

True and Fake Piety, Acts 4 & 5

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, October 27, 2021 (Wednesday)

Giving is important but the motive for giving is even more important. Jesus taught this in the Sermon on the Mount when he talked about almsgiving. Almsgiving was not to be done with fanfare but quietly unto the Lord. (Matt 6:1-4) 6:1 *"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*

Sometimes people get confused about the quiet aspect of almsgiving and apply it to every kind of giving. I would just point out that the requirement for quiet giving applies to almsgiving but not to all giving. The Capernaum synagogue is quite beautiful as you can see. I like to show people the column in the right front of the synagogue which has the name of the guy that contributed money for the building. There is another like this in Arad in the south and quite a number in mosaic floors throughout Israel. I would also note that Jesus sat watching what people gave and commented on the widow who gave two tiny copper coins which was all she had.

The early days of the church, right after Pentecost, were quite amazing in Jerusalem. Acts 4 tells us a bit about those days.

(Acts 4:32-37) *"32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. 34 There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.*

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

What characterized the people here is that they shared with one another generously and there was a real powerful testimony about Jesus going out.

This was right after Pentecost, lasting a matter of weeks. I would not say this was the ongoing way in which the church operated but crops would already have been harvested and it would have mostly been a down time when people could stay a little longer in Jerusalem. They stayed and enjoyed this new faith that was taking root in the land.

For the first time we meet Barnabas and it becomes pretty clear why they called him that. He was just one of those encouraging guys that everybody liked to have around.

Joseph or Barnabas became quite a figure in church history. I have visited his grave in Cyprus. The little mausoleum is part of a much larger complex called the Monastery of St. Barnabas located not far from Salamis.

Whenever people do extraordinary things or give substantial sums of money it tends to encourage other people. In any kind of fundraising, you need someone to step up and give the lead gift which is usually at least 10% of the total needed. Barnabas was that guy in this case and there were probably others. In Antioch, Dr. Luke gave the property for the church there.

That was the church to which Barnabas would later be called to minister, along with Paul, to help disciple a bunch of new Christians. He was the right guy for the job because he was so supportive of people.

Maybe Luke, who wrote this account, was also impressed with the gift of property that Barnabas made. Tradition in Antioch, Turkey says that Luke donated the property for the church there.

In chapter 5, Luke tells us that not everyone acted out of unmixed motives. *5:1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. 3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. 6 Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. 7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." 9 Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." 10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.*

Chapter 5 begins with a **failure that looks like a success**. Ananias and Sapphira came with a big offering for the poor. They didn't have to give anything, but they wanted to appear like they were giving everything. They wanted to appear more righteous than they were in their heart. The Reader's Digest version would be, "they lied and they died."

The questions of Peter go to the heart of the issue. *"Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?"* Peter notes that the land belonged to them before it was sold. After it was sold, they could have done anything with the money. They could have kept it all. It could have been spent on a boat or a chariot without incurring any problem. The problem was not that they withheld some. It was that they said they were giving it all. They did this so they would appear spiritual when they were not.

God apparently had his own reasons at this very early stage for taking the lives of these two people. I am thankful that I do not possess this power and that it is apparently no longer resident.

12 The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. 13 No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. 14 Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. 15 As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. 16 Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

How do you build a church that no one dared join? Apparently this was a very unusual time in church history. I have never heard of a person's shadow healing anyone. Yet Luke's

account here suggests that not only were people healed but others were also delivered from demonic torment. He says “all” of them were healed. Later on Paul left some behind because of sickness and spent two years on the sick list while he was in Galatia. Clearly this was an unusual dispensation of grace for the start of the church.

If we do not live in that era of time, we don't have to pretend that everyone is healed today or to make claims that are not sustainable. Pretend faith is not faith. Pretend healing is not healing. Nor do we need to make excessive claims about righteousness.