

Acts 4:32-5:11 - Papendorf

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[0:00] Good morning, it's a joy to greet you in the name of Jesus.! This morning we're well underway in our series in Acts,! and we are studying the amazingly powerful triune-shaped message of the early church in this book.

I mentioned a couple weeks ago when we started this series that Acts is famous for lots of striking stories. And this for sure is one of them. Shocking, maybe jarring in a number of ways. Maybe this is the story for which Acts is most notable or famous for a lot of people. And I want to suggest to you that this passage, though striking and intentionally so, from Luke, our author, is pretty straightforward.

We don't want to think about that flippantly, but the message is clear and simple in its focus. It's really about, this passage is really about two things.

Generosity and integrity in worship. And the second is what really undergirds the whole passage. Generosity and integrity of Christian worship.

[1:13] And we've read, and we'll explore in just a second, how there's a description here of a powerful account in this Holy Spirit-driven community.

And there's a violation of proper worship and its community. So there's a description here. And then there's prescriptions, things that we today as the church can take and apply.

And we want to be careful when we do that, again, because of the striking nature of this passage. And we need help to do that. I need help. So let's pray as we begin. Lord, as I preach this morning, a sinner, a clay jar, I ask, we ask that your glory and power would be made known, that it comes from you and your word.

Grow us, all of us, together, as we hear your word this morning. We can read this text as encouragement and Christian instruction. And we ask this by the Spirit that you so richly pour out upon us through Jesus.

Amen. Okay, so a few bits of context to brush off where we have come from. We've seen a really quickly paced growth of the early church here.

[2:30] The apostles in chapter 1, we heard read again, are assured of the Father's plan to exalt the Son through the testimony of the Spirit. We know all about this miraculous growth of the church and tongues.

We'll hear some about them next week at Pentecost. And we've seen how this Christian community, a little bit of which we heard this morning, is sharing and praying and committing itself to the testimony of the apostles and sacrificially giving to sustain each other, fellowshiping, going to the temple, praying.

We've seen Peter and John and the apostles who are leaders in this church do miraculous things, both heal people through the power of the Spirit, but also give miraculous and challenging testimony before the leaders of the temple.

Last week, we saw the first challenge in the book of Acts, influential Jewish leaders trying to silence the message of the resurrected and ascended Jesus. And Peter says, what else can we do but speak of this testimony, God's plan, God's plan of redemption, which is made realized in the resurrection of Jesus among this group of people?

The temple authorities last week we saw don't really have anything in response. They're judges over the temple community, but they cannot help but be judged by Jesus, the Son.

[3:57] As we heard last week in Psalm 2. And then verse 31, just right before our passage, we hear that as the disciples prayed, there were earthquakes that were demonstrating the Holy Spirit's power among them.

And so that's where we are. Last week, a long scene in the temple. Next week, a long scene in the temple. This passage is about the temple, God's people in particular.

And it's nestled right here on purpose. And we know about temples. Kids, you know about temples. We studied it in the Old Testament. The temples have priests. And we're going to meet priests.

One of them is named as a priest, Barnabas or Joseph. And we're going to see some other bad priests, Ananias and Sapphira. Luke is calling us to think about what it means for God's people to be reconstituted as the true temple, true priesthood of worshipers of God.

With integrity and in community. Rightly embodying the generosity and hospitality and the invitation that Israel was meant to give to all those who lived around them.

[5:16] God's church through the spirit is meant to do that. And we see these two comparisons, even a contrast between these two stories to underscore something of what we're meant to take away there.

So our passage is structured pretty straightforwardly. There's two examples. There's the first bit, 32 through 37. And the second bit, chapter 5, verse 1 through verse 11.

So we can put it this way. There's a positive model of generosity and integrity in worship. That's the first section. A positive model. Verses 32 through 37 of chapter 4.

And then there's a negative model of generosity and integrity in worship. That's chapter 5, verses 1 through 11. Generosity, integrity, and worship may be even priesthood of God's people, if we want to put it that way.

Okay, so let's get started here. We have this nice little frame to our passage. Look at verse 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.

[6:29] A big sweeping summary statement. We also have a bit of that in the very last verse here, verse 11, all the way in chapter 5. And great fear came upon, notice, the whole church and upon all who heard these things.

So a nice little frame to our set of narratives here. We saw a few weeks ago how Luke will do this. This is one of his narrative strategies.

