

Who's in control? – Acts 4:32-5:11

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



We won't see such a contrast again in the book of Acts. As Luke records these two events, we get a clear picture and come to the very real sense that in both situations, there was a divine act. Frankly, there is just no other way to explain it. In the first story, we see a generosity that is unexplainably bold, big, and benevolent from a purely human perspective. No one is that giving or generous. Well, it is only unexplainable if God is not involved. But, when God changes hearts, he changes lives, and he changes us from being self-centered to self-giving.

The other story, well, it leaves us uncomfortable and a little angry. In it, we see typical human behavior, selfishness, greedy, deceit, and pride. And when the God of the universe confronts those things, well, we have to be ready and open that God may not wait to bring justice. This story brings us straight to the reality that **God is either sovereign over everything, or He is sovereign over nothing.**

So, as we unpack these stories, let's start with a few ground rules.

- **This isn't about money – It's about hearts.**
 - In one story, there is a heart of gratitude and worship, and in the other, a heart of control and selfishness.
- **This isn't about expectations – It's about hypocrisy and deceit.**
 - It isn't that there was a simple or naïve misplacement of expectations. There was planned and thought through deceit that was aimed at pretending to be something they were not.
- **This is about whether God is God or He isn't.**
 - There is an uncomfortable reality in this passage; if God is sovereign to save us, he is sovereign to judge us.
 - We like it when God does generous and merciful God things.
 - We like it when God's ability to bring justice occurs in our favor.
 - We like it when God's patience is so great it seems to border on the absurd.
 - If we like these things, we must confess and give praise that God is absolutely sovereign over all things and in all ways, even when they make us uncomfortable.

1. God's generosity prompts my generosity. (4:32-37)

- a. There was something distinctly different about this early group of Christians in comparison to the larger cultural context.
 - i. During the time of the first-century Church, a large percentage of those living in the Roman Empire were slaves. Christians lived under a tyrannical, wicked government that

demanded high taxes. Great disparities existed between the rich and the poor. Inequities were a normal way of life.¹

- ii. It is estimated that only around a third of the entire empire had some level of citizenship in the first century.

b. What stood out about this early group of Christians? → They were generous / self-giving in a culture of extreme self-centeredness.

- i. What you do with money and possessions declares loudly what sort of a community you are, and the statement made by the early church's practice was clear and definite. **No wonder they were able to give such powerful testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. They were demonstrating that it was a reality in ways that many Christians today, who often sadly balk at even giving a tithe of their income to the church, can only dream of.**²

- 1. Meanwhile, Luke uses this note about property-sharing in the community to introduce us to a character who will be important as the book progresses.³

a. Radical generosity is the norm. Why? Because Jesus was first generous.

- 2. As in his **gospel**, so here in Acts, Luke keeps popping people like this into his story, not only making it more vivid **but helping us to get a sense of what following Jesus looks like in practice.**⁴

- a. Barnabas doesn't give or follow Jesus on his own terms.

- b. He gives generously and freely because he is a recipient of God's generous grace and love through Jesus.

- i. His actions are a picture of what it meant to "be of one heart and mind."

- 3. **The two characteristics thus described correspond broadly to the two great commandments of love (or devotion) to God and love to one's neighbor.**⁵

- a. Great commandment love results in great commission living.

- ii. This generosity attracted hurting people, and the church grew!

- 1. They also had the additional burden of dealing with the common fund of the church, and, while at first, this may not have been too heavy a task, it was not long before new arrangements were needed (6:1–6).⁶

- a. In chapter 6, we are going to see the establishment of a team that is dedicated to serving the Greek widows.

- b. The church has grown numerically, ethnically (racially), and economically.
 - i. In that, it is now increasingly outgrowing its original roots of a primarily Jewish audience.

- ii. And, we have wealthy and generous members such as Barnabas and others who are in need (Greek widows).

- 2. **Faithfulness is a key marker that we will see when we get to chapter 6 and look at Stephen's story.**

- a. God was first faithful. & God was first generous.

- b. As our hearts and minds are changed to be more like Christ's, we are then prompted to be faithful and generous.

- i. **What motivates my generosity to others?**

¹ Monique Duson, "Reconciled" (Center For Biblical Unity), 45.

² Tom Wright, [Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 76.

³ Tom Wright, [Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 77.

