

July 7, 2024

## ACCOUNTABLE: ACTS 4:36-5:11

God holds believers accountable for their motives in service.

### Focus Attention Option 1 (Adapted from ETB LG, 68)

**Read:** Guide the group to read the opening paragraph on page 55 of the PSG silently. [Or have someone read the paragraph aloud.] Encourage adults to share times when they were held accountable by their parents—or had to hold their own children accountable. Allow them to share how they feel knowing that God ultimately holds them accountable for what they do.

**Transition:** Today's session is about accountability. The contrast between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira is financial, but we can apply these principles of accountability to other areas of our lives too. Keep that in mind as we walk through these verses."

**Introduce the Passage:** After Peter and John were released from jail, they reported the events to the other believers. In response, they worshipped the Lord and asked that He embolden them to speak the Truth to those who did not believe. After concluding the story of those events, Luke describes the church in Jerusalem. He reports that they were "of one mind and heart." In their minds, they all believed the Truth of the gospel and wanted to tell others. In their hearts, they loved one another. This love was manifested in their care for one another. We discussed the mechanism by which they did this a few weeks ago. In a time when ATMs and savings accounts were unheard of, the believers who had the means would sell possessions, like land, to fund the benevolence ministry of the church. As a result of their care, Luke tells us that "there was not a needy person among them." (Acts 4:34) This description of the church lays the groundwork for the account that follows in which Luke gives examples of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. In Acts 4 and 5 we will learn that "God holds believers accountable for their motives in service." (ETB PSG, 55)

### 1. EXHIBIT A: BARNABAS (ACTS 4:36-37)

**Read or have someone read** Acts 4:36-37

**Explain:** Luke presents us with Exhibit A in his lesson on faithfulness. The person on display for us is a man named Joseph. Joseph was a converted Jew who came from the descendants of Levi. He was also from Cyprus. These biographical details are not the important facts Luke wants to present. Instead, Luke presents a man marked by ministry and a ministry marked by generosity.

- **A man marked by ministry:** First, we see that Barnabas was marked by ministry. "Luke had a way of taking characters who played a major role later in the book and introducing them early, but only briefly and in

#### Notes:

This is the Aim of the lesson. It drives our discussion and should be the point we drive home throughout the lesson.

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *New American Commentary: Acts* (NAC)
- *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts* (HNTC)
- *Preaching the Word: Acts* (Preaching)
- *Exalting Jesus in Acts* (Exalting)
- *Unstoppable Gospel*, Gregg Matte

"He gets mentioned twenty-three times in Acts!" (Exalting, 72)

"Just how strong were Barnabas's Cypriot roots we also are not told. Luke simply said here that he was a Cypriot by birth. His family may have moved to Jerusalem when he was quite young, and it is in and around Jerusalem where we find Barnabas active in the early chapters of Acts. On the other hand, it is probably not by chance that Paul and Barnabas's mission work together began on the island of Cyprus." (NAC, 155)

passing, as is the case with Barnabas here.” (NAC, 154) This man will play a significant role in the book. In fact, he is mentioned 23 times in the book. (Exalting, 72) Luke tells us that the Apostles had given him a nickname: Son of Encouragement. We see that he lives up to this name in the book. Let’s take a brief look at the life and ministry of Barnabas.

(1) We see that he encouraged the Apostle Paul:

**Have someone read: Acts 9:26-28** (<sup>26</sup> When he arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, since they did not believe he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> Barnabas, however, took him and brought him to the apostles and explained to them how Saul had seen the Lord on the road and that the Lord had talked to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.)

(2) We see that he encouraged others in their faith as a missionary:

**Have someone read Acts 13:2-3** (<sup>2</sup> As they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” <sup>3</sup> Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off.)

(3) We see that he stood beside John Mark when he was discouraged:

**Have Some read Acts 15:36-40** (<sup>36</sup> After some time had passed, Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s go back and visit the brothers and sisters in every town where we have preached the word of the Lord and see how they’re doing.” <sup>37</sup> Barnabas wanted to take along John who was called Mark. <sup>38</sup> But Paul insisted that they should not take along this man who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone on with them to the work. <sup>39</sup> They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed off to Cyprus. <sup>40</sup> But Paul chose Silas and departed, after being commended by the brothers and sisters to the grace of the Lord.)

