

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Hypocrisy, Death and the Spirit's Church

Acts 4:32-5:11

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Please grab the Bible from the pew in front of you, or if you've got one on your device that would work too. Open up to Acts chapter 4.

If you've been with us for the last several weeks you know that we've been in Acts for a couple months now, and are going through it verse by verse. Acts is a book written by Luke – the same guy who wrote the Gospel of Luke – and throughout this series we've worked to set a few mistaken ideas straight.

So in the King James Version, Acts is titled “The Acts of the Apostles.” But we said this is a bit of a misnomer. First because this was never the original title, but also because Jesus and His Spirit are the main characters, not the Apostles.

So the action in Acts isn't stuff the Apostles are doing, it is stuff Jesus is doing even after going back to Heaven. So I've titled this series “The Continuing Acts of Jesus.”

Another mistaken idea about Acts is that it is a history of the early Church. Now certainly it does take place in the days and years immediately after the resurrection of Jesus, but Luke's goal is not to simply give us an account of what happened. Rather he has a very specific agenda that he is working to convey. And his agenda is driven by Jesus' last words to His disciples before His ascension. Jesus said:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

And this verse becomes the outline. So for the rest of the book, Luke records stories that demonstrate that this happened. He wants us to recognize how the Holy Spirit came on people, and keeps coming on people, to fill them with power and enable them to be Jesus' witnesses. That's his primary focus. His secondary agenda to keep an eye out for in Acts is the churches' progression from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and finally out to the ends of the earth. This is the story Luke is telling.

On the negative side what this means is don't go to Acts to find out how to govern a church. Just because something happened a certain way in the early church doesn't mean it is the way it is supposed to happen today – Acts isn't a book about church polity. And also don't go looking in Acts for a model for how to heal people or perform miracles – this isn't a supernatural instruction manual.

Instead look to Acts for a faith-inspiring account of normal people who were filled with the Holy Spirit. These people were enabled to see God working in the midst of their mundane. And they were emboldened to participate with what He was doing. And Luke's point is that God wants us to experience this as well. That's exciting!

A final thing we've been doing in this series is hearing stories from our people who have seen God at work in their lives. And this morning I want to call on Dave and Dorala to share an experience they had with Jesus providing for them in a surprising way.

[Testimony: Dave and Dorala]

Thanks guys – great story! Isn't it true that God often shows up looking different than we expect? Have you noticed that? What this means is that training our eyes to recognize His involvement is necessary. That's what Dave and Dorala have done.

As an aside here's something I do to accomplish this – this is free, you can take it or leave it. But every morning when I gain consciousness I pray a simple prayer. I pray "Jesus open my eyes to see where You are working today, and give me the courage to participate." And then I head out into my day expecting to see Him show up. And the things I've seen have been incredibly encouraging. So I recommend this to you.

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Now today in our text the Holy Spirit shows up in a pretty unexpected way. If you've got your Bible open let's start reading in chapter 4 verse 32.

[Read 4:32-35]

I don't know about you, but when I read accounts like this I get excited and a bit jealous. And maybe you've felt this way too. After all the early church just seems like an incredible place. People were being generous. And God was moving in powerful ways. And there are multiple accounts of this. So you may have noticed that these verses sound very similar to the section at the end of chapter 2.

Right at the end of Pentecost Luke tells us the brand-new church was giving themselves to the Apostle's teaching, and holding their possessions in common and enjoying His favor. And that's pretty similar to what is going on here.

But the danger is to read sections like these all by themselves. If you do that you get a very rose colored early church. And actually Luke is very intentionally not trying to present the church that way. So we need the context. And the context in chapter 4 is the two stories that immediately follow this incredible account.

And the contrast between these stories is anything but rose colored. But the Good News is in the contrast, so be ready for that. The first story is about a man named Joseph that we get in verse 36.

