Generosity, Reputation and the Gospel
Acts 4:32-5:11

Sandwiched between two accounts of the apostles being arrested for preaching about Jesus is this passage. And it's remarkable for what Luke brings together. On the one hand is this cameo of the incredible community life the early church was experiencing, but on the other is Luke letting us know that things were far from rosy in the garden.

Letting Go and Holding On
Look at v32: '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.'

So Luke tells us that two things were going on in this church community. Firstly, there was the ever-tightening grip – maybe it would be better to call it the ever-tightening bond - of fellowship and community, of sharing life together. But secondly there was this loosening grip on money, and stuff.

And they went hand in hand didn't they? It's as if as the hold with which they held one another tightened, so their grasp on their possessions lessened.

Now, first off, think about the growing bond there was between them. Luke says that they were 'of one heart and soul.' Which is remarkable, because Stephen Pacht who directs Jews for Jesus here in Switzerland and is himself Jewish says that if you get three Jewish people in a room you immediately have four opinions, and this church has by now at least 10,000 in the room. But despite their numbers there's this real, deep, heart level unity. There's this deepening mutual commitment to one another. It's why as we saw last week, that when the apostles were freed, Luke can say that they went *to their own* – to where they belonged.

And that's interesting in the light of how these guys viewed their stuff, their possessions. Luke says, 'no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own.' It's their friends who were their own, that's what had caught their affections, not their stuff. But they could have. When Peter challenges Ananias about what he's claiming about the money he got from the sale of his field he says, 5:4, "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?" I mean, this was your field Ananias. You didn't need to sell it, there's no compulsion here, it was your own and you can do with it what you like, it's yours.

But whilst people could have thought like that, they weren't thinking like that. There was this growing attitude of mind, 'this isn't *mine*'. Now, of course the danger of thinking 'this *is* mine' is that this thing you want to possess begins to possess you doesn't it? This thing you think you own and want to keep begins to own and control you, like Gollum in Lord of the Rings, and his Precious: a life completely controlled and possessed by this thing he wants to possess.

But that kind of attitude was being replaced by this sense of oneness, of community. That instead of thinking 'this stuff is mine, this belongs to me' they were thinking, 'hey, you're mine, and I belong to you.' It's not this stuff that is my

own, it's you, my friends. It's not my belongings, it's you who I belong to and with.

And as a great example of this attitude, Luke tells us, for the first time, about a man named Barnabas, who we're going to meet again later on in Acts. Now, if you don't know Barnabas, he gets an incredibly positive write up in Acts. He was one of these guys who no one could say a bad word about. I imagine Barnabas as this large, somewhat rotund, big-bearded guy, with an even bigger heart. In fact Su and I so like this man, and you'll see why as we go through Acts, that when we expecting our first child we were going to call him Barnabas, after Barnabas! Now, we didn't want to know the sex of our baby, so we didn't ask, but when we both independently saw this dangly thing on the ultrasound scans, we knew that Barnabas was on his way. And then Naomi was born – great doctors we were! So when number two was coming along, we decided that this one was also going to be Barnabas. And Lydia was born. So then there was number three, and we knew this one was going to be Barnabas. And Hannah appeared. So by number four we realized that maybe God was not going to give us a boy all the time we were going to inflict a name like Barnabas on him, so we decided that if this was a boy we would call him, for reasons I won't go into, Jonathan Joshua Jeremy Barnabas Slack, hoping that we could slip the B name in without the Lord seeing. And Katie was born. So we gave up.

But why did this guy leave the impression that he did? Why did the apostles give him this nic-name 'Barnabas', Son of encouragement' in the first place? Because he oozed encouragement. Now those of us who were in home groups this week started looking at Paul's letter to the Colossians, and he writes the letter with the purpose of encouraging the Christians there, and we discussed this whole area of encouragement and discouragement in our lives. And here was a man, Barnabas, who left people better off, more encouraged, more affirmed, than when he met them. And here we see him exemplifying this spirit of loving others, by selling a field that belonged to him and giving the money away.

Now, what is striking about this scenario that Luke paints for us, is that what he shows going on in the church is what many of those in the ancient world longed for, whether Jews or Greeks. You see, as a result of this growing bond between the Christians, Luke could say in v34, 'There was not a needy person among them', which is a direct quote from the Old Testament, Deut 15:4, where the Lord says that when the people of Israel enter the Promised Land, need will effectively be abolished, not because the land will provide everything for everyone without fail, but because the people of God will care for one another and look out for one another.

