

Honest Christian Community

A Sermon Study Guide on Acts 4:32–5:11

THE BIG IDEA: God desires a covenant community marked by generous love, honest hearts, and reverent fear because His holy presence dwells among His people. In this sacred community, our private stewardship and public integrity are inseparable from our worship of the Holy King.

I. Living in the Presence of the Holy King

To comprehend the spiritual weight of Acts 4:32–5:11, we must first confront the dramatic theological reality of the Holy Spirit's immediate presence among His people. Many people imagine the early church as a comfortable, relaxed, and safe environment defined exclusively by peace and mutual support. However, the narrative of Acts 5 fundamentally disrupts this assumption, warning us that we are in a spiritual 'danger zone' where the immediate presence of the Holy God dwells. The Holy Spirit who pours out grace also protects His church from inner pollution with strict, lethal justice.

This profound tension between God's goodness and His holy, untamed majesty is illustrated in C.S. Lewis's classic narrative. When the children ask about Aslan, the great lion who represents the King, Susan asks whether he is safe. Mr. Beaver's famous response encapsulates the reality of the early church's encounter with the divine:

"Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King."

— C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

"For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." – Deuteronomy 4:24

"... For our God is a consuming fire." – Hebrews 13:29

Living in God's church means living in the presence of the holy King. He is infinitely good, but His goodness includes perfect holiness and justice. He cannot be manipulated, controlled, or deceived, and the closer we are to His presence, the more seriously He treats sin.

II. The Joy of Generous Sharing (Acts 4:32–37)

A. Community of Goods (4:32–35)

1. The one heart, one soul, one purpose, and shared possession (v. 32)
2. Great power, gospel witness, and abundant grace (v. 33)

3. No needy among them, generous giving, and needs met (vv. 34-35)

Luke depicts a community completely transformed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This unity was spiritual before it was material; the multitude of believers became united as 'one heart and soul' (v. 32). Because their hearts belonged to Christ, their material possessions no longer owned them. No one claimed individual ownership over their property, choosing instead to hold everything in common. The engine of this radical sharing was the bold gospel witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, which was accompanied by great apostolic power and abundant grace upon them all (v. 33).

This grace effectively eliminated poverty within the covenant community. Richer members voluntarily liquidated land or houses, bringing the proceeds to be laid at the apostles' feet for distribution according to need. In describing this, Luke intentionally echoes the Old Testament covenant vision of Deuteronomy 15:4, which promised that under God's blessing, there would be no needy person among His people:

"There will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you . . . "

— Deuteronomy 15:4

This shared life was voluntary and driven by the Holy Spirit. While ancient Greek and Roman philosophers like Seneca, Plato, and Aristotle could only theoretically dream of a society where friends share all things and poverty is eliminated, the early church actualized these loftiest ideals through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

B. Barnabas as a Model (4:36–37)

1. Barnabas: model of generosity, encouragement, and faithful giving (vv. 36-37)

To provide a concrete example of genuine discipleship, Luke introduces Joseph, a Cypriot Levite whom the apostles surnamed Barnabas, which means 'son of encouragement'. Quietly and without demanding recognition, Barnabas sold a field he owned, brought the full purchase price, and placed it at the apostles' feet. Barnabas serves as the archetype of true, self-emptying generosity giving to meet a real need while seeking God's approval rather than human applause.

III. The Danger of Deceptive Motives (Acts 5:1–10)

A. Ananias and Sapphira's Deception (5:1–6)

1. Appearance of generosity, desire for praise, and hidden deception (vv. 1-2)
2. Good deed, wrong motive, and lied to God (vv. 3-4)
3. God's judgment, immediate death, and great fear (vv. 5-6)

Immediately following the exemplary generosity of Barnabas, Luke introduces a dark and sobering contrast in the characters of Ananias and his wife, Sapphira. This couple sold a piece of property and

brought a financial gift to the apostles. However, their outward act of generosity concealed a calculated deception; they conspiratorially kept back a portion of the proceeds for themselves while presenting the remainder as if it were the total sum. Luke's Greek text uses the highly specific word 'nosphizomai' for 'keeping back' the money, which is the exact term used in the Septuagint translation of Joshua 7 to describe Achan's theft of devoted things. Luke intentionally echoes Joshua 7 and the sin of Achan to convey a profound theological warning:

THE HISTORICAL PARALLEL TO ACHAN: Just as Israel began life in the Promised Land with a warning about holiness (Achan's hidden sin of withholding), the church begins its worldwide mission with the same warning. In both cases, God establishes from the beginning that holiness matters, and that hidden sin in the community threatens the spiritual power and progress of the entire covenant body.