In these examples from his biography, we see that Barnabas was marked by ministry. One commentator remarks, “His ministry became his moniker.” (Exalting, 72)

**Encourage a moment of quiet reflection:** Ask the group to silently consider what nickname other church members might give them after seeing their ministry in the church. (TELL THE GROUP THAT YOU ARE NOT GOING TO ASK THEM TO REPORT BACK AND THEY ARE TO TAKE A MOMENT OF PRAYERFUL SILENCE AND ASK THE LORD TO REVEAL THIS.)

**Apply:** During the moment of prayerful silence, the Lord might have encouraged you to keep ministering in your usual manner. Conversely, He might have shown you a nickname that is not as positive as Barnabas’. If that is the case, it is a good thing because that means He wants you to grow in your relationship with Him and move toward a positive nickname that is marked by a zealous ministry.

- **A ministry marked by generosity:** Next, see that Barnabas’ ministry was marked by generosity. When Luke describes the actions of Barnabas in

Notes:

TEACHER’S NOTE

You will come back to these points later in the lesson.

the passage, he is being descriptive, not prescriptive. In other words, he is telling us what Barnabas did, not telling us to do exactly what Barnabas did. The actions of Barnabas are setting the stage for what is to follow. However, we can learn a few things from Barnabas' actions.

- (1) We see a man who puts actions to his words. Barnabas was not just a person who spoke encouragingly to others. He acted in ways that were encouraging. His love for Jesus had caused him to love the other believers in the church, and he knew some of them were in need. So, he did what he could to help out. Instead of simply expressing sympathy for those in need, he gave resources to help them. In his letter to the Romans (chapter 12) and the first letter to the Corinthians (chapter 12), Paul explains that there are many different ministry roles one can play in the local church. Much of Barnabas' life was lived on the mission field. However, early on he played the role of giver. At different times in our lives, we have the opportunity to do different things for the Lord. Some of us can be substantial and generous givers on occasion. Some of us, as life situations permit, can be teachers on occasion. However, some of us can be substantial and generous givers more often and some of us are gifted with the skills and time to teach more often. (The same can be true of various roles in the church.) "Just as some Christians have a lifetime of teaching ministry ahead of them, others are positioned to spend their lifetimes blessing others through financial giving." (Exalting, 72) Regardless, of our level of wealth we can learn from Barnabas that when we see a need arise, we should do what we can within our means to be generous givers.
- (2) We see a man who humbly trusted his leaders. Luke tells us Barnabas "brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet." The money Barnabas collected from selling the land was meant to benefit the ministries of the local church. The local church in Jerusalem was different from the modern church. Today the church is more organized and programmatic. This reality has its positives and negatives, but it is what it is. For the Jerusalem church, their main financial concern was helping the members in need. Later they would need to help fund missionaries and other ministries. For the modern church ministry needs include funding kids' ministry, youth ministry, local outreach, benevolence, international missions, administrative needs like insurance and electric bills, and various other things. This is different from the early church but necessary for the established, local church to do Kingdom work in the United States. The actions of Barnabas can remind us, that while our situation is somewhat different, we should still trust our leaders to funnel monetary resources to the right ministry areas. Again, our situation is different. Local churches need financial oversight committees and budgets that are guided by the church either through congregational or committee approval. Nevertheless, church members should trust their God-called leadership to guide the local church to use the resources in a God-honoring manner.

Notes:

**"KEY DOCTRINE:**

*Stewardship*

According to the Scriptures, Christians should contribute of their means cheerfully, regularly, systematically, proportionately, and liberally for the advancement of the Redeemer's cause on earth. (See Acts 2:44-47; Philippians 4:10-19.)" (ETB PSG, 58)

"He trusted the apostles to distribute it. He didn't want credit for how it was used. He wasn't interested in self-glorification but in God's glory." (Exalting, 72)

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**Transition:** Barnabas is Exhibit A in Luke's presentation of faithfulness. He shows us that giving is a means by which we can encourage others and fund the mission of the local church as it does the work of God's Kingdom.

