



ATTACKS UPON LIFE - HYPOCRISY

SERIES: ACTS: LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 4:32–5:11

8th Message

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Good morning. With the fires around California this fall, it reminded me of a story. In a small rural town in the midwest, a pastor was doing everything he could to get one of the community leaders to come to church. He had lost track of how many times he had stopped by his house and his office to invite the man to the church. But he never came. Late one night, a fire broke out at the church. An alarm was sounded and all the firefighters showed up to fight the fire, including this community leader. The community leader ended up in the bucket line right next to the pastor, very near the burning building. The pastor said to the leader, ‘Well, I see you finally made it to church.’ To which the man replied, ‘That’s because this is the first time I’ve seen the church on fire.’

Is our church on fire? Are you on fire?

When we ask questions like that, we are really asking whether we are filled up and being led by the Holy Spirit, the life of God which indwells his people. In Scripture, fire is a common image for the Holy Spirit. When John the Baptist comes and baptizes with water, he says that someone after him will come, namely Jesus, and baptize with the holy spirit and with fire. In Acts, which we are getting back into today, when Pentecost happens and the Holy Spirit is poured out on his people, the visual is tongues of fire on top of the believers. And as we continue in Acts we see that the Holy Spirit is what fuels the flames of the early church. The church doesn’t work without the Holy Spirit. Just like a microwave doesn’t work without power. A car doesn’t go without fuel (electricity now). A water balloon doesn’t work on a middle-schooler without water. A church doesn’t work without the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts shows us that very thing.

So, where are we in the book of Acts?

Review

Let me set the context this morning. We are near the end of Chapter 4 in Acts. Through the first few chapters, we see an idyllic picture of the early church. There seem to be no problems and no issues, and you begin to feel a little envious of it because it seems perfect. People were coming to the church from everywhere.

But then chapter 4 hits, and we see Satan beginning to mount a resistance against this early church. Specifically, he’s going to challenge the church in three ways:

- First was intimidation from the outside. Brian would have spoken on that two weeks ago. He is going to come back to it next week.
- The second one we hit today, which is hypocrisy from inside the church.
- And the third one will be distraction, which we will get to in a few weeks.

But today the verse that sets up our study is Acts 4:31. The Apostles have gone back to the church after being intimidated by the religious

authorities at which point a prayer meeting breaks out, and this is what the text says:

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:31 ESV)

In other words, the early church is on fire with the Holy Spirit. So what does that look like? How is this demonstrated in the life of a church? That’s what we are going to talk about today.

Full of the Holy Spirit & Great Grace Upon Them

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. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 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 and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (vv. 32–35)

Who wouldn’t want to be part of a community like this? Who wouldn’t want to be a part of a church that looked like this one? This is certainly a beautiful picture of church life. Luke gave us a similar picture back in chapter 2. That was right after Pentecost, so once again the believers had been filled with the Holy Spirit, as here.

The other clear catalyst for this beautiful picture of church life is verse 33: “God’s great grace was upon them.” In the Greek, ‘Mega charis’. Great grace was upon them. So this early church was on fire with the Holy Spirit and under God’s great grace! Because of those two things, three key characteristics emerge in this early church:

- Unity
- Ministry
- Generosity

Now these aren’t the only manifestations of being full of the Holy Spirit and under God’s great grace, but these are three key ones that I think Luke wants us to see.

Unity

The early church was of one heart and one soul. Heart is the control center of our lives, which determines our conduct. They had a unity of heart. Soul or mind is the inner life of person or the inner thought process of a person. They had a unity of soul. And this led to a church flourishing with peace and harmony. They were committed and devoted to God and to each other. They had each other’s backs. This is what happens when you are on fire with the Holy Spirit and bathing in God’s great grace.

This theme runs throughout the New Testament. In our Scripture reading today from John 17, in Jesus' high priestly prayer, Jesus prays this for his church that we would be one! Jesus' heart ticks when we are of one heart and one soul. Paul says in Philippians 1:27

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one SOUL striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.'

But this idea of unity runs directly against the culture we live in, right? We live in an individualistic society where it's all about me! And if we follow our culture and fill ourselves up with "me," there will be no room for the Holy Spirit. If we are so full of ourselves, there will be no room for the Holy Spirit.

We have the youth in here today. It's great to have you in here! We love it when you are in here!

A few weeks ago, the VMAs were on TV. For you adults, that's the Video Music Awards. The VMAs provide a glimpse into the popular culture of our day. And what we saw this year really drove home how individualistic and narcissistic our culture is. Walt Mueller, a well-known youth ministry veteran who we had here a few years ago, commented on the VMAs like this: "The VMAs were a massive moral, ethical, spiritual and lifestyle train wreck...It was a celebration and embracing of brokenness...more over the top than ever." He went on to say, "We, as a culture, care about, worship and serve ourselves."¹

That is the soup that we are swimming in everyday. And we, as the church, must swim upstream against it every day.

It can be hard though, to be of one heart and one soul, because we have many differences between us:

- Age differences, as evidenced today
- Economic differences
- Gender differences
- Ethnic differences
- Dodgers and Giants fans

We are very, very diverse! We also have different tastes in how church should work:

- We all like different music.
- We all like different kinds of sermons.
- We all like different kinds of activities.

But what we have to realize is this: Jesus came and died not just for our personal salvation but also to break through all of our differences, all of our divisions, and heal them! We are a colony of heaven, a new society, all baptized into the body of Christ, of one heart and one soul.

And if we care about, worship and serve only ourselves, we will experience tension and division. Now, that doesn't mean you can't share your opinion, but if you insist on having it your way, it will lead to division. This also does not mean that we must be Christian clones.

That we have to carry the same Bible translation, that we read the same books, promote the same styles, educate our children the same way, have the same likes and dislikes...We are all unique creations. But, we are united in the essentials of faith such as who Christ is, that Jesus is Lord of all, the authority of Scripture, and the necessity of living for him.²

The fact is that being part of the church might mean we must be of one heart and one soul with people we may not like. Are you committed to that?

If you are new here or fairly new maybe, these are some words for you. Or maybe you've been here awhile and as we read this passage about being of one heart and one soul, you felt a tinge of disappointment because you don't feel that here.

I think I understand. My wife and I lived near Denver for 7 years, and we found it very difficult to feel of one heart and soul in a church there. We tried several churches and after settling on one we tried hard to get into the church. We even jumped into serving to help get us connected, and it was still hard. We tried small groups. We tried going early and staying late but it was still a struggle...By the way, if you come late and leave early, you'll never feel like you are of one heart and one soul in any church.

Church life can be hard to get into. We continually need to work at this with the power of the Spirit. We continually need to empty ourselves, be filled with the Holy Spirit and pray for God's great grace upon us to live in harmony with one another. Let's continue to work hard at this as a church through the power of the Spirit.

Ministry

And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. (v.33)

As we've seen over and over again, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and under God's great grace, the apostles continue to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus. The apostles are the leaders of this new church and provide the example of using their spiritual gift to preach the resurrection of Jesus. If I were Brian I would point out a chiasm here; at the center we get the power of the Spirit working through the apostles. And so with us, when we are filled with the Spirit and on fire and under God's great grace, ministry happens according to our spiritual gifts. I am going to talk more about this in November when we get to the beginning of chapter 6. But, as a teaser until then, over the next few weeks think about what your gifts are and how you are using them.

Generosity

and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common... 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 and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (vv. 32, 33–34)

Being filled with the Holy Spirit and with God's great grace upon them, the church's attitude toward their money and possessions was transformed. It manifested itself in the fact that everyone shared their stuff. As the Message says, "No one said, 'That's mine; you can't have it.' They shared everything."

A three-step process is outlined through which the needy were supported.

- Step #1: Lands and/or houses were sold. Luke doesn't say that people sold everything. It appears that believers sold possessions as needs arose.
- Step #2: The proceeds of the sale were brought and laid at the apostles' feet.
- Step #3: The apostles then distributed the funds to the needy.

This whole process was counter cultural because in that culture, reciprocity reigned supreme. “In that culture, honor, prestige and social position were gained through benefaction and patronage.”³ But the church swam against the culture. The apostles are middlemen so that there is no expectation of reciprocity. This was sharing with no strings attached. And as a result there was no needy person among them.

When we truly understand God’s great grace, we realize that we are already rich through what Christ has done on the cross. We can hold our possessions loosely. We represent God well when we share our things.

Here’s the deal; everyone today is asking “what is God like?” And Hollywood is kind enough to give us the answers...

For example, in the *Wizard of Oz*, the great and powerful god acts tough, but is simply a little frumpy man behind the curtain. In *The Kingdom of Heaven* as they go into battle, battling for the holy land, and they’re screaming, “God wills it!” as blood drips off their swords. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Ultron says, “When the earth starts to settle, God throws a stone at it,” as if God doesn’t really want peace. Then, of course, Narnia gets it right. Remember the conversation with the beavers in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*? It goes something like this:

“Aslan is a lion, the Lion, the great Lion,” Mr. Beaver says. “Ooh,” says Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver, “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”⁴

Our God is a good and generous God and we are called to bear witness to who this God is! When we are filled up and on fire with the Holy Spirit and under his great grace, such that generosity results, we represent him well to the watching world.

