

One of the reasons I'm convinced that the Bible is absolutely true, is because it doesn't attempt to present a false picture of how wonderful and perfect God's people all are (or for that matter, the church). It tells us the story as it actually is, and shows us a picture of the church, 'warts and all'.

And that's what we find here, in the Book of Acts. When Luke wrote the book of Acts, he told us about the good. He told us about the bad. And in today's reading, we get a dose of both of them.

Somebody once said, "If you ever find a perfect church, whatever you do, don't join it, because you'll spoil it."

And this church in Acts, was certainly not perfect. And there are a few themes in this reading, that I want to highlight, and hopefully, by doing this, it might pull it all together for us:

1. The first theme is fellowship – and that's a good theme.

We talked about fellowship (koinonia) a couple of weeks ago. One of the characteristics of a Spirit-filled church, is fellowship (or koinonia). Last week, the topic was "the Name of Jesus". They **believed** in the Name of Jesus. And now we're being told that ³² **the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul**, - that means they had a unity of belief, and they had a love for one-another, and they cared for one-another. Their souls were united in some way – and that's what fellowship is – Fellowship is when we know that we have an eternal destiny

together, and that our shared, eternal destiny begins now – right here on earth.

If you don't love other Christians, and enjoy fellowshiping with other Christians, you're going to be miserable when you get to heaven, because there aren't going to be any others there... Shared destiny, begins now..

And V32 says: “**they had everything in common**”. And it goes on to describe, how when one of the fellowship were in need, the rest of the fellowship cared for them. Now, this story is not simply about giving to the needy (Do not confuse it for that)... – It's about fellowship (koinonia). These believers, cared so deeply for one another, that selfishness was abandoned, and selflessness and unity were embraced..... I wonder how that came about... How did they come to this point of selflessness????

When we submit to Jesus Christ as “Lord”, we are not merely committing our heart to Him; we don't just commit our minds; we don't just commit our body; we don't just commit our soul.... – When we submit to Jesus Christ as “Lord”, we are committing everything that we are, **and** everything that we have, to Jesus.

So, when Jesus Christ is Lord, everything we have, belongs to God. Which means, it's not a very big step then, when some of the fellowship are in need, to bring what is **already** God's, and allow it to be used for the needy. Do you see what I'm saying here???? The Lord looks after His people, doesn't He???? And if what **I** have, belongs to God, I shouldn't be surprised that God may redeploy that, to care for the whole fellowship...

V33 describes that **great grace** was upon them all.

And let me tell ya – to get to that point – to stop seeing the stuff that I have as “Mine”, and to begin seeing the stuff that I have as “God’s” – well that requires great grace. God extends His enormous grace to us (being saved in Christ. Our sins are forgiven), and we then have the opportunity to share grace with others.

So, Luke gives us two examples in this church. One’s a good example, and the other is bad.

Firstly, he introduces to us, a bloke by the name of “Joseph” – we will get to know him better by his nickname, “Barnabas” (which means son of encouragement). From this point on in the New Testament, Barnabas actually becomes someone we hear a lot of – he becomes a missionary, and does a few missionary journeys with Paul.

Anyway, Barnabas owned a paddock, and he sold that paddock, and he brought the money, and laid it at the feet of the Apostles. Alright, so Barnabas is redeploying, what **already** belonged to God. And he entrusts the proceeds, to the Apostles to share the money out as it was needed....

And Barnabas was a good man. He had experienced the grace of God, and now he was extending grace to those who were in need.

But not everybody was as good as Barnabas.

Ananias, and his wife, Sapphira, wanted to have the **appearance** of being as good as Barnabas, but their greed and selfishness and pride, got in the way.

Ananias and Sapphira, **also** sold a piece of property. But when he brought the money, Ananias pretended that he had brought **all** of it, but he actually only brought **part** of it. And so he lied about how much he was putting in the offering. And Peter said “Why would you do that?” It was yours. You could have kept it. Or if you wanted to give a **part** of it, that was up to you. But you lied. Why would you do that?”... “You’ve lied to the Spirit of God....”

And he dropped dead. So, the young men picked him up, and took him out and buried him. 3 hours later, Sapphira, not knowing know that any of this has happened, comes in and Peter says “Is this how much you sold your property for?” “Yep, that’s it – that’s all of it...” “Why would you do that? Why would you agree together to test the Spirit of The Lord?”

And so she falls over dead, and the burial squad open the door, and discover they’ve got some more work to do.

2. And so the second theme is the deceitfulness of wealth

And I believe that this is something we (being a wealthy country), need to be very aware of. The wealthy – and let’s face it, by world standards, we are very wealthy – the wealthy are **more** in danger of being deceived by our wealth, than what the poor are.

What we have, can be used for good, or it can become our downfall. Money can be used to feed the poor; to support missionaries; to support ministry in your local church... You can use your money for good. But our money can also tempt us, and deceive us.

In the parable of the sower, the wheat growing among thorns that chokes us out... Well, the thorns are ^{Matthew 13:22} **the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches [that] choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.**

*And that's a pretty big challenge for us today. If you want to get ahead financially in the world today, we're told we have to set 'financial goals'... But have you ever considered "What **really** are God's plans for my finances?"*

Ananias and Sapphira lied about how much they put in the offering. They were deceived by their wealth.

How do we do that??? How are we deceived by wealth???

Let me give you an example from my own life...