But it wasn't just devout Jews who longed for this kind of society, a whole movement in Greek philosophy, Plato and the Pythagoreans, did too: the utopian society where property was held in common, and all were equals. And Luke is saying that that great Jewish hope, of the people of God caring for one another without respect of person or social standing, and the far-off dream of Greek philosophy, is being fulfilled here in the church.

But it's not just ancient Jews and Greeks who long for such a society is it? Don't many of us long for a world where poverty on the one hand, and greed and selfishness on the other, is eradicated? But we also know that communism, with its forced equality, and rampant individualistic capitalism with its barely limited freedom both fail. And the question is why? And the answer the Bible gives is the human heart: the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart (Stott). And no amount of legislation or freedom can cure the human heart of its deep-seated selfishness.

And so Luke is saying that what ancient Jews and Greeks and 21st Century moderns and post-moderns long for was happening in this community. But how? What was it that was bringing this kind of love for your neighbor about, because interestingly it doesn't seem to have been Peter preaching about giving does it? It doesn't look like there was any pressure to sell or give or tithe at all. Instead, what was happening is that their hearts were being changed.

Look again at how Luke puts it in v32: '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.'

It was as a result of *believing* something in their hearts that these men and women grew in this bond of community and at the same time let their grip loosen on their stuff. So what was it that they believed? Well, look what Luke says in 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.'

So these men and women had come to believe the gospel, that Jesus had died for them, that he had risen from the dead and that he was the Lord. And that tells you why they were doing what they were doing and making the choices they were making.

You see, when our hearts are changed by the gospel and our mindset begins to be shaped by the gospel, we're going to start thinking differently about people and about possessions. When it dawns on you, and you believe it and know that it's true, that Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth, gave up everything for you and became poor for you, when you were poor and needy, that's going to start loosening your grip on your money in the face of others' poverty, because you see yourself in them and his grace in you. When you realize that he gave himself for you out of his self-giving love, that's going to start influencing how you give of yourself to others.

But it's not just Jesus giving his life that's going to influence you, it's also his being raised to new life. You see, when you realize that Christ's resurrection from the dead is just the first-fruits of the resurrection of the dead, and that in him, because of him, one day you will be raised to new life, it radically affects how you see life now and in particular what reward you're living for. Just listen to what Jesus says in Luke 14:13-14: "When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." You see, resurrection day is

going to be reward day. And that can be a challenge to us, because often we tend to see wealth and riches in this life as the reward, don't we? Being well off in this life is the blessing, the reward. But Jesus is saying: No! taking what God has entrusted to you, and using that to bless the poor and the crippled and the lame and the blind, that's the blessing, and your reward, your eternal reward, lies up ahead. So believing in the resurrection, and it's future implications, fundamentally alters what reward you are living for, and it's not riches in this life.

And so, as these guys believed the gospel, as the death and resurrection of Jesus shaped how they saw their life, they grew in this bond of love for each other, and their grip on their possessions weakened. And Luke says in v33, 'and great grace was upon them all.' You see, when you understand just how gracious God has been to you, it begins to turn your heart with grace towards others, and on top of that God just pours even more grace – it's the chocolate fountain of grace, it's the positive feedback-loop of grace.

But, if this community life and Barnabas as an example of that, was great, not everything was rosy in the garden, was it?

An example not to follow

So, Luke has given us the example of Barnabas, but then comes 5:1, 'But' – 'But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira.' And Ananias and Sapphira do exactly what Barnabas did: they have a piece of land, which they sell, and they give the money to the apostles to care for the needy. But whilst Barnabas gave it all away, Ananias and Sapphira kept some money back for themselves.

Now, was that so wrong? And the answer is 'no'!

You see, Peter makes it clear when he questions Ananias that this was his field and his money to do with whatever he liked. There was zero sense of obligation, or 'have to'. Verse 4: 'While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?' 'This was yours, Ananias, you could do with it totally as you liked.' So what is so fascinating here is that their sin was not meanness or tightfistedness, or lack of generosity – in fact you could say that they *were* being generous, because they could have kept all of it, couldn't they? Their sin was the lie, the deceit. They had clearly given the impression that this was the whole value of the whole piece of land.

And when they were each individually confronted with that, and confirmed their lie, they fall down dead and there is this heavy, awesome sense of divine judgment in the air.

