

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Possessed by the Spirit

Acts 4:32-5:11

Our church yard sale is coming up next Saturday. This will be a new type of experience for our congregation. It takes a lot of planning and preparation. Our Church Council spent several meetings exploring and discussing various options and formats. We wanted to make sure that we picked the best strategy for our first attempt at something on this scale. Though we certainly expect to learn through trial and error, we wanted to do whatever we could to head off any unnecessary surprises.

After all, there are occasions when a yard sale can produce unexpected results. That's what happened in early 2021 when a small bowl purchased for just \$35 at a yard sale in Connecticut turned out to be a rare 15th-century Chinese artifact. An expert evaluation revealed that the bowl, from the Ming dynasty period, was probably worth between \$300,000 and \$500,000. How it ended up being sold at an outdoor sale was a mystery. One expert on Chinese ceramics noted, "It's always quite astounding to think that it still happens, that these treasures can be discovered." She added, "It's always really exciting for us as specialists when something we didn't even know existed here appears seemingly out of nowhere."¹

So we'll see if any treasures appear out of nowhere here at Grace Baptist Church next Saturday. Items donated by church members have already been arriving. Maybe we should take a close look to see if any of those boxes contain something that could be worth six figures rather than just a dollar or two. That would certainly add to the church's missions budget.

According to Luke, the church sign in Jerusalem didn't mention a yard sale, but it did welcome visitors to come and experience a congregation where generosity was thriving and unity was abundant. In today's text from Acts, we get a summary statement about the cohesion of Jesus' followers. "All the believers were one in heart and mind," says Luke (v. 32a). Remember that he's describing life in the church not long after the experience of Pentecost. He's giving us a snapshot of what salvation looks like among those who confess Jesus as Lord. And in this photo, we see the comprehensive unity that the Holy Spirit creates and enables. "All the believers were one in heart and mind."

So it should come as no surprise that this unity included the way that they held and managed their possessions. I like the way one person translates the first verse of our text: "The heart and soul of the group of those who had come to believe was one—not even a single person used to say that any of their possessions was their own, but all things were common for them," (v. 32).² In other words, their unity wasn't just a matter of shared beliefs, shared commitments, and shared convictions. It was also a matter of shared wealth and property. Their practice of holding all things in common meant exactly that—all things—including financial and material resources. According to Luke, the church purse grew, particularly as some folks in the congregation liquidated their assets and gave the money to help provide for the poor in the fellowship.

Several years ago, a church in California decided to do something about the need for children's health care in the country of Malawi, Africa. The church decided to raise \$160,000 to build a fully-equipped pediatric clinic. Though this was a fairly large church, the project was far beyond anything they'd ever done, so they decided to raise the funds through a special Christmas Eve offering. The pastor summarizes what happened:

The mood was electric on Christmas Eve as people brought their gifts to the front and put them in large baskets. Women cried, children ran up smiling, people gave with the greatest joy we have ever seen. They were delighted to give to God that which cost them something. People came in droves, three rows in the lobby, chairs in every doorway, people standing along the walls. People from the community had heard of the project and wanted to participate.

Before taking the offering, the pastor asked everyone to write on their envelopes where the money had come from. It turns out that children had sold toys and candy, saved allowances, babysat, and sacrificed Christmas presents to be able to give to the children of Malawi. As for the adults, they had given up physical therapy, Christmas presents, and winter vacations. Some had hosted dinners, sold stock and cars, and donated savings. One couple had even donated money they had planned to use for fertility drugs, hoping that even if they couldn't have a baby, maybe they could help save the life of someone else's. This was an offering where everyone dug down deep and made personal sacrifices to achieve the goal. And when everything had been collected and counted, the congregation had raised \$525,057!³

As I noted, what was striking about this offering wasn't just the total, but the expectation that the givers tell where the money came from. If a similar method had been used in the early church as described by Luke, some of the envelopes would have revealed that the contributors had sold a house or some land to come up with the money. In fact, when the service was over and the apostles gathered up the envelopes and took them to the church tellers for counting, they noticed one in particular, from a man named Joseph, aka Barnabas, disclosing that he sold a few acres of property in order to contribute to the congregation's ministry. Joseph's gift was just one example of the kind of solidarity and sacrifice that the Spirit was inspiring among Jesus' followers.

Note also that Joseph's gift was about more than just dollars and cents. It was also about trust. Trust in God and trust in the other members of the congregation. It took a lot of trust for Joseph to sell that field he owned. It took a lot of trust to reveal to the church where the money had come from. It took a lot of trust to hand the proceeds over to the church leaders and to count on them to distribute the funds wisely. It took a lot of trust that those who got assistance were speaking truthfully about their needs. In the early church, the patterns of giving, and the practice of sharing possessions, presumed an enormous amount of trust, in God and in each other.

That's why, in the very next scene, the behavior of Ananias and Sapphira is so shocking, and the consequences so terrifying. Just as Joseph's gift was a prime example of truthfulness and mutual trust, so Ananias and Sapphira's offering was a demonstration of deception and falsehood. Turns out that this seemingly generous and sacrificial couple has actually held back some of the profits for themselves. What appeared to be a Barnabas-like sacrifice is actually just a percentage gift, with the rest tucked away in an online savings account for themselves, as a hedge against rising inflation.

We soon learn that while planning for their financial future, Ananias and Sapphira should have also reviewed their life insurance policies. After all, who knew that this trip to church would be their last. The head of the community, Peter himself, tells them the truth about

their offering. Instead of commending them for being generous, Peter condemns them for being deceptive. The bottom line is that they have lied to God and to the community of God's people. They've undermined the unity of the fellowship of believers. Their behavior has virtually severed the tie that binds, and for that, they're severed from life itself.