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not that they kept some of the money for Peter explicitly reminded them that the property and the proceeds were entirely at their own disposal. Rather, their sin was the premeditated lie. They did a structurally 'good deed' for a corrupt, selfish motive, desiring the public praise of spiritual devotion without paying the actual price of complete surrender. Peter confronted Ananias, noting that Satan had filled his heart to lie not merely to humans, but to the Holy Spirit. Upon hearing these words, Ananias fell down dead, a sudden act of divine judgment that caused great fear to seize all who heard of it (v. 5).

B. Sapphira's Encounter and Death (5:7–10)

1. Sapphira questioned, conspiracy exposed, and judgment pronounced (vv. 7-10)

About three hours later, Sapphira entered the assembly, completely unaware of her husband's sudden death. Showing immense pastoral patience, Peter handed her an opportunity to confess, asking if they had indeed sold the land for the specified price. Instead of repenting, she brazened out the falsehood, confirming their joint conspiracy and sealing her own fate. Peter pronounced her immediate judgment, and she fell down dead at his feet.

Luke's Parallel Structure of Judgment

Luke intentionally structures these two encounters side-by-side to emphasize that hypocrisy is never a harmless or accidental mistake, but a deliberate, agreed-upon conspiracy to test the forbearance of God:

Narrative Element	Acts 5:1–6 (Ananias)	Acts 5:7–11 (Sapphira)
The Appearance	Ananias appears before the community (v. 1)	Sapphira appears after 3 hours (v. 7)
The Apostolic Question	Peter confronts the deceit and exposes Satan's fill (vv. 3–4)	Peter questions her about the specific price (vv. 8–9)
The Lie Exposed	Lied to the Holy Spirit and to God (vv. 3–4)	Agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord (vv. 8–9)
The Sovereign Judgment	Ananias falls down and breathes his last (v. 5a)	Sapphira falls down and breathes her last (v. 10a)
The Immediate Burial	Young men wrap, carry out, and bury him (v. 6)	Young men find her dead, carry, and bury her (v. 10b)
Great Fear	And great fear came upon all who heard of it. (v. 5b)	And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things (v. 11)

IV. The Fear of God's Holiness (Acts 5:5b & 11)

The immediate consequence of this sudden divine judgment was a profound, holy dread that rippled through the entire region. Luke records that 'great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things' (v. 11), marking the first time the Greek word 'ekklesiā' (church) appears in the authentic text of Acts. It is highly significant that this word, denoting the covenant assembly of God, is introduced not in a moment of celebratory triumph, but in a moment of terrifying discipline. This placement teaches us that the very identity of the Christian church is inseparable from the absolute holiness of God.

The 'great fear' that fell upon the believers was not a paralyzing, toxic terror; rather, in the biblical tradition, holy fear is a rich combination of deep reverence, awe, worship, humility, and strict obedience. The early church learned that grace never removes God's holiness. Just as God once dwelt in terrifying glory at Mount Sinai, in the Tabernacle, and in the Temple, His Holy Spirit now physically inhabited the church. This indwelling presence is a source of unmatched comfort and life, but it remains a dangerous and consuming fire to any who attempt to bring deceit into His sanctuary.

V. Living with Integrity Before God and Others

The sobering lesson of Acts 4:32–5:11 demands deep, ongoing self-examination from every believer today, focusing on three essential spiritual disciplines:

- **Examine Your Motives:** Ananias and Sapphira performed a structurally 'good deed' (giving a financial gift) but had a completely corrupt motive (seeking human applause). We must aggressively examine why we serve, give, or lead, ensuring we seek God's approval rather than human

recognition. Integrity means our outward public actions perfectly match the inward spiritual condition of our hearts, refusing to wear a hyper-spiritual mask to impress others.

- **Practice Radical Honesty:** Healthy Christian community cannot survive on spiritual performance; it depends entirely on truth. We must reject the temptation to hide our weaknesses or pretend to be more mature or faithful than we actually are. The church must be a safe, authentic harbor of mutual confession, where believers can honestly admit weakness, repent of sin, and receive genuine, restorative grace.
- **Live in Reverent Fear:** We must never treat grace as a license for ethical carelessness or lazy compromise. Grace does not make sin unimportant; rather, it allows us to live safely within God's holy presence. We should live every moment in the conscious, humble awareness that the holy God who sees the deepest, most hidden corners of our hearts cannot be deceived.

VI. The Heart God Desires

To close, consider the stark contrast between two givers who sat in the very same congregation. Joseph Barnabas and Ananias shared the same spiritual environment: both belonged to the Christian fellowship, both heard the apostles powerfully proclaim the resurrection of Christ, both witnessed extraordinary miracles, both owned property, and both brought money to lay at the apostles' feet. To any human observer, their actions were completely identical. Yet, only Barnabas pleased God, while Ananias met swift and terrifying judgment.

The difference was not the size of the gift or the value of the property; it was the condition of their hearts. Barnabas gave sincerely out of a heart filled with love and encouragement, while Ananias gave deceptively out of a heart poisoned by pride and self-promotion. Because Christ gave Himself completely and honestly for us on the cross, we are freed from the exhausting need to perform or pretend. We can come truthfully before our Savior just as we are as broken sinners in need of mercy and allow His Spirit to transform us into a covenant community marked by generous love, honest hearts, and reverent fear.

Final Exhortation

A CALL TO RADICAL INTEGRITY: *Let us become a community marked by generous love, honest hearts, and reverent fear because the holy God dwells among us.*

May God give us the heart of Barnabas to honor Him with joy.

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HONEST CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Living with Integrity in the Presence of the Holy King

ACTS 4:32 – 5:11

*"Safe? Who said anything about safe?
'Course he isn't safe. But he's good.
He's the King."*

— C.S. LEWIS, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

*We are in danger zone! The Loin and The
King! The LORD! The Holy God is here!*

“For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” – Deuteronomy 4:24

“... For our God is a consuming fire.” – Hebrews 13:29

THE JOY OF GENEROUS SHARING (Acts 4:32–37) - Community of Goods (4:32–35)

The One heart, one soul, one purpose, shared possessions (4:32)

“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.”

ACTS 4:32

THE JOY OF GENEROUS SHARING (Acts 4:32–37) - Community of Goods (4:32–35)

Great power, gospel witness, abundant grace (4:33)

“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

ACTS 4:33

THE JOY OF GENEROUS SHARING (Acts 4:32–37) - Community of Goods (4:32–35)

No needy among them, generous giving, needs met (4:34–35)

“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.”

ACTS 4:34-35

THE COVENANT PROMISE KEPT

“There will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you . . . ” Deuteronomy 15:4

Acts 4:34 • Echoing the Covenant Ideal of Deuteronomy 15:4

THE JOY OF GENEROUS SHARING (Acts 4:32–37) - Barnabas as a Model (4:36–37)

Barnabas: model of generosity, encouragement, faithful giving (4:36–37)

“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.”

ACTS 4:36-37

The Danger of Deceptive Motives (Acts 5:1–10) - Ananias and Sapphira's Deception (5:1–6)

Ananias and Sapphira: appearance of generosity, desire for praise, & hidden deception (5:1–2)

“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.”

ACTS 5:1-2

The Danger of Deceptive Motives (Acts 5:1–10) - Ananias and Sapphira's Deception (5:1–6)

Good deed, wrong motive, lied to God (5:3–4)

“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? 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.’”

ACTS 5:3-4

THE WARNING OF HOLINESS

Ananias' 'keeping back' echoes the sin of Achan in Joshua 7.

Just as Israel entered the Promised Land with a warning of holiness,
the Church launches its global mission with the same absolute
boundary.

God establishes from the beginning that holiness matters.

The Danger of Deceptive Motives (Acts 5:1–10) - Ananias and Sapphira's Deception (5:1–6)

God's judgment, immediate death, great fear (5:5–6)

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

ACTS 5:5-6

The Danger of Deceptive Motives (Acts 5:1–10) - Sapphira's Encounter and Death (5:7–10)

Sapphira questioned, conspiracy exposed, judgment pronounced (5:7–10)

“After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” . . . ”

ACTS 5:7-8

The Danger of Deceptive Motives (Acts 5:1–10) - Sapphira's Encounter and Death (5:7–10)

Sapphira questioned, conspiracy exposed, judgment pronounced (5:7–10)

“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.’ 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.”

