

SHARING LOVE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Acts 4:32–5:11

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. (Acts 4:32)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Nov. 16	Preparing to Become a Deacon	1 Timothy 3:8–13
T	Nov. 17	Healing Ministry Grows the Church	Acts 5:12–16
W	Nov. 18	Church Sharing Plan Enlarged	Acts 6:1–7
Th	Nov. 19	Stephen's Ministry Opposed	Acts 6:8–15
F	Nov. 20	Sharing All of Life Together	Acts 2:42–47
Sa	Nov. 21	Prayer for Boldness and Signs	Acts 4:23–31

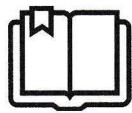
STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Sharing, it seems, is not a universal or automatic response. Young children, for the most part, do not naturally share. One cannot always be first in line or have the most desired book or the best Halloween candy or Easter eggs. As such, one of the first tasks families and preschools undertake is teaching a sharing attitude.

Some adults have trouble with sharing too. Consider the way too many people carry out the task of driving a car. They act as if they alone own the road and can go as they please. Think about trying to get into a crowded space: cattle often seem to take a more gracious approach of getting through a gate than drivers trying to merge onto a highway. Or have you ever heard someone bragging about beating someone else to get the last piece of cake? Many adults give only a very small amount to their church—or to any other charity for that matter. Too often, it seems, their attitude is “what’s mine is mine, and I’m going to keep it!”

Part of the problem is that too many adults measure their own worth by comparing what they have with what others have. Owning more does not make one better. The accumulation of material things is not a mark of divine favor. Why is sharing so difficult for many? Is the refusal to share “sin”?

Gracious God, you have shared your love for us in Jesus. You ask that we share that love with others. Help us to consider carefully the many ways we can share your love. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Acts 4:32-5:11

4:32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

5:1 But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ²with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³"Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" ⁵Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." ⁹Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

A SHARING CHURCH

The book of Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Theophilus (meaning “God lover”) is mentioned in both books. While the account in the Gospel summarized the life and ministry of Jesus, Acts is a review of the first years of the church. One of its major aims is to tell how the gospel of Jesus was taken beyond the original setting among Jewish believers and shared with Gentiles.

The selection of Matthias to replace Judas, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, two sermons by Peter, and the experience of Peter and John before the Council set the stage for the description of life in the early church. Though a large number of people became believers, the overall size of the group was rather small. While at the beginning the members of the group were mostly Jewish, by the end of the period covered by Acts large numbers were Gentiles who had joined the Jesus movement.

Those who followed Jesus came to be called “Christians.” Initially the term “Christian” may have been derogatory. But by the end of the second century, the term was well established and used by those in the church as well as those outside it. There were many places where it was difficult to be a Christian because family and old neighbors became hostile to this new group.

In this changing religious and political scene, many people needed the support and assistance of others; such is the situation in this lesson’s focal Scripture. While not compelled to share their possessions, many did sell homes and lands and put all they had into a common pool to be used by those believers impoverished and ostracized by becoming Christian (Acts 4:32).

As we know, this extravagant sharing mainly occurred in the Jerusalem community and not across the wider church. And there were some outstanding exceptions to this practice. Two such exceptions were a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira (5:1). Their encounter with Peter and their death resulting from their lying to the Spirit certainly emphasized the importance of Peter and the centrality of the church (vv. 5, 10).

Acts is not a full-blown history of the early church. Rather, it is a curated set of stories and accounts chosen to illustrate important features of the Christian movement and its leaders. Some episodes may seem strange to our modern ears but represent well

the issues before the early church and the way these needs were met. The problems were neither ignored nor over-emphasized. While some of the solutions survived the judgment of time, many did not.

② What are some of the more important lessons to draw from this selective account?

THE PRACTICE OF LOVE

In 1 John 3:18 the hearers are encouraged to love one another “in truth and action.” We know full well how easy it is to talk about loving others as long as we don’t have to get too specific or too close. Jesus’ command to love one another is okay so long as the one to be loved is James or John or Peter. But is Judas Iscariot also to be loved?

In today’s passage the acts of love described are directed to other believers, particularly those in special need. Perhaps they have lost their jobs or their homes. When such needs became known within the congregation, persons with the means brought money to the apostles, who in turn distributed the funds to those in need. Private ownership was not claimed. If a home, land, or other materials could be sold to meet the need, it was done. This action was not mandated by any civil authority. It was not the result of some economic theory. It was simply a consequence of following one who gave all he had, even his life, to bring relief to the suffering. It was wrong, and a betrayal of Jesus, to turn away from recognized need!

But there is another side to the practice of love. The action is to be true, genuine, and not in any way a show. To practice love is to give honest, specific assistance to another who is in need. No receipt is expected or received. What is done springs from the recognition of need and the means to do something to relieve that need.

The example offered has a two-fold edge. First, there was Ananias who desired to help others in the congregation by selling a piece of property and bringing the proceeds to Peter for proper distribution. The issue being addressed here is that Ananias wanted recognition as a benevolent giver who gave a great gift, but at the same time he also wanted a little of the money from his land sale for himself.

Loving another truthfully does not allow for deception. Peter exposed Ananias’s deceit. Ananias was not required or necessarily expected to make a generous gift. But when he tried to make

it look more generous than it actually was, his lie was unacceptable not merely to the congregation or to Peter, but to God. For that lie, Ananias died. To compound the problem, when Sapphira, Ananias' wife, was confronted with the scam, she acknowledged her own complicity. Thereupon she too died.

⑦ Do you think it fair that Ananias and Sapphira should die because of their deception? Why? Why not?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

How should the church's funding and program be organized? In the early church, the needs of the near-at-hand were of first importance. Little, if any, concern for outsiders is indicated. Sure, new members then (as now) were warmly welcomed, but outreach was not a programmatic issue. The early church was not seeking to grow. It was trying to survive.

The model of generosity put forward was not something that was mandated for all communities of believers. For those in Jerusalem, it was a response to a very difficult situation. This model has continued to be used in places around the world where Christians are but a tiny minority and, of necessity, must care for one another. But it would be selfish for larger, more affluent communities to concentrate strictly on their own people. Christians should take care of one another, but if they have the means, they need to look beyond their own group.

What's more, those who can should be trying to change the economic and political situations that push people into difficult straits. Loss of job, injury, natural disasters, disease: any of these can put a person in real need. Some such circumstances are of an individual nature and need individual attention. But others stem from the structure of society such as the cost of drugs, the availability of health care, the opioid epidemic, and so forth, and these need to be dealt with at the level of government. If we are to love one another, this is a task we must tackle.

As always, however, there will be people who try to game the system. They want to give as little as possible while claiming great amounts. They try to look highly successful and generous while they may be neither. Within the church these folk need to be exposed and brought to repentance. Before one suggests the Ananias/Sapphira solution, however, one's own closet (and perhaps basement) should be carefully examined.

For schemers who try to cheat the poor, the disabled, the elderly, or anyone else, public pressure on government officials

and the justice system have a decided role to play. Sometimes law-abiding people don't want to get involved with the muddy realities that sink to the bottom of our social order, but our text won't let us off the hook too easily or quickly. You see, if we are to love our neighbors, if we truly are to share Christ's love, we have to work for an equitable society where unnecessary need is eliminated and unavoidable needs are remedied.

① How might you find a place in this critical labor?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture that may be helpful for your study.

1. The explosive growth of the church from the beginning (Acts 2:41) may have created the need for the unique communal arrangement described in Acts 2:44 and 4:32. Many of the Jewish pilgrims from all over the world who had stayed in Jerusalem between Passover and Pentecost (2:5) would have become believers and may have decided to extend their stay. That would explain why the church's practice of selling all of one's property for the good of the community did not appear to have extended beyond Jerusalem.
2. The communal economic system of the early Jerusalem church was not utopian. It tempted Ananias and Sapphira to lie about their generosity (5:3, 8–9) and also stirred controversy when some believed that the goods were not distributed equitably (6:1).
3. Sharing in the early church was not mandatory but was spontaneous and voluntary (5:4). Some, such as Mary (mother of John Mark), still owned a house in Jerusalem some time later (12:12). Though the particular giving arrangement described in Acts 2 and 4 is not seen elsewhere in the New Testament, the spirit behind it is (2 Cor. 9:7).