

03

SESSION THREE

The Church Grew in Unity

SESSION SUMMARY

Generosity should be a defining characteristic of the church because God is generous. The Father gave His Son. The Son gave His life. The Father and the Son gave the Spirit. The Spirit gives Christ-followers hearts of generosity. The Spirit works through our hearts to bring unity to the body of Christ through loving support for one another. Greed is contrary to who God is and invites His judgment. The Holy Spirit of God helps us distinguish between generous and greedy giving.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 4:32–5:11

THE POINT

God calls us to show our unity with other believers.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

In early 2016, Hamdi Ulukaya, founder of the Chobani Yogurt company, made front page news with a business decision. The company had recently experienced raging success, riding the wave of protein-rich fad diets that made Greek yogurt more popular than its ordinary siblings.

To celebrate the success, Ulukaya called together his company's employees and announced that he was giving ten percent of the company's stock to be distributed amongst them. If the company ever goes public or sells to someone else, the stock will be incredibly valuable. The result is that some of these employees—working at a dairy company—will be millionaires.¹

Contrast this with the story of Martin Shkreli, the CEO of a pharmaceutical company, who raised the price of a medication from \$13.50/pill to \$750/pill. Shkreli was universally disliked for this decision. Yet, it was perfectly legal and permissible.²

What differences would you expect between these two business leaders in their outlooks on the world and personal actions? For Ulukaya, the world would seem to be an abundant place, and the proper response to success, wealth, and thriving would be extending it to others—especially to those who made the success possible. For Shkreli, the world would seem to have a scarcity of resources, so the more one can acquire the better, no matter the cost. In other words, it might destroy your reputation to raise the price of a drug 5,000 percent, but if it makes you rich, then it is worth it.

The Bible is clear that the world is a place of abundance, and God calls us to a life of joyful generosity in response, whether that is with our money, our possessions, our time, or our very lives.

- **Do you find your heart and actions are pulled more in the direction of Shkreli or Ulukaya?**

Option 2

Have you ever heard someone say, “Pay it forward?” The idea could be summed up in this: When someone does something nice for you, go and do something nice for someone else in return. For example, if the person at the table next to you in a restaurant buys your meal, maybe you pay it forward by serving a meal at a homeless shelter.

- **When have you seen someone pay it forward? How did that affect you?**

While “paying it forward” is not a bad thing, we should constantly live kind and generous lives—no matter what others do or don't do for us. The early church's unity didn't leave room for greed or selfishness; they modeled complete generosity by giving to all who had needs among them.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to show our unity with other believers.

CHARACTERS

- **Holy Spirit:** third person of the Trinity
- **Barnabas:** a Levite from Cyprus who sold his property and gave the proceeds to the Jerusalem church; later attended several missionary journeys as recorded in the Book of Acts
- **Ananias and Sapphira:** a married couple who demonstrated material and spiritual greed by lying to God and the Apostles about their financial contribution to the church

PLOT

Jesus modeled generous giving for us when He set aside heavenly riches to share His inheritance with all who trust in Him. In obedience to the Holy Spirit's prompting, the early Christians shared their resources and gave generously to those in need. But Ananias and Sapphira's deceptive action was a sin against the church and against the Spirit. The Spirit distinguishes between giving from a heart of generosity and giving that is greedy and deceitful.

**COMMUNITY OF
GENEROSITY***The church displays
unity and generosity.*** Bonus Session*
**FROM HUMILIATION
TO EXALTATION***Jesus' arrival is one of
humility, obedience,
and exaltation.***THE FIRST MARTYR***Stephen reflects Jesus in
his life and his death.*

THE CHURCH GREW IN UNITY

The Holy Spirit inspired radical generosity in the early church, leading them to share all they had and to take care of one another's needs.

³² 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. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

It's important not to misunderstand what's happening here. This isn't a call to poverty or a demand for Christians to sell everything they have and give it to the poor. In fact, it isn't a demand at all; it's an invitation. These new Christians found themselves as part of this new family. If someone had a need, then they responded with radical generosity. Those who were wealthy and had more than they needed sold their resources to provide for others in their new family.

