

Changing Hearts from Within

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[0 : 0 0] Well, thank you so much, Alice, and thank you, Fraser, for leading us this far. Folks, come back with me to Acts chapter 4, to this passage this morning. Maybe you've got lots of questions about it. Hopefully, as we go through this, you'll see that there's a big thing that holds it together. Looking forward to getting into this this morning. But here's what I want you to do. I want you to grab a Bible, come back to Acts chapter 4, and once you're there, I want you to make a beeline to verse 36. Okay, beeline to verse 36. And here's two questions for you. We'll have a show of hands. Okay, hands up if you know somebody with a nickname. Good. Excellent. Okay, hands up if you've got a nickname. Oh, wow, more than I was expecting. That's great. Well, you can be grateful for COVID restrictions, meaning that I'm not going to get you to shout out that nickname, but I'll get you the door afterwards. Okay, nicknames. Are they not a strange thing that we do as human beings? Really strange when you think about it. They say it's a sign of affection, don't they, to give somebody a nickname. Sometimes it's based on your appearance. Sometimes it's based on where you're from.

Sometimes, in my case, it's based on your surname. Or sometimes, and see if this is true of the people that you know, sometimes it's based upon the things that characterize a person's life. Well, here's what we're seeing today. This section is brought to us in association with a guy in the early church with a nickname. Come with me to verse 36. We'll learn about him, see his nickname. So do you see his name? Verse 36, his name is Joseph. So that's his name. I mean, if ever there was a chance for the rollout of Holy Joe, this is the point, isn't it, to introduce that nickname. But do you see how they don't go for Holy Joe? They don't go for Wee Joe. They're not Scottish.

What do they call him? Well, it's not derived either from where he's from. We get that bit of information as well. He is a Levite from Cyprus. I'm sure if you were creative, you could come up with something there. But that is not what they call this man, Joseph. Do you see they call him, the apostles, call this man Joseph Barnabas. Do you see that in the text? They call him Barnabas.

Because encouragement is the defining feature of this guy's life. Do you not love that? Encouragement. It's what they think when they look at him. Encouragement. Here's a guy that's been gifted by the Lord to serve him, to inspire his people. And they see that encouragement is the defining feature of his life. I absolutely love that. Love that. Maybe you know some encouragers in our church family. I don't know. But Barnabas is all about encouragement. Now, remember verse 4 of chapter 4. How many people are in the early church at this point? What's the figure that we're given?

Roughly 5,000 people. You see it? So why then does Luke move from 5,000 to one? Why does he introduce us? Why does he spotlight this man Barnabas? Well, I think there's a couple of things going on here. I think Barnabas is going to play a big role in the rest of the story at the book of Acts at crucial points. Just give you a couple of them. It's Barnabas chapter 9 who introduces the apostle Paul to the rest of the disciples. When they're cowering at the sound of Paul's name given his previous life, Barnabas is the one that goes and gets him and brings him in. There's Barnabas later on in the story, chapter 13, who's commissioned with the apostle Paul to go and to take the gospel, the message of Jesus, to the nations and the peoples of the earth. So Barnabas is a big player in the rest of the book of Acts. And as well as that, I think Barnabas is almost like exhibit A of what the Lord is graciously doing in transforming the hearts and the minds of his people.

[4 : 06] Right? The people who together are now the church, right? This is the first time in the book of Acts you'll see that term, the church. Collective name for the people who are following Jesus.

These people who are in the, who because of the power of the risen Jesus, because of the sent spirit, are continuing to grow. I mean, I don't know if you've thought this over the last couple of weeks as we've gone through the book of Acts. It's almost as if the amount of people who are responding are a bit like daisies in your garden, aren't they? Or if you don't have a garden, go to the park. You see this time of year, daisies just coming up everywhere. You can't seem to get rid of them, can you?

You mow your lawn, look out the next day and there's little things. How do you get rid of these things? You can't stop them. Well, that's kind of the early church is the sun shines and they respond.

You can't stop them. They're coming up everywhere. And that's what's going on at this point in the story of the book of Acts. Church is growing. Can't be stopped. And I think the thing that we need to appreciate at this point is that the devil hates it. Hates it. What's going on, what God is doing.

So, he's going to go on an attack to stop it. And it's the old classic pincer movement, right?

