

RESPONSIVE LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: 2 Corinthians 6:1–10

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 4:32–5:11

ACTS 4:32–37

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Acts 5:1–11

¹ Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it

that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

⁹ Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

KEY VERSE

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything

they had. — Acts 4:32

- A. An Encouraging Word
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

Unit 3: Godly Love Among Believers

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List faithful practices of the first-century church.
2. Contrast the actions of the first-century church in general with the actions of Ananias and Sapphira specifically.
3. Examine personal giving practices and create a plan to correct any selfish or dishonest habits that have been formed.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Never a Discouraging Word
- B. Lesson Context

- I. Generosity Exercised (Acts 4:32–37)
 - A. Unity in Purpose (vv. 32–35)
 - B. Example of Giving (vv. 36–37)
More Than Words
- II. Deception Exposed (Acts 5:1–11)
 - A. A Couple’s Plan (vv. 1–2)
 - B. Satan and Ananias (vv. 3–6)
 - C. The Spirit and Sapphira (vv. 7–11)
Fraud Reports

Conclusion

HOW TO SAY IT

Ananias	An-uh-nye-us.
Barnabas	Bar-nuh-bus.
Cyprus	Sigh-prus.
Salamis	Sal-uh-mis.
Sapphira	Suh-fye-ruh.

Introduction

A. Never a Discouraging Word

Today’s country music reflects many influences. One of these from the past century was the singing cowboy. Cowboy music was not about cheatin’ husbands and loyal wives standin’ by their men. It was about “The Red River Valley” or the “Streets of Laredo.” They sang, “Yippee-kai-yai-ay, get along, little dogies.” It might seem strange now, but many cowboy singers included yodeling in their repertoire.

One classic cowboy song induced nostalgia for when American culture was not urbanized. Written in 1872 by Brewster Higley, “Home on the Range” includes this chorus:

Home, home on the range,
Where the deer and the antelope play;
Where seldom is heard a discouraging
word
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

Such a romantic picture of the past! Is there a place now “where seldom is heard a discouraging word”? Who wouldn’t want to live there?

Discouragement thrives among us today, but we are not unusual. The history of the Wild West, where the cowboys sang, was full of reasons for discouragement, not the least of which was the violence against the native peoples. The early church also had its share of discouragement. Then, like now, encouragers were needed to be examples.

B. Lesson Context

Luke and Acts comprise a two-volume work written by a single author, assumed to be Luke, the physician and companion of Paul ([Colossians 4:14](#)). The first volume, the Gospel of Luke, tells the story of Jesus: his birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. The second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, tells the story of the first-century church, beginning in Jerusalem and ending with Paul’s arrival in the imperial capital city, Rome.

We look to the book of Acts to understand the nature of the church in its infancy. By so doing, we hope to understand better Christ’s intention for his church, as enacted through his trusted apostles, and thereby understand what the church should be today. From Acts we realize the church’s primary mission: to share the gospel “to the ends of the earth” ([Acts 1:8](#)). We learn that this imperative to preach the good news about Jesus must withstand ridicule (exam-

ple: [2:13](#)), doubters (example: [3:11–12](#)), and even coordinated persecution (example: [4:1–3](#)).

Yet the first-century church in Jerusalem had its share of problems. It faced leadership succession issues ([Acts 1:15–26](#)). It had organizational challenges ([6:1–6](#)). The beloved fellowship even suffered from dishonesty concerning financial disclosure ([Acts 5:1–11](#); see commentary below).

I. Generosity Exercised

([ACTS 4:32–37](#))

A. Unity in Purpose (vv. [32–35](#))

32. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

All the believers is a unanimous majority, for they are *one in heart and mind*. *Heart* signifies the determined will of these people—they had common desires and plans. *Mind* is elsewhere translated “soul” ([Mark 8:36](#); [Luke 10:27](#); etc.). It represents the inner self, the life force. The Old Testament uses the phrase “heart and soul” to indicate the entire person (examples: [Deuteronomy 13:3](#); [Joshua 22:5](#)). In these examples, the people are called to love God with all of their being; they were to leave no part separate to adore any other god.

