

“Everything in Common” (Acts 4:32-5:11)

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Acts 4:32-37 (ESV)

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. 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. 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. 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.¹

What is your idea of the ideal society?

We're in the midst of a long campaign season, in which there are very different candidates running to be the next president of these United States. And one of the main issues underlying all their proposed policies, all their stated values, is what their vision of the ideal society is. In all the debates, the candidates rarely discuss first principles, but it's not hard to figure out what a candidate values most. Some value freedom—the ability for individuals to make their own choices, for good or for ill. Candidates who tend to be more libertarian value freedom. Some value safety, security, and order—even if that means giving up some freedom. Candidates who talk about defeating terrorism at home and abroad and candidates who talk about building walls value these things. Some value equality. Sometimes that means everyone should have equal opportunities. Sometimes it means everyone should be the same in every way. Candidates who lean toward the socialist end of the political spectrum value such things.

But what does the Bible say? What are the most important values in an ideal community, according to the Bible?

Today, we're going to get a glimpse of how the church, as a community of people united together, should live together. We're united together because we're united to Christ, not because we're all the same, or have the same backgrounds, or even all the same interests. And because we are one, we must take care of each other. We should do this willingly, because we are

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

grateful to God for the grace he has shown us. We should help each other because we love God and we love each other.

But Luke, the historian who wrote the book of Acts, also gives us a negative example. I believe we're supposed to see the end of Acts 4 juxtaposed with the beginning of Acts 5. That's one way that the biblical authors teach truth—by setting two different episodes next to each other so we can compare and contrast them. So we'll see in Acts 5 an example of behavior that isn't suitable for the church. There is no room for pride and deception within the church.

So let's first look at the end of Acts 4. I'll read verses 32-37 again.

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. 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. 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. 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.

Here we're told that the "full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul." All of the disciples of Jesus were living together in harmony. And none of them said that their belongings were their own. They all realized that everything they had was a gift from God. James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." Even the ability to work is a gift from God, because, ultimately, he has given us all our talents and abilities (Deut. 8:17-18).

Now, this doesn't mean that the disciples didn't have personal property. We'll see that this morning. Also, the commandment not to steal is upheld in the New Testament (Rom. 13:9; Eph. 4:28), and that commandment presupposes that people have personal property. It's certainly not wrong to own things, and the letters in the New Testament don't tell us to sell everything and give it to the church, so that the church can then distribute everything equally to its members.

I've heard it said that Jesus was a socialist. I've even heard some people claim that the New Testament's teachings on money are closer to communism. These statements are a complete misunderstanding of what Jesus taught. Jesus and the apostles taught that Christians should give generously and willingly. They taught that Christians have an obligation to love their

neighbors. Jesus did not teach that it is the government's role to redistribute wealth. He didn't say we should have a large government that taxes heavily. After all, taxation is not voluntary. There's a sense that for an action to be virtuous, it can't be forced. In a socialist or communist nation, people don't give willingly for the common good. They are taxed. And that's something very different from New Testament ethics.

One of the reasons we're specifically told about Barnabas, whom we'll meet again later in Acts, is because he voluntarily sold a field and gave the money to the apostles. If Barnabas was told by the apostles that he had to sell the field, he wouldn't be an example of generosity.

And we're told in verse 34 that "there was not a needy person among them." The money that was shared was to take care of needs. So, in verse 35, we're told that "it was distributed to each as any had need." These early Christians made sure that everyone had their basic needs met. That doesn't mean they all had the same amount of money, or wore the same clothes, or lived in the same houses. The point is that needs were met.

In the body of Christ, there is unity. Every member of the body is valuable. But that doesn't mean that every member of the body is the same. In this case, there were some who were wealthier than others. Some in the body are given gifts of leading and teaching, while others are given gifts of encouragement and serving. Every member is important and useful, but we're not all the same.

I think we have made an idol of equality and sameness in America. We see this often in the way we speak of children. I've heard it say that every child is a genius, or that every child is smart. But if every child is a genius, then no child is a genius. We see this attitude when every child gets a trophy for participating in sports. For better or worse, we have a democracy. But the fact is that not all voters are equally informed and equally wise. Some pundits lament the prevalence of "low information" voters, who hardly know anything about the candidates. So we get the politicians that we the people deserve.

This idol of sameness was satirized by the writer Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) in a short story called "Harrison Bergeron," which was published in 1961. This is how the story begins:

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th,

212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.²

Vonnegut then goes on to describe a world in which smarter people wear devices that keep them from thinking differently from others, and ballerinas are weighted down so they can't dance better than anyone else, and they wear masks so they don't look better than anyone else. Harrison Bergeron is a 14 year-old who is 7 feet tall, handsome, and a genius, so he has to wear more handicaps than anyone else. Harrison tries to break free of the enforced shackles of these handicaps, but in the end he is killed by the Handicapper General.

This story shows the foolishness of trying to make everyone the same. The Bible never teaches that everyone is the same, or must have the same amount of possessions. So that's not what this passage is teaching. What this passage shows is that the disciples realized they had an obligation to take care of each other. They realized that they were their brothers' keepers. So they sold possessions in order to share what they had, so that no one had need.³

We're told "they had everything in common." The Greek word, *koinos*, is related to the Greek word that is often translated as "community" or "fellowship."⁴ The word generally has the sense of "participation." In a community, you participate with other people in some activity. Or, more to the point, you participate in life together. As Christians, we participate in Jesus' death and resurrection. We didn't die on the cross, but since we're united to Christ, it's as if we died on that cross and rose from the grave. Though we aren't the Son of God, since we participate in Jesus' life, we're regarded by God the Father as his own children. And we should participate in each other's lives. When one of us is hurting, we all hurt. That's why Paul writes, in 1 Corinthians 12:26, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." We belong to each other. So if one of us is in need, we need to make sure we help each other.

That's what happened in the first century. We'll see later in Acts that there was a famine in Judea, the region where Jerusalem was. So Paul and Barnabas brought some aid from Antioch to Jerusalem. Later, Paul took up an offering for those in Jerusalem. He writes about in Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians. This is what Paul writes in Romans 15:25-27:

² Kurt Vonnegut, "Harrison Bergeron," https://archive.org/stream/HarrisonBergeron/Harrison%20Bergeron_djvu.txt (accessed March 12, 2016).

³ Perhaps they reflected on Deut. 15:4: "But there will be no poor among you."

⁴ The Greek word in verse 32 is κοινός (*koinos*). The Greek word translated as "fellowship" or "community" or "participation" is κοινωνία (*koinonia*).

²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.

Paul tells the Romans he is going to bring money from Macedonia and Greece—from Gentiles—to Jerusalem to give it to Jewish Christians. And what's interesting is he says that these Gentiles owe it to these Jews. Why? Because salvation came from the Jews (John 4:22). God revealed himself to the Jews in the Old Testament. Jesus himself was Jewish. So were Paul and Peter and all the apostles. This message came from God through the Jews to these Gentiles. The Gentiles received that spiritual blessing, so they should return the favor by giving the Jewish Christian material blessings.

If you want to read more about that, you can read 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. There, Paul says that the Macedonians gave to the Christians in Jerusalem even though the Macedonians were poor themselves (8:1-5). Paul says that people should give out of their abundance to supply the needs of others (8:11-15). Paul makes it clear that giving should be done cheerfully and voluntarily (9:7). He says that such giving glorifies God (9:12-15). And the reason why we should give to each other is because Christ gave to us: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (8:9). Jesus left the riches of his home in heaven to come to earth. He became poor in that sense, so that we could be brought to heaven and be made rich.

All of this shows that the lives and possessions of Christians should be interconnected. We're not told we must give a certain amount of our money and possessions. But we should understand that we all belong together. We are participating in life together because we are united in Christ together and we are indwelled by the same Spirit. Therefore, we should make sure there are no people living in poverty.

I'll say this again, though I said it about three weeks ago: If anyone has needs in this church, please let us know. If you have trouble paying for food or rent or your mortgage or medical bills, please let us know.

Before we move on, I want to make one more point. Some people, when they talk about Christianity, seem to reduce the whole faith to taking care of the poor. Working against poverty is a part of Christianity, but it's certainly not the whole of the faith. In fact, it's not even the most

important thing. Being generous flows out of our understanding of the gospel: God has been gracious to us, so we should be gracious to others. What that means is our understanding of the gospel and our celebration of the gospel must come first. And we see a glimpse of that in verse 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 were preaching Jesus’ resurrection, which means they were preaching the gospel: Jesus died in the place of sinners so they wouldn’t have to die. Jesus’ resurrection guarantees that everyone who puts their trust in him will have a resurrection of their own in the future. And as the apostles were preaching this message, and as the believers received this message, God’s grace was upon them.

The center of the Christian faith—the whole reason why we’re here—is the gospel. God saves us not because we’re good, but because Jesus is perfect. And because we receive that gift, we want to be generous to each other and to others. No amount of doing good and helping the needy will fix us and make us acceptable to God. Jesus’ atoning, substitutionary sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection from the grave is the only thing that can reconcile us to God and give us eternal life.