Now, before we look at why they died as they did, just ask yourself, why did they behave as they did? Why did they, in Peter's words in v3, 'lie to the Holy Spirit'? Why say they were giving more than they actually were? Why do that? Well, isn't it, most likely, that they wanted the credit and the prestige of being more generous than they actually were, without the cost of that? That this was about their reputation, and how others saw them, and that what bothered them more

than the needs of their brothers and sisters in the church was looking good in the eyes of others. And so maybe, just maybe, their sin was the sin of spin, the sin of spinning and trying to manipulate your image.

But Peter sees past the mask, and he sees the powers of darkness lurking behind the scenes: v3, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?' Now, we read in chapter 4, and we'll read later on in chapter 5, of how the enemy tried to deploy opposition and persecution to stop the spread of the gospel, but he also tries moral compromise. And if he can't destroy the church from the outside, he'll try it from the inside. And as John Stott says, 'the enemy is peculiarly lacking in imagination' isn't he? His tactics just don't change; he goes on using the same tactics, of trying to destroy through failures of moral and relational integrity.

But if that's why Ananias and Sapphira did what they did, they got sucked in to this web of lies where their image mattered more than truth and their relationship with their friends, why does God take this so seriously? I mean, isn't killing them a gross over-reaction? Because to our modern ears this story is terrible, isn't it? A husband and a wife struck down dead, and for what?

Well, it's supposed to be terrible. And it wasn't any less terrible for those involved at the time – Luke tells us twice that great fear came upon them all, and the whole reason Luke gives us this account is because of how shocking the whole episode was.

So why does judgment fall on these two in the way it does? Why does God take this so seriously?

Well, just imagine if their behavior became the norm, who could you trust? If spinning your image, and saying one thing but doing and being another was left unaddressed, wouldn't that undermine everything that the Spirit was doing in building this deep oneness and heart unity? So, their sin strikes at the very core of this genuine, open, honest, life-laying down love and sharing of life that is going on there.

And what happens to them is a measure of how seriously God takes unity, and what makes and sustains unity on the one hand, and how he views hypocrisy on the other. Because ask any non-Christian, and they will tell you that religious hypocrisy – people pretending to be better than they are - kills the witness of Jesus. And spiritual superficiality is a killer to true fellowship and the spread of the gospel.

But isn't this deeply challenging to us? Because which of us could claim to be better than them? Ok, sure we may not tell brazen, bare-faced lies as they did, but aren't we all guilty of embracing this idol of image, of appearance, of wanting to look good in the eyes of others, of wanting to appear better or more sorted, or more spiritual than we really are? 'My, how generous, or kind, or thoughtful Martin is!' Don't we all feel the desire, at time, for a reputation? To want to be liked, admired, even thought of as generous, more than we deserve?

So, where's the hope for us? And as we joked in the elders' prayer meeting on Friday when I told them this was our passage for Sunday, does this mean we have stretchers and defibrillators at hand each Sunday?

The Gospel and Your Reputation
Just listen to the question Peter asks Ananias, v4, 'Why have you contrived this deed in your heart?' Why have you done this Ananias?

It's a good question isn't it? What is it that lies behind the need to appear better than we are?

Isn't it our deep insecurity? That we long to be loved and accepted and approved of, but we think that if people really knew us as we are they would turn from us. So we put on a mask, religious or otherwise.

But the incredible good news of the gospel is that God sees you as you are, he lifts the mask and he sees the real you, and he loves you. And to bring you to himself, with all your faults and failures he gave fully of himself. When Jesus died for you on the cross, when he gave himself for you, he didn't hold anything back, like Ananias and Sapphira held back. There was no self-preservation. He let go of everything: all his glory, all his majesty, all his dignity, all his riches, he let go of it all, that he might take hold of you.

And it's his opinion of you that is the only one that really counts: that you are more desperately needy than you could ever know, but more loved than you could ever understand. And when we go running after other people's affirmation, thinking that to get it we have to put on a mask, we are simply running after faint, distant echoes of the one voice we really need to hear, the voice of our heavenly father saying, 'I love you, come to me'.

And when we understand his love for us in Jesus, then it changes us and we slowly shift, and we become less like Ananias and Sapphira, with the pretense of image, and more like Barnabas – secure in Christ's love for us, and spreading that love and encouragement around: in deed as well as in word.