[5 : 33] You familiar with that term, the old pincer movement? I think it's a military term. I used to think it was associated with the crabs. That's where they got it from. I guess it's the same thing, isn't it? The pincer movement, the attack on two fronts. That's the attack here. Okay, last week we thought about the threat to the church that's coming from the outside. Yeah? Persecution, trying to stop people, stop the apostles talking, get a gagging order put on them. That was the attack. This week we're going to think about the threat to the church that's coming from the inside. The inside. Disunity.

Hypocrisy. Hypocrisy. Whatever it takes to compromise the church's witness to the watching world. That's the kind of pincer movement that I think Luke is describing at this point in the book of Acts. External and internal. And I think that is why this chapter, this section, has so much to teach us today as the Lord's people. Because the devil's tactics haven't changed.

Haven't changed. External and internal. We're thinking about internal today. And I think that's why we need to be savvy to what is going on in this section. If last week was about the early church's lips, this week is about their lives. Okay? Now, two headings for us this morning. Here's the first one.

Luke gives us, firstly, a snapshot of a community gripped by grace. Right? A snapshot of a community gripped by grace. And here's the phrase, I think, that gets us to the heart of what's going on here.

You'll find it in verse 32 if you've got your Bibles there. Here's the phrase. All the believers were one in heart and mind. All the believers. Think about it. There's 5,000 people at this point. Right? 5,000 people. All sorts of different people in there, I'd imagine. Right?

[7 : 30] Doing all sorts of different things. Doing different jobs. Different personalities. Different interests. Different temperaments. You take your pick. In a group that size, how diverse this group is. And yet, what is the thing that Luke draws our attention to again and again and again? It's their unity.

Their oneness. Right? See the expressions here. One heart and mind. They had all things in common. Great grace was upon not just a few of them. It was upon all of them. They are one. One.

How counter-culturally different in a world that doesn't know how to handle diversity. The only way to handle it is by uniformity. No, here is diversity and unity in this group. This is what God is doing. Do you see the phrases which I'm sure were part of their everyday life? Your needs are my concern. Your success is my joy. Your tears get my time. My abundance is your provision. This is a group of people who deeply care for one another. Why? Not because they're BFFs. Okay? It's a phrase our kids are using at the minute. That's why I know it. Okay? Best friends forever. It's not because they're best mates. It's way deeper than that. It's this realization that in Jesus, our lives, our lives are intrinsically bound together. Because the only way you can explain this is that this is a community from above. Right? Just notice a couple of things in the text that help us see that. Notice how they viewed what they owned. Verse 32, it's all the

Lord's. Everything we have, he's given it to us to use for his purposes in the world. I think that's why they lay everything at the apostles' feet. They're not just spending it willy-nilly, are they? They're laying what they have at the apostles' feet. It's God's purposes we're interested in. You know, remember a church I was part of as a student. It was always the phrase when the communion bag went round. We are simply giving to God out of what he has first given to us. And that's what's going on here, I think. This is all the Lord's. And then notice how they used what they owns. Verse 34, there wasn't a needy one amongst them. So they're willing to meet each other's needs in extremely sacrificial ways. Do you notice that? I mean, this is not just ready cash from your piggy bank at home. This is people selling houses and fields, right? Which is where your money's tied up.

They're doing it to meet needs. And do you see who's leading the way? Who's leading the way? Barney's leading the way. Do you see him, Barnabas? He's leading the way. What a community.

[10 : 16] What a community. Grace-filled community. And let me just say, just in case you're connecting the dots in your head, maybe you're not a Christian and you're thinking, I've seen something like this before.

Let me just kind of, at this point, help us see that the gospel is doing something that communism could only dream of. Okay, it was Nikita Khrushchev, I think I've pronounced that right, former leader of the Soviet Union, who famously said that communism's downfall was its failure to produce, and this is our phrase, its failure to produce the selfless man. Okay, and in other words, the idea that you make people share everything, you bring it to the lowest common denominator, everyone has the same, and logically, oneness and togetherness should follow.

In other words, you change the outside to get to the inside. Now, notwithstanding its conceptual merits, history tells us that the whole concept doesn't work. It doesn't work. Why? Because of its failure to change the human heart. You can't do it outside to end. It doesn't work. It's what the Bible consistently says the problem is. Where the problem is. Remember my mate at uni always had this phrase, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. Loved it. Wish I'd come up with it. I didn't.

It was his. Okay, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. Stayed with me all these days. That's where the Bible says the problem is. That's where the Bible says we need to change.