[Read Acts 4:36-37]

Now if you are familiar with Acts the name Barnabas probably rings a bell. This is the first time we've heard of him, but he is going to pop up again in chapter 9 advocating for Saul, who had just left his murderous, anti-Christ life behind. But Barnabas, the son of encouragement, is going to take a chance on him.

Then Barnabas is going to be described as a shepherd of new converts, and be trusted with the offerings raised to take care of the poor. He is going to become the first partner of Paul on his missionary journeys. And then he will advocate for giving John Mark a second chance when he drops the ball.

So along with Peter and Paul, Barnabas is one of the most Christ-imitating characters in the early church. And his ministry began here in these verses. But what obviously had already begun was the Spirit's work in Barnabas' life. And we know this because Barnabas looks like Jesus when he shows up on the scene.

Here's what I mean: throughout the Gospel of Luke one of the central themes we see is Jesus' desire that His followers be free from the love of things. We are to be people lovers, not rule lovers or money lovers, just like Jesus was.

So for example in Luke 12 Jesus tells us:

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. (Luke 12:32-33)

Jesus says His people care more about their eternal future than their earthly future, and they prove this by investing their resources to this end. After all this is what Jesus did. Jesus obviously loved people more than money. And He did this with His eyes set on eternity rather than retirement. Right?

And the evidence is in on Barnabas. Obviously Jesus' Spirit was at work in him long before he makes his debut here because he does what Jesus would do. And people only do that when Jesus' Spirit is at work in them.

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Now let's consider the other side of this coin for a second. We've said before that God isn't waiting for us to get out there and evangelize the city of Prince George, He is already at work outside these walls increasing His glory and expanding His kingdom. And our participation, or lack of it, has no bearing on His success. But God wants to extend the opportunity to participate with Him to us. Not because He needs us, but because – like any good Dad – He knows that His kids need to spend time with Him – and He loves this. He loves to let us join Him in expanding His kingdom.

Now one of the frustrating, and indeed scary, things about sharing our faith is having it thrown back at us. If this has ever happened to you it can feel a bit like you are “throwing your pearls before swine” – to quote Jesus.

So the question is how do we avoid that? How do we know who to invest our evangelistic energy in, and who to avoid? And one answer is to look for people that show evidence of God already working in them.

So this last week I bumped into a guy who out of the blue offered hospitality to a stranger in need. And after this happened I mentioned to him how Christ-like his actions were. And I told him that in my experience when I see things like this it is evidence that God is working and has good plans for them. And that's true whatever else is going on in their life. This always starts an interesting conversation, and God starts it, not me. So look for people God is already working in because they are usually ready to hear more about Him.

Now back to Barnabas. Jesus' Spirit is burning inside Him. And so in excitement he goes and sells one of his fields and brings the proceeds to the Apostles in order for them to use the money to take care of the poor.

And the church is inspired by this. They see God moving and they rejoice. But the story doesn't end there. Not everything in the early church was rose colored, and so when Ananias hears about Barnabas he gets inspired in a different direction. Look at chapter 5 verse 1.

[Read Acts 5:1-11]

No kidding fear fell! People are dropping dead at the doors of the church. Talk about not a seeker sensitive service!

Now there are three things that we need to dig into here. The first is to affirm that the Spirit is at work in this. The second is to unpack Ananias' and Sapphira's giving problem. And finally we will look in general at hypocrisy in the church. We will do all this, and hopefully in the end we will come out with some encouragement on Mother's Day, and inspiration to live in a way that pleases Jesus. Sound good?

So first the Spirit is working here, and this is Luke's primary point. But we need to say this out loud because the temptation with texts like this one is to shove it under the carpet without admitting "this is weird." God just kills two people for lying. Come on! Doesn't this seem a little bit like overkill? Wasn't Peter's denial just a little worse than this? How come he isn't dead?

Let yourself stew on those questions, and I'm not going to answer them because Luke doesn't. The fact is when God shows up He often does it in unexpected ways. And this is certainly an unexpected way.

And actually it was unexpected for Peter too. Now we aren't told in the text how Peter knew that Ananias was being deceptive with his apparent generosity. Had someone else come and told Peter about the sale? Had the Spirit simply quickened his eyes of faith to perceive something wasn't right? We don't know.

But what we do know is that when Peter catches Ananias in his sin, he has no idea what is about to happen. He just says "you aren't only lying to me, you are attempting to lie to God." And then Ananias falls over dead.

It's at this point Peter perceives something is up. Brilliant fisherman right? I just picture him saying "Whoa! I'm onto something here." Only after this, when Sapphira shows up and repeats the lie, does Peter speak more boldly. "The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

But here is what we have to see in all this, Peter isn't killing these people. He doesn't control the force. God, for whatever reason, killed these people, and Peter simply participated with what God was doing.

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Oh, yuck! Now I don't like this story, and I suspect you don't either. A God like this troubles me. He doesn't seem safe. I would prefer if He had simply warned them and given them another chance. That's what I want Him to do for me. But that isn't what we get here. And Luke refuses to explain God's actions.

So we are stuck with the question "What are we going to do with a God who isn't safe?" And you get a choice here. You can reject Him because His actions don't make sense... to you. Or you can take Him at His word that He is good – even when He makes decisions that are above your pay grade.

But wherever you come down on this – either angry, or confused but trusting – it seems wise to recognize that the Spirit cares deeply about what happens in His church. So don't treat this lightly. Later Paul will say:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

Friends, we need to acknowledge God's presence at work in the church and anticipate His involvement. We must not fall into living in a way that demonstrates we don't really think God is present at all.

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Now we don't know exactly why God decided to strike down Ananias and Sapphira, but we do know that they had a giving problem, so let's take a minute to look at that in a little more detail.

So first, in verses 3 and 4 notice how Peter denies that Ananias was under any obligation to give. Peter says "Didn't this belong to you? And so wasn't the money yours?" Not once does he accuse Ananias of stealing what was rightfully God's.

And Peter says all this because there was no obligation. Yes, a few people had just sold their property and donated the proceeds – and Barnabas was one of them. But that was generosity not compulsion.

And we see this across the board in the New Testament. Now in the Old Testament there was a rule. People were called to "tithe." But this meant something different than has often been preached.

You see the word “tithe” often appears as “tithes” in the Old Testament – and that is because there were three of them. So in Deuteronomy Moses told the people:

Bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices [to the temple], your **tithes** and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings. (Deuteronomy 12:6)

So the law stipulated that every family was to give 10% of their money to the Levites. These were like the pastor/governors of the country, and this money went to supporting them and running the country – this was the first tithe. But then a second mandatory tithe went towards celebrating religious festivals.

Now we need to get our minds around this one because we don’t do anything like this. God actually commanded His people to use a 10th of their resources for celebrating His goodness. Imagine how life might be different if you used a 10th of your money to buy food, drink and party supplies for celebrating Jesus. This was the second tithe.

Finally, a third tithe was taken every three years – so 3.3% per year – that went to supporting widows and orphans and other people who couldn’t provide for themselves.

So altogether when Jews talked about tithes they were talking about 23% of their income not 10%. And then they did their giving on top of this. This was the Law.

But Jesus fulfilled the Law, and now the only rule Christ followers are under is Jesus’ Law of Love. Jesus said it has two parts. First:

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’... And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matthew 22:37-39)

Jesus’ followers are to be God and people lovers, not rule or money lovers. And as God and people lovers there is no room for what percentage of our income should be designated God’s and what can remain ours.

Think about it this way: When Jesus came and saved us did He put a tithe of His efforts towards our salvation? No! He went all in – He went to the cross! And people who meet Jesus, and are transformed by His Spirit, find themselves imaging Him. They use everything they’ve got to increase God’s glory and expand His kingdom.¹

And this is what Barnabas demonstrates in this text. He is a man who has Jesus’ Spirit all over him, and the evidence is that he gives like Jesus. Ananias and Sapphira, are a picture of the opposite.

