

## Unit 29

# Fundamentals of the Faith

*Acts; Epistles*

### Memory Verses

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, resulting in salvation.”

—ROMANS 10:9-10

# Living Generously

**SESSION IN A SENTENCE:** God calls on the church, His Son's bride, to practice heartfelt generosity and live reverently before Him.

**BACKGROUND PASSAGE:** Acts 4:32–5:16

Every Saturday at noon, an elderly man sits down in a booth at his favorite diner. Without fail, a father and his son come in around the same time for their weekly daddy-son lunch. The elderly man always orders a large brownie with his meal. And every week, when the boy walks past his table, he always offers to split the brownie with the boy. The boy, not surprisingly, always accepts his offer.

One Saturday morning, the boy came in with a bag of tiny chocolate candies. When the elderly gentleman noticed, he leaned over with a twinkle in his eye and said, “Want to split it?” The boy thought for a moment and said, “Sorry! These chocolates are way too small to split in half!”



How would you have responded to the boy?

# Group Time

## Point 1: God's people are to live generously (Acts 4:32-35).

<sup>32</sup> Now the entire group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them. <sup>34</sup> For there was not a needy person among them because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, <sup>35</sup> and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed to each person as any had need.

This session begins with an encouraging word: The church had continued its generous ways that had characterized them from the beginning (Acts 2:44-45). Not only were they generous with their belongings—money, food, clothing, etc.—but they also sold their houses and land to give even more money to those in need. Empowered and bound together by the gift of the Holy Spirit, these believers clearly saw generosity as a natural outflow of their salvation. This is no surprise, of course; sacrificial generosity is a fundamental component of the gospel—just look at Jesus.



What are some ways we see sacrificial generosity as fundamental to the gospel?

If we are going to share in the divine nature of God by faith in Jesus and follow in the steps of our Savior (2 Pet. 1:4), then there must be no distinction between claiming Christ and being sacrificially generous. This passage shows us that generosity goes hand-in-hand with salvation, and this makes sense because our God is a generous God. If God is a giving God, then we should be His giving children who recognize that nothing we own is really ours—it all belongs to God the Creator, who has given it to us.

**Stewardship:** We are to invest the time, talents, and material possessions God has given us for His \_\_\_\_\_ work. Motivated by God's generosity to us made most clear in the \_\_\_\_\_, we are to give God the \_\_\_\_\_ of what we have, regularly, sacrificially, humbly, and cheerfully, praying that God may be \_\_\_\_\_ in our stewardship of His provisions.

## Point 2: God's people are to live honestly (Acts 4:36–5:2).

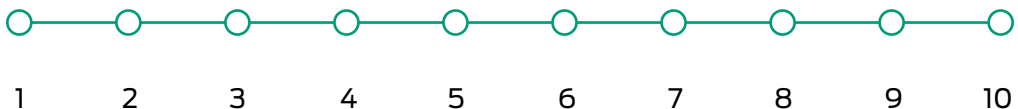
<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus by birth, the one the apostles called Barnabas (which is translated Son of Encouragement), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>5:1</sup> But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> However, he kept back part of the proceeds with his wife's knowledge, and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

At the end of Acts 4, Barnabas sold a field and gave the proceeds to the apostles. The author then used the word “but” to indicate a juxtaposition: “*But*” Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property. In verse 2 we start to see the reason for the “but”—deception. It's not that they decided to give a portion of the proceeds and keep some of the money for themselves. That wouldn't have been a sin necessarily. However, Luke's wording—“with his wife's knowledge”—sets the stage for their dishonesty: not everyone was supposed to know.

The juxtaposition between **Christ's people** (the generous, community-oriented church) and **Satan's people** (the selfish, “me”-oriented Ananias and Sapphira) is obvious in the text. As God's people, we are to live honest lives, open for all to see. The early church held everything in common to help fulfill one another's needs. They ate together regularly. They worshiped together. Nothing was hidden. Ananias and Sapphira, however, turned away from this gospel-centered way of life.

On a scale of 1 (the secrecy of Ananias and Sapphira) to 10 (the openness of the early church), where does your sense of personal integrity land?