That is where the Bible says that we can't change unless by God's sovereign grace. Whereas the gospel, friends, in contrast to communism, it can and it does work because, and this is what we need to see, it does it the other way around. Okay, change on the inside leads to transformation on the outside. Okay, where did this passage start? With Luke telling us that their hearts had been transformed by Jesus. It starts with their oneness and then it shows how that supernaturally, that unity flowed out into action. In other words, this was an inside out kind of deal.

[12 : 39] Okay, remember it's like a young teenager thinking about the things of God, frustrated that it didn't seem to make sense. Remember there was a chorus that we used to sing, right? The chorus went like this.

In my heart and my soul, Lord, I give you control. Consume me from the inside out, Lord. Let justice and praise. Become my embrace to love you from the inside out. And that concept blew my mind.

Then went to the scriptures and saw that's exactly what Jesus is saying. The problem is an internal one. There's no point cleaning up your external act and thinking that's going to change you. We need a deep work of God in our hearts and our souls. That's where change needs to happen.

By being gripped and transformed by God's free grace to sinners like you and I in Christ Jesus. He is the pearl of great price. He is the treasure hidden in the field. He is something far more glorious. And when he grips our hearts, change will happen. And I think that's the first question we need to ask ourselves perhaps as we respond to this section this morning. Friends, has Jesus gripped us inside?

Has he gripped us inside? Do you know him? Do you love him? And flowing from that, friends, as we maybe think about our life corporately together, here's the question that I perhaps was dwelling on this week.

[14 : 06] Are we aware of each other's needs? It seems to be the thing that Luke draws attention to here, this early church. That word need, yeah? People responding to one another's needs. Friends, do we know one another's needs? Let me just take it up a level and think about application for us here. If you're a student here, let me ask you, do you know the needs of an older generation?

Older generation here, are you aware of the pressures that are currently facing families? Families, are you mindful of the struggles that people living on their own are facing? Males, are you, are we aware of the concerns facing many of our dear loved sisters in our own church family?

And on and on and on we could go, okay? But you get the point, friends. Are we mindful of one another? Do we know one another's needs? You know a really simple way to find out? Just ask.

Just ask. I'm going to kick this up a level in terms of our spiritual life together. Great question to get to the heart of it. How can I pray for you this week? You'd be amazed at what comes back.

How can I pray for you this week? Now this is what I'm finding perhaps, and it's only been in the last few weeks, hasn't it, that the scales are beginning to shift, that we're seeing more of people in person than we are on Zoom, which is a huge relief for everyone, isn't it? But perhaps as I'm seeing more people, I think I'm recognizing, and I'm picking up, looking people in the eye instead of on a screen, and I'm picking up on body language. Perhaps listing a lot more and recognizing that, friends, there are needs that have arisen, are arising, and will arise down the line because of what we have experienced in the last year and a half. Do we know one another's needs? And I think that's why we need to see that we have no hope of doing this virtually. We cannot do this virtually. We've got to be doing this physically, which is why coming together is such an important thing.

[16:19] Right? Do we know one another's needs? You know, for some of us, it's going to be financial. For some of us, it's going to be spiritual. For some of us, it's going to be emotional, mental, physical, practical. Do we know one another's needs? And I think the other question is, are we willing to meet them? Can't do this virtually, friends. We need to do this physically. All the believers were one in heart and mind. Luke gives us a snapshot here at the start of a community that's gripped by grace.

And boy, is it attractive, isn't it? Boy, is this attractive. Community gripped by grace. Now, at this point, I'm reminded of a lecturer I once had at university, and he introduced me to this word I'd never heard of before. Ready for the word? Hagiography. Anyone heard of it? No? Oh, here, every day is a school day. It's great. Right? Hagiography. Pull that one out of the bag and scrabble, friends. Game's yours. Okay? Hagiography. The danger of idealizing something. Okay? Or as I like to call it, rose-tinted spectacle syndrome. Right? Luke's about to burst the bubble that I think he knows might be developing in the minds of his readers when it comes to the early church. Right? And he does it with the very first word of chapter five. The very first word. Do you see it? It's always the word your teacher used to use in your school report card, wasn't it? Okay? Always a very enthusiastic people. Used to get that every single report. Very enthusiastic people. Oh, she engages well in class. And then what was the next word that came? But. But. Or however, sometimes you put the but. Here's the but, friends. The other side of the story. What's an all tale of the early church? And we're going to move from the snapshot to the mugshot.

Right? And it's a mugshot of a couple who are eaten alive by envy. And we're back to our boy with the nickname at this point. Okay? Remember Barney? Remember him? Well, keep him in the back of your mind as we look at what's going on with this couple here. Ananias and Sapphira, who are presumably part of this group of 5,000 people. Right? And to get to the heart, I think, of what this is about. And it is difficult. We're going to zoom in on the text and then zoom out to the Bible story really quickly.

Okay? Zoom in on the text. Verse 1. What do they do? They sell a piece of property. And they bring the cash to the apostles' feet. Now, at this point, you're asking yourselves, is that ringing any bells? Does that sound familiar to something that we've read?

Right? Remember, again, your school exam papers. What was that phrase? Compare and contrast. Compare and contrast. This is exactly what just has been used to describe what Barnabas has just done. Right? At the end of chapter 4. Do you see it? Compare and contrast.

[19:25] They look exactly the same. Two very similar acts on the surface. But what's really going on behind the scenes? Ananias and Sapphira have deliberately kept back some of the money whilst deliberately giving the impression to the watching world that they gave it all. Here's what's going on. The hearts of this people crave the same fame that Barnabas got. Right? The envy has gripped their hearts. Jealousy has gripped it. We want a piece of that action. But all the while, they're not willing to pay the cost.

And what's happened in their desire for that nickname is that they have lied to God. Okay? So do you see the issue isn't in the amount that they gave? Okay? They didn't need to give anything. That's clear if you read on Peter's response here. They didn't need to give anything. The issue is, verse 3 and 4, that they lied to God. Right? They tried to play him for a fool. As my grandpa used to say, they're at it. They're at it. Okay? You know that scene where you get boxers who are, they're trying to promote the fight, and you get them toe to toe. This is what they've tried to do with God. I think they could fool him. And Peter, presumably through divinely inspired knowledge, he outs them. Verse 5, Ananias falls down dead. Three hours later, verse 8 and 9, and I think this is crucial to see, even though the text implies that Sapphira is given a chance to repent and come clean, which she doesn't take, the same thing happens to her. And so ironically, the couple who were craving that positive nickname end up being a negative byword throughout history.

Remember we said a few weeks ago that Luke is into irony. Well, that's the zoom in. Let's zoom out and see what's going on here as we seek to understand this. Maybe, I don't know whether this is helpful, but maybe think on it like this. Okay? I remember growing up playing football. I'm sure this applies to every sport you can think of. There was always a phrase that was drilled into us when it came to the game. And the phrase was, you are at your most vulnerable when you've just scored. You heard that phrase before? You're at your most vulnerable when you've just scored. And the logic, I think, is that when you've just scored a goal, when you take the lead, as it were, you're kind of in a new phase of the game. Things aren't the same as they were before.

You're kind of in a new part of the game. Things are different now. And because of that, you're open to two potential dangers, right? You're open firstly to complacency, sneaking in. Okay, we've kind of got this one. We know what we're doing. It doesn't matter. Let's just keep on going. You're open to complacency and you're open to an opposition who are desperate to strike back because of what's just happened. Desperate to strike back. Friends, I think the key thing we need to see here is the moment that this happens. The moment that it happens, right? Because the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and the pouring out of the Spirit has seen, do you remember this a few weeks ago, the turn of a new page, right? In the life of the church and God's purposes. We are at a new phase in the game now.

Something has happened. We're at a new phase. But the church at this point is still at the kind of Bambi on ice phase. You know that phrase? You kind of, we're beginning to grow. Things are beginning to happen. And if blatant sin begins to creep into this community and goes unchecked at this point, right? If envy and anger and jealousy, if that seeps into people's hearts and is it most likely will grow and will fester amongst the community, this is going to kill the witness of the early church, is it not? That phrase, it won't even get up off the ground.

[23 : 40] And so it's almost as if God, at this critical point in the story, at the start of this new phase of the game, he visibly reminds the church and the watching world that he is the still the same holy God.

And he cares way too much about his glory and his purposes for the peoples of the world being blessed and the good of the hearts of his people to let this slip in stealth under the radar and potentially compromise the whole thing. And I think that's why people rightly see parallels here, again in the Bible story, with the story of Achan in Joshua 7. You can look at it in your own time.

That's a key point in the Bible story as well. You've got, there you have Israel just having entered the promised land and by God's grace, they have taken the city of Jericho and they've taken the plunder as well. But God is saying, no, that is for my purposes. Okay. And what happens is Achan takes some and hides it for himself. And this whole community is bigger than 5,000 Israel at this point.