There is an Old Testament principal of tithing. Now because we are in Christ, you are not bound by the law of tithing (I want to be clear on that). The New Testament principle, is to give as we are able. My problem is, I find it way too easy to spend everything I have, and find myself, not able to give anything. So I've actually found the concept of a tithe of 10% to be very helpful, as a guide to giving. So, when I used to earn \$100 a week, it was tough, but I could afford \$10. When I was earning \$500 a week, it was tough, but I was able to do \$50. When I was to earning \$1000 per week, I was able to tithe \$100.

But early on, the first question I came to, was “Is this before tax or after tax?” And I decided that it should be the gross amount I tithe on, otherwise I would be cheating God. God deserves the first of what I earn.

Then when I began a business, I had another decision to make? Do I dare to tithe on gross income? Or do I tithe on operating profit? Or on gross margin? Do I tithe before or after my fixed expenses come out???? Before I make repayments on equipment and interest, or after???

*There was big decisions to make. But really it was an easy one, because I had decided to tithe. In the Old Testament, the tithe was always on gross income. So, if 100 sheep were born, 10 of them belonged to God. And so, I made the decision, that if I were to **say** that I tithe, well I’d better be tithing on 10% of gross, otherwise it’s not a tithe at all. I would be doing exactly what Ananias and Sapphira did – saying that I’d given it all, but keeping it back for myself...*

Now, that’s an example from my life. I’m not telling you you have to tithe 10% - that’s between you and God, how much you give. But for me, if I said I was going to tithe, then it would have to be on the gross, otherwise I was lying to God.

3. Which brings us to our third theme – Truthfulness.

Ananias and Sapphira were not executed because they kept some money for themselves – They were judged because they lied. More specifically they lied to God.

Truthfulness in the character of the disciples of Jesus, is critical. Sometimes we might feel “A little white lie won’t matter”, but there’s another name for “a little white lie” – Does anyone know what it is? - It’s a “dirty great big lie”. A lie, is a lie, is a lie. And as God’s children, truth should **always** be on our lips.

In Revelation 21:⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.”

Let me tell you, lying in the church, is something that is so horrendous, that it had to be dealt with, right there and then, to serve as an example and a warning for us.

4. Which brings us to the fourth theme, the Fear of God

V ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Well, there’s nothing surprising about that, is there??? I mean, imagine – imagine if that happened right here, in this church... wowh....

The fear of God, I believe, is something that we as a generation, need to rediscover.... Christians and non-Christians alike, need to rediscover the fear of God.

If there's one thing that this story of Ananias & Sapphira should remind us of, it's the Day of The Lord – The Day of Judgment, when Christ returns, to judge the living and the dead... But most people are totally oblivious of it. They have no fear of God – “I'll take my chances”, they say.

But even us Christians, I believe, need to rediscover the fear of God.

When CS Lewis wrote his Narnia series, he was writing a fantasy story, that was actually describing Christ and the gospel. And Aslan (the lion), is the Christ figure. And I reckon he gave a most marvellous image in “*the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*” of how we should fear God:

Beaver says: "Aslan is a lion--the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he--quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King I tell you'."

We should never presume upon God. God, is God. He is all powerful. He is creator, redeemer, and judge. We don't need to be afraid of him, but we do need to fear Him. I know I've used this illustration before, but I'll use it again, because it's a good one:

When I was going to school, the school principle was feared – not only by the students, but also by teachers. He was looked up to. He was respected. He was honoured. When we spoke to him, it was with the utmost of respect. I wasn't scared of him (Oh, naughty kids going up for the cuts were scared of him) – I wasn't scared of him, but I did fear him... Do you get the difference? I don't think kids today, fear the principal like we used to...

And I don't think most of us Christians fear God, in the way that we should fear Him.

Respect Him, and honour Him, and trust Him, because He is good and loving and kind....

5. The fifth theme, is evangelism.

And we're going to see this throughout the book of Acts – Evangelism is key, to everything they did.

It begins and ends with evangelism:

V³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

And then at the end:

5:14 And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,

You know, when a church has gone through a period of growth, it's very tempting to take a deep breath, and to take time to consolidate, and develop the fellowship, and concentrate on our relationship with one another, and our relationship with God... There's something missing, when that happens.... Evangelism.

The purpose of Christian fellowship, is **not** just so we can feel good about ourselves. Christian fellowship, is a witness to the world. It's a witness of the reconciling work of Christ... Fellowship and evangelism, go hand in hand. And if evangelism is missing, then one of the key purposes of the church is missing....

I want to finish with V13. It says: ¹³ None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.

The way that reads, it seems like there were onlookers, and they felt drawn to this Christian community. They felt drawn to the fellowship – they felt drawn to Christ who was being preached – they held these Christians in high esteem... but they didn't dare to join them.

And that describes many people today. And there's all sorts of reasons people come to church. Some are lookers. Some are seeking something, but they don't know what they seek... Some are looking for personal validation of their **own** spiritual ideas... Some are seeking friendship; or

strength; or moral guidance... Some admire Christians because of their social responsibility and generosity...

But they do not dare to join them.... They don't dare, to give up everything to follow Christ. They don't dare, to risk persecution for the name of Jesus. They don't dare, to give up their own ideas about God, and to believe in the God who reveals Himself to us in Jesus Christ, and testified to by the apostles...

And my question for you today, is "Where are you at with God?" Have you dared, to become a disciples of Jesus Christ?... or you just esteem them???

Do you dare, to believe in the Name of Jesus, and to become His disciple???? Do you dare???

ⁱ CS Lewis, The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe