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theme: Fellowship and Deception (Acts 4:32- 5:11)

materials: Bibles, news story

welcome

What is the best thing about being involved in your faith community / cell?

Bring in a news item about your neighbourhood, city, country or world that you can discuss with the cell. Where do you see God in this story? Ask other members of cell to bring in stories to discuss in subsequent weeks.

worship

Where have you seen God this week? Where have you experienced divine community this week? Ask if there are any personal prayer requests, and spend some time praying for one another.

word

Read **Acts 4:32- 5:11**

Why does Luke interrupt the narrative of Peter, John and persecution in order to tell us this story?

Why did the new Christian community live in the way described in **Acts 4:32-37**?

Is that an attractive way of living to you? Why or why not? What would be difficult about it?

How is it different from the way we live today?

How can we apply the principles of that way of life to our Church lives now?

What exactly was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira? Who did they sin against?

Does this sin deserve death? Is sin really this big a deal?

What effect could this sin have had on the new Christian community if it had not been uncovered?

Why aren't other sinners (ie., everyone) killed on the spot when they sin?

How could there have been such sin so early on in the life of the Church?

What do you think might have happened if Ananias and Sapphira had confessed and repented?

What message do you take from the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira?

Do you have any unconfessed sin in your life, something you need to repent of? If so, write it down, and strongly consider confessing it now, or to one other person you trust in community this week.

witness

What witness is your faith community/cell giving to the world around just by the way you interact with each other? What do you think the world around you thinks about Jesus when they see your community? Talk this through amongst yourselves, but also make a point of asking some friends this week what they think about your community: does it do a good job of reflecting Jesus to the world?

If you are in Vancouver, join in with one of 614's outreach ministries such as League of Mercy, Night Vision, or Street Combat.



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action points

Continue reading through the entire books of Luke and Acts with one other person. If the other person is a fellow believer, read them through in a public place, like a café (not yelling it out or anything, just reading it to one another). Make a regular time to come in and read together, and more likely than not someone will eventually ask you what you are reading and why.

If the other person is not a fellow-believer, perhaps choose a less public place to read, but again set regular times, daily if possible, to get together and read the Gospel. You don't have to read it all at once. Read two to three chapters at a time, and then meet another day to read some more.

What does this passage tell us about the way we should use our finances in our cell / corps / church? Have you been using your finances with integrity and love? What accountability do you have for the way you spend and give your money? What accountability do you want?

Cell is a great time to give loose offerings and tithes to the support of your local Christian community and towards missions and justice work.

leader's guide

This week's passage has caused a great deal of worry amongst believers and non-believers alike. It comes right off the heels of Peter and John's release from the Sanhedrin and the prayers of the new community, which conclude with the Holy Spirit falling once again upon their gathering, shaking the room and empowering them with the boldness to continue speaking the word of Christ. (The continuation of the story of Peter and John's persecution by the Sanhedrin takes place in **Acts 5:12**)

After the description of the Holy Spirit's appearance at Pentecost (**Acts 2:1-4**) Luke gives us a picture of the new Spirit-inspired community (**Acts 2:42-47**). This picture shows the believers devoted to the teaching, to prayer, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, to sharing with one another sacrificially, to meeting daily together, to joy, and to witness. We get the very same picture of the community again in **Acts 4:32-37**, again right after the Holy Spirit has fallen upon them.

This is a picture of the new community, now grown and growing in size, living and preaching by the Holy Spirit. They ignored the Sanhedrin's ban on speaking about Jesus' resurrection, and preached with great power. They also lived with great power. Once again they are shown as being devoted to the fellowship of believers (a gift of the Holy Spirit), being of one heart and mind, making their possessions available to one another as anyone had need. And, fulfilling the promise from **Deut 15:4**, there were, at this time, no needy amongst them. This was not an enforced communism. People still did own private property, but they did not consider this property theirs alone, or only available to themselves and their own needs. What is described is a voluntary sharing of resources that made sense to a people who shared the same Holy Spirit. Their solidarity of love manifested itself in a sharing of financial goods. Good news for the poor, announced by Jesus in such passages as **Luke 4:18, 6:20, and 7:22**, means that justice and redress of poverty is offered as well as the forgiveness of sins.