Now that we’ve looked at a good example of how the Christian community should function, let’s look at a negative example. Let’s read Acts 5:1-6:

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. 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? 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.” ⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

I’ll have to admit that this passage, along with the verses that come next, is one of the more alarming episodes in the New Testament. Apparently this is what happened: A husband and wife named Ananias and Sapphira sold a field for a certain price. No one told them they had to sell the field. And no one told them they had to give the full price to the apostles. Peter makes that clear in verse 4. He said the field was theirs, and even after they sold it, the money was at their disposal. Yet they gave a portion of the money they got from the sale of the field and said to the apostles, “This is all the money we got from the field we sold.” They lied to the apostles. I

suppose they wanted to look generous. Maybe they wanted to appear to be like Barnabas. The irony is that Ananias's name means "Yahweh is gracious" in Hebrew. God was generous to Ananias, and Ananias was trying to appear more generous than he actually was.

We don't know how Peter found out about Ananias and Sapphira's lie. I suppose we would have to chalk it up to a supernatural knowledge that came through the Holy Spirit. He says two things that are very important: First, he says that Satan filled their hearts to lie to the Holy Spirit (v. 3). Instead of being filled with the Spirit (cf. Acts 4:31), Ananias and Sapphira's hearts were filled by Satan. Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44). He is the devil, the shadowy force who wants to kill, destroy, accuse, and disrupt.. We should be wary of him, understanding that our fight is not against humans, but against Satan (Eph. 6:12). We need to be aware of the ways in which Satan wants to disrupt things in the church. He can be at work in the middle of churches. The church is engaged in a spiritual warfare. We must realize our fight is not against each other, or even against non-Christians, but against Satan. We must stand firm and resist Satan (James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8-9). And we must put on the armor of God, being clothed in Christ, and fastening on truth, righteousness, and faith. We must use the sword of the Spirit, the Bible, and we must pray (Eph. 6:12-18).

The second important thing is that Peter says is that Ananias and Sapphira lied not to man, but to God (v. 4). Now, this couple did lie to men. They lied to the apostles. But, ultimately, they were lying to God. And since Peter says they lied to the Holy Spirit, this is one of those verses in the Bible that show us that the Holy Spirit is a person and he is God. You don't lie to an impersonal force. No one ever said, "Why did you lie to gravity?" But you can lie to a person. So the Holy Spirit is the third Person of the one true God. That's an important theological point. But this is equally important: to lie to the church is the equivalent of lying to God. To lie to your brothers and sisters in Christ is like lying to Christ himself. To lie to people who have the Holy Spirit inside of them is to lie to the Holy Spirit himself. The church is no place for lies, deception, and hypocrisy. It's not a place to make yourself look great and to take credit for things that you haven't done. Remember, everything good we have, and every bit of goodness that we display, comes from God (James 1:17; John 15:5). We must give all credit to God, not to ourselves.

Before I make any comments about why Ananias died, let's look at the conclusion of the story:

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.” 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.” 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.

Sapphira hadn't heard what happened to her husband. When she came home, Peter asked if she had sold the field for the amount of money that she and her husband gave to the church, and she said yes. Peter caught her repeating this lie. Peter said that Ananias and Sapphira were putting the Holy Spirit to the test. In several places in the Bible, we're told not to put the Lord to the test (Deut. 6:16; Luke 4:12; 1 Cor. 10:9). So Peter warned her that her death was imminent, and she, too, died, just like her husband.

Now, it may still be shocking to you that this man Ananias and his wife dropped dead. We don't know exactly what caused their deaths. It could have been a heart attack from shock. But it's clear that this is judgment for what they had done. We may wonder why God would act in such a way.

Well, let's consider this: When the first human beings had sinned, God had already warned them that if they disregarded his words, they would die (Gen. 2:17). When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they didn't die immediately. But God would have been just if they did. Our sin is so serious that it deserves death. When we sin, we're basically saying that we don't trust God. We don't trust that he's good. We don't trust that his ways are right. We don't trust that what he has planned for us is better than what we have planned for ourselves. When we sin, we turn our backs on the Creator. We turn our backs on the giver of life. And because of that, we deserve death. It's only God's mercy that keeps him from treating us the way Ananias was treated.

