

June 16, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

Authentic Faith and the Cost of Hypocrisy

Acts 4:31 – 5:11

Here in this passage this morning we essentially have two stories. The first is in verses 31 to 37 of chapter four; and the second is verses 1 to 11 in chapter 5. The first story serves as a good example; the second serves as a dire warning. The first story tells us what happens when people are filled with the Holy Spirit; the second tells us what happens when they're not. The first story tells us about people who have a genuine faith; the second portrays those whose faith is inauthentic – a hypocritical faith. And I believe what this passage intends to show us is the contrast between saving faith and unbelief. With the one we see the Holy Spirit filling the hearts of the people and giving them a powerful, positive witness, an incredible unity, and a radical generosity. With the other we see Satan filling the hearts of a husband and wife, leading to self-serving stinginess, an insincere unity and a negative witness. Let's look at both these stories and then draw out some implications for ourselves.

First of all we see the community of believers described by Luke in the last part of chapter four: *And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. 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.* Acts 4:31-35

Authentic Faith

Notice that the text tells us that all the believers were *filled with the Holy Spirit*. That is the hallmark of genuine Christians – they are Spirit-filled. The word is *pleroo* and it means to make full, to fill up full, to cause to abound, to furnish or supply liberally; to render full, to fill to the top: so that nothing is wanting, to fill to the brim. I am amazed sometimes by those who ask, 'Is he or she a Spirit-filled Christian?' Is there any other kind? The problem is that the phrase has come to mean, 'Do they speak in tongues?' And that might be a legitimate question to ask. But if someone claims to be a Christian, that assumes they are in fact Spirit-filled.

Everyone who is a genuine son of God has been born of the Spirit of God. Jesus told Nicodemus that the way into the kingdom of God was to be born of the Spirit – born again. Real Christians are Spirit-born people. There are no other kind. They are born of the Spirit and the Spirit of God now lives in them. That's the difference between Christians and everyone else. Paul emphasizes this in his letter to the Romans: *You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.* Romans 8:9 And to the Corinthians he writes: *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of one Spirit.* 1 Corinthians 12:13

However there is another aspect to this we see particularly in the book of Acts. We noted when we began this series on Acts, that even before the Pentecost event in chapter 2, those who had gathered to pray were already believers, they already belonged to Christ and had the Spirit of God dwelling in them. And what we saw at Pentecost, and what we saw with Peter before the rulers and the elders in chapter 4, and what we see here as they prayed, and what we'll continue to see in Acts, is the extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit at specific and crucial times in the life of the church. It is something extraordinary, something that is more than the ordinary power necessary for Christian living. Something more than the experience of power that makes you a Christian and makes you joyfully love God and worship God and devote yourself to prayer.

As believers we need to be continually, persistently, ceaselessly, asking for more of the Holy Spirit. More times of refreshing from the Lord, as Peter put it. If we are going to have a powerful, positive Christians witness in the world; if we are going to enjoy an incredible unity of heart and soul; if we are ever going to have the root of self-serving stinginess severed in our lives and abound in radical generosity, we need continual times of Holy Spirit filling. This is exactly what happened here. It begins at Pentecost and it keeps on happening. The believers are filled, there is powerful witness to the gospel, thousands come to Christ, there is a sense of incredible unity in the church, and radical generosity breaks out, and we see it again and again.

Powerful Witness

Here Luke records that there was ongoing, powerful preaching and many were coming to Christ: *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 In reading up on this text, I found that most scholars believe that the church in Jerusalem, at this early point in its history, numbered already between 15 and 20,000 believers. And we see later in this chapter even more coming to faith. That is strong testimony to Spirit-filled, powerful witness. If we are to have an impact for the kingdom of God in our neighborhoods and communities, we need to have continued, persistent, persevering prayer for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on this church and Spirit-empowered preaching.

Incredible Unity

Now when Luke records here that *those who believed were of one heart and soul*; he's making the same point he made in chapter two when he said the believers were: *Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple.* Acts 2:46 The word Luke uses there is **homothumadon** which is a compound of two words meaning to "**rush along**" and "**in unison**". The image is a musical one in which a number of notes are sounded which, while different, harmonise perfectly in pitch and tone, like the notes of a great symphony. That is, these early believers had one great passion and purpose, to worship God through Jesus Christ and make Him known to the world. Everything in their lives was bent to this purpose – everything in their lives served this purpose. Their minds and hearts and souls were playing the same symphony together and because of that they experienced an incredible unity.

Radical Generosity

And this unity expressed itself in a very particular way: *no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.* Acts 4:32 Luke says that these guys were of one heart and soul, and they didn't consider what they owned as belonging to them personally. In fact Luke goes on to say that *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 In other words, what the gospel does is liberate us from our natural tendency toward selfishness. Genuine faith is always marked by radical generosity. You cannot claim to be a Christian and remain stingy-hearted. The impetus of the Spirit of God always moves you to generosity.