### Voices from the Church

“If I'm dishonest or selfish in my use of a few dollars, I would be dishonest or selfish in my use of a million dollars ... God pays a great deal of attention to the ‘little things.’”<sup>1</sup>

—Randy Alcorn

### Point 3: God's people are to live reverently (Acts 5:3-11).

<sup>3</sup> “Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup> Wasn't it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn't it at your disposal? Why is it that you planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to people but to God.” <sup>5</sup> When he heard these words, Ananias dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard. <sup>6</sup> The young men got up, wrapped his body, carried him out, and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> About three hours later, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

<sup>8</sup> “Tell me,” Peter asked her, “did you sell the land for this price?”

“Yes,” she said, “for that price.”

<sup>9</sup> Then Peter said to her, “Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.”

<sup>10</sup> Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in, they found her dead, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> Then great fear came on the whole church and on all who heard these things.

The Book of Acts flows smoothly to this point; God has provided victory after victory for the church, even through persecution! But then He punishes two people in the church with death for being a little deceptive and greedy? Yes, they didn't revere God or respect the family of faith. They dishonored the Savior and lied to the Holy Spirit.

**Deity of the Holy Spirit:** The Holy Spirit is the \_\_\_\_\_ Person of the Trinity, possessing the \_\_\_\_\_ of deity like the Father and Son.

God led Peter to shine a light on Ananias and Sapphira's deceit so the church could root out unrepentant sin in its midst. The result was a just punishment for their sin, but also a benefit for the church—they greatly feared the Lord. We are accountable to God, our Creator and Savior, and we ought to revere Him just as the early church did in light of these events.



What are some ways we should express our reverence for God?

# My Mission

Because God has lavished upon us the riches of salvation and new life in Christ, we live in unity, generous and honest, as we reflect Christ's truth and love.

- **How has this session caused you to reconsider your motives when it comes to generosity, especially with regard to the local church?**
- **What role does a healthy fear of God have in motivating us to pursue holiness together as a group and church?**
- **Why is the purity and generosity of the church relevant to how we present the gospel to non-Christians?**



## Voices from Church History

“The Spirit of the fear of God shall fill Him. He will not judge according to appearance nor reprove according to report, but will render judgement to the lowly and have compassion on the humble of the earth.”<sup>2</sup>

—Irenaeus (c. 130–202)

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# Daily Study

## Day 1: Read Acts 4:32-35

If we have any doubt that the Bible teaches Christians to be sacrificially generous, we need look no further than the early church. The early church, led by the apostles themselves, made generosity a core part of their identity. There is no doubt that the apostles learned this from Jesus and felt entrusted to carry along this principle.

Generosity is Gospel 101. The Father sent His only Son, who subsequently sent us the Holy Spirit, so that we might be adopted into God's family and inherit all the riches of heaven. These first Christians were merely responding to the gift they'd been given. Before Christ, they may have seen their possessions as all they had; after Christ, they saw their salvation as all they needed. Everything else was expendable for the advancement of God's kingdom and the renewal of all things. After all, everything is His anyway.

Our calling is the same. We're called to be generous not merely for cultural pleasantries or to make someone smile; we're called to be generous because God has been generous with us, and nothing we have is ours—it all belongs to God.

 How does your generosity carry on the tradition and practice of the apostles?

### Voices from the Church

"A lack of generosity refuses to acknowledge that your assets are not really yours, but God's."<sup>3</sup>

—Timothy Keller

## Day 2: Read Acts 4:36–5:2

Applying the concept of sacrificial generosity is difficult. Christians can reasonably disagree about these applications. But again, we cannot argue with the command to be not only generous but *sacrificially* generous. In Scripture, the rich ruler (Luke 18:18-23) and the poor widow (Luke 21:1-4) are juxtaposed not because of their level of income but because of their *hearts*.

Jesus told the rich ruler to sell everything not because he was too rich but because the ruler loved his riches too much. The widow, on the other hand, had nothing, so her gift was especially sacrificial. We see the same juxtaposition here between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira. We see that generosity isn't a mathematical calculation—it's a posture of heart.



In what ways do you resemble the rich ruler? In what ways do you resemble the widow?

## Day 3: Read Acts 5:3-11

It is easy to read this story and be afraid that God might strike you dead if you aren't generous enough. That's not what's going on here; this was a desire for the appearance of sacrificial giving and deceit to accomplish the look. God was not a passive character in this story; rather, He was an active participant. The Holy Spirit was among them, so the couple lied not only to the church but also to God Himself.