He'll tell specific stories and then he'll zoom out and give a picture of the whole Christian community. And so the first bit of our passage does that very thing.

We're meant to link all of these narratives together and recognize that Luke is pacing his story of the growth of the church by doing general things and then specifics and letting the general and the specifics complement and build and develop on each other.

In other words, all these stories are meaning to do big picture and small detail granular stuff here. Wide scope and then close examples.

[7:32] John called it a couple weeks ago, now what passages. That's a good way to think about it. We hear these stories and after there's this earthquake shaking and demonstration of the Holy Spirit, well, what happens next?

Verse 32, the full number of the people who believed were unified and there's some teaching there for us as well. So we see in verse 32, there is this group of people, Christians, God's people who were of one heart and soul and they had everything in common.

This is a uniquely unified group, almost wildly unified group. There's this stunning lack of protectiveness of someone's own personal belongings or possessions.

There's a great care to share with people, having everything in common. And verse 33 notes that this generous community is characterized by testimony.

So notice as you keep reading Acts, how community and generosity and belonging and testimony always go together.

[8:46] Always. There's community, there's unity, and there's testimony. These things are always united. Verse 33 really makes that clear to us. And the apostles are the ones who testify here.

We tend to always have some surfaced leaders or apostles demonstrating there's order in the church and there are those who are commissioned to lead the church.

And the apostolic testimony, look at verse 33 at the middle bit there. This testimony comes with great power. And because of that great power, great grace comes on all who hear it.

Awesome, right? Okay, now we can talk about the thing that you think is weird. Verse 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 and laid it at the apostles' feet.

And it was distributed to each as any had need. Interesting. Now, in the 21st century, we might think about liquidating landed assets, cashing them out, and putting it in a big bank account or something like that.

[9:59] That's not exactly what's happening here. And we're not meant to sell all of our real estate necessarily here, according to Luke. But, again, we don't want to press the economic parallels too strongly, because selling land looked differently in the Old Testament and here in the New Testament than maybe we're used to in Wheaton, Illinois.

But the point being, there are those who are privileged, who are wealthy, and who leverage their wealth not for themselves but for other people.

This isn't some proto-utopian commune or something either. The point is that those with landed wealth are using that wealth to bless and care for others.

We spent a lot of time studying Deuteronomy. And we didn't preach on Deuteronomy 15, but there's an important passage there. Deuteronomy, an important section there at the start of Deuteronomy 15, where Moses speaks to his people.

Remember, he's preaching a sermon as they're about to enter the promised land. And what he says to them, he pronounces that, if you live according to God's blessing, there will be no poor among you.

[11:18] Deuteronomy 15, 4. If you are living in God's blessings, if you are rightly managing those that he has given to you, there will not be poor people.

And we see a vision of that, an echo of that here. There's a principle of God's vision for prosperity and blessedness in the land mapped right onto the church here.

That's what's going on. Now, it's possible some of these needy people were being persecuted.

We've seen persecution already. Maybe some of them are socially isolated or cast out because they've become Christians.

It's possible that that's the case. We see some of those things developing in Acts. But this is the vision we have. God says for his people when they enter the land, there will be no poor and needy among you because the blessing that I give you will overflow and you're not meant to hold onto it with white knuckles.

Here in the church, the same thing is meant to be happening. And we have a great example of that starting in verse 36. Thus, Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a man of Cyprus.

[12:29] He sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. A great example, a guy from Cyprus.

A Levite, we know him as Barnabas. We'll talk a lot about Paul and Barnabas later in the coming weeks. And he sells this field and puts the money at the feet of the apostles.

Guys, bonus reading. Think about Judas. What does Judas do? Judas does a different thing. The money he scatters at the feet of the priests in the temple and they buy a field.

So we see a faithful iteration of that here. You can read Luke 22 later and see the parallels. We also studied Numbers last year.

And so all of you are thinking, Levites aren't supposed to own land. Right, I can tell you're thinking that. At least you are now. And you're right. There is no inheritance of land for the Levites when they enter into the promised land.

[13:31] So this guy here is a Levite who, by the way, lives in Cyprus but somehow has land nearby. He can liquidate that and he can put it at the feet of the apostles.

Luke wants us to not just see a specific example of someone doing this, but to demonstrate a reordering and a reprincipalizing of what it means to be God's people.