One of the reasons that is true is because the root of stinginess, the root of selfishness is really fear. If you go back in the chapter you realize that these guys were praying because they were fearful. Peter and John had been arrested and thrown in jail; there were threats of further action; so they prayed for boldness. And when the Holy Spirit was poured out in boldness in these saints, their hearts were freed to give generously. Why is it we don't give as we should? We're fearful about the future. What if I lose my job? What if the stock market crashes? What if I have unexpected medical bills? What if my car breaks down? We're afraid and we don't really trust God to provide. Fear paralyzes our giving and causes us to be stingy.

What this looked like in this time and place was just as radical as it would look in our day. Look at what they were doing. Some owned land or houses, and they sold those lands or houses, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet. **Who does that?** You see, when it says they sold the land or the house, the implication is that they took ALL the money – not just some sort of tithe of the price – and brought it to the church so that there wouldn't be anyone who would lack what they needed to live. What they would do was when they gathered together as the church at the temple under what was called Solomon's portico or colonnade, they would bring their tithes and offerings and literally lay them at the feet of the apostles who were the leaders in the church. That's how they took offerings in those days.

But what is incredible is that they would actually liquidate their assets, take that money and give it to the leadership who would then distribute that money to those in need. They weren't giving out of their surplus – there were needs, they saw the need, and Luke says that from time to time, they sold their house or their land and gave the money to meet that need. When the gospel really impacts our hearts, one major effect is that it loosens our death-grip on money and possessions. Because, truth be told, our hearts are never very far from our wallets. You see Luke says that *great grace was upon them*. When grace enters our hearts, the power of money and possessions over us is broken. The zipper on our money pouch is broken. You can tell those whose lives have been changed by the gospel in the way they handle their money and possessions. They realize that all we have is not our own – it all belongs to God. That's what it says - *no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common*. Is that true of us? Can we say that, really say that, about our stuff?

This is especially staggering when we understand that in those days, houses and particularly land, represented secure wealth. That is wealth that could be counted on as a hedge against bad times. It represented security, stability, income for their golden years. It wasn't as if they were selling off summer homes and stuff. And yet when the gospel got hold of them, **houses and lands merely represented available help for those in need**. I think Luke wants us to understand that this is a community of people whose lives have been utterly revolutionized by believing in Jesus. Their hearts had been at the same time, knitted together in love for one another, and surgically severed from the deadly grip of money and possessions.

A Good Example

And I am sure that there were lots of examples in that early church Luke could have given us to make this point, but he gives us two powerful ones – Joseph, who was nicknamed, Barnabas – and Ananias and Sapphira. *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 Barnabas' fruitful ministry begins here in Acts four; and we meet him several more times in this book – befriending the dreaded Saul of Tarsus when he became a believer; pastoring in Antioch in chapter 11; entrusted with the offering for the relief of the saints in Jerusalem; Paul's first partner in missions in chapter 13; and the advocate of giving young John Mark a second chance when he stumbled in his first ministry opportunity. He was, as his nickname suggests, a real son of encouragement, the good example

A Dire Warning

And then Luke gives us the other story – Ananias and Sapphira – the dire warning. *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 Apparently Ananias and his wife, saw what was happening, perhaps even saw the respect and admiration that may have come to Barnabas when he laid his gift at the feet of the apostles, and wanted in on the action. We don't really know the reason they went and sold their property, but they did. And they presented it just like Barnabas did, except they didn't tell the whole story. And we need to be clear that the sin was not that they didn't give it all, but rather that they lied about it and said they did. If it can be said that God is ever impressed, He is not impressed by how much you give, but by how much you keep for yourself. And He knows – down to the penny.

Inauthentic Faith

And somehow Peter found out about their little scheme and exposed it for what it was: *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 men but to God."* Acts 5:3-4 Notice the contrast here. In Acts 4:31 the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit. Here it says that Ananias and Sapphira had a different kind of filling – Satan filled their hearts. Which is not surprising since he is a liar and the Father of lies. When the believers are filled with the Holy Spirit, what comes out is truth and a powerful witness, an incredible love and unity, and radical generosity. If Satan fills your heart, what comes out are lies, self-serving stinginess and hypocrisy.

Insincere Unity

Now a lot of Bible commentators seem to be reluctant to label these two as unbelievers and some hold them up as examples of what can happen to believers who commit especially grievous sins. And the Bible does talk about the discipline of God in terms of cutting short a believer's life at times. But as the title of this message suggests, I believe that Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was giving us these two stories to highlight the difference between authentic faith and pretend faith. I am convinced that these two were pretend believers. For whatever reason, they wanted to be associated with the church, but they didn't want to pay the price. Their unity was insincere. Let's look a couple of reasons why I think that is the case.

First you need to look at a couple of verses we didn't read this morning. Look at verses 12-14: *Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women* Acts 5:12-14 Notice the different groups of people. You've got the apostles, the rest of the church, new converts – and the people who didn't dare join the church. From the construction of this it seems like prior to the sudden demise of Ananias and Sapphira, there were people who sort of joined themselves to the church but weren't really believers. But that day there in Solomons Colonnade, they got the message. 'Boy, these people are serious – you'd better not be associated with them unless you're really serious – people die in those meetings! They're not very seeker friendly'.