God is good, wise, and just, so His punishments are always right. He cares about injustice. He cares about protecting His church. The church in Acts 5 rightly reacted in “great fear” about this, but “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10). This incident is an encouragement to us (1) because we see God's care for His people and the advancement of His kingdom, and (2) because it shows us the importance of sacrificial giving.



How should we differentiate between a healthy fear of God (wisdom and reverence) and an unhealthy fear (terror and paranoia)?



## Day 4: Read Acts 5:12-16

Immediately following the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, the church once again saw increasing numbers of converts. It is no surprise that God's removal of the toxic couple from the church's midst was part of a spiritual revival. With Ananias and Sapphira in the church, they potentially could have ruined the whole mission.

God's mission is not wholly dependent on us. It's *His* mission running on *His* power. Salvation is *His* alone to offer. However, we see in Acts time and time again that our participation in the mission really does matter. It is a mystery why God would include us in His mission, but the fact is we know He does. As we seek to join God in His mission to save sinners and make all things new, we can rejoice that salvation does not depend on us and that God will clear the way.



In what ways do you consciously or unconsciously act as though the salvation of others depends on you?

## Day 5: Read Acts 5:17-42

The apostles' boldness here is remarkable, but not surprising. We might marvel at their faith, and in some sense we should. But we should note two things.

First, they were not standing firm in the face of imprisonment and beatings in their own power. They reminded their hearers every single time that their ministry was tethered to God and His gospel.

Second, their entire lives as Christians had been marked by suffering and opposition. They saw their Messiah crucified, raised from the dead, and later ascend into heaven. What could a human court do to them?

Though our trials and sufferings may vary in degree and consistency, the apostles show us that God's people cannot be shaken by mere mortals. We stand in the powerful, death-defeating name of Jesus.



In what ways do you want the Holy Spirit to change how you respond to trials and suffering?

# Encourage One Another

*Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.*

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- God's people are to live generously (Acts 4:32-35).
- God's people are to live honestly (Acts 4:36-5:2).
- God's people are to live reverently (Acts 5:3-11).



How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?



When have you been the recipient of or a participant in a radical display of sacrificial generosity?



Why should we expect heartfelt generosity to be a practical and concrete expression of a true conversion to the Christian faith?

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3. St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 97.

### SESSION 2

1. A. W. Tozer, *How to Be Filled with the Holy Spirit, in Life in the Spirit* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 24.
2. Andrew Murray, in *Andrew Murray On Prayer* (Whitaker House, 1998) [eBook].

### CHRISTMAS SESSION

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3. C. S. Lewis, "The Incarnation," in *The Joyful Christian* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 52.

### SESSION 3

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2. Jen Wilkin, *None Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016) [eBook].
3. Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005) [Wordsearch].

### SESSION 4

1. Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006), 111.
2. David Platt, "Is Your Definition of Faith Biblical?" *Radical*, July 27, 2018, [radical.net/is-your-definition-of-faith-biblical](http://radical.net/is-your-definition-of-faith-biblical).
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3. Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010), 91.

### SESSION 2

1. Athanasius, *De Synodis*, in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, vol. IV in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1892), 453.
2. Eric Mason, *Unleashed* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 61.

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3. John Newton, "Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound," in *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Worship, 2008), 104.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Christianity Today*, "John Newton: Reformed Slave Trader," May 12, 2020, [www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/pastorsandpreachers/john-newton.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/pastorsandpreachers/john-newton.html).

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2. "James 2," in Bible Lessons International, 2012, [bible.org/book/export/html/21430](http://bible.org/book/export/html/21430).
3. Adrian Rogers, *Adrianisms: The Wit and Wisdom of Adrian Rogers* (Memphis, TN: Love Worth Finding Ministries, 2006), 57.
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3. Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* 18, quoted in *Acts*, ed. Francis Martin, vol. V in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001) [Wordsearch].

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2. Rudolf Gwalther, Homily 65, Acts 9:10-16, quoted in *Acts*, eds. Esther Chung-Kim and Todd R. Hains, vol. 6 in *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014) [Wordsearch].
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