## 2. EXHIBIT B: ANANIAS (ACTS 5:1-6)

**Read (or have someone read)** Acts 4:13-18

**Explain:** If Exhibit A had been a man marked by ministry and generosity, Exhibit B is a man marked by duplicity. We don't know why Ananias and Sapphira chose to act in this manner. We can ask questions like:

Why did they pledge to sell the field and give the money in the first place?

Why did they keep some back?

Why didn't they pledge part of the money?

We can't answer these questions, but we can glean a few truths from the account. It appears that the couple had made it known that they were selling the field with the full intention of giving the entire amount to the church. Peter makes it clear that this was not required of them. He says to Ananias, "Wasn't it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn't it at your disposal?"

**Apply:** We can apply this to our lives in two ways. First, God allows us to use our resources as we see fit when doing Kingdom work. This couple owned the property and could have done with as they wanted. The trouble came when they decided to lie about their actions. As believers, we understand that God owns all things and He instructs us to return a portion of what we have to Him. Typically, we understand this amount to be ten percent. We call this the "tithe." Any giving above that amount is to be guided by the Lord. We call this type of giving "offerings." It was a little different for this couple in the early church because the church was not yet organized in the way it is today. However, we might think of this practice of selling property and giving it to the church as an "offering." It was not required of them. They could have easily said, "We sold the land and are giving half to the church." However, they lied about it.

**Discuss:** Ask the group to brainstorm some habits or means by which they can faithfully give to the Kingdom of God. (budgeting, automatic withdrawals, marking envelopes beforehand as a private pledge to give)

Second, we can see that God wants us to maintain unity with Him and the body. Peter asks Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" He follows that up with a statement "You have not lied to people but to God." In this passage, we have a clear reference to the trinitarian understanding of God. Luke equates the Holy Spirit with God the Father. God is three persons in one. We also see the importance of the Spirit to the early church. It was the Spirit that united this community of believers into a community of "one heart and one mind." (Acts 4:32) In lying to the community and the Spirit about their actions, they were undermining that unity. Their actions were "in effect a denial, a falsification of the Spirit's presence in the community." (NAC, 157) All believers, like this couple, are susceptible to the temptation of greed and other

### Notes:

"How Peter knew it was an incomplete sum the text does not say. The emphasis on the Spirit throughout the passage would indicate that it was inspired, prophetic insight on Peter's part." (NAC 157)

"There is a mild irony even in Ananias's name, whose etymology is 'God is gracious.'" (NAC, 156)

"The use of this word implies that they had promised all of the funds to the church. The word means *to pilfer, to purloin, to embezzle*. One does not embezzle one's own funds but those of another, in this instance those that rightfully belonged to the common Christian fund.... One must assume either that the practice of the community was always to pledge the full proceeds of a sale or that Ananias and Sapphira had made such a pledge with regard to the sale of the field." (NAC, 156)

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sins. In giving in to those temptations, a believer is allowing Satan to fill his heart. “In filling the heart of one of its members, Satan had now entered for the first time into the young Christian community as well.” (NAC, 157) As a result, God was determined to stop this invasion of sin before it gained any traction. Longnecker reminds us, “The way Ananias and Sapphira attempted to reach their goals was so dramatically opposed to the whole thrust of the Gospel that to allow it to go unchallenged would have set the entire mission of the Church off course.” (Preaching, 78)

**Discuss:** Encourage the group to brainstorm some ideas they can develop and maintain unity as a group. (organize and carry out fellowship, move to a deeper level of prayer in your group time by using smaller prayer groups on occasion, developing a ministry plan for your group to allow your group to organize and carry out ministry and missions in the community together)

**Transition:** Ananias had acted deceitfully when he withheld what he promised to give to the church. He has also lied to the Lord and to the church about his actions. His actions threatened to undermine the work of the early church and God put an end to that before it could get started. Luke also tells us that as a result of God’s discipline, a “great fear came” upon the church. Awe of the Lord and His ways filled the church. When a person feels awe and respect for the Lord, that person will seek to please the Lord through right living. The example made of this couple produced a right understanding of God in the Jerusalem Church. The story does not end with the husband. Luke is going to tell us what happens when his wife comes to see Peter.

