



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

Last week we looked at the crowd in Acts and considered why they were now responding to the gospel message of the Kingdom. This past Sunday, we looked at disciples, both the apostles and the new converts. The apostles are much more faithful than what we saw from them at the end of Luke, and the new converts show impressive devotion.

The apostles are carrying on the ministry of Jesus, which is teaching accompanied by miracles of healing. And in chapter 5 they follow in his footsteps when they are flogged and rejoice *“that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”* (5:41). They are now able to understand that there can be suffering at the hand of those opposed to God while God is still sovereign and accomplishing His purposes. They have learned from their failure to grasp this when Jesus is arrested and crucified. Their prayer recorded in 4:24-30 shows how differently they are responding to the threats from the chief priests and elders. They turn to Scripture to understand what is happening and to assure themselves that God is in control. They pray for boldness because they now know that suffering adversity may be part of God’s plan for them just as it was for Jesus. Yet they still have faith in God’s power, praying for healing and signs and wonders. This is a model of faith that trusts God in the midst of difficult and trying circumstances.

The authority and leadership role of the apostles is emphasized in the early chapters of Acts. All the signs and wonders and the teaching is taking place through them. And when property was sold, the money was laid at the apostle’s feet. It is not, however, the baptism in the Holy Spirit that distinguishes them from the others because all 120 received that as did the new converts presumably since Peter promises in 2:38 that the gift of the Holy Spirit is for all. What distinguished the apostles is that they are witnesses of the resurrection and they have been taught by Jesus (1:1-3). Their central role effectively conveys the historical fact of the resurrection and the accurate transmission of Jesus’ teaching. The Church always needs the Word and the Spirit working together. Neither is sufficient in and of itself.

Acts 2:42-7 and 4:32-35 give us descriptions of life in the early church community. The new converts devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship and prayer *“day by day”*. Their faith was not an add on to their lives. Rather it had taken over their lives. The sharing of property is a clear example of this. This was not a rule or requirement of the new community to obey, it was an expression of a heart attitude. Their faith had radically reoriented their perspective on wealth and possessions, so that it made sense to them to sell property to meet the needs of their fellow saints. This is a fruit of their devotion and the expression of their love of God and neighbor. The witness of their faith is an important factor in the remarkable growth of the early church. Their single minded devotion testified to the reality and power of God in their lives. We are challenged to examine our witness in comparison. Is it as clear to others that we have this faith in Christ? Is it as clear to others how our faith influences our lives? I mentioned some special factors in their context that helped them to be so devoted. We do not have the same factors, but that does not let us off the hook. It only means that we need to be even more diligent in prayer and effort to emulate their powerful witness.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is the first sign of weakness or fault in devotion. This is a disturbing account because they suffer death with no opportunity for repentance and their sin does not appear to be

so terrible in our eyes. We find this hard to understand, but in a narrative study, we need to try to answer why this account is here and what we are supposed to learn from it. I believe the clues for this are found in the questions that Peter directs to Ananias and Sapphira.

Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? This is a work of Satan so we can understand that this account is about the internal threat to the church coming in the midst of the external threat, which is the opposition of the religious leaders. What is Satan trying to accomplish that will harm the church? Answering a second question can help us here. *Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?* What is Ananias hoping to accomplish? That is easier to discern. He wants to have the reputation of being an especially devoted disciple, like Barnabas. So he pretends to give it all but keeps back some for himself. In this way he gains the reputation while maintaining more financial security. He is in effect attempting to serve both God and money at the same time, which Jesus has said is not possible (Luke 16:13). Jesus also teaches in Luke 14 that is impossible to be a disciple and have divided loyalties. Jesus concludes that teaching with, *So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.* Satan is attempting to introduce a perspective and practice that will undermine discipleship. Discipleship is all about turning from our flesh, which is self-serving, in order to serve God. To allow self-serving motivation to mix into our devotion to God would be to completely ruin that devotion, just like Jesus' salt metaphor in Luke 14.

Yet how often do we do exactly that? Popular Christianity is characterized by celebrating the combination of serving God and serving self at the same time. There is a great deal of teaching about how faith in Christ will bring you fulfillment and very little teaching about how faith in Christ requires sacrifice and taking up your cross, the opposite of self-fulfillment. We easily lose sight of what I believe the early church had a clearer perspective on. Our lives here on earth are primarily about serving God and that service is primarily about being witnesses to Christ and salvation to the world. It is not about our personal fulfillment.

One more thing about the primacy of being witnesses. Ananias and Sapphira are guilty of lying. If we are called to be witnesses to the reality of Christ and salvation, and we are discovered to be liars about something else, what does that do to our witness to Christ? One last question to Sapphira, *How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?* They are not just lying to the community by pretending to give all the money, they are lying to God. When you think about that for a second, you realize how stupid that is. How could you ever expect to get away with lying to God? The answer is that they simply did not consider the presence of the Holy Spirit. If they had considered his presence, they would never have considered this plan. The impact of this event was, *...and great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.* This word 'fear' is also found in Acts 9:31. *So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.* So this fear is a proper awareness of the presence of the Lord and his holiness. Ananias and Sapphira are lacking that completely in their conduct. And that awareness, that fear of the Lord, was also a crucial feature of the early church.

I will leave you with some questions to ponder and discuss. To what extent do we lack *walking in the fear of the Lord* today? When we talk about or consider the presence of the Lord, do we also consider that his presence is holy? Acts 9 has both the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. What is the result when you have one but not the other? Finally, how do we restore a sense of awe that helps us to walk in the fear of the Lord?

Pastorally Yours,
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