Luke's Parallel Structure

Narrative Stage	Ananias's Encounter (vv. 1–6)	Sapphira's Encounter (vv. 7–11)
1. Appearance	Appears before the community with a deceptive gift (v. 1)	Enters three hours later, completely unaware of what happened (v. 7)
2. Peter's Questioning	Peter asks why Satan filled his heart to lie to the Spirit (vv. 3–4)	Peter tests her by asking if they sold the land for that amount (vv. 8–9)
3. Lie Exposed	Peter exposes that he kept part of the price for himself (vv. 3–4)	Peter exposes the conspiracy to test the Spirit of the Lord (vv. 8–9)
4. Immediate Judgment	He falls down and breathes his last upon hearing the words (v. 5a)	She falls down at his feet immediately and breathes her last (v. 10a)
5. Act of Burial	The young men wrap him, carry him out, and bury him (v. 6)	The young men find her dead, carry her out, and bury her beside him (v. 10b)
6. Impact on Others	Great fear came upon all who heard of it (v. 5b)	Great fear came upon the whole church and all who heard (v. 11)

The Fear of God's Holiness (Acts 5:5b & 11)

The Covenant Scriptures

Acts 5:5b

"And great fear came upon all who heard of it."

Acts 5:11

"And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things."

THE COVENANT ASSEMBLY

- **Rooted in Holiness:** The church is defined not merely as a social club or community network, but as an assembly bound by the holy presence of God.
- **Reverent Awe:** The 'great fear' was not a paralyzing or toxic terror, but a deep worship, humility, and absolute obedience.

Understanding Holy Fear

- **Great Fear Seized Everyone (5:5b & 11):** Great fear came upon the whole church and all who heard of these things. This is not cowering terror, but a deep, awe-inspired reverence for God's holiness that preserves community integrity.
- **First Occurrence of 'Church':** In v. 11, Luke uses the Greek word 'Ekklesia' (Church) for the first time in Acts. Holiness is what defines the boundary and identity of the covenant assembly.
- **An Untamed Presence:** Just as God dwelt in terrifying glory at Mt. Sinai, in the Tabernacle, or in the Temple, His Spirit now physically dwells among His people. Grace never removes holiness; it brings us safely into His active presence.

"And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things."

— ACTS 5:11

Living with Integrity Before God and Others

a. Examine Your Motives

Ananias and Sapphira did a good thing for the wrong reason, seeking public praise over heart truth.

- i. God Sees Motives:** He looks beyond outward metrics directly to the underlying purpose of our hearts.
- ii. Serve God, Not Praise:** We must reject the self-exalting desire for human applause and reputation.
- iii. Match Inward & Outward:** True spiritual integrity is when our visible actions agree with our private reality.

b. Practice Honesty

Christian community depends fundamentally on truth; performance and pretense destroy trust.

- i. Reject Pretense:** We must throw away our hyper-spiritual masks and pursue raw, transparent authenticity.
- ii. Confess Sin:** Make the church a safe haven of confession where we can admit weakness and receive correction.
- iii. Build Trust:** Sincere, honest vulnerability builds unshakeable, unified covenant relationships.

c. Live in Reverent Fear

The early church realized that grace is free, but God's presence remains a consuming fire.

- i. Grace is No License:** Free grace never excuses ethical carelessness or lazy compromise with sin.
- ii. Fear Produces Holiness:** Holy fear produces humility, active repentance, and a lifestyle of deep obedience.
- iii. All is Transparent:** Every single heart is completely naked and exposed before the eyes of the Holy King.

VI. This is The Heart God Desires

Barnabas

A Heart of Sincere Grace

- Gave sincerely
- Selfless love
- Sincere devotion
- Desire to encourage
- Grounded in deep trust

Ananias & Sapphira

A Heart of Deceptive Pride

- Gave deceptively
- Selfish concealment
- Duplicity of spirit
- Desire for praise
- Grounded in greed

Same Gift, Different Hearts

Barnabas and Ananias brought structurally similar contributions. Yet one was an offering of worship, while the other was a toxic play for reputation. God desires honest, sincere devotion, not merely the outward appearance of sacrifice.

***“Let us become a community
marked by generous love,
honest hearts, and reverent
fear because the holy God
dwells among us.”***

May God give us the heart of Barnabas to honor Him with joy.