Just as the church was united in devotion to the Lord, so they were united in showing that love through service to one another. Their purpose was to share wealth so that no

one suffered poverty's devastations ([Acts 2:44–45](#)). *They shared everything they had.* This does not mean they surrendered *all* their money, possessions, and property to the church leaders and lived a fully communal life. Instead, everyone gave generously to provide for those in need. This fulfilled the intent of the law to ensure there were “no poor people among you” ([Deuteronomy 15:4](#)), a longtime goal for the people of God.

33–34a. **With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.**

This loving, unified community allowed *the apostles* to continue their powerful preaching without undue distractions. With the crucifixion still fresh in the minds of Jerusalem's residents, the apostles proclaimed *the resurrection of ... Jesus*. Nonbelievers witnessed a community bound by love for one another and heard a life-changing message from their leaders.

Grace is a sign of God's favor (examples: [Luke 2:40](#); [Acts 11:23](#)). Although we primarily think of grace as a factor in forgiveness, it is not exclusively linked to forgiveness. It is a gift given by God to strengthen his people. God worked through their willingness to serve and blessed them as they loved one another.

34b–35. **For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.**

Pentecost saw 3,000 men respond to Peter's preaching ([Acts 2:41](#)), a number that grew to 5,000 ([4:4](#)). Perhaps not all of these were active in the fellowship, for some had likely been short-term pilgrims to Jerusalem ([2:5](#)). Even so, many hundreds (at least) were involved on a weekly, even daily, basis. This large group would have naturally included some wealthy folks and some struggling to put food on their tables.

In this situation, God chose to provide for needs not through miraculous multiplication of loaves and fish ([Luke 9:16–17](#)) or through manna from Heaven ([Psalm 78:24](#)). Instead, the Spirit moved the hearts of the wealthy to sell *land* and *houses* and release the proceeds to the apostles. This was done by bringing the money from such sales and laying the coins *at the apostles' feet*, thus giving it to the church's leaders to be used appropriately.

At least one way the distribution was made was in food for the hungry (see [Acts 6:1](#)). The church leaders may also have *distributed* money to the believers (consider [2 Corinthians 8:19–20](#)), trusting that any funds requested were needed and trusting the Spirit to guide their giving aid. This resulted in a community where needs were met.

What Do You Think?

How do you see the progressive modifications to meeting needs from [Acts 2:44–45](#) to [4:32–35](#) to [6:1–6](#) to [1 Timothy 5:3–16](#) applying to your church?

Digging Deeper

How should your own role change in that regard?

B. Example of Giving (vv. 36–37)

36. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”),

Joseph has a nickname, given to him by *the apostles*, that reflects his character. He has earned the designation *son of encouragement* by his talk and actions. This is the only verse in the book of Acts that refers to him as Joseph; elsewhere (more than two dozen times) he is always *Barnabas*.

What Do You Think?

What positive and descriptive nickname would you like to have with regard to your service for Christ?

Digging Deeper

What do you need to do to move toward such a bestowal or recognition?

Barnabas was from the tribe of Levi, which was the priestly tribe ([Deuteronomy 18:1–8](#)). We don’t know whether he lived in Jerusalem or was only visiting there from *Cyprus*, the third largest island in Mediterranean. That island hosted a considerable Jewish population, as suggested by the multiple synagogues in the city of Salamis ([Acts 13:5](#)). It is possible that Barnabas had some duties to attend to that took him to the temple.

Later, Barnabas is reintroduced as an emissary from the Jerusalem church to the congregation in Antioch of Syria ([Acts 11:22](#)). Here, Barnabas is described as a “good man” who was “full of the Holy Spirit and faith” ([11:24a](#)). In Antioch, Barnabas lived up to his name as an encourager of the brothers and sisters, with the result that many were added to the church ([11:24b](#)). Barnabas was the first in Jerusalem to put aside suspicion and welcome Paul as a brother in Christ ([9:27](#)). The two were missionaries together ([Acts 13–14](#)) and close companions (examples: [1 Corinthians 9:6](#); [Galatians 2:1, 9, 13](#)).

37. sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

Barnabas served as the example of those who *owned* land and *sold* it to raise *money* for the care of the needy in the congregation. He acted in a straightforward manner, already outlined (see commentary on [Acts 4:34b–35](#), above). He gave with no expectation of receiving anything in return (see [Luke 6:34](#)).

MORE THAN WORDS

“Discouragement is not the absence of adequacy but the absence of courage” (Neal A. Maxwell). People all around us have the ability, but not the courage, to accomplish their full potential. When we encourage them, we are not building them up with platitudes or falsehoods. Instead, we’re helping them see the truth about themselves and the situation they’re facing.

Sometimes our encouragement offers more than words. When we help a strug-

gling college student with his tuition, when we buy a bag of groceries for an underpaid single mother, or when we send a Christmas gift to a missionary far from home, we're doing more than *telling* them better days are ahead. We're actually relieving pressure that is preventing them from doing their best.

Study the life of Barnabas and you'll see that he always did more than talk. He gave. He helped. He accompanied. Which of those last three is your weakest area?

—M. T.

II. Deception Exposed (ACTS 5:1–11)

A. A Couple's Plan (vv. 1–2)

1–2. Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Ananias and *Sapphira* serve as the negative counterpoint to Barnabas. Our initial impression may be that the negative part is that in selling a *piece of property* and, unlike Barnabas, giving less than 100 percent of the proceeds is the problem. But that will prove to be the wrong conclusion as the rest of the story unfolds.

B. Satan and Ananias (vv. 3–6)

3–4. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have

kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

The decision by *Ananias* and *Sapphira* to sell property was not wrong. Giving less than 100 percent of the proceeds for distribution among the needy was not wrong. What *was* wrong was the deliberate misrepresentation (lying). The plot to deceive the apostles, by the two making themselves appear to be more generous than they actually were, tainted what otherwise could have been an act that modeled generosity. To lie to *human beings* is bad enough; to lie to *the Holy Spirit* is much worse! Ananias knew that the money he had placed at Peter's feet was only part of the sale price, and, to his surprise, Peter knew it too.

An honest accounting of the sale would have been something like, "We sold land, but because of our financial situation, we can give only half the money." This could have served as a giving-stimulus to others who felt it necessary to keep part of what was received in a sale of property. But by misrepresenting the proceeds as the *whole* instead of only the *part* that it actually was, Ananias committed moral fraud.

Peter's accusation *You have not lied just to human beings but to God* repeats and emphasizes the accusation of sinning against the deity. This also betrays Ananias's lack of belief in the ability of God to be aware of

such an attempt. The masquerade further betrays that Ananias's lack of belief in the Holy Spirit's power to work his will in the church.

Thus we are struck by the absurdity of attempting to lie to God. God always knows the truth and will never be fooled by human deception. Yet Ananias carried out a plan that depended on God's not knowing and/or not caring! Peter's condemnation came in stark terms—and Peter himself knew what it was like to be accused of being under the influence of Satan (see [Matthew 4:10](#); compare [Luke 22:3](#)).

What Do You Think?

How does this lesson cause you to rethink your own giving pattern?

Digging Deeper

How important are the additional considerations of [Luke 3:11](#); [18:22](#) to your answer?

5a. When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died.

Neither God nor Peter gave *Ananias* a chance to mount a defense. The time for lying was over. The man's instant death was clear evidence to those watching that God knew Ananias's heart and was angered by what he saw.

5b. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.

Fear is sometimes an unfaithful reaction, as when it causes a person to act without faith in God. But in this case, the fear seems to be of the type that causes greater respect

for God. Though this reaction may have been limited to believers, likely others living in Jerusalem also *heard* the tale and were afraid. There is no record of anyone having cried "Injustice!" when they heard. That is perhaps a testimony to the reputation of Ananias. The reaction was fear of God's wrath rather than indignation on behalf of the dead man.

What Do You Think?

What deeper role should accountability play in your service to Christ's church?