Example: Positive – Barnabas

Now Luke gives us two illustrations—a positive one (Barnabas) and a negative one (Ananias and Sapphira).

Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. (vv. 36-37)

The unity and generosity of this new church is now concretely illustrated through Joseph called Barnabas. Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, lives up to his name. Introduced into the narrative here, Barnabas is one of the most frequent believers mentioned in Acts. And every mention of Barnabas describes him as helping someone. How unifying is that, when you are constantly looking out for others? Here is a man full of the Holy Spirit and under God’s great grace.

But Luke moves on quickly to give us a negative example...

Example: Negative - Ananias and Sapphira

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 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. 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? 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.” When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” 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.” 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. And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. (vv. 5-11)

Wow. This is a wake up call. And if you are new here or new to the Bible, I want you to know that this has never happened here at PBCC. It is an unusual story, but there are some Old Testament stories like it—

Leviticus 10 tells of two sons of Aaron who infringed on the holiness of the sanctuary and immediately died.

Joshua 7 tells of a man named Achan who takes some of the things that should have been devoted to the Lord, is found out, and swift and supernatural judgment comes upon him.

It appears that when God is doing a new thing bringing new life into the world, he is not going to allow the sin of one or two individuals to derail his whole project. We don’t like these stories but as NT Wright says we can’t have it both ways:

If you want to be a community 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. 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. God is not mocked.⁵

Ananias and Sapphira choose to sell some property, which is their choice. They sell their property for X amount. Then, they lay the proceeds at the Apostle’s feet but it’s not X, it’s X minus Y. They hold back some of the money for themselves which is also their choice. There is no problem with X-Y. The problem is that they claim that X is there in the bag, the whole amount is there in the bag. They want to prop themselves up and make themselves look overly generous, so they lie. Their sin is not stealing; it is lying. It is hypocrisy and pride because they want to prop themselves up to look better than others.

Peter, inspired by the Spirit of truth confronts first Ananias then Sapphira, and they both fall dead, three hours apart. They are so full of themselves that they’ve quenched the Holy Spirit of God. And this is a wake up call for each one of us. We need to be very careful about this because it sneaks in there so easily.

When I was a middle-schooler I was a church kid. And I remember going to church every Sunday and we would pull out the hymnal and sing our songs. I would make a point of not looking at the hymnal because I already knew the words. I was so super spiritual, I didn’t need to look at the words, I already knew them! See how easily our pride can slip in there?

But why is this such a big deal? The reason is because lying and hypocrisy destroy unity, and makes authentic community impossible. If we cannot be trusted in our words, then we cannot make unity in our church. Their lie opens a crack in the door for Satan to infiltrate the church, and it must be dealt with. God is doing a new thing bringing new life into the world, and their lie threatens to derail the entire operation! God must get rid of the cancer.

I think it reveals at least three key facts of life that we all must understand:

The gravity of our sin. Our sin is not just against other human beings, it is against God! Peter says it plainly, “why have you lied to the Holy Spirit, and why have you tested the Holy Spirit?” The Living God never takes sin lightly and neither should we.

Our private sin affects more than just ourselves. it affects the entire community! Our sin affects our judgement, our sin affects our relationships and it affects our ability to hear clearly from the Holy Spirit. We need to deal ruthlessly with our sin so that we can maintain a unified, spirit-led community.

There is a constant spiritual battle going on for our hearts. It's constant! We must remain on constant watch to protect our hearts and our souls from the evil one. And Jesus prayed for that to didn't he? In his high priestly prayer, He prays that we would be protected from the evil one.

Well a great fear came over the early church, because they realize they are dealing with the living God. He is God and we are not. And we do not tread on his holiness lightly. CS Lewis had it right. God is not safe, but he is good.

Are we on fire?

Are we so on fire with the Spirit and under God's great grace that we are of one heart and soul, that we are ministering out of our spiritual gifts and that we are generous with our possessions? In other words, do we look like Barnabas?

May we look like Barnabas this week. Amen.

And now may the great grace of Christ which daily renews us and the love of our good God which enables us to love all, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit which unites us in one body make us eager to obey the will of God until we meet again through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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4. Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe*, (Grand Rapids: Harper Collins), 68.
5. Wright, N.T. *Acts For Everyone, Part 1*. (Louisville: John Knox Press), 80.

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