⁴ Tom Wright, [Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 78.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, [Acts: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 115.

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, [Acts: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 115–116.

1. Time
2. Talents
3. Treasure (Money)
- ii. Life Question: **How are my investments doing?**
- iii. **Am I living a radically generous life?**
 1. Am I generous with **gentleness** in a world of outrage?
 2. Am I generous with **presence** in a world of seclusion?
 3. Am I generous with **wealth** in a world of greed?
 4. Am I generous with **hope** in a world of fear?
 5. Am I generous with **personhood** in a world that dehumanizes the person?
 6. Am I generous with **grace** in a world of retribution?
- iv. **We experience the fullness of God's radical generosity in Jesus.**
 1. We are called to live in community that is marked by that generosity.
 2. **Lasting community is only possible through the power of God's Spirit.**

2. Who is in control of my life? (5:5,11)

- a. This is one of the toughest stories in the NT.
 - i. We have two powerfully contrasting stories.
 1. Barnabas – makes us excited, joyful, and hopeful for humanity.
 2. Ananias & Sapphira – leaves us confused, slack-jawed, and kind of angry with God.
 - ii. We don't like those stories, of course, any more than we like Acts 5, but we can't have it both ways. **If we watch with excited fascination as the early church does wonderful healings, stands up to the bullying authorities, makes converts to right and left, and lives a life of astonishing property-sharing, we may have to face the fact that if you want to be a community which seems to be taking the place of the Temple of the living God, you mustn't be surprised if the living God takes you seriously, seriously enough to make it clear that there is no such thing as cheap grace.**
 - iii. If you invoke the power of the holy one, the one who will eventually right all wrongs and sort out all cheating and lying, he may just decide to do some of that work already, in advance.⁷
- b. **This forces us to ask the question – Who is in control of my life?**
 - i. In many ways, we have a false sense of autonomy. Or, in other words, we have a blind sense of self-determination.
 - ii. We do this with an overinflated sense of self-importance.
 1. Look at how good I am... Look at what I've achieved.
 2. Secular humanism – Man is inherently good and capable.
 - iii. We see this destructive mentality in the life of Israel when they wanted a king.
 1. 1 Sam. 8:5 – **"Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations."**
 2. 1 Sam. 8:10-18 – **"¹⁰ So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him. ¹¹ He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. ¹² And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be**

⁷ Tom Wright, [Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 80.

perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. ¹⁵ He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶ He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

iv. How often do we live as if we are the kings of our own lives?

1. I know best.
2. I achieved this.
3. I earned that.
 - a. In many ways, this is a replication of the culture of the flesh that is present around us.
 - b. Israel looked to the nations... We look to the culture of secular humanism.
 - i. **If we are so sufficient, why then, with all of our power, money, resources, and technology, can't we seem to fix the world's greatest problems?**
 - ii. May I propose an answer? Because we make bad kings and are not sufficient.
- c. Either God is God, or He isn't. → These are the only two options.
 - i. **This is about whether God is God or He isn't.**
 - ii. There is an uncomfortable reality in this passage; if God is sovereign to save us, he is sovereign to judge us.
 1. We like it when God does generous and merciful God things.
 2. We like it when God's ability to bring justice occurs in our favor.
 3. We like it when God's patience is so great it seems to border on the absurd.
 - a. If we like these things, we must confess and give praise that God is absolutely sovereign over all things and in all ways, even when they make us uncomfortable.
- d. **God's sovereignty is a truth for every area of our lives.**
 - i. Fear: What is the role of fear in our relationship with God?
 1. Fear = Reverence / Fear ≠ Cowering or Hiding
 - a. We are to have

¹⁰ **The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,**

and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

¹¹ **For by me your days will be multiplied,**

and years will be added to your life.

¹² **If you are wise, you are wise for yourself;**

if you scoff, you alone will bear it. (Prov. 9:10-12)
 2. Most sin is not treated so harshly, but at this early stage, such a divine act **serves to remind the community of its call to holiness and its loyalty to God.** God sees and knows all. Sin is dealt with directly. The resulting fear that the judgment

creates is exactly what the passage seeks to engender—**respect for God and for righteousness**, as well as a recognition that sin is destructive and dangerous.⁸

a. **4:32 – Only God can do this amazing work.**

b. **5:5,11 – Only God can judge like this.**

i. **The actions of the Divine could not be denied in the midst of this community.**

ii. If this is true, what does it mean for our lives? **Or, how does it change our perspective on our lives?**

3. Halfhearted obedience is a thief. (5:1-11)

a. **When I give God half of my heart, I steal away God's blessings for others and for myself.**

i. Consider the contrast between the two stories (Barnabas & Ananias and Sapphira).