The contrast between Joseph's gift and the one offered by Ananias and Sapphira shows us that one of the early church's most prized possessions was mutual trust. Money was important, but money, and more specifically how it was shared, was a sign of an even deeper, more fundamental reality, namely, that followers of Jesus belong to God and to one another. "No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own." That kind of outlook, and that way of sharing resources, probably seems inconceivable to most churchgoers in our day and time. At first glance, it doesn't even look like a real option for contemporary Christians. That in itself reveals just how far we still have to go in truly being "one in heart and mind."

Bishop Stewart Ruch III tells about some of his in-laws who are missionaries in Brazil. He says that for years they rented a house that they used not only for their own family but also to practice hospitality for people in their community. One day a wealthy widow approached Ruch's in-laws and said, "I want to buy the house you are renting and give it you. Please take this as a free gift, without any strings attached. I can afford it, and I want to give it to you." It was a beautiful, gracious, and unexpected gift. As Ruch puts it:

For the next twenty years, at no point did my in-laws ever say, "This is such an incredible gift; somehow we have to earn the money so we can pay her back. We must repay this debt." They knew that they could never repay this woman for her generosity. So what did they do? Naturally, they brought her close. They became family, and they included her in all their activities. My in-laws kept thinking about ways to express their gratitude and to honor her. "As she has given to us," they kept saying, "we don't have to give back to her; we *want* to give back to her. The gift she gave to us didn't come with strings attached, but it has bonded us to her forever. We belong to her and she belongs to us."⁴

Remember that the early church's practice of sharing possessions was part of their testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. It was a manifestation of the Holy Spirit's presence and work among them. It was a sign that God's gracious act of salvation in Christ had bound them to God and to one another. They belonged to God and to one another, which only naturally meant that their money and property weren't private possessions. They held them in common with everyone else sitting there in the pews.

As I mentioned, this way of being church and doing church may sound like it's completely beyond the realm of possibility for us. If so, that's partly because our ways of acquiring and handling possessions have been so deeply shaped by our individualistic culture where personal ownership is supreme. What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours. But in the community of believers, it's not primarily about what's mine and what's yours. It's most of all about what's the Lord's. And the simplest answer is, all of it. It all ultimately belongs to him. This fundamental truth of the Christian life enables us to loosen our grip on our possessions, lay our gifts at the feet of the risen Lord, and be God's people together.

One pastor tells a story about how his church responded to a need in their fellowship. He says:

I had been praying regularly with the deacons for one of our members. His wife, Pat, attended our small congregation faithfully, but John hadn't been to church in years. So every Sunday afternoon before the evening service, we prayed for ways to communicate our commitment to John and his family.

It wasn't long before we received an answer. During the morning service one week, Pat told us through tears that John had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. A surgery was planned for the following week, and doctors were confident John would make a full recovery.

The bad news was John would be out of work for months. He drove a log truck and was paid by the mile. There was no way he could recover while spending ten hours a day in a bumpy eighteen-wheeler, but if he didn't drive, John and Pat didn't get a paycheck.

The congregation sprang immediately to action. There was no question whether the congregation would pitch in to support the family in their time of need. That afternoon in an emergency business meeting, we sat around a long folding table and our head deacon, a trucker himself, asked with his characteristic boldness, "How much can everyone give?" Some pledged \$50 or \$100 a month; one family committed to pay for utilities and another for groceries, whatever the cost. Beginning immediately, Anchor Baptist Church took responsibility for the wellbeing of one of its families. All bills were paid on time; there was a new supply of groceries on the front steps every weekend; some of the men made sure the lawn was mowed and other maintenance issues around the house were addressed.

John has since rejoined the congregation. Months after his surgery John testified on a Sunday morning that the church's tireless care of his family had convinced him that the congregation did not simply want another warm body in the seats or an extra dollar in the offering plate; they were committed to sharing their lives and resources with him unconditionally.⁵

When it comes to being the church, the way to be faithful with our possessions is to be possessed by the Spirit, who inspires our generosity, enables our giving, and creates our cohesion. We continually need the Spirit to motivate us, to mobilize us, and to move us into deeper solidarity with each other, in all aspects of our life as a congregation, including our use of money. This is especially true during times like the present, where the price of everything keeps rising, fears of recession loom, and our households get financially squeezed. But the household of God, the church, endures. And as God's people, we're called not simply to fund our budget and meet our mission offering goals, but also to show unity of purpose and to protect one another's well-being with the resources God has entrusted to us. In this way, we demonstrate that we are "one in heart and mind."

¹ "'Exceptional' 15-th Century Ming Dunasty bowl unearthed at US yard sale." BBC (March 3, 2021).

² Steve Walton, "Sharing Possessions in Earliest Christian Communities: An Exegetical Sketch of Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-5:11; 6:1-6." https://bnts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Sharing-posessions-BNTS-2019_Walton.pdf (June 15, 2022).

³ As told by Lee Eclov. Source: Alpha Lim, "Christmas gift idea—fully equipped children's hospital," Soulcareres blog.

⁴ Stewart Ruch III, from the sermon "Why We Give to Worship and Mission," preached at Church of the Resurrection, Wheaton, Illinois (January 16, 2011). PreachingToday website. Accessed May 26, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/february/6020711.html>>.

⁵ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2007/november/1111207.html> (June 15, 2022).