Barnabas stands in as an example of someone who shouldn't have land and knows it and knows that all of God's, all the land is God's land and gives it for God's people.

Which is really cool. This is a biblically faithful priest who's doing what priests ought to do. That's our example.

That's why it matters that he's a Levite here. And that's why the example is so striking and such a positive one. This is the right kind of way that a priest ought to act.

[14:33] He restores the land properly to the new temple of God's people. The church. So we have a positive model for generosity and integrity in worship.

A new priesthood principle here. Really not a new one, but a right one. That is doing what was meant to be done in the Old Testament. And we can recognize that Luke is teaching us something here.

That when we read the Old Testament as Christians, God is teaching us. We read about Leviticus today and blasphemy. And that was quite a bit striking too.

But we know that God continues to project this vision for us in the Old Testament that is given new dimension here in the New Testament. Of abundance and generosity and overflowing.

God is the one who cares for all and provides for all. We saw this when we studied the Old Testament. And we see it again here. And remember, as we prayed just a few moments ago, our daily bread comes from God's hand.

[15 : 40] Jesus teaches about how God provides for everyone. So we ought not to be worried. Flowers, grass, birds. God's care and provision for his people is given a positive example.

It's renewed here among his people. Which is an amazing thing to see and to grasp. A Levite priest who sets the tone. Renews the tone. Really.

And we know too that God is revealed in this positive example as the one who cares for the needy. That matters. That's important. We pray for those who are in need.

Every week here at our church. That doesn't mean we're perfect. But it does mean we're trying. At least to see that. Giving away money generously. Maybe even in a counter-cultural way that seems weird and strange to people who are not Christians.

Is what Christians are called to do. Tithing is one way to do that, of course. Notice there's leadership and oversight there. Laid at the feet of the apostles. We're going to talk about the budget tonight.

[16 : 44] At our member meeting. That's important. That is not some insignificant detail. Not just because there's dollars and cents attached to it. But because there's spiritual leadership and stewardship.

And accountability between leaders and people. And so that matters. This text demonstrates such a thing. And let's not be ignorant of an important fact here.

We are really rich. We are. We have a lot of things. We have a lot of blessings. Now, some of us may be in need and need things.

But relative to most people in the world and throughout history, we are incredibly blessed and wealthy. And that's not necessarily bad. In fact, it's quite good when it is rightly ordered.

When it overflows to generosity. There's ways that we can do this. We can cultivate this. We can take a positive example. I'm going to borrow some ideas from Dan Godoy's sermon from a few months ago about work.

[17 : 49] Remember, he said to the young adults, you should get a job with a manager who can fire you. Yeah. How do you be generous? How do you cultivate generosity? Well, get a job. Work hard.

Earn money. And give some of it away. Kids, if you're not old enough to have formal employment, talk to your parents. Work, earn money, give it away.

Because as Paul teaches us, the things that we have are not ours to begin with. They're all given to us. Generosity is a heartbeat of God's people. We need to be generous people.

Adults who have jobs, we need to give our money away too. In ways that don't make sense, at least to, I don't know, wealth acquisition sort of sensibilities.

But instead, as ways to overflow into abundance and generosity. That's an important thing. Okay, we're going to see examples of people who don't do that.

[18 : 55] And don't do that well in this next section. Chapter 5, verse 1, negative model of priesthood and integrity in Christian community and worship. Verse 1, but a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property.

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. So in contrast with this obedient priest who tries to step back into the way that God designed land and his people and priesthood, we see these two individuals, this married couple.

And notice how long it is. Notice there's drama. There's dialogue. We're meant to feel that. We see Ananias and Sapphira work in tandem here. They're selling the land.

They're keeping part of the proceeds. And Luke suggests to us and makes clear and clear that that's bad. So in other words, they sell a bunch of land. And they keep some of the money. And they give the rest to the apostles. And they make it seem like what they give to the apostles is all of the money the land was sold for. They're being deceptive.

[20:09] Misrepresentative. We have a bit of a reverse parallel here with Adam and Eve. If you didn't catch that, maybe now you might recognize. There's a married couple who are disobedient.

This time it's the husband who takes the initiative. This is our first layer of biblical theology here. Peter then speaks to Ananias in verse 3.

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? He continues. While it was 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. Peter's speech here, his little discussion, part of the kind of one-sided dialogue really, is clarifying to us here.