### 3. EXHIBIT C: SAPPHIRA (ACTS 5:7-11)

**Read (or have someone read)** Acts 5:7-11

**Explain:** The book of Acts is a book of first. In our passage today, we see one of the more sobering “firsts” in the book. The death and burial of Ananias and Sapphira are the first recorded deaths in the Christian community. We are not sure why Sapphira was not present when Ananias came to present their gift to Peter, but we do know that she was with her husband when this process began. Acts 5:2 tells us that the husband acted with the full knowledge of his wife. It appears they made the decision together to lie to the Lord and to the church. We might read this passage and simply see it as a conclusion to the account. We might assume that Luke is just “tying up the loose ends” of the story and recording the death of Sapphira. However, Sapphira is Exhibit 3 in Luke’s presentation about faithfulness and accountability.

During the time of the early church, wives and women were not viewed as equal to men. Some might have thought the death of Ananias, as the man and head of the household, was the conclusion of the events. However, the death of his wife shows us something important about our decisions. Peter asks here, “Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?” His question shows that every person will be held individually accountable for their actions. Simply because society viewed Sapphira as less than her husband God did not hold her less responsible for her actions.

Notes:

A Note on the quick burial: “This was most unusual procedure. Burials were often fairly hasty in Palestine, but not that hasty, not, that is, except for death under unusual circumstances, such as suicides and criminals—and judgments from God.” (NAC, 158)

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**Apply:** We are each individually responsible for decisions. These decisions include those related to our moral and ethical decisions. We cannot dodge our responsibility for reasons like social norms, family traditions, or workplace culture. We are also individually responsible for our decisions related to discipleship and spiritual growth. While family schedules and spousal dynamics sometimes place speed bumps in the way of our discipleship and spiritual growth path, we are individually responsible for growing the Lord. We should seek out ways to grow in our faith and as a part of the local body *in light of* those speed bumps. We are also individually responsible for our personal thoughts and emotions. While those around us might influence us to think a certain way or feel a certain way, we are responsible for our inner lives. Filling our minds with Scripture and worshipful melodies will help keep our inner thoughts and emotions in check.

**Guide and Discuss:** Guide the group to page 62 of their Personal Study Guide and ask the question: “Why is it so important to be careful about who we allow to influence us? How do you determine what choices you make?”

**Summarize and Transition:** In this passage, Luke presents three pieces of evidence related to faithfulness. He also shows us that we are each accountable for our decisions. Barnabas’ life was marked by ministry, and he went on to faithfully serve the Lord. Ananias and Sapphira made the decision to test the Lord. As a result, the Lord removed them from the scene and prevented further devilish intervention in the Jerusalem church. In these three, we find an example of faithfulness worth following and two examples of faithless living to be avoided.

## CONCLUDE

**Summarize:** While we focused on the individual actions and responsibilities of those presented in Luke’s account, we can also be reminded that their actions were prompted by the needs in the local community and church. Let’s end today’s lesson by brainstorming ways that we can follow in Barnabas’ footsteps. Earlier we examined three ways Barnabas encouraged others.

First, we saw that he encouraged the Apostle Paul (Acts 9:26-28): Paul was a new believer not trusted by others because he had been an enemy of the faith. **Brainstorm some ways your group can encourage those new to the faith.** (Maybe your group can commit to being a welcoming group for those who do not know the Bible or feel uncomfortable in church. Maybe you can commit to reaching out to the many people who were baptized this last year through a card, visit, or phone call—the pastor can provide you with a list of those people.)

Second, we saw that he encouraged others in their faith as a missionary (Acts 13:2-3): As a missionary Barnabas encouraged others to find Jesus and grow in their faith. **Brainstorm some ways your group can encourage others to grow in their faith.** (Maybe your group can commit or recommit to developing and working a prospect list for your group, maybe your group can commit to being a part of Wednesday night visitation even if it is once a month or quarterly, maybe your group can commit to developing a goal of having a certain number of gospel conversation each week and keep track of that goal each Sunday.)

