

# THE CHURCH WORKS TOGETHER



## + SESSION OUTLINE

1. God's people practice generosity (Acts 4:32-37).
2. God's people confront sin (Acts 5:1-9).
3. God's people display reverence (Acts 5:10-11).

Background Passage: Acts 4–5

## + WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God judged Ananias and Sapphira for lying about the gift they gave, protecting the purity of the early church.

## + HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Ananias and Sapphira's deceptive action was a sin and came not from a heart of generosity but from a heart of greed. Followers of Jesus share their resources and give generously to those in need, following the example of Jesus who gave up heavenly riches to share His inheritance with all who trust in Him.

## + HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because God has lavished us with riches of salvation and new life in Christ, we live in unity, being generous and honest as we reflect Christ's truth and love.

# GROUP TIME

**Group content** found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



## SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.

## INTRODUCTION

**ASK:** As participants arrive, ask: **When have you seen radical generosity on display, and how did it make you feel?** (people have rallied to support others who endured a tragedy; hosting fundraisers for unexpected medical expenses; giving someone a job or a place to live when they'd fallen on hard times; bringing food or offer to keep the kids after the birth of a child; providing a financial gift so someone can go on a mission trip; this generosity often humbles us, makes us feel thankful, and prompts us to want to be generous to others)

**TRANSITION:** People on the receiving end of generosity know the joy of people rallying around them in a time of need. For example, someone experiencing a medical crisis or an unexpected job loss often finds it humbling to see others come to their aid. In our day, it's common to see fund-sharing accounts launched to meet critical needs, where well-wishers can pray, write notes of encouragement, and give money to meet needs. In the era before technology, needs were seen in the communities in which one lived. This was certainly the case in Bible times, and one of the marks of God's people throughout history has been the willingness to meet needs especially among the people of God.

**SUMMARIZE:** Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- After Peter's preaching and the group's prayer for boldness and for God to act in miraculous ways, the group felt a sense of further oneness, and one of their first actions was to give generously to meet the needs of their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. The first picture of generosity was given in Acts 2, where all the believers shared everything they had, even selling their possessions to give to all "as any had need" (v. 45). Here in Acts 4, this pattern continued, though not all would be generous.



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# POINT 1

## GOD'S PEOPLE PRACTICE GENEROSITY (ACTS 4:32-37).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 4:32-37** from his or her Bible.

**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.

**EXPLAIN:** Use the following idea seen in **verses 32-33** to explain (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 118):

When individual believers see themselves as one unified body in Christ and act as such through generosity, God's power and grace will be present.

- The connection between unity and generosity is clear. The Christian community gave to meet the needs of others because they were united in Christ. To care for others was a way of enhancing the unity and health they shared.
- Note all the words of entirety and oneness in verse 32: "full," "one," "no one," "own," "everything," and "common." Luke was making sure we understood that the early church was one, and they acted in generosity to show love to one another as well as to show those around them that Christ's love transformed them to live differently than the world.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 118)

From Day 1 in the DDG: **How can we, as a body of believers, feel and act more unified?** (be more intentional at welcoming new people or people we don't know; be consistent in asking people's prayer requests to not only pray but see if we can meet those needs tangibly; be in learning mode and in care for those in the church who are different from us in race, culture, or socioeconomically)

**HIGHLIGHT:** Luke continued by giving examples of how this early group of believers were one in heart and mind. Referring to **verses 34-37**, highlight the key doctrine of stewardship (DDG p. 118).

**Key Doctrine #88: Stewardship:** God’s intention for mankind is that we serve Him as faithful stewards of His creation (Gen. 1:28; 1 Cor. 4:1-2). We are to invest the time, talents, and material possessions God has given us for His kingdom work (Matt. 25:14-29), knowing that God is the true owner of all we have, and that our true treasure is found not on earth but in heaven (Matt. 6:19,21; Luke 12:16-21). Motivated by God’s generosity to us made most clear in the gospel, we are to give God the best of what we have (Prov. 3:9), regularly (1 Cor. 16:2), sacrificially (Matt. 12:41-44), humbly (Matt. 6:1-4), and cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:6-7), praying that God may be glorified in our stewardship of His provisions.