Peter says that you're being misrepresentative, that Satan is involved here. And importantly, we can glean that it's not that every Christian has to sell all of their land and give all of the money to the church.

[21:16] Was it not at your disposal? Peter says. So why have you lied? That's the issue at hand here. Peter identifies the activity of Satan in sin and then exposes the real issue, the misrepresentation.

Okay, sometimes theologians will come to this passage and they'll point out something interesting in verses 3 and 4. Or they'll say that Peter says that lying to God is lying to the Holy Spirit. So maybe this is a kind of indirect proof of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. I think that's a fine implication to make. That's not exactly what Luke is driving at here. But we can draw that conclusion if we'd like.

Again, Ananias and Sapphira are not required to sell the land. They're not even required to give all of the money that they made selling the land. But the issue is they make it seem like that was the case.

And they hold back some for themselves. Probably because there's some social pressure. Probably because they want to be seen as the sort of people who are giving lots of money away.

[22:29] But also because they are like us. They are materialistic. They are driven by greed. Maybe we're not exactly like this.

But you know and I know that we can be like this too. They hold some back. And then shockingly, God judges them.

Verse 5. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

Luke tells us this story in a very abrupt, intentionally jarring kind of way. Luke also wants us to be thinking of priests.

You might be thinking of some other priests. Are you? A year ago, Tad preached on Leviticus 10. And there's these two guys, by the way, second layer of biblical theology.

[23:33] Two priests, Nadab and Abihu. Remember them? The temple had just been established and consecrated. Which is an amazing thing in the sight of all of God's people.

And Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, they go to worship in the temple. And they do it the wrong way. Unauthorized fire is how it's then described.

They worship improperly. We're not sure exactly what that means. But they die because of it in the temple. And shortly thereafter, people go in and wrap them up with their coats and take them out. Now, if we didn't make that connection, that's okay. We still take the point that Luke is making here. That this kind of behavior, misrepresenting and therefore looking to lift oneself up rather than serve the community, is not the way God's people are meant to be.

But a reinstilled idea here is that worship that is not befitting of God deserves judgment. Or can be an occasion for God's judgment.

[24:46] There's parallels here. And we're meant to take that, feel that, and recognize that. Two pairs, two priests in a manner of speaking, both killed, both buried.

This is a serious warning for God's people in both instances. And we're meant to hear the echo here. Okay, the details are very similar and repeated again with Sapphira in 7 through 10.

She comes back. She doesn't know exactly what's happened yet. She has a slightly different conversation with Peter. Peter again says, you have lied and you've tested the spirit. She dies. The young men come back. They wrap her up. They bury her as well. Misrepresenting the amount of the gift is still the issue.

Testing God. Okay, there's a whole bunch of other priests. Biblical theology layer. Three. Do you know about Eli's sons in 1 Samuel?

[25 : 51] Do you remember what these guys do? Okay, they take way too much of the meat, more than they're allowed. And they leverage their position of authority as leaders as a way to abusively benefit themselves and to take privileges.

That's a good warning for those of us who have authority and leadership in the church. That can happen. That does happen. It's really sad when that happens.

That happens way too often, doesn't it? It doesn't take that long to find an example on the news, for goodness sakes. So, another parallel here of those who are bad priests.

Okay, Ananias and Sapphira are like a version of Adam and Eve, a version of Nadab and Abihu, a version of Eli's sons, and a bunch of others. I won't go on and on about them.

And Luke is steeping this passage in a manner of speaking to show us that the priesthood that God's people are called to in God's temple, his community, is not one of abusiveness.

[26 : 56] It's one of self-giving and service. That's the frame. And just like God judges in the Old Testament, so he judges here as a prominent, pronounced example for us to take to heart.

That's the idea. Okay, it's worth maybe giving a pastoral word here. We should find what happens bracing, stunning.

We should not personally worry. I want to reassure you about this particular thing happening to us. Those of us who might be sensitive and conscious, conscience might internalize this to think, am I holding something back?

Is this going to happen to me? Luke is not trying to instill fear in us, at least that kind of fear. In this passage, Luke is showing an example of faithless people to demonstrate God's swift judgment on them and his care for generosity and integrity among God's people.

He's not saying, all of you be worried. Instead, we ought to be in the community devoting ourselves to the testimony of the apostles. This is a striking example that proves a really strident point.

