

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

What Does The Bible Say About Giving?

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Acts 4 and 5

Excursus

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 4:32; that’s on page 912 in the pew Bibles, which is actually one page BACKWARDS from where we were LAST WEEK – so what’s going on here?

Well, as I mentioned last week, the whole reason for this series in the Book of Acts is to give us an opportunity to re-evaluate everything we think we know about church. We just came out of a massively disruptive event. An event that seemed uniquely engineered to shut down the corporate worship of the church. You’ve heard the expression: “It is hard to do maintenance on an airplane in flight” – well COVID grounded the church and gave us the opportunity to think deep thoughts about who we are and what we’re supposed to be doing. And so our intention for this series is to slow down whenever we encounter an issue that we may need to reevaluate as a people; and I think we are in one of those places here. Here in Acts 4 and 5 we have encountered two stories about GIVING - one good and one bad – and that gives us the opportunity to ask some big questions: Why do we do this? How should we do this? Are there any rules or principles that we need to be aware of?

By God's grace, that is what we are going to attempt to do this morning. We will revisit the GOOD ILLUSTRATION – hopefully we have retained in our brains the BAD ILLUSTRATION from last week – and then we will also reach back and reach forward across the entire canon of Scripture in an effort to come to some sort of balanced and informed understanding of this issue. So let's do that and let's begin with the text that open that is open before us; Acts 4:32-37. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

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.³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.³⁴ 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 sold³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus,³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:32–37 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

We've already talked about this passage in a general sense, several weeks ago, but let's quickly make some observations now in terms of what we are seeing in this story specifically about giving.

Giving In Acts 4:

The first thing we see is that:

1. The giving in this story was grace fuelled

There is no mention of any rules or laws that were brought to bear in this story, rather we are told in verse 33 that:

“great grace was upon them all.” (Acts 4:33 ESV)

Generosity is an overflow of grace. Giving is a response to grace. That’s a fundamental New Testament principle, and we are seeing it on full and glorious display in this passage.

The second thing we see here, I think is just as obvious as the first thing; we are seeing the giving in this story directed toward real and obvious need.

2. The giving in this story was toward need

We see that in verse 34:

“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” (Acts 4:34 ESV)

We’ll get into this a bit more when we get to chapter 6 in the Book of Acts, but what was happening was that many of the pilgrims who were present for the Festival of Pentecost and who were converted and baptized after Peter’s sermon, STAYED in Jerusalem and joined the church. Remember, at this point in the story, Jerusalem was the only Christian church in the world! So it was not like you could just go back to Athens or Rome or Corinth or wherever you had come from and just hook up with the local church there – no – if you wanted to grow in your knowledge of Christ you needed to stay in Jerusalem. So they did. But they didn’t have jobs. They had no income. So all of the sudden, this church of 120 people – that’s how big they were before Peter’s sermon on Pentecost – so this church of 120 people is responsible for 3000 non-resident, non-wage-earning new converts. How in the world are they going to support all those people?

Well – that’s what this story is about. They went out and started selling stuff. Barnabas sold an entire property and brought 100% of the proceeds to the common pot.

That’s what was going on in this story.

They weren't giving to the Gold Staircase Fund – they weren't giving to the Chocolate Fountain Fund – they were giving to real and immediate NEED.

Alright, the third thing we see here is that:

3. The giving in this story went into a common pot

In verses 34-35 it says:

“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.” (Acts 4:34–35 ESV)

That expression: “they laid it at the apostles' feet” implies formal transfer into the common pot that was overseen by the Apostles for the common work of the church.

That's interesting.

The text doesn't say that Barnabas saw the Smith family in need so he sold a piece of property and took that money and gave it directly to the Smiths.

It doesn't say that.

Why?

Because that kind of Wild West approach to giving will inevitably lead to all kinds of abuse, injustice and inefficiency. The Smith family might share their story with 10 families in the church and they might receive more help than they actually need – whereas the Jones family, who is not as well connected, might get nothing. That's what happens in a completely open system – the best

communicators get the most money – so to avoid that scenario, the money went into the common pot and the leadership made reasoned decisions about how much went where and to whom.

The early church was remarkably careful in terms of how benevolence was distributed. Perhaps that's because they were regular readers of the Old Testament. The Book of Proverbs contains extensive instruction about wise and unwise acts of benevolence. I was just studying Proverbs 6 this past week for an upcoming Into The Word series and I was impressed by Bruce Waltke's commentary on the opening paragraph in Proverbs 6 which he referred to as a warning "against indiscriminating, impulsive benevolence".

Did you know that the Bible warns against that?

There will always be people trying to take advantage of the kindness and generosity of Christians and so we do the most good when we submit our giving to collaborative and reasoned process. Not all giving is helpful. Some giving actually does more harm than good as it confirms people in destructive patterns of behaviour. The Apostle Paul went so far as to say:

“If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10 ESV)

The early church had rigorous standards in place and they invested heavily in the process of oversight and distribution. In fact, in Acts 6 which we will encounter shortly, we read about 7 people being appointed – in all probability HIRED - to oversee the benevolence ministry of the church.

Because it has to be fair.

It has to be WISE.

There have to be standards.

We can't just give our money to every sad story or every sad commercial we see on TV.

Let me tell you something that might ease your guilt – I almost NEVER give at the cash register of the grocery store or the coffee shop – because I don't know anything about those charities. My wife and I plan our giving – we decide on the amount – we decide on the organizations – we don't just give to every sad commercial or urgent appeal. We appreciate the importance of oversight and intentionality – and that is exactly what we are seeing in this story. If a person had a need, they took it to the leadership and there was a collaborative process, there was a set of standards; there was a system.

And it worked! According to Luke:

“There was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34 ESV)

Praise the Lord!

The fourth and final observation I want to draw out here is this:

4. The giving in this story was over and above what was required

This really comes out in the mirror image story that we talked about last week. You will recall that Ananias and Sapphira were deeply envious of the fame and renown that accumulated to Barnabas as a result of his incredible act of charity – so they contrived to imitate it. They sold a piece of property and then TOLD EVERYONE that – just like Barnabas – they had given 100% of the proceeds to the common pot – except, they hadn't and the Lord revealed that through the Spirit to the Apostle Peter. Do you remember what Peter said to them? He said:

“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.” (Acts 5:4 ESV)

Are you seeing that?

Barnabas' example did not become A RULE in the church. You didn't have to give 100% - you didn't have to give 50% - you didn't have to give 5% - AFTER IT WAS SOLD, WAS IT NOT AT YOUR DISPOSAL? You can do with your stuff whatever you like! That's what Peter is saying to them.

This was not about rules, this was not about MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS. The people in the early church were giving AS GRACE ALLOWED and as THE SPIRIT DIRECTED.

I think it is important for us to notice that.

Now, as I mentioned off the top, I want to slow down here because our goal is not just to make it through Acts as quick as we can – our goal is to learn as much as we can from these foundational stories. So I want to stop and cast our net a little wider. This is just ONE STORY or TWO STORIES I guess, one good and one bad – but in order to say anything definitive we will want to consider the teaching of the Bible as a whole. So let's do that, let's ZOOM OUT and conduct a quick survey of what the Scriptures say about giving in general.

Giving In The Bible As A Whole:

And the first thing I would want to say is this:

1. There is a principle of tithing that stands outside the Law

So a moment ago I said that there was no talk of RULES or REQUIREMENTS in the stories about giving we have read so far – and that's true. But that doesn't mean that there weren't principles that were known and respected.

If you have your Bible with you, flip over quickly to Genesis 28 verse 20 – that's on page 23 in your pew Bible. While you find that I'll give you a little bit of background. In Genesis 28 Jacob

has inherited the line of promise from his father Isaac – but he is on the run from his brother Esau. God visits Jacob in a dream and promises to bless him and watch over him – and in verse 20 we see how Jacob responds. The Bible says:

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear,²¹ so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God,²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. **And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.**” (Genesis 28:20–22 ESV)

Are you seeing that? 42 chapters and more than 400 years before we get the LAW at Mount Sinai we have a man saying to God: if you bless me, watch over me and promise to bring me into a place of peace, I will demonstrate my loyalty and gratitude to you by giving you 10% of all you give to me.