Generosity is a fruit of God's grace, something people should be internally motivated to do (2 Cor. 9:7). While in one way this understanding liberates us from any legalism around giving, it also heightens our expectations for giving. Because generosity flows from the heart, it is a tangible way of seeing the condition of the heart. This is why Jesus said our hearts are where our treasures are (Matt. 6:21).

We give to what we love. The picture in Acts 4 is of a church united by the Spirit and motivated by love for one another to radical generosity. Love for the family of God is the centerpiece of the passage. We might be shocked by the radical steps these believers took, but we should be more stunned by the love that motivated them. When we examine our own lives, we should ask how we've made space for that kind of generosity with other Christians.

- **What are some ways our group and our church can show this kind of generosity today?** (p. 22, PSG)

GENEROUS AND GREEDY GIVING

The heart is always what concerns God when it comes to our giving, not the gift itself. Joyful giving—whether it’s a lot or a little, whether it’s all we have or just a portion—is something God delights in. By contrast, reluctant giving, constrained giving, or giving meant to impress the people around us is not pleasing to God.

36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. ... 1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:36-5:2)

There’s a familiar story here that many of us can probably identify with on some level. Joseph, more popularly known as Barnabas, was moved by the gospel and by his love for the church. He chose to sell a field he owned and give the money to the apostles for them to distribute to those in need. We can imagine that there was some kind of applause or acknowledgment for what was genuinely and certainly a generous action. This recognition, whether it came from the apostles or the disciples as a whole, was what also motivated Ananias. He didn’t necessarily want to be generous but wanted to be seen as generous.

The problem with Ananias and Sapphira’s gift wasn’t that they held back a portion of the profit but that they presented it as if it were the whole value of what they sold. The lie revealed the truth of Ananias and Sapphira’s hearts. They weren’t giving out of generous hearts but greedy ones, and their greed wasn’t simply material; it was spiritual. They wanted to give so they would be seen as radically generous. They wanted the praise of the crowd.

Their story invites us to examine our own motivations in how and why we give. Are we giving with joyful hearts? Are we giving in response to God’s goodness to us? Or are we giving to ensure that others talk about our giving? Are we generous because we’re joyful or because we want to display generosity?

The difference between Barnabas and Ananias was their sense of what kind of world we live in. Barnabas viewed the world as abundant; he could share what he had with confidence because he knew all he had came from God and he could rely on God and God’s people for his needs. Ananias lived in a world of scarcity. He didn’t just cling to his wealth, he grasped for praise and applause. Ananias soon found he would have neither.

THE SPIRIT JUDGES AND PURIFIES THE CHURCH

What happened to Ananias as a result of his lies is rather shocking.

3 But Peter said, “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? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. 7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” 9 But Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:3-11)

Ananias was confronted for his deception, and he dropped dead. Later, his wife did too. Some might think this was a harsh punishment, but it was a sign of the depth and severity of their sin, and ours too, for that matter. This wasn't about an accounting error, and it really wasn't about money at all. Instead, the issue was the unity of the family of God and how sin violates the trust, intimacy, and communion of His family.

Because of the gospel, these Christians were living sacrificial and generous lives and enjoying the fruit of that generosity. Those with more than they needed took joy in giving to others. Those in need rejoiced in having their needs met. Ananias and Sapphira wanted the credit for their giving. More specifically, they wanted the credit for a greater sacrifice than they were willing to make. They wanted the apostles to think they had given all they had received from the sale of their land, just as Barnabas had done. It seems unlikely that they'd have dropped dead if they'd either truly given it all or been honest about keeping a portion for themselves. Judgment came because they pursued their own glory rather than God's, their own good rather than the church's.

The Spirit's judgment and discipline were necessary in the life of the church. Ananias and Sapphira's story is a dramatic example, but discipline comes in many forms, and often in subtle ones. It doesn't come because God is cranky or an intolerant overseer but because He loves His church and longs for its purity (Heb. 12:5-11).