This story reminds me of a few Old Testament stories.⁵ One is the book of Leviticus. Most of the book concerns how the Israelites were supposed to worship at the tabernacle. In the

⁵ In addition to the ones I mention above, most commentators note the story of Achan from Joshua 7. The Greek word translated in Acts 5:2 as “kept back” (νοσφίζω) is also used in the Greek translation of Josh. 7:1. In that story, a man named Achan kept some of the treasures of Jericho, which were supposed to be devoted to destruction. This deception caused the Israelites to be defeated at Ai. When Achan was found out (he had taken a cloak and silver and gold as his spoils of war), he was put to death.

midst of these details, there's a story of how Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, didn't handle things correctly at the tabernacle. Aaron was the first high priest and his sons were supposed to follow in his footsteps. But because they disregarded God's instructions, they died. This is what it says in Leviticus 10:1-3:

¹ Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. ² And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. ³ Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" And Aaron held his peace.

It's hard to know exactly what Nadab and Abihu did, but they apparently used fire or coals that were not supposed to be used. What is clear is that they did something contrary to God's commands. So fire from God destroyed them. And God says that he will be glorified. When his people disregard his commandments, it does not glorify God. A few verses later, God tells Aaron, "You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean" (v. 10). Aaron had to learn that in God's temple, there was no messing around. God demands purity for the sake of his name.

There's another that's similar. It appears in 2 Samuel 6 and 1 Chronicles 13. The ark of the covenant, a piece of furniture that represented God's throne and special presence, was being transported into Jerusalem. Normally, the ark was in the Most Holy Place at the back of the tabernacle and, later, the temple. As the ark was being pulled on a cart by oxen, the oxen stumbled. A Levite named Uzzah put his hand on the ark to steady it, and because he did this, God struck him down. The reason was because no one was supposed to touch the ark. Numbers 4:15 says, "they must not touch the holy things, lest they die." The ark was normally carried on poles so it wouldn't be touched.

The point is that God is so pure, he can't have sinful people in his presence. And because God is so pure and holy, people must approach him carefully. These Old Testament stories concern God's presence. People had to be very careful how they acted at the tabernacle and the temple. They couldn't do whatever they wanted. They had to be careful around God's special presence. The church is now the temple of God, and we must be careful how we do things. I think this episode in Acts 5 is supposed to remind us that God is still holy, and his temple must be still be holy. Yes, we hear a lot about God's forgiveness—his mercy and his grace. But we

must not forget that God demands holiness for the sake of his name. When people in churches lie and deceive, when they're greedy, when they're sexually immoral—all these things taint God's reputation. Even in the New Testament, when the church is called the temple, there is a reminder that it should be holy. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul writes,

¹⁶Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

A few chapters later in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul warns these Christians against sexual immorality. And he writes,

¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

I want to be clear: there is forgiveness for all sins. Yes, there is forgiveness for greed and pride and lying and sexual immorality. But God still wants his people to reflect who he is. He still wants a temple that is marked by purity and holiness and righteousness. God still cares about these things. I think the reason why we have this story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 is to remind us of this important truth. The gospel certainly does communicate grace, but it doesn't give us a license to keep on sinning. I think God wanted the early Christians to know that, and I think he wants us to know that today.

The question for us today is, How do we respond to this passage as a church?

Earlier, I asked what our view of an ideal society is. According to this passage, the ideal society is one that is marked by grace and truth. The church should be marked by love and truth.

We should be gracious by giving to each other and forgiving each other. This church should be a real community, one in which we share our lives together. We participate in Christ together. We should participate in each other's lives. We should continue to share the gospel with each other, to remind us of what we have in Christ. And we should even share our wealth with each other if there are people in need. In a number of ways, we already do some of this, though I think we could continue to become more centered on the gospel. I think we can also find ways to be more involved in each other's lives outside of this building. A lot of it depends on how much we are willing to give to the life of the church.

The church should also be committed to truth. We should be committed to the truth about God and the truth about ourselves. This church should be a community in which there is no lying and no hypocrisy. We shouldn't put on masks. We shouldn't act as if we're holier than we are. We should be ourselves. Of course, we should want to be the best versions of ourselves that we can be, but we shouldn't pretend that we have no struggles. We should be honest about our shortcomings. We should be more open about where we need to grow. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church—and ultimately to God—because they wanted to look more impressive than they were. There's no need for anyone to do that.

Finally, we should be very careful how we do church. God desires for his church to be a holy temple. He has given instructions for how we are supposed to do church—how the church should be organized, what its mission is, what we're supposed to focus on. There are ways in which we could improve in this area. I want to make sure that what we do as a church and how we do it are in line with God's word.

I pray that we would be a church of which people would say, “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and . . . they had everything in common.”