In the Bible – long before tithing is a law – it is a recognized way of demonstrating love, loyalty, trust and gratitude to God.

That’s important for us to see. Tithing in the Bible PRECEDES the Law - AND it stands outside the law as a principle of wisdom. If you flip forward in your Bibles now to Proverbs 3 verse 9 you will find the wise father saying to his young son:

Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. (Proverbs 3:9–10 ESV)

WISDOM is universal as opposed to LAW which is covenantal – but even here in a book of universal wisdom – we are being told that it is WISE to honour God with your wealth. Don’t just worship with your mouth, the father says; talk is cheap. Worship the LORD with your substance. Show him that you honour him as your Creator. Show him that you are grateful for his kindness. Show him that you are committed to his purposes.

That is wise, son, irrespective of your relationship to the Law.

Alright so that's the first thing we see as we survey the Bible – there is a principle of tithing that precedes and stands outside of the Law. The second thing we see is that:

2. There is a system of tithing that was regulated by the Law

That's how Israel functions in the Old Testament. They were called together and told to MANIFEST or DISPLAY what a righteous society looks like. That's why God gave them the Law. The Law was supposed to instruct them and restrain them in the way of righteousness and as an aspect of that, we've got LAWS about tithing. There were actually 3 TITHES required under the Mosaic Covenant – there was a regular tithe to support the temple and the priesthood, you can read about that Numbers 18:21; there was a festival tithe for the support of the required feasts, you can read about that in Deuteronomy 12:17-19; and then there was a charity tithe, given every third year to support the poor, you can read about that in Deuteronomy 14:28-29. So actually, if you add that all up, the Old Testament believers were actually tithing 23.3% of their annual income and all of that was CODIFIED in the Law of Moses. The goal was to facilitate worship, ministry and charity.

That brings us to our third observation:

3. There is a New Testament motivation that surpasses the Law

It is interesting to note that nowhere in the Book of Acts and nowhere in the Epistles do we find a restatement or reapplication of the Law of the tithe. For one thing, the circumstances were totally different. Unlike we see in the Old Testament, in the New Testament the covenant community is NOT a church AND a state – it is a church inside every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth. And we the New Testament covenant community no longer maintains a central shrine, rather we see them meeting in smaller, local assemblies. And we there are no more MASSIVE national FESTIVALS – rather we have smaller, weekly gatherings and our main feast now is actually just

a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine – in Baptist churches it isn't even a bottle of wine, it's a bottle of Welch's Grape juice so, no probably no special offering required to support that.

So the circumstances are different - but the law of the tithe could easily have been adapted and reapplied as a way of instructing and guiding people in the New Testament.

But it wasn't – and we ought to pay attention to that because it reflects one of the most significant CHANGES as we move from the Old Testament to the New. In the Old Testament people were guided and motivated by THE LAW – but in the New Testament they are guided and motivated by the Holy Spirit and by the principle of love.

Now, that isn't to say that the Spirit and love pull us in different directions – on the contrary, Paul says:

“Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”
(Romans 13:10 ESV)

Paul wants everyone to understand: LOVE is not taking us down a different path here.

Remember, the purpose of the Law was to teach us how to love God and love neighbour – that was the direction of the law. Well, of course, LOVE is about travelling in that same direction.

Filled with the Spirit of love, we are now INTERNALLY MOTIVATED to love God and neighbour – so we are driving down the same road here, but now we have a new and better FUEL filling our tanks – does that make sense?

So you just don't FIND appeals to Mosaic Law in the New Testament – not as a BINDING LAW – you find appeals to principle and you find the motivation and direction of the Holy Spirit and of love, but not a lot of talk about law - and that lines up exactly with what we are seeing in Acts 4.