They are interested in human approval and money more than God’s approval and the opportunity to grow their heavenly treasure. And all of this points to a single fact, Ananias and Sapphira didn’t have eyes of faith able to see what God was doing.

¹ For more information on how the Old Testament practice of tithing does not apply to New Testament Christians see <http://www.fortgeorgebaptist.ca/media/2015-04-15-giving-to-god-new-testament-style>

Their actions demonstrated that they didn't really think the Spirit of God was present in the church at all – if they had believed this they wouldn't have dreamed of lying to Him.

And so they discredited the Holy Spirit, and it was the last thing they ever did. Friends, we must not underestimate the Spirit's involvement in the church or the city outside these doors. He isn't absent; He hasn't lost control. He is alive and active, and we are wise to make remembering this a regular part of our day.

So if you've got Jesus' Spirit don't tithe, use everything you've got to increase God's glory.

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I want to end with a brief word about how hypocrisy sneaks into the church. Hypocrisy is pretending to be more virtuous than you are. And we all of us have an understanding of what that means, but I suspect few of us would happily describe ourselves as hypocrites – it's not a nice word. But hypocrisy in the church is a sneaky reality.

So after Barnabas sold his property and donated the proceeds, Ananias and Sapphira saw how respected he became and wanted this for themselves. The only difference was they didn't want to give the proceeds of their property to the poor. They wanted to appear more spiritual than they were.

Now how does hypocrisy happen? Well, it happens when two forces clash. The first force is the gospel which contains within it the message that God meets us where we are. There is no one who is too bad for God. God comes to everyone full of grace.

But when God comes to us He always tells the truth about us. So God only saves sinners. In Romans Paul says "There is no one who is righteous, not even one."²

And this is good news because if God showed up and said "Dan, you are awesome. I'm going to be your God because you deserve it." I'd be in trouble because I know me, and I'm not awesome. I lose my patience. I'm selfish with my wife and kids and you. I've got tendencies towards laziness and a love of money and lust. And these aren't just problems in my past, I fight these things today. The simple reality is I haven't gotten over being a sinner. How about you?... Praise God, He meets us where we are.

But this comes face to face with a second force, and that is that after you've been in the church a bit you realize that everyone else seems to have their lives put together. They aren't all broken up like I am. And so I need to perform.

So I look at how you talk, and I look at what you wear, and I look at what you admit to struggling with and not struggling with. And pretty fast I fall into line.

² Romans 3:10

And the reason we do this is because we make the mistake of thinking that the gospel says God has saved us out of depravity so we should be perfect now. But that's not how things work. The reality is we are rescued out of depravity into the process of sanctification. Looking like Jesus is a process. You're not there yet!

Now when God looks at those of us who have been saved He sees the righteousness of Jesus. So we are saved by grace alone. But once we are saved the Holy Spirit begins His work of sanctification in us. And this doesn't finish until we join Jesus in glory.

The fact is, this side of heaven we never get over our need of grace. Grace never becomes the thing we received yesterday. We are always sinners in need of a Saviour.

And forgetting this is what leads to hypocrisy in the church. So friends, stop stressing about appearing like you have your life together. Instead admit you are broken to your neighbours. Enjoy that freedom. And the Saviour will enter your relationship.

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So three things from this: First, Jesus has given you everything, so everything you've got is His. Don't fall into the lie of thinking you can buy Him off with 10%. The reality is we need to live our lives totally for Him. Every resource and talent we've got is His. So think "What do I have that I could use to participate in increasing God's kingdom?"

Second, guard your heart against hypocrisy. It's bondage to have to pretend to be perfect. Truth breeds freedom. This is why the Apostle Paul said "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst." As long as you are the worst sinner you know you are not likely to judge those around you.

And finally, the Spirit is at work here. He is a good God, but He's not safe. We have no control over Him. But He tells us He loves us, and He loves the church. And He wants us to develop eyes about to see what He is doing and the courage to participate. He tells us this is where joy lies. So let's be a church of people who risk the Spirit's leading.

I love you guys!