Digging Deeper

How do texts such as [Ezra 8:33–34](#); [Nehemiah 13:13](#); [Daniel 6:1–4](#); and/or [Hebrews 13:17](#) help shape your conclusion?

6. Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

The burial was hasty and unceremonious. Any funeral service was no more than what was minimally necessary (compare and contrast [John 19:40](#)).

C. The Spirit and Sapphira (vv. 7–11)

7. About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

News of the death spread quickly, but no one told Ananias's *wife*, Sapphira. This emphasizes how quickly events were moving along: she was not even present when they buried her husband. She entered the room assuming that Ananias had delivered his gift and received praise and honor. She likely

expected the same thing.

8. Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?”

“Yes,” she said, “that is the price.”

Peter confronted Sapphira immediately, asking only if *the price* quoted by Ananias was true. This gave her a chance to be honest where her husband had been deceitful. Sadly, her story matched Ananias’s, confirming that her husband had acted with her full knowledge and approval.

Acts does not reveal what motivated Ananias and Sapphira to perpetrate this fraud. But we can easily imagine it was tied to esteem in the church. After seeing Barnabas’s standing improve following his generous gifts, this couple was probably envious and wanted to garner such positive recognition too.

9a. Peter said to her, “How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord?”

Peter wasted no time and minced no words telling Sapphira where she had gone wrong. She had tested *the Spirit of the Lord*. We can never tempt God with evil and expect him to fail (see [James 1:13](#)). We can, however, try the patience of God with a test. Those who *test* the patience of God play a dangerous game, a fool’s game (see [Deuteronomy 6:16](#)). The sense of testing here is very similar to Jesus’ temptation ([Luke 4:1–13](#)). Satan there intended to make Jesus act contrary to his identity as the Son of God; here Ananias and Sapphira unwittingly tested the Spirit, only to learn that he is also powerful in the church to guide it in holiness. Jesus did not fail in the wilderness;

the Spirit did not fail in Jerusalem.

What Do You Think?

If a similar situation regarding intentional deception in your church came to your attention, what would you do?

Digging Deeper

Is there a single, step-by-step way to handle such a situation? Why, or why not?

FRAUD REPORTS

Forbes magazine quoted the study *Status of Global Mission 2013* that reported a staggering amount of embezzlement fraud among churchgoers. One line item, “Ecclesiastical Crime,” projected losses of \$37 billion worldwide. Another \$8 billion was lost due to mismanagement of funds. The study contrasts these amounts with the \$32 billion it says was given to mission work the same year.

Ananias and Sapphira may have been the first believers to commit financial fraud in the church, but clearly they were not the last. These reports do not document the effect on the individuals who commit these crimes. Their dishonesty or desperation has damaged their souls, and that fact leads us to look at our own attitudes toward the money we give to the church.

Are we giving only because others are giving? Are we pretending that we’re giving a sacrificial gift, while actually contributing from our overflow? If so, although our names may never make it into a fraud report, the “fraud” label might nevertheless apply.

—M. T.

9b–10. “Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”

At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

As with her husband, Sapphira had no further opportunity to defend herself. Barely three hours after Ananias was struck dead, *the young men* finished interring him only to return to more work. Without resting, they *buried Sapphira beside her husband*. The haste suggests that neither the Spirit nor the church would waste any time before rooting out wickedness in the midst of the body of Christ.

This story may trouble some of us. A primary problem is that the penalty of death seems too severe to us. These two did something good (gave money for the poor), although in a selfish manner. Didn't they deserve some credit?

Furthermore, the story puts Peter in an uncomfortable role as the stern judge who does not hesitate to pronounce the fate that would befall Sapphira. Couldn't he at least have given Sapphira a warning when asking about the details? “Don't lie to me, sister, I'm warning you!”

Both of these objections again find their best answer in the Spirit's interest in keeping the church holy. Though the world may claim that the ends justify the means, Christian ethics requires the ends and the means

to work together virtuously. When Paul wrote later about spiritual gifts, he made a similar point. No gift on its own is worth anything; only the correct motivation, coming from the heart, can give those gifts any value (1 Corinthians 13; see lesson 8).

11. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

The community *fear* caused by Ananias and Sapphira's deaths intensified. Surely the people wondered what was going on in this fellowship! No one seemed to question that God had acted in a powerful, judicious way. Barnabas encouraged all who aspired to be generous; Ananias and Sapphira terrified all who believed they could fool God and the church with false piety and lies.



Visual for Lesson 12. While discussing Acts 4:32, use the visual to ask the class how they see the church holding resources in common today.

Conclusion

A. An Encouraging Word

■ While we may not understand exactly

how the Spirit works in the church or what he is up to all the time, church business is serious business. Faith and fraud cannot coexist. For this reason, when we allow the Spirit to lead us, we will be genuine givers like Barnabas, not sly and deceitful like Ananias and Sapphira.

Dishonesty within the church can destroy it entirely and must be dealt with severely. The very thought of doing a good deed to receive kudos and honors violates the spirit of charity. As Jesus taught, when we give for relief of the poor, it should be so private that our left hand doesn't know about the money our right hand put in the offering basket ([Matthew 6:3](#)). This requires a delicate balance of being a witness at the same time ([5:16](#)). But when we yield our hearts to the Spirit, we know that he sees our deeds and blesses them ([6:4](#)).

B. Prayer

Lord God, forgive us when we attempt to deceive you and Christ's body. Help us to genuinely seek to encourage. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The Spirit works powerfully in the church.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at

www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Write these two propositions on the board:

Overall, we live in a generous culture.

Overall, we live in a selfish culture.

Divide the class in half, assigning one proposition to each. Direct each group to take about five minutes to list reasons that support its assigned proposition.

After calling time, have groups share their lists in whole-class discussion. Possible responses to expect in support of "generous culture" are accounts of volunteering to clean up after natural disasters and donations to charitable organizations. Responses in support of "selfish culture" may include examples of insider-trading scandals in the stock market and frauds perpetrated on the elderly.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Truth from an Atheist?" exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners form study pairs to complete it as indicated.

After either activity ask, "As we consider our own needs and wants, how do we know when we've crossed the line into selfishness? And how do we ensure that our generosity isn't really a form of selfishness? Let's consider how today's text can answer such questions."

Into the Word

Divide the class in half. One half will take the role of Barnabas and the other the role of Ananias and Sapphira in answering the following interview questions. Provide groups with these questions on handouts (you prepare):

- 1—How does the Jerusalem church respond to the needs of its members?
- 2—What have you seen this initiative accomplish?
- 3—Why should people see this work as an act of God rather than simply as good people doing good things?
- 4—How do you personally feel about parting with your possessions?
- 5—We understand that you made a substantial contribution. How would you like people to react to your generosity?

Allow groups about 15 minutes to read the text of [Acts 4:32–5:11](#) and prepare responses in the character of either Barnabas or Ananias and Sapphira, as assigned. As groups work, move among them to help as needed. Encourage use of the text to inform learners’ “sanctified imaginations” to depict the motivation of their assigned character(s). Act as interviewer in posing the above questions after group preparations are complete.

Into Life

Write on the board the following habits of generous people:

Generous people budget their money and time.

Generous people build relationships that make them available to help others.

Generous people avoid the spotlight.

In whole-class discussion, invite learners to respond to this list in explaining the value of each. Expect responses such as these: *Having budgets* helps avoid wasting resources by considering how they will be spent; we cannot know what we can give if we do not know what we have. *Building relationships* recognizes that we accomplish more together; being an active part of a serving group increases our outreach. *Avoiding the spotlight* honors Jesus’ instruction in [Matthew 6:1–4](#), as balanced by [Matthew 5:14–16](#).

Option. Distribute copies of the “My Response to Need” exercise from the activity page for learners to complete the first part as indicated, time limit of one minute. This can also be a take-home exercise. If the latter, increase the likelihood of completion by announcing that you will begin the next class by asking volunteers to share results.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(November 22: Responsive Love\)](#)