John Calvin made this comment concerning this passage: "In those days the believers gave abundantly of what was their own; we in our day are content not just jealously to retain what we possess, but callously to rob others....They sold their own possessions in those days; in our day it is the lust to purchase that reigns supreme. At that time love made each man's possessions common property for those in need; in our day such is the inhumanity of many, that they begrudge to the poor a common dwelling upon earth, the common use of water, air and sky."

So far so good. We then get an example of this kind of giving experienced in the new Spirit-filled community



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through the person of Joseph of Cyprus, nicknamed Barnabus, meaning the “Son of Encouragement”. Barnabus, who becomes an important player in the continuing story of the Christian community and mission, voluntarily sells a field he owns and lays the proceeds at the apostle’s feet. He did not have to do this, nor was he the only one to do this; Luke is giving a good example of the kind of generosity that was the norm. Sadly this good example is followed up by a bad example, in the persons of Ananias and Sapphira.

This is a very difficult story for many modern believers. It has been interpreted as a scare tactic used by God or the early Church to ensure that people are frightened into obedience and giving. “If you don’t give it all, or if you lie, you will die!” But at its heart, this is a story of a couple who are testing the Holy Spirit to see what they can get away with, in a way that if left undiscovered or unchecked had the potential to destroy the new Christian community. Deception destroys fellowship.

Some see this story as the second part of Satan’s strategy to disrupt the early Church. The first part of the strategy was official persecution and violence, which continues throughout the story of Acts and the ongoing story of the persecuted Church throughout history. This attack though comes from within, and deals with moral compromise and corruption, in some ways a much more subtle and destructive assault on the believer’s fellowship. Others will see this story as a retelling of the story of Achan from Joshua 7. Achan was a Hebrew who stole some items that were to be given over totally for the worship of God. His theft and deception halted the advance of God’s people into the Promised Land, and ended with his judgment and death. The story of Ananias and Sapphira, then, could be seen similarly as a theft and deception that halted the advance of the new people of God, and that also ended in their deaths. We don’t know what killed them, whether it was the shock of being discovered, or an act of God (and those two possibilities are not mutually exclusive).

Naturally, people take issue with this kind of thinking. How could God, who just finished dying on the cross, kill these people for a sin they committed? And why aren’t other sinners killed? No matter how you slice it, this is a difficult passage. But it is important to remember that, according to the book of Romans, the wages of sin are death. Death is the end result of sin. That doesn’t mean that every sin in the Christian community leads to instant death, but it does mean that the path of hidden and unrepentant sin leads inexorably to many deaths: the death of trust, the death of community, the death of relationship, the death of mission, the death of integrity, and yes, the death of people. Sin, after all, led to the death of Jesus. The point of this story is that sin is serious, serious business. Especially in the light of the newness of the community, and the norm by which they were living, this sin of theft and deception was horrific. Ananias and Sapphira did not have to sell their property and give the proceeds to the apostles; they chose to do that, seemingly for the status they would gain as a result. But after having made promises to give the full amount, to withhold a portion amounted to theft, theft from the new people of God who simply had to trust one another. Even worse, they both lied about it, (after having been given the opportunity to tell the truth) deepening the distrust and the offense. We don’t know how the story would have played out had the couple confessed and repented of their sin, but it is hard to imagine a community based upon the forgiving act of Jesus withholding forgiveness to those who sinned against them.

Their sin amounts not just to theft and deception though; it amounts to unbelief, and even blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. They were acting in such a way as to deny accountability to God. In other words, they were testing God’s Holy Spirit, believing that they could get away with their sin because God would not really see it, or wouldn’t really mind it if He did. This story indicates in the clearest possible way that God does see the actions of his people, that he does care how we act with one another, and that the consequences for sin are still drastic. Just because Jesus died for our sins does not mean sin is no longer a big deal, or that there is no accountability for our actions.