

## The Church's Heart

Acts 4:32–5:11

In John ch. 17, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come—the moment when he was about to be arrested, falsely condemned, and then crucified—knowing that his earthly ministry was coming to a conclusion, he prayed to his Father. More specifically, he prayed to his Father *for the church*—for his apostles, and for all who would believe in him through their witness. He prayed for *us*. And among the various things he prays for his church—for their faithfulness, for their protection, for their sanctification—the request that he emphasizes at the conclusion of his prayer, is for unity.

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, *that they may all be one*, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, *so that* the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, *that they may be one* even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become *perfectly one*, *so that* the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (Jn. 17:20-23)

And it makes sense, when you think about what Jesus is sending his church into the world to do—to bear witness to him and make disciples of all nations—it makes sense that he would pray for us to be unified. How hard is it to accomplish something as a group or a team if you're not moving in the same direction?

And as we come to our passage this morning and its focus on the church's heart, we see that among the early church God answered his Son's prayer for unity: “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul . . .” (4:32).

But what does a heart of unity in the local church look like, practically speaking? Especially in a world where the church is divided by denominations and traditions, by factions and tribal identities? For instance, is it enough to simply have the same statement of faith? To have *doctrinal* unity?

Now that's essential. If we're not agreed on the gospel, then we're not really united in Christ. You can't be united in the Savior if you reject the message and authority of that Savior. So there is no true church unity apart from faith in the gospel. And the early church had unity around the gospel. Back in ch. 2, one of the key marks of the church's unity was their common devotion to “the apostles' teaching” (2:42), the heart of which was the gospel message that Jesus entrusted to them. Not that the church didn't have disagreements on secondary issues; that's the reason you have the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15; that's the reason we have a lot of the epistles—to sort out some of those things. But unity of heart, unity in Christ is necessarily *doctrinal*; it requires a common faith in the good news of Jesus.

But as we'll see in our passage, that's not all there is to unity. A heart that's unified in Christ will necessarily show itself not only in what we believe and proclaim, but in how we live and how we treat each other. Because what we do and say in everyday life often reveals what's inside our heart. Nobody can see into someone else's heart (unless you're God); but what's in our hearts will be exposed by how we live. And God, in his vision for his church, isn't just concerned with what's on the outside; he's concerned with our hearts.

Now there are two parts to our passage that are set in contrast to one another, both of which focuses on behavior that flows from the heart. Chapter 4:32-37 shows us a portrait of a unified heart—what the church looks like when the gospel grips our own hearts. And ch. 5:1-11 shows us a different picture, a portrait of a self-centered heart—what it looks like to pretend to serve the Lord, but really to use the faith as a guise to serve oneself.

### **A Portrait of a Unified Heart: Generosity and Hospitality (4:32-37)**

We'll start with the portrait of a unified heart in 4:32-37. This section comes directly on the heels of what Pastor Bruce looked at with us last week, the church's boldness. At the end of that passage, the church gathered to pray for bold witness (4:23-31). And we see here that their bold witness does in fact continue—v. 33: "And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus . . ." But everything else in this passage focuses not on the church's public witness, but on their daily life and interaction with one another. Which is not unrelated to our public witness. How we treat one another within the local church is a powerful part of our witness, for better or for worse. If we're preaching a gospel of love, and we hate each other, why would anyone want to listen? If we preach a gospel of transformation, and our lives are no different than the world around us, why should anyone take note? But if our relationships are marked by radical forgiveness, and sacrificial generosity, that's something the world is going to notice, too. And that's something that some of them are going to want in on, or at least be willing to take us seriously because of.

And that's what we see in our passage—a unity of heart expressed in generosity and hospitality within the local church body. Verse 32 again: "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" (4:32)—very similar to what Luke said at the end of ch. 2 (v. 44). And v. 34 continues: "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" (4:34-35).

Now, an important point of clarification. Sometimes, when people read this passage, they come to the conclusion, or even advocate that the early church was somewhat communistic or at least socialistic. Communal property, redistribution of wealth. Socialism is taking on increased popularity among American young people these days, and sometimes people will point to this passage as evidence that it's somehow biblical.

But regardless of what you think of socialism or communism as an economic system, you can't get there from here. In fact, the Bible doesn't advocate for any particular economic system (though you can certainly evaluate them on different biblical principles). But there are three key reasons that what we read here can't fit into the categories of socialism or communism.

First, the early church did not eliminate the reality of personal property. To say that “no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own,” is not the same thing as saying no one owned anything. They lived *as though* it wasn’t their own; they didn’t treat it as their own. They treated it as God’s, and therefore as his church’s. It’s a picture of radical generosity and hospitality. We see this even clearer when Peter rebukes Ananias in ch. 5; he wasn’t obligated to sell his property, or to give any portion of it to the church. There’s no elimination of personal property *except for in one’s heart*—in how you think of it and how you treat it.

Second, for both socialism and communism, it’s the state that makes decisions about how to spend money and make distributions. And I’m pretty sure the early church was not asking the Roman Empire to decide how to spend their money. Rather it was the church that oversaw the distribution and care of the congregation, particularly the apostles (though when you get to ch. 6, they enlist some help).

And then third, and perhaps most importantly, the system of care that we read about here was not governed by law, but by grace. There was no rule that people had to sell property and share it with others. Again, Peter’s words to Ananias in ch. 5:4: “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?” People weren’t sharing their possessions because they had to, but because they *wanted* to. Their generosity and hospitality was fueled by grace. That’s what we’re told in v. 33: “. . . and great grace was upon them all.” Because they received grace, they operated by grace. Because Jesus Christ willingly laid down his life and gave everything to love them, they were willing and eager to lay down their own lives for one another. Their hearts were united in Christ.

The category that helps us understand this passage is not a state-run economic system; rather, that category is *family*. This is how family operates. When we’ve had trouble paying our bills in the past—fixing a car, or even just buying groceries—our family has helped us out. It’s what you do. When I visit my folks in Nebraska, they don’t make a distinction between which sodas in the fridge are for guests and which ones are off limits; what’s theirs is mine and what’s mine is theirs because we’re family. Ownership is not the dominant category in a family; love is the operative category. And the church is the family of God united in Christ.

And so now the uncomfortable question: what does this look like today? How are we doing as a local church with regard to generosity and hospitality within our own church family? Can we say what v. 34 says: “There was not a needy person among them”? And are we willing to disrupt our lives to be able to say it?

Now one thing I will say is that this is a ridiculously generous church. We see that each year, not just in our giving to the general fund, but in our giving to missions, and the special needs fund. And many of us do relatively well financially. But there are needs in our body. There are households in our church who need a car. Not because they want to upgrade, but because they don’t have a car. There are households who need help with medical bills. There are members looking for jobs. And those are just financial needs; there are other needs as well. There are people in our congregation who feel lonely. Who feel scared. Or sad. Need someone to talk to, to cry with; someone to walk alongside them. And if that’s true about us, what about our neighbors and those who live around us—the people we are sent on mission to as witnesses of Christ?

Now that's not to say that the local church is the only line of support for members in need. In fact, the individual bears the primary responsibility. In Ephesians 4 Paul says to let one "labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (Eph. 4:28). And when idleness became a big problem among the Thessalonian church, Paul wrote, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10).

But we all know that despite our best efforts, we can still find ourselves facing need. Injury, illness, a downturn economy, any number of circumstances can thrust us into a situation we never thought possible. Systemic inequalities can keep us in situations we fear we'll never escape. And so the second line of support, according to Scripture, is the family—biological or legal (if you're adopted or married into it). In 1 Timothy, Paul addresses a situation where widows within the church were being neglected by their own relatives—relatives who had means to assist—such that the full burden of care was thrust on the church. And he rebukes them for it, saying, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8).

So the local church is not the only, or necessarily the first line of support. But it's an essential one. We *are* family. But the tempting thing to do with this is to think, what kind of one-off activity can I do to alleviate some need? Our default is to turn the needs of our body into a project. Something that has a beginning and an end. And then we can get back to focusing on our nuclear family. But that's not the picture here. What this passage calls us to is an *everyday* generosity, an *everyday* hospitality. This isn't just about special occasions; this is a manner of life. It's easy to include other people in your family for special occasions; it's quite different for that to be an everyday part of life. But that's what the church is. And apart from an everyday lifestyle of hospitality and generosity, we're never even going to know what those needs are and who has them. Nor will the world around us see the truly radical impact that the gospel of Jesus can make.

I can think of no better resource that gets at this than Rosaria Butterfield's recent book on what she calls "radically ordinary hospitality." The book is called, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*. Listen to a bit of what she describes and imagine what that might look like for you:

Those who live out radically ordinary hospitality see their homes not as theirs at all but as God's gift to use for the furtherance of his kingdom. They open doors; they seek out the underprivileged. They know that the gospel comes with a house key. . . . [They] see strangers as neighbors and neighbors as family of God. They recoil at reducing a person to a category or a label. They see God's image reflected in the eyes of every human being on earth. . . .

A truly hospitable heart anticipates everyday, Christ-centered table fellowship and guests who are genuinely in need. Such a heart seeks opportunities to serve. Radically ordinary hospitality doesn't keep fussy lists or make a big deal about invitations. Invitations are open. Radically ordinary hospitality is reflected in Christian homes that resemble those of the first century. Such homes are communal. They are deep and wide in Christian tradition and practice. As Christians we are a set-apart people, and we do things differently. We don't worry about what the unbelieving neighbors think, because the unbelieving neighbors are right here sharing our table, and they are more than happy to tell us what they think.

Practicing radically ordinary hospitality necessitates building margin time into the day, time where regular routines can be disrupted but not destroyed. This margin stays open for the Lord to fill—to take an older neighbor to the doctor, to babysit on the fly, to make room for a family displaced by a flood or a worldwide refugee crisis. Living out radically ordinary hospitality leaves us with plenty to share, because we intentionally live below our means. In radically ordinary hospitality, host and guest are interchangeable. If you come to my house for dinner and notice that I am still teaching a math lesson to a child, and my laundry remains on the dining room table unfolded, you roll up your sleeves and fold my laundry. Or set the table. Or load the dishwasher. Or feed the dogs. Radically ordinary hospitality means that hosts are not embarrassed to receive help, and guests know that their help is needed. A family of God gathering daily together needs each and every person. . . .

Radically ordinary hospitality gives evidence of faith in Jesus’s power to save. It doesn’t get dug in over politics or culture or where someone stands on current events. It knows what conversion means, what identity in Christ does, and what repentance creates. It knows that sin is deceptive. To be deceived means to be taken captive by an evil force to do its bidding. It knows that people need to be rescued from their sin, not to be given pep talks about good choice making. It remembers that Jesus rescues people from their sin. Jesus rescued us. Jesus lives and reigns.<sup>1</sup>

What would that look like for us? For you? For me? I confess that my life doesn’t look like that. And this isn’t about new rules. This isn’t about pressure to perform. This is about hearts united in Christ, overflowing in love, amid a watching world, and taking steps to make sure there’s space in our lives to live that way. A unified heart in Christ expresses itself in radical, ordinary hospitality amid courageous witness.

Peter gives us a specific example at the end of ch. 4—the example of Barnabas, who sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet (vv. 36-37). It puts a face on the general habit of the early church. But it also sets up the contrast that follows in ch. 5, in what is really one of the most shocking stories in the book of Acts—the portrait of a self-centered heart. The story of Ananias and Sapphira.

### **A Portrait of a Self-Centered Heart: Deception and Greed (5:1-11)**

Listen to the intentional echo of the end of ch. 4: “But a man named Ananias, with 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” (5:1-2). It’s identical to the description of Barnabas’s gift—with one clear exception: they “kept back” for themselves some of the proceeds and brought “only a part of it.”

Now what precisely are Ananias and Sapphira doing wrong, that results in such a harsh and swift consequence? As we noted earlier, it’s not that they were required to sell any of their possessions, or even that they were required to give 100% of what they made from the sale. Look again at Peter’s response in v. 4: “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?” The problem is that they willfully misrepresented

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<sup>1</sup> Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018). Kindle Edition.

the size and nature of their gift. They claimed to give the entire sale amount, but secretly kept some back for themselves, probably to look good spiritually. They wanted the praise that comes from giving generously, but also the personal gain that comes from keeping the money. Deception and greed that issue from a self-centered heart.

And this wasn't an accident. It's not as though they forgot how much they made and accidentally gave a portion, or changed their plans midstream because something came up. Their misrepresentation was premeditated. Verse 2, "with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds." And when Sapphira shows up later, Peter gives her a chance to come clean. Verse 8: "'Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.' And she said, 'Yes, for so much.'" They plotted in advance to deceive the church, to do something that looked like it belonged to the same spirit of generosity that was sweeping through the congregation, but instead made much of themselves rather than God. And carried on even when they were pressed. This is not what flows from a heart united in the gospel; this is what flows from a self-centered heart.

At that's what Peter attributes it to. Look again at his rebuke in v. 3: "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? . . . Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your *heart*?" (vv. 3-4). God is concerned not merely with what we do and say, but why we do it—the aims and ends of our heart.

And it might be easy for us to look down on Ananias and Sapphira for such a willful, deliberate scheme of deception. But how often are we tempted to do or say something that makes us look more spiritually mature than we are? Kent Hughes writes:

Examples of Ananias' sin today include creating the impression that we are a people of prayer when we are not, making it look like we have it all together when we do not, promoting the idea that we are generous when we are so tight we squeak when we smile, misrepresenting our spiritual effectiveness (for example, saying 'When I was at the crusade in New York, I ran the whole follow-up program,' when the truth is, you were a substitute counselor).<sup>2</sup>

What Ananias and Sapphira didn't understand, and what we don't always understand, is that lying to the church is lying to God; lying to the body of Christ is lying to Christ. That's what Peter tells us: [3-4, 9] "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit" (v. 3). "You have not lied to man but to God" (v. 4). "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?" (v. 9). This is one more indication of how Jesus remains the central figure of the book of Acts. He is active and present by his Spirit in his church. Such that love for Jesus shows itself and love for one another. And lying to one another, means lying to Jesus.

And the consequences for Ananias and Sapphira lying to God are severe. They both drop dead when caught in their deception (vv. 5-6, 10-11). It's shocking. Some would say overkill. It makes some of us uncomfortable, even scared. What if God responds to my deception or sin that way?

And that's actually part of the point of Ananias and Sapphira receiving such a startling and severe consequence—to remind the church that *God is holy*. He is not to be trifled with, or used to promote yourself. What's interesting that as "great grace" fueled the church's generosity in v.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Acts* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 77.

33 earlier, here the reaction to God's discipline of both Ananias and Sapphira is a "great fear" coming over the community (5:5, 11). God's grace and God's holiness are inseparable. You cannot play one off the other and think you'll get away with it. What's in your heart will be exposed, either here on earth or at the judgment seat of Christ. And both God's grace and holiness are effective motivators for living out of a genuinely unified heart in Christ.

So what do we do with all of this? First, we ask God to examine our hearts. We pray what David prayed in Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (139:23-24). And where we see something that we don't like, something that dishonors God or deprives his people of love, we repent. And seek help repenting. Spend some time journaling about what you see, praying, reading Scripture, talking to a trusted friend on how you can grow.

Second, we ask God to help us see the local church the way he sees it. Not as a mere institution, or even less as a project. But as the body of Christ and our eternal family in God. Brothers and sisters united in Christ, bound by a common love, a common Spirit, a common hope, and a common cause to make Christ known.

Finally, we devote ourselves to making room in our hearts for one another, and space in our lives for hospitality and generosity that flows from a heart united in Christ. Ask God to show you two things you can do differently to make this a part of your daily life. Maybe it's rearranging your budget. Maybe it's thinning your daily planner. Getting involved in a home group. Deciding to share one meal a week with someone else in the church. Or with your neighbors.

Ask God that as we move forward as a church in our commitment to seeing Christ treasured above all things, praying that we would be a people marked by radically ordinary hospitality, with the wind of God's grace at our backs and the fear of his holiness before our eyes. And may that hospitality be the backdrop for our bold and courageous witness of Christ.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### **Questions for Study and Understanding**

1. How does the previous section provide context for what happens in this text? What's unique about the focus of this passage in comparison?
2. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in these verses (for clues, look at things like structure, repetition, etc.)?
3. How does Luke characterize the heart and actions of the local church in this passage? What most strikes you about this portrait?
4. According to Peter, what precisely did Ananias and Sapphira do wrong? Where did their behavior come from?

5. What do you think about the consequences of their actions? How does the church's response to those consequences help us make sense of them?

### **Questions for Reflection and Application**

6. How does the hospitality and generosity displayed at the end of ch. 4 compare with the church today? In what ways have you experienced this? What do you think keeps this kind of generosity and hospitality from being more common?
7. In what ways are you tempted to follow Ananias and Sapphira's example in deceiving others or misrepresenting your spiritual maturity? How can you guard against this?
8. What two things can you do to make more room in your heart and more space in your life for living out this kind of radically ordinary hospitality?