[28 : 19] I don't think we need to worry about this happening to us or in our church. And we want to hold in tension the seriousness but not overly concern ourselves here.

And remember, the key dynamic is misrepresentation. If Sarah and I sell our house and we bring all of the money and lay it at the feet of the elders and we, you know, say, we sold our house and here's \$100,000.

All of you who have been to the Papendorf Manor, you know, you raise your eyebrows and say, oh, really? Or all of you who know anything about real estate in the western suburbs, you get the point, right?

It's that we take that instinct to heart, that teaching to heart, not be misrepresentative, yet instead be generous. Okay, so in summary here, our passage gives us this contrast.

Okay, it's nestled in between two big scenes and speeches that happen at the temple in Jerusalem. The one before this and the one that will come next week. And Luke says that though these things take place in the temple, God's temple is about, more than anything, his presence among his people.

[29 : 34] And his people are meant to be priests. Remember what Peter says? We're called to be what? A chosen race, a royal priesthood. So Luke is teaching us and says, well, look, here's how this is meant to work among the temple of God's people, all of whom are priests who are to serve and to self-give like Barnabas and not be misrepresentative bad priests like Ananias and Sapphira.

So if we're going to draw some theological implications, I think there's four. One of them is to be good priests.

Now, I don't mean you should call yourself a priest necessarily. That might be a bit strange. But the task of being those who are created by God in his image is a priestly task.

Maybe not with vestments and incense necessarily, but Adam and Eve are called to be priests and ministers who build culture and who cultivate and name and care for God's creation.

That's a priestly task. We're called to that too. We need to be good priests. This passage teaches us, compels us to do such a thing.

[30:58] This is reflected in the way that we serve in church, the way that we manage our money, the way that we are generous, the way that we recognize what is true of what it means to be a part of God's people, which is that we should be overflowing in our abundance and generosity.

So be good priests. Work hard at your job. Serve in the church. Kids, work hard at home. That is a way that you can honor God and honor your parents in the chores that you have, in the small things that you have.

Recognize that we have nothing that we didn't receive from God. Even if we work hard, we still receive. We're called to serve, not to have notoriety.

It's another lesson we need to learn here. Being good priests means not looking to be lifted up when we serve and when we exercise our gifts, which is easier said than done, isn't it?

Be good priests, thing number one. Thing number two, okay, duh, don't be bad priests. Okay?

We've seen that pattern and temptation across the history of Israel.

[32:14] Well, we know, as we hear in Ezekiel and Malachi, the priests were sometimes some of the worst people.

Some of the most abusive people or the most manipulative people. Don't be bad priests. Don't be Ananias and Sapphira. Don't lie. Don't lift up your image, especially when you're pretending to serve the church.

Maybe when you're pretending to be a Christian, don't practice your righteousness before men.

Someone important said that, didn't he? Don't be bad priests.

Don't be bad priests. Thing three, recognize, hold intently the holiness of the community of God and the integrity of worship here.

We can laugh. We can have fun. We can enjoy each other's company. As a church, we're meant to serve each other, serve our community, be a place that overflows.

[33:16] We'll hear some about that tonight and how we hope to do that. Again, we're not perfect at our church, but we are trying and we hope to be accountable to you as well when we give away our money and hope to bless others.

Last thing, thing four. Luke is a great teacher to us. If you read this passage and you didn't think about Deuteronomy 15 and you didn't think about numbers and land allotments and you didn't think about priests and you didn't think about Adam and Eve and you didn't think about Eli's sons, that's okay.

You're not missing the point. You're not being poorly taught by Luke. But Luke is showing us that as we read, as we think about the Old Testament and we see the church here in the New Testament, there's ways that we can make connections.

We can hear echoes. We can keep our eye on the ball that the continuity of God's program as planned from the Old Testament continues into today.

Read the Old Testament when you read the New Testament. We can grow as readers of the whole scriptures as Christians. Maybe it's just catching a glimpse. Maybe it's really feeling the weight of the echoes there.

[34:36] Be encouraged in that way. And friends, as we see the spirit at work in the church here, we see the spirit at work in our church.

As we await the promised return of Jesus that we heard about in Acts 1. So let's do that together.

Let's look for the return of the son, live in the power of the spirit, and continue to build a community that overflows in generous abundance.

In the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.