just may discover a new way of doing church. Or a very old way that draws us ever nearer to God and each other.

Let me draw you a picture...Slide 4 [*heaven on earth*] We could be a community of people, evacuated from danger, freed from sin and selfishness. Much like Qualcomm stadium in San Diego this past week. I wonder if you heard the stories. It was called the Ritz of evacuation centers, heaven sent. As evacuees descended upon it, so did volunteers. No one was turned away. One man used his gift of organization to set up a commissary to hand out food and supplies—he even arranged it in orderly rows like Costco so it would be familiar. Others came and brought chalk and balloons to entertain the children. Still others set up spots for massage while others came just to sit and listen and show support. Finally a bluegrass band set up in the evening and provided a cheery atmosphere, even though smoke filled the air. I didn't hear of one story where anyone wanted to be anyone else. People weren't comparing, they were sharing, and loving and being together. Donations poured in, and when the news heard of the spontaneous and joyful community they wanted to see it in action. Supplies and money never ran short, for everyone gave as they could.

Now let me draw it a little closer. That was Qualcomm and it was great. But we aren't that big or that able. We can't compare—nor should we. “Do nothing from deceit or self congratulation, but always and in everything giving thanks to God who saves us.” Phil 2:3 This past week as fires raged all around, and even some of our own were evacuated, leaders led and encouragers encouraged. Givers gave generously in many ways all around. Pray-ers prayed for rain. We had members wanting to connect to help families evacuate on Tuesday and move back on Saturday. We had members putting strangers up in hotels or their own homes. We had members packing lunches for firefighters, and could've packed so many more. We had children writing notes of thanks to the firefighters to stuff in the lunches. And some had to go to work, some had to protect what they had. We are all evacuees from the fire of sin and selfishness, but we have come together to the church to make a new heaven on this earth. Firefighters are family, evacuees are family, volunteers are family. All together we were the family of God, loving each other and loving our service. It was a great thing to behold, and you know what? Many people wanted to do more.

And we did. Yesterday afternoon others led by our children and youth went over to Iglesia Park where we had a Halloween party with new friends. This is part of our initiative, but also part of our life. Not everyone does everything, but we all share in the joy. There is a spirit of community growing here at Geneva, and with it is a spirit of giving. We give glory and worship to God who saves us by grace. Let us love the Lord with all our heart and mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ^s dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and

spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:12)

5 But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ² with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" ⁵ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." ⁹ Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ ***Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.*** ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was^a in Christ Jesus...