Third, we saw that he stood beside John Mark when he was discouraged (Acts 15:36-40): Every day we encounter people who are discouraged. **Brainstorm some ways your group can encourage the downtrodden.** (Maybe your group can commit to writing cards of encouragement to church members or people in the community—as the new school year approaches you could also write cards to teachers or administrators. Maybe your group can commit to helping a family that is struggling or one that just needs a pick-me-up financially.)

**Conclude** with prayer and ask the Lord to help you and your group follow Barnabas’ good example and not the example of Ananias and Sapphira.

**In the New American Commentary Polhill gives an extended overview of the passage that deals with the severity of the punishment experienced by the couple. You might find this helpful if you get questions along those lines.**

*Overview.* There have been numerous approaches to dealing with the severity of this passage. One has been to note the various parallels to this story elsewhere. In form this story can be classified as a “penalty miracle,” or miracle of divine judgment; and such stories are common in the Old Testament. To those of Achan and Gehazi, one could add the incident of Nadab and Abihu in Lev 10:1f., who were consumed by the same “unauthorized fire” that they laid upon the censor, or the devastating judgment on Jeroboam delivered to his disguised wife by Abijah the prophet (1 Kgs 14:1–18). Even closer is the unhappy fate of the two elders whose lie about Susanna led to their own death rather than hers (Sus). The most apt Old Testament parallel is the provision for Israel’s purity, which one encounters frequently in Deuteronomy: “Root out the evil one from your midst” (author’s translation). A number of recent interpreters have sought a closer parallel in the punishment the Qumran community enforced on those who held back goods from the common fund. As has already been noted, this is not a real parallel, since the early church seems to have had a voluntary system of sharing and not an enforced monastic community of goods like Qumran. What happened to Ananias and Sapphira is quite remote from the punishment meted to the Qumran member who failed to surrender all his property on entrance to the community. Such violators were excluded from the common meal for a period of a year and had their food rations cut by a quarter.

Other suggestions have sought to alleviate the judgmental note in the story of Ananias and Sapphira. It is often argued that their “lying to the Spirit” was the sin Jesus declared to be “unforgivable.” It has already been noted that Acts 5:1–11 simply does not depict Ananias and Sapphira’s sin in terms of blaspheming the Spirit, attributing the work of the Spirit to Satan. Often it is said that the pair died of psychological fright. This can be neither proved nor disproved from the text, and it well may have been the case; but it does not alleviate the strong judgmental note of the text. Peter knew and told Sapphira beforehand that she was about to be carried feetfirst out the door. Luke’s emphasis on the fear of the people would likewise indicate that they saw divine judgment in the incident, not just a couple’s panic in being caught with the goods.

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.

The same Spirit that gave the community its growth also maintained its purity. This seems to have been Luke’s point, for the Ananias and Sapphira story is bracketed by an emphasis on the unity of the community (4:32–35) and the power of the Spirit in its midst (5:12–16).

One must not pass the story off, however, as a unique phenomenon of the primitive church or an adjunct to Luke’s ideal portrait of the church. If the incident makes us uncomfortable, it should. For one, it deals with money. Luke, who as a physician probably had known personally the pitfalls of wealth, of all the Gospel writers gave the strongest treatment of money’s dangers. Ultimately the temptations of money ensnared Judas (Luke 22:5; Acts 1:18), the rich young man (Luke 18:18–23), and the rich fool (Luke 12:15–21). The same quest for material security trapped Ananias and Sapphira. Not only was it their undoing, but it also threatened the church. Then, and now, the mark of any Christian fellowship is the relationship of its members to material matters. That is where its real heart and mind are revealed. This story reminds us of a further truth. The church, when it *is* the church, is a holy community, the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16f.). Disunity, duplicity, and hypocrisy always “believe” the Spirit and hinder his work. If the church is to have genuine spiritual power in its life and witness, it must be an environment of the Spirit, devoted to maintaining its sanctity and purity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 160–162. J. Cardinell, 2024