

Unstoppable...Wisdom to Confront Internal Threats

6/23/19 – Pastor Randy

Acts 4:32-37

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. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 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. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Last week we ended looking at Luke's description of Jesus' unstoppable church as a unified church; a church experiencing great power and grace as they boldly taught about the resurrection of Jesus; a church full of love for each other demonstrated by their generous sharing with one another. At the end of chapter four, Luke shared one specific example of their generosity: Barnabas sold a field that belonged to him and gave the proceeds to the church leaders so they could distribute it to those in need. Unfortunately, while chapter four concludes with this great story of Barnabas's generosity, chapter five begins with these words; *"But a man named Ananias..."*

That three letter word "but" can bring either relief or distress. When someone is sharing some bad news with you and then they say "but", that "but" is a welcome word. But... when someone is sharing good news with you that word "but" is the last word you want to hear. Although we don't like to encounter the word but at this point in the story, we need to read on anyway because it is still God's word and we need to hear it. In contrast to Barnabas...

Ananias, along with the knowledge and approval of his wife, Sapphira, sold a piece of property and they brought some of the proceeds from the sale to the apostles so they could distribute it to church members in need. Peter scolded them harshly for "lying to the Holy Spirit and keeping some of the profit for themselves. Now this might seem like an overreaction on Peters part and very unfair to Ananias and Sapphira. Why is he calling them out for giving

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something they didn't owe?!? The Devil is in the details. The problem was not that they kept some of the money for themselves but that they lied to the church about it. Peter's words make this clear:

"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."

The details are important because many people have misconstrued the early chapters of Acts as if they support communism. Peter was clear about the fact that Ananias was under no compulsion to sell the property and once he sold it, he and Sapphira had complete discretion over the profit. The problem was not the size of the gift but the attempt to deceive their church family. And their lie was not a little thing. The result was that both Ananias were struck dead as an act of God's judgment on them. The result of God's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira was nothing less than one might expect. The whole church was filled with fear of God!

We will come back to this story at the end to draw out some implications and then make some applications.

Luke goes on to report that many people continued to be healed and delivered from demonic spirits through the apostles. Some people were so afraid that they kept their distance but Luke tells us, *"many others held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord..."*

The wonderful works of the apostles that brought healing and deliverance to so many people were once again met with angry opposition. The group of Jewish leaders that arrested Peter and John in chapter 4 were back and once again arrested them without just cause. This time Luke tells us that their motivation was jealousy. What the Sadducees didn't realize was that although they had the power to put them in jail, they didn't have the power to keep them jailed. God sent a messenger to open the prison doors. After escaping they went immediately back to the temple and began to verbally witness for Jesus. While this is happening the Jewish Leadership assembled and called for the apostles to be brought in for interrogation just like they had done with Peter and John in chapter 4. But when they went to the prison

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to get them they discovered they weren't there. Then someone came in and told them that the apostles they put in prison the night before had somehow escaped and were back teaching at the temple again. Imagine how infuriated they must be at being shown up like this. So they sent their officers to get them but they were careful to bring them in without force.

They said, "We gave you strict orders to stop telling the people that Jesus was resurrected proving he was the Messiah and the Savior of the world." Peter, again acting as the spokesperson, responded by repeating the same things he said the first time they arrested and interrogated him. He began with a statement the Jewish leaders would not argue. He said,

1. "We have to obey God rather than men." Then Peter said:
2. You killed Jesus but the God of our fathers raised him to life.
3. Jesus has now been exalted to the right hand of God the Father.
4. He is Savior with sole authority to grant repentance and forgiveness of sins.

The Jewish leaders were so enraged they were on the verge of killing the apostles until Gamaliel, a leader among the Pharisees, talked some sense into them. He reminded them that if this Jesus was not really who they were saying he was, God would not allow this movement to continue but it would eventually be proven to be a farce. On the other hand, he said, if this Jesus really was from God like they are saying, opposing them will get you nowhere, because what is of God is unstoppable!! Worse yet, you will put yourselves in the position of fighting against God!! They couldn't refute Gamaliel's logic so they let the apostles go, but not without first taking some of their anger out on them, beating them and threatening them again.

The apostles' response is truly amazing. After being beaten and threatened,

1. They left rejoicing
2. Everyday in public and private they continued teaching Jesus is the Messiah.

Remember, the church is called to bear witness to the reality of Jesus Christ, and that witness takes place on two levels: We must witness with our words and our works. People come to faith in Jesus and are added to His family as they hear about Jesus from us and as they see Jesus in and among us. So far the church has faced two attempts from outsiders to shut down their verbal

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witness and one threat from insiders that had the potential to diminish, or even destroy, their lifestyle witness. As we move into chapter six...

Luke follows up his retelling of the second external threat to the church by recording a second internal threat to the church. This time it is not deception that endangers the church, but discrimination.

The wording of the opening sentence is very important: As the church was growing numerically, a complaint arose. When there is numerical growth there are new people. New people create stress in your life. They take your seat. They eat your food at the church picnic. You have to share your friends with them and you have to share ministry with them.

The complaint was that the widows of the Greek-Jews were being neglected when it came to the distribution of food while the widows among the Hebrew-Jews were adequately cared for. Luke doesn't bother to reveal the specific reasons why this discrimination was taking place or how severe it was. His focus is on the response to the complaint. From the apostles' response it appears that they had been in charge of managing the distribution for food - and possibly funds for other necessities - but due to the growth of the church the need had outgrown their ability to oversee it effectively. Their solution was to charge the church community with the responsibility of selecting seven men who were recognized as being full of the Spirit, wisdom and integrity to take the responsibility to see to it that all widows, regardless of their cultural background, were cared for in a fair and equitable manner. Luke identified two results from this decision.

1. Everyone was pleased with the solution, successfully restoring unity.
2. The number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. Their lifestyle witness continued to be effective.

Now for the "SO WHAT" question. What are the lessons for us?

A. Lessons from Ananias and Sapphira's deception.

1. A lie to God's people is a lie to God. As a side note, this text gives clear evidence of the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit. "Why did you lie to the Holy Spirit?" The Holy Spirit is not a force or power but a person. "You

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have not lied to man, but to God.” Because you lied to the Holy Spirit, you lied to God.

2. They lied to their church family. Deception is an insidious poison.

Trust is the foundation of any healthy relationship. When people start relating deceptively towards one another the social fabric begins to unravel.

3. Pride was the underlying sin. Pride is an insidious poison that corrupts relationships. They were motivated by a desire to look generous more than to be generous. Pride seeks praise for self rather than for God.

Pride elevates concern over one’s image above meeting the needs of others.

By doing so, pride works in opposition to love; it turns giving into a selfish act.

Their pride also betrayed a competitive spirit. They wanted to appear at least as generous, or even more generous, than Barnabas. Pride works against love by turning our partners into our opponents. **Pride is evil for two reasons: It seeks to rob God of His glory and it robs us of the Holy Spirit’s love.**

B. Lessons from threat of discrimination resulting in disunity.

1. The answer was not for the apostles to oversee the food distribution. The answer was to enlist more members to take responsibility for the ministry.

2. Growth is good but it brings challenges and pain. Do we think: “More people = more problems” or “more people = more opportunities to love”.

3. Discrimination does not have to be intentional to be real. We don’t always favor people intentionally. We do it because we have a natural inclination to be attentive to those who are closest to us. This means we have to be very intentional in order to avoid discrimination. Love looks out for the left out.

4. The apostles did not react defensively. They listened and acted.

5. Identifying a problem is of no value without a willingness to work towards a solution. The people who complained were charged with helping to fix it.

NOW WHAT?

1. Search your heart for pride that could lead you to act deceptively.

2. Resist the temptation to seek attention and praise.

3. If you believe that someone, or a certain group is being overlooked, don’t gripe; talk to us. Let us know of need of benevolence or of assistance from our meal ministry. We need people to join our visitation team.

4. Do not take criticism personally. Listen honestly for what you can learn.