- The apostles were entrusted with a great responsibility. Rather than merely meeting needs individually, the believers brought their assets and gave them to the apostles and trusted them to meet the needs of the group.
- This practice parallels the way Christians today can give to their church and trust the church’s leaders to use those resources to meet needs. There are times when church leaders are more aware of needs than individual members may be. This need not mean that members don’t give directly to meet needs, but it’s worth noting how even the giving of the church was done collectively through the church.
- Luke introduced Barnabas (also known as Joseph), who would be an important figure in the early church. Barnabas sold his field and gave the proceeds to the apostles. As a Levite, Barnabas was part of the religious aristocracy, and one could assume he was a wealthy man. As a Christian, however, Barnabas considered the growing church to be more important than his own wealth.
- Notice that Barnabas’s act wasn’t coerced. No one forced or pressured him to sell his land. His actions were not the result of a social program or political pressure. Rather, he was willing to sacrifice his material blessings in this life in order to bless the whole body.

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 118)

**What does it take to sacrifice worldly goods for the sake of needs in the church body?** (belief that the needs are worth it; an eternal perspective that doesn’t place undue value on the pleasures of this life; seeing that blessing others is worth more than your own pleasure, and in actuality would give you more pleasure; belief that leaders would use the resources with the Spirit’s direction to help those in need)

**TRANSITION:** Barnabas was a leader who encouraged others by giving generously. His generosity was indicative of the life of those in this early church, who were selling and giving to meet the needs of others. However, as Luke will show next, there were still those who did not follow this pattern of radical generosity.

### **BARNABAS**

Not only was Barnabas generous in his stewardship, he was also compassionate in introducing Saul to the Jerusalem church when other disciples were skeptical (Acts 9:26-27). He also gave a good report when he was sent by the Jerusalem church to check up on the Gentile believers in Antioch (11:19-23). Luke describes him as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (11:24).

# POINT 2

## GOD'S PEOPLE CONFRONT SIN (ACTS 5:1-9).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 5:1-9** from his or her Bible.

**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. **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."

**COMPARE:** Make a quick chart on the board to discuss: "What is similar and different about this event and the one about Barnabas at the end of Acts 4? (both sold property; both received payment for the property; both brought resources to the apostles; Barnabas gave everything and was honest; Ananias and Sapphira gave a portion and lied to Peter, the church, and the Holy Spirit)"

**HIGHLIGHT:** Using **verses 1-6**, highlight the following main idea below (DDG p. 118):

Part of the role of the church is to combat and confront sin in the church and in the life of individual believers.

- Though it is not specifically stated in verse 2, the implication is that Ananias and Sapphira kept some of the proceeds but led the apostles to believe they were donating all of it. The Holy Spirit, however, saw through their deceit and gave Peter discernment to figure out what they did and confront Ananias.
- *Optional:* Use **PACK ITEM 11: SEEING THE OLD IN THE NEW** to show how a similar action occurred in the Old Testament when Achan stole the spoils of war at Jericho and hid them inside his tent. The Israelites didn't know why they were defeated by their next enemy, but God revealed that someone was disobedient. Achan was selected and judged by death (Josh. 7).
- Peter noted that Satan had filled Ananias's heart to lie to not only the church but to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). Ananias didn't have to sell his land and give all the proceeds. Peter stated plainly that it was his while he owned it, and the money from selling the land was his too. But Satan filled his heart to do evil to disrupt the unity of the early church in his spiritual pride.



### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"As to those feeblers spirits who, though they cannot be said to prefer earthly possessions to Christ, do yet cleave to them with a somewhat immoderate attachment, they have discovered by the pain of losing these things how much they were sinning in loving them. For their grief is of their own making."<sup>1</sup>

—Augustine (354–430)

- Ananias died on the spot (v. 5). He didn't have an opportunity to respond to Peter's questioning. In this instance, sin led to immediate death. Immediate death does not always follow human sin in the Bible, but it does happen in extreme circumstances.
- The result of Ananias's death was great fear (v. 5). The young church was just forming, and God wanted to make it clear that He took sin seriously.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 119)

**How easy or difficult is it to confront sin in others and why?** (very difficult because we don't want to seem judgmental or prideful in pointing out others' sin, knowing we have sin ourselves; sometimes we show too much grace and sometimes not enough; speaking truth in love is difficult)

**EXPLAIN:** From **verses 7-9**, explain the following point (DDG p. 119):

God gives us opportunities to repent, but confronted unrepentant sin will lead to dire consequences.

- Sapphira may not have known what happened to Ananias, but she knew what he had plotted. Looking back to verses 1-2, they committed the sin together. She was part of the decision to sell the property and keep some of the proceeds, while saying they were giving all the proceeds.
- Peter, led by the Spirit, asked Sapphira if they had sold the land for the amount they offered the church. This time, God did give her an opportunity to confess sin. She chose poorly in lying to Peter, which Peter understood as lying to the Holy Spirit. Peter then pronounced upon her the same consequence that her husband suffered.

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 119)

**When confronted with sin, why do we sometimes fall into more sin when we are unrepentant?** (we excuse ourselves with other lies; we don't want to get in trouble so we try to do all we can to escape wrath; we rely on ourselves instead of the power of God)

**TRANSITION:** The early church had experienced grace from the Lord, and they then witnessed His power in another way—His judgment over sin. How would the church respond to God now?

# POINT 3

## GOD'S PEOPLE DISPLAY REVERENCE (ACTS 5:10-11).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 5:10-11** from his or her Bible.

**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.

**ASK:** In groups of 3-4, ask: "Why do you think the punishment for Ananias and Sapphira was so severe?" (God takes sin seriously; the early church was the beginning of God's new covenant people and needed to start out right; God is not to be trifled with; God needed to set a precedent for His people)

**EXPLAIN:** Using **verse 10**, discuss the following point (DDG p. 119):

God made it clear that He is almighty and all-holy, and He will continue to take sin seriously.

- Some commentators have speculated that Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead because Peter cursed them, or perhaps they were so overwhelmed by their own guilt and anxiety, they died on the spot. Luke made it clear, however, that their deaths were divine judgment. And in general, the longterm consequences of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Death is the proper result of sin—death now or death later.
- Similar to Adam and Eve at the beginning of creation, here at the beginning of the church, there was an opportunity to be faithful and honest to God or not. Choosing the latter would lead to dire consequences. And death was the result in both instances. Sapphira was held to the same standard as Ananias and was condemned, just as both Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of Eden to experience toil and death.
- For those who may be offended by these events or deem that God was being unfair, remember the church was in its newborn stage. The people were unified and growing in favor among the unbelievers. But "falsehood ruins fellowship. If the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira had not been publicly exposed and punished, the Christian ideal of an open fellowship would not have been preserved, and the modern cry 'there are so many hypocrites in the church' would have been heard from the beginning."<sup>2</sup>

**EXPLORE:** (DDG p. 119)

**How do we balance a seriousness for staying away from sin and grace to forgive when sin happens?** (by understanding more of who God is in His holiness as much as His mercy; by knowing God is grieved by sin and being truly repentant when it occurs; by accepting God's forgiveness when we sin but putting things in motion to not repeat the same sin)

**SHARE:** In groups of 2-4, ask: “How has the Lord taught you to hold Him in fear and reverence?” Then share with the group some responses.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Using **verse 11** and the points below, explain (DDG p. 119):

Christians should live in awe of God’s grace among them while maintaining a reverent fear for His holiness and hatred of sin.

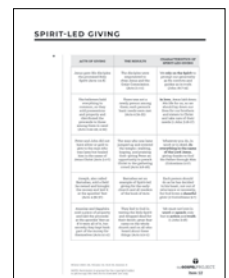
- Proverbs talk about the fear of the Lord: The fear of the Lord is the “beginning of wisdom” (9:10) and “prolongs life” (10:27). The opposite of the fear of the Lord—disdain or flippancy—produces foolishness and a life cut short. Often, since we don’t see immediate and fatal consequences of our sin, we believe that God is not that serious about sin.
- Fear of the Lord is good. The holiness of God and His judgment of sin helps us walk faithfully, and it reminds Christians of the price Jesus paid to forgive sin. In light of Jesus’s gruesome death on the cross, we as Christians should keep in the forefront of our minds how serious God truly is about sin. Like John Owen famously stated, “Be killing sin or sin will be killing you.”<sup>3</sup> As Christians, we are no longer under condemnation for sin, but we are called to die to sin daily.

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 119)

**How can the church instill more understanding of reverent fear of the Lord to its people?** (by incorporating praying more for a reverent fear; by holding people accountable with truth and love; by offering help to those with addictions; by holding up the weight of God’s character including His holiness with His mercy)

**DIG:** A reverent fear of God compels us to be generous and a good steward of all that God has given us. Use **PACK ITEM 12: SPIRIT-LED GIVING** to highlight the characteristics of what it means to give generously in the Spirit. As we’ve looked at the early church over the past weeks, we can understand that because God has given so much to us, we surely should be willing to give back to Him and His people as there is need.

**TRANSITION:** The early church sought to work together as one with one Lord and one mission. May our church have the same heart and mission.





# MY RESPONSE

**SAY:** Ananias and Sapphira's deceptive action was a sin and came not from a heart of generosity but from a heart of greed. Followers of Jesus share their resources and give generously to those in need, following the example of Jesus who gave up heavenly riches to share His inheritance with all who trust in Him. Because God has lavished us with riches of salvation and new life in Christ, we live in unity, being generous and honest as we reflect Christ's truth and love.

## HEAD:

The good news of Jesus compels radical generosity. Paul wrote about Jesus: "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus is the perfect One—the One who possessed all the riches of God—yet He willingly laid that aside to meet the needs of sin-impoorished people. As Christians reflect on the gospel, they are compelled to follow His example of generosity as an act of worship.

**How was Jesus generous, and how can we imitate Him?**

## HEART:

Generosity starts with the heart on at least two levels. Christians are generous because their hearts are moved by what Jesus has done. Also, their hearts are broken over the needs of those around them. A heart moved by these realities can't help but seek ways to see needs and meet needs, especially needs within the body of Christ. As Paul wrote: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

**How have you experienced the generosity of the church body that you can thank God for?**

## HANDS:

It's not enough to understand God's generosity or feel broken by the needs of the poor. We must also open our hands and give. Like Barnabas, we can consider the resources that are at our disposal. Then, we live in community with others so that we are aware of their needs. Finally, we give as an act of worship, returning to God the resources He has entrusted to us in the first place and asking Him to bless our giving so He receives the glory.

**Where do you need to demonstrate increased generosity?**

**PRAY:** Father, thank You that You care about transforming us into the image of Jesus. Protect us from selfishness and, if needed, pry our hands from our earthly resources to bring about Your goodness in the world.

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man."<sup>4</sup>

—C. S. Lewis (1898–1963)

# EXTRA

## **POINT 1: GOD'S PEOPLE PRACTICE GENEROSITY (ACTS 4:32-37).**

### **+ COMMENTARY**

“The Spirit-filled community exhibited a remarkable unanimity which expressed itself even in the attitude to private property. Whereas the institution of a communal purse was explicitly regulated in writing at Qumran, the action taken by these early disciples of Jesus was intended to be voluntary. Members regarded their private estates as being at the community’s disposal; those who owned houses or lands sold these in order that they might be more conveniently available to the community in the form of money. The richer members thus made provision for the poorer, and for a time no one had any need to complain of hunger or want.”<sup>5</sup>

### **+ ILLUSTRATION**

Luke describes the church as being of “one heart and one mind.” The closest biblical parallel for this language is that of marriage. Genesis 2:23-24 describes it this way: “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

A married couple is one flesh. This supernatural unity means more than merely that they live together or work together to raise kids. They are, in the eyes of God, one. A similar concept is true of Christians. They are not merely attending the same church or working together in ministry, but they are united by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and fellowship with Jesus Christ. The local church today continues to embody this unity as people join together to love the Lord.

### **+ OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY**

Glue is a picture of oneness. Take two pieces of wood and strong wood-resin glue and affix them together. If you give the glue time to adhere to the objects, it’s virtually impossible to pull them apart and, when you do, there are splinters and broken pieces everywhere. The same should be true for relationships within the church.

Today it’s common for people to bounce between churches and move rapidly from one location to the next. Also, it’s common for hard relationships and conflict to cause people to leave one

# EXTRA

church for another. When people move from place to place, especially when they are leaving frustrated or bitter, there are splinters that are left, both in the heart of the individuals involved and in the church as a whole. It's common today to go into churches that have been fractured by disunity and the implications linger for decades. If we see ourselves as one with the church, it changes the way Christians work through hard relationships with the church and the way they seek to forgive and fight for unity over the long haul.

## **POINT 2: GOD'S PEOPLE CONFRONT SIN (ACTS 5:1-9).**

### **+ COMMENTARY**

“When all is said and done, there is no ‘comfortable’ solution to the passage. It is a unique story. There is nothing like it elsewhere in Acts, or for that matter in the New Testament. But nowhere in the story are Ananias and Sapphira condemned to eternal perdition. Their death did not necessarily involve their loss of salvation. Still, the judgment that befell Ananias and Sapphira was severe, and one is all too aware that today’s churches would be much emptier if such standards were consistently applied. It is part and parcel of Luke’s ideal portrait of the early church in Acts. None of the standards fit the church of our experience—‘one in heart and mind,’ no one ‘claimed that any of his possessions was his own.’ Luke depicted it as a unique period, the new people of God in Christ, filled with the Spirit, growing by leaps and bounds. There was no room for distrust, for duplicity, for any breach in fellowship.”<sup>6</sup>

### **+ ILLUSTRATION**

Viral videos often deter crime or wrongdoing of all sorts. We live in a time where there’s always a camera around, regardless of where you are in the world. People can catch you doing all sorts of heinous acts that you might think you were getting away with. Body-cam footage from the police often captures the intricacies of the circumstances surrounding an arrest. Our actions are shaped when we know someone is watching.

Sadly, we are prone to forget that God is watching us as well. He is aware of our lives, knows the corners we tend to cut, and is aware of the motives of our hearts. Like Ananias and Sapphira, many assume that God isn’t aware of the way we’ve purposed in our hearts to disobey. We might think we are getting away with selfishness, but it’s important to know that God is watching, is active, and can judge.

## POINT 3: GOD'S PEOPLE DISPLAY REVERENCE (ACTS 5:10-11).

### + COMMENTARY

“The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira provide more evidence of the shift from the old covenant to the new. Judgment is carried out not on the temple grounds or in the council of Israel’s leaders but in the community of believers led by the apostle Peter. He is the one with the authority to speak on God’s behalf, and through him comes God’s judgment for unfaithfulness. God is with the believers in both salvation and judgment. The word ‘fear’ appears after both deaths (Acts 5:5, 11) and connotes the healthy fear of the Lord that comes from knowing who he is and recognizing what he is able to do. This fear now grows in the company of believers, apart from the temple and those who rejected Jesus Christ of Nazareth.”<sup>7</sup>

### + OPTIONAL DISCUSSION

Obituaries rarely tell the whole story. Many obituaries describe the good of someone’s life—highlight their various accomplishments, their family, and their vocation. But obituaries often neglect to mention how someone died, especially if the circumstances surrounding the death were somehow tragic. It’s common to want to mask the pain of an untimely death that resulted from sinful choices.

Imagine reading an obituary for Ananias and Sapphira. The Bible records nothing about them other than this scene. It would be hard to summarize their death in a favorable light. The circumstances are the kind that you’d love to hide in secret. What might happen, however, if the obituary were honest? What if it held up their sin and exhorted others to avoid following a similar path? While the obituary might not be a pleasant read, it would be a standing reminder of the high price of sin. In our day, it’s important that we not vilify people, especially those who’ve passed from this life, but it’s also important that we are honest in appropriate ways about the high price of sin and the cost of rebellion.

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