I think Ananias and Sapphira were joiners. There was something so attractive about those church people, something so generous and loving and kind, they thought they'd hang with them. But authentic faith is not based on our joining the church. Parking yourself in a pew on Sunday mornings doesn't make you a Christian any more than sleeping in a garage makes you a car. The hypocrisy of their faith was exposed and the price was pretty high. *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 That's another usher function we don't talk a lot about.

The other reason I don't think these two had an authentic faith is the fact that the Bible records that instead of being filled with the Holy Spirit, it says that Satan filled their hearts. The same word **pleroo** is used to describe being filled to the brim. And if Satan fills your heart to the brim, there isn't any room in there for the Holy Spirit. Whatever you are filled with will spill out. If you are a real believer and filled with the Holy Spirit, and not a just a joiner, your life will overflow with a love for the saints, a deep desire for the truth and a radical generosity. Otherwise what comes out is hypocrisy, and stinginess and deception.

And sadly, Ananias was not alone in this, but he conspired together with his wife: *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." 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.* Acts 5:7-10 It seems that the ushers had a very busy day. I've often wondered too, what the offering was like the next week.

A Negative Witness

Whatever it was, I know this, that if people weren't really serious about this thing to begin with, they certainly knew that they'd better be: *And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.* Acts 5:11 That is probably a great understatement. And it causes lots of problems for people when they read this account. Because what you have, in contrast to the powerful, positive witness of the church, is a powerful negative witness – two people die. A lot of people expect that of an Old Testament God – wasn't He always striking people down back then? But this is New Testament stuff – I thought we turned a corner here. Isn't Jesus about love and tolerance and gentleness and forgiveness? And the answer is yes – **and** He is still God. He is the very God who is angry at sin and whose wrath rests on the head of everyone who rejects Him. And here we see that anger bursting out over the hypocrisy and deception that threatened to destroy what He had begun. Anger, righteous anger, is the appropriate response to whatever threatens to undermine or destroy someone you love.

Think how you feel when you see someone you love and care deeply for, ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do you respond with kindly tolerance or even overlook or ignore the problem? No, what rises up is anger. Anger that your loved one would be treated this way. Anger at the injustice and deceit that is leading them to destruction. Anger is not the opposite of love, hate is. And the ultimate form of hate is indifference. The wrath of God is not the outburst of a cranky God, but rather it is His settled opposition to the destructive cancer of sin. Sin is a cancer which, if not cut out, will kill you. And this cancer is eating out the insides of the human race which God loves with His whole being. And this sin, this hypocrisy and deception threatened this young church and God stepped in to deal with it.

And although God doesn't deal with every sin that comes through the door like this, sometimes the threat is so immediate that immediate action needs to be taken. A couple of years ago I spent some time in Pastor Denis Makutu's home in Mwamba and he was telling me about a witch doctor in his village who was vigorously opposing the proclamation of the gospel and the growing church there. During a series of evangelistic meetings held in Mwamba, this witch doctor was busy with his spells and incantations, standing outside the church and loudly opposing the work. And many people stayed away, fearful of being put under a spell by this guy. But the church was praying, and Denis kept preaching and people kept coming to Christ. But one night things came to a head and this witch doctor felt bold enough to come into the church meeting to try and intimidate people with his presence. But Denis, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked at that witch doctor and said, 'God has told me that you have this night to repent and come to Christ. But if you don't, He is going to take your life. He will not allow you to be a hindrance anymore'. The witch doctor scoffed and left the building. But the next morning, they found him dead at his worship shrine in the forest. Sometimes a powerful negative witness is required.

Two thoughts I want to leave with you from this passage. One positive, one negative. The negative one is don't play at this. Don't be casual about your faith. Make sure you have an authentic faith. This story makes it clear that God is not fooled. Look at your life – is it characterized by a genuine witness and proclamation of the gospel? Is there a sense of unity and oneness with the saints? Is your life marked by radical generosity? Do you have a healthy fear of a holy God and an abhorrence of the sin that would separate you from His love and glory? I urge you by the mercies of God to embrace the good news that Jesus died for sinners like you and I so that we could live as we were meant to live.

The positive one is this. You were created to live in community like this. A community in which the love of God that has been poured out in your life overflows in love and unity and radical generosity to those around you. A community where the power of God is continually going out to the world around you, inviting others into this community where life is lived as it was meant to be lived. A transformed community of sinners made saints that demonstrate the radical love and generosity of God to a watching world.

Our gracious God and loving Father,

Grant that we would have a real, authentic faith that mirrors and reflects Your grace. Give us a deep and thorough repentance from the sin that seduces our hearts from You. Give us too we pray, a reverent, holy fear that would keep us from playing at faith and make us real all the way through. Come, Holy Spirit and fill us to overflowing so that our witness to Your grace would be powerful and compelling, our love for one another and our neighbor would abound, and our lives would be marked by a radical generosity that serves to point others to Your generous gift of love to the world. Let Your love fill our souls to delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.