God hones in and says, no, that is not on. It's not on. And God outs him. It's the same thing, isn't it? It's the same thing. And I think the key lesson to learn here for us is in what the church learnt. Okay. Luke repeats this twice. If you've got the text there, verse 5 and verse 11, watch the phrase that great fear seized the whole church. Okay. Fear being the right response of reverence and wonder at who this God is. One that sees you orientate your life and live it in joyful and faith-filled obedience to the God who has gripped your soul. You know, we were doing Christianity Explored last Tuesday night and it suddenly occurred to me that this is the same word, the same root word, fear here, that Mark uses to describe the reaction of the disciples as they see Jesus calm the storm.

Right? Fear filled their hearts. What is the question they ask in that? Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him? It's the same word there. Great fear gripped them because they were gripped by something far greater and far more glorious. They realized the Lord Jesus was those things far greater, far more glorious than they had ever initially realized. They couldn't take their eyes off him.

[26 : 16] And I take it the fear of the Lord is the response that we need to make as we almost come to a close this morning. You know, for some of us, friends, this might come as a huge wake-up call. If we're trying today to pull the wool over God's eyes, right? Yes, we might not be living at this precise moment in church history. And again, I think we need to see that narrative isn't always normative, but make no mistake that this God hasn't changed.

And God sees when we're trying to play him and he will not be mocked. And let me just say church history and even very recent church history when it comes to church leaders tells us that when people think they can get away with sin, God has got this habit of bringing it to the surface and exposing it for what it is. And he does it internally. This God will not be mocked. He will not be lied to.

And I take it, friends, if some of us might be watching this, and we have to remember that for many of us, that is good news. For all of us, that is good news because you might be here today and you have been lied to in the most horrific of circumstances. And I take it we should be comforted that this God not only sees, but this God will do something about it. This God will not be mocked.

And friends, let me just say, if we see the presence of envy and jealousy and resentment and bitterness, if we see that in our own lives, I take it again, this is a huge wake-up call not to let those things fester in our hearts. How easy is it individually and corporately to believe the devil's lie? Did God really say? Did God really say that you can't have your cake and eat it? What kind of killjoy would he be?

It doesn't matter. But he's been to kill the sin. Do you remember that government slogan a number of years ago with swine flu? What was the phrase? Catch it, bin it, kill it. Catch it, bin it, kill it. And that's what we're challenged to do with these things when we see the presence in our own hearts. Friends, what is the state of your heart before him today? Great fear seized the whole church.

[28 : 42] And as we close, Luke has presented us with the snapshot and the mugshot. And essentially, this is a tale of two hearts, really, isn't it, before the Lord? Two hearts. I say two, really it's three.

Because standing above and in the midst of all this is another man who got a nickname. What do people say of Jesus? When they saw who he associated with, when they saw who he ate with, when they saw who he conversed with, when they saw who was drawn to him and their questionable character, what did they call him? And what did they call him mockingly so? The friend of sinners.

Are you not so glad that that was his nickname? Not the enemy of sinners. Not sick of sinners.

Not the tolerator of sinners. No, the friend of sinners. Not because he winked at sin, but because his heart welled with compassion for those who knew their failings and ran to him repentant for grace and salvation. Friends, this morning, let us be characterized as a community who have fear of the Lord. What will that mean? It means we will run to and be captivated by the friend of sinners. The God who shows us grace in Christ. And that's where we're going to end this morning. By that compelling call to run to him and know who he is. So why don't we just be quiet for a moment? And I take it that as this has gone forth this morning, the Lord, by his grace and through his spirit, will be at work in our hearts in different ways. So why don't we just have a moment of silence, of reflection, and then I'll close.

And so, Heavenly Father, we thank you for who you are today. Lord, help us in the words of the writer of Ecclesiastes to let our words be few in light of who you are. Father, I pray for many of us today who will have heard this and who will be, it may have brought back painful memories. Lord, I pray that your spirit would be at work in their hearts, Father, bringing comfort and peace for those of us, Lord, who maybe respond to this in that same defiant spirit that Ananias and Sapphira had. Lord, I pray that you would be at work softening our hearts. Thank you so much for the Lord Jesus and for who he is today. And I pray, Lord, that you would help us all to have hearts that are captivated by him.

[31 : 32] So, Father, thank you for your great grace. Thank you, Lord, for your holiness. And we pray these things in Jesus' wonderful name. Amen.