1. Barnabas becomes the son of encouragement.

2. Ananias & Sapphira die of shock when their sin is uncovered.

a. As we have seen, we have two radically different pictures here.

ii. There are blessings that come from being generous.

1. Often the one who is moved to be a blessing is blessed more than those being blessed.

a. Have you ever had this experience?

2. Being a blessing is a normal Christian response. (4:32)

3. Generous people experience:

a. Joy

b. Contentment

c. Hope

d. Satisfaction

e. Gratitude

4. **A heart orientated towards blessing changes my mindset... I will find that I have more than enough.**

a. **But, when I live as if I never have enough, I'll never have enough.**

iii. **The fruit of a halfhearted life... Nothing satisfies.**

1. Jesus confronts this idea: Obedience to the Father is his food.

a. **Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." (Jn. 4:34)**

2. They are in Samaria and urging him to eat. Yes, he needed lunch, but here again, Jesus contrasts the finite satisfaction of this life with the infinite satisfaction of eternal life.

3. We understand the reality of a halfhearted approach to life.

a. We admire those that pursue excellence.

b. We do not admire those who are lukewarm.

b. **Four ways to view our lives⁹ → Who is in control of my life? Three that rob and one that gives.**

i. **OWNER: "It is mine to do with AS I PLEASE."**

1. Robs glory from God and fosters a delusional reality for ourselves.

a. Don't forget; we make pretty poor kings.

ii. **BORROWER: "I'll bring it back in the same condition I GOT IT."**

⁸ Darrell L. Bock, [Acts](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 227.

⁹ From Chris Brown – North Coast Community Church

1. Robs us of the passion and purpose of our lives
2. If we never endeavor wholehearted obedience, we will miss the goodness and joy of life in Christ.
3. We will miss out on the victory over our sin and struggles.
- iii. **RENTER:** "I will do **MY PART**, and you do **YOUR PART**."
 1. Robs us of joyful cooperation and partnership with God in this life
 2. Robs us of the glory, freedom, and lavishness of grace
 - a. I.e., Turns your relationship with God into a contractual agreement.
 - b. This was Ananias & Sapphira's perspective.
 - i. We give ... You honor us.
 - c. **Pride:** Can we talk about the pride that Ananias & Sapphira had as the foundation of their plan?
 - i. **They really believed that God couldn't or wouldn't hold them accountable.**
 1. This at least acknowledges God's presence and existence.
 - ii. **Or, even more shocking, they thought they were more crafty and sharp than God himself**
 1. Again, if that is true, if we are so great and ingenious that we can fool or dupe the God of the universe, why haven't we fixed the brokenness of the world?
- iv. **MANAGER:** "I'm expected to **TAKE CARE OF** your things and make them **EVEN BETTER**."
 1. Gives purpose, joy, contentment, and fulfillment
 - a. How? Because God is in his right place, and we are in ours.
 - b. Remember Jesus' words, "**My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.**" (Jn. 4:34)
 - i. Jesus, in his humanity, subjugates himself to the Father. And, in that, he models for us what a contented posture is before God.
 - ii. I am content because I know my Father in heaven is good, and if he has given generously to me today, he will supply my need for tomorrow, and in that, I can joyfully obey him and be generous to others.
 2. This was Barnabas' perspective, and he received as much if not more than he gave.
 3. Fosters an abiding (remaining) relationship with Jesus. (Jn. 15)
 4. Prompts continued generosity because your heart is tuned into the generosity of your Father in heaven.

Again, we must confront the reality that **God is either sovereign over everything, or He is sovereign over nothing**. So, when it comes to my life, resources, talents, treasures, and time, I must realize that they were never mine, to begin with. They are blessings and gifts of a loving God who desires to care for me and to make his glory known through me. I am not an owner, borrower, or renter of my life and resources. I am a manager, and I am called by God to honor him by being a blessing with them.