The Holy Spirit FALLS on the church in Acts 2, and then we have a FURTHER FILLING in Acts 4:31; Luke says:

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31 ESV)

So after a SECOND FILLING with the Holy Spirit the church begins to OVERFLOW in remarkable, over the top, awe inspiring acts of generosity and love. That's the story in Acts 4. Luke is telling us that the more Holy Spirit you have in your church, the more Spirit-directed LOVE you have in your church, the more people are going to want to overflow in generous giving.

That's the message.

Alright, so let's bring this down to street level. How do we turn all of this into some practical counsel for us as 21st century believers? Let me leave you with a few principles and guidelines.

Principles And Guidelines Moving Forward:

The first one is this:

1. Be led by the Spirit

Listen, let me just acknowledge that is EASIER to simply appeal to the Law. As a pastor I get asked all the time – usually by newcomers to the church – “is there a law of tithing for New Testament believers?”

And let me just tell you, the simplest thing to do there is just to say: “Yes” – and that's kind of true. I mean, there is a law of tithing; it's in the Mosaic Covenant and Jesus fulfilled the Mosaic Covenant and so the Mosaic Covenant has expired, but it remains a very helpful GUIDE for us as believers today. And everything that it CODIFIED there reflects ETERNAL PRINCIPLES of wisdom and morality, so in a sense YES there is a LAW of tithing.

But can I tell you something church? The older I get as a man, and the older I get as a pastor, the less inclined I am to appeal to the power of the Law. I'd rather use other means to move people further along the ways of life. I'd rather help you USE the law to better understand the direction of love. I'd rather help use the law to learn how to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit. Because that's what a Christian IS. The Apostle Paul said:

“all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” (Romans 8:14 ESV)

He also said:

“if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” (Galatians 5:18 ESV)

There is a sense in which as the Spirit begins to guide and lead you – you leave the Law behind – not in the sense that you travel in new directions – but in the sense that you no longer need that lesser form of guidance and motivation. So, I guess that's what I'd say to you is this: Don't ask, “am I LEGALLY required to tithe?” The better question is: “What would the Holy Spirit of Jesus have me do with the resources and capacities I've been entrusted with?”

That's a better conversation and I believe it is one that any truly saved person is capable of having.

The second word of guidance I would give you, based on everything we've read so far would be this: be animated by cheerfulness and gratitude.

2. Be animated by gratitude

Again – that's the point that was being made in Acts 4 and 5. Nobody had to do this. It was not a rule. It was something that people WERE GLAD TO DO. That is the kind of giving that is regularly commended in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians:

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:7 ESV)

If you don't WANT to give to the Lord's work – brother or sister, I would argue, there is something wrong with you. If you are not GLAD in the Lord and eager to serve his people and advance his Kingdom – then I sincerely wonder if you are saved. Do you have the Spirit in you? Because in Acts 4, we are being told, that the more Spirit there is, the more GLAD and JOYFUL generosity there will be.

So let me speak very plainly here: If you don't WANT to give then DON'T. Don't be Ananias and Sapphira. Don't give as a type of performance art. Give because you LOVE the LORD and you are THANKFUL for all his kindnesses in your life. Give because you believe that the church is the hope of the world. Give because the hour is late and the mission is urgent. But don't give reluctantly or under compulsion. That kind of giving SOURS those who give it – and those who receive it.

The third thing – and the last thing – I would say to you, based on all we've read together today is this, in your giving:

3. Be fortified by the faithfulness of God

In the Old Testament, at one point, the people of God had really pulled back on their giving. Times were tough, and life was hard – you know the deal – and so all of the ministries and all of the worship that was fuelled by their giving was at a low ebb. And God challenged the people. In Malachi 3:10 he said:

“Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.” (Malachi 3:10 ESV)

When have I ever failed to live up to my side of the bargain, God says. That's a good question. I don't believe he ever has. God is FAITHFUL. He is GOOD. He always empowers and sustains his people – in good times and bad. As a New Testament believer, I have even more reason to believe in that than did my Old Testament predecessors. As a New Testament believer, how could I EVER question the goodness and faithfulness of God?

To everything God did for the Old Covenant community has been added TO ME: pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide; strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings ALL MINE with ten thousand beside.

Great is thy faithfulness – can you say amen to that church?

Amen. Let's pray together.