TIMELINE

THE ETHIOPIAN TRAVELER

Philip faithfully shares the message of the gospel.

PETER VISITS CORNELIUS

The gospel goes to the Gentiles.

FROM PERSECUTOR TO PREACHER

The opposition leader, Paul, is forever changed when he encounters the risen Christ.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Social Concern (p. 23, PSG)

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the Spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends, Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth (Mic. 6:8; Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Thess. 3:12).

CHRIST CONNECTION

We live in an abundant world, as seen in the way God made the world and the way He pursues and provides for His people—whether it’s a ram in a bush, a lamb at Passover, or manna in the desert. Of course, we also see His extravagant giving in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In this abundant world, giving somehow yields more than keeping. Jesus, our supreme example, became exalted above every name in giving His life away (Phil. 2:5-11).

In following Jesus, we’re invited to do the same, not clinging to what we have but giving it away and becoming servants. We’re invited to allow God to multiply it for His good and glory in His church and in the world around us. The Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives should inspire such radical generosity, transforming our hearts to mirror Jesus’ own so we don’t cling to what’s “ours” by rights.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What would a life of radical generosity in the church look like today?**
Answers will vary.
- **How can reflecting on the gospel of Jesus lead us to joy in generous giving for the benefit of others in need?** *Reflecting on the gospel partly means recognizing the generous and undeserved gift we have been given in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Such grace, mercy, and generosity should motivate us to extend generosity toward others.*
- **How might this biblical narrative feed into some misconceptions people have about the God of the Bible?** *Some people may try to say God is unloving, unfair, too harsh, and so on.*
- **What truths of the Bible help us respond to those misconceptions?** *For starters, it is helpful to state at the outset that God is incapable of wrong doing or injustice. Further, He is under no obligation to show grace or mercy to any of us because of our sin. However, He has done exactly that time and time again since creation. In our journey through Scripture, we have seen God constantly show grace and mercy when He didn't have to, the greatest example being when He sent His Son to bear our sins on the cross.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The discipline we experience may not be as severe as Ananias and Sapphira's, but sin always has consequences. The pain of those consequences is one way God purifies and shapes us. The Spirit works through and bears that pain with us and can heal us. He brings us to an awareness of our sin and to the possibility of being purified from our sin.

- **What are some ways dishonesty might creep into our giving?** *Dishonesty can creep into our giving when we give for show, expect something in return for our giving, and so forth.*
- **How can we guard ourselves against dishonesty in giving?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

It's worth saying again that the key to this story isn't in the details of Ananias and Sapphira's accounting. It's in their hearts, motives, and desire to grab fame and glory for themselves. If we seek to live a life in the Spirit, then we must begin to pay careful attention to our hearts—where the Spirit meets us and carries out His work. If what we find there is self-centered, self-glorifying, and self-seeking, then we must take it as our cue to turn to Jesus and ask for His Spirit to transform our hearts.

- **What do Ananias and Sapphira's deaths say about the purity of the church?** *This consequence says God takes the unity and purity of the church seriously and so should we.*
- **What role do the people of God have in preserving the purity of the church?** *To preserve the purity of the church, the people of God should hold one another accountable, practice church discipline when necessary, cling to the gospel, and so forth.*



HANDS

This account emphasizes two things: the importance of family unity in the body of Christ and the role of generosity in the heart and life of a Christian. These two important truths are not necessarily separate, as we see in the story itself. In order to have genuine church unity in a culture that is already very individualistic and greedy, generosity is needed.

- **How have you experienced the blessing of the family of God?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some biblical examples of radical generosity that inspire you?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCES

1. Yuki Noguchi, “Why Chobani gave employees a financial stake in company's future,” *NPR*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2016/04/28/476021520/why-chobani-gave-employees-a-financial-stake-in-companys-future>.
2. Robert Mclean, “Martin Shkreli on drug price hike: ‘\$1 billion here we come,’” *CNN Money*, February 3, 2016, <http://money.cnn.com/2016/02/03/news/shkreli-turing-daraprim-price-house-hearing/>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject