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*this way forward*

## AWKWARD VERSES... GIVE UP OR DROP DEAD

Acts 5:1-6

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The second chapter of Acts contains the most beautiful and wondrous verses in all the Bible about the church. The goodwill, the generosity, the love, and the devotion to God convey the ideal every church strives for; it is simply glorious.

But only a few chapters later, it begins to fall apart.

The grace and goodwill disintegrate when a couple sells their land and fails to give the proceeds to the church. Peter shames Ananias, who drops dead on the spot. When his wife, Sapphira, appears rather than showing sympathy for her loss, he doubles down on his criticism and she dies as well.

Apparently, Acts is trying to teach us that the church is all about love and forgiveness except when it comes time to tithe. Give up or drop dead is the clearest message that comes through!

Just like the other passages we have studied this month, these verses prove problematic for our faith today. We understand the church to be a place of grace. After all, this faith was founded upon the sacrificial death of Jesus, a supreme act of love. We remember Jesus taught Peter to forgive seventy times seven.

We can also easily cite scores of passages like Second Corinthians 9, that teach we should give voluntarily and not as an extortion... *"each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion"*. Clearly the threat of death is extortion. So which passage do we follow?

Luke, the author, offers no commentary or insight into this event, leaving us the impression that all that transpired was God's will and that Peter was his agent. It leaves me wondering, and perhaps you too, that if God truly, genuinely works this way, I should be walking around with a

lightning rod on my head, for surely I have committed worse sins than this.

It is also problematic for preachers. We need your tithe to do God's work through the church. Passages like this can be used to not only inflict guilt into your heart, but mortal fear of being smote by the Lord if you don't give enough! This prosperity gospel nonsense not only tries to convince people that if you give generously enough to the church your personal finances will multiply. But the converse that if you fail to give, like Ananias and Sapphira, you will be severely punished.

Yet, it is also all too easy to simply dismiss this passage. We are a church of love and grace and often we are tempted to soft peddle Jesus.

We know that Jesus lived love and grace, but he also believed that to embrace this love meant being willing to give up everything... whether it is your family, your possessions, or your life. In Luke, he tells us,

*Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple .. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.*

Because the church has been so maligned (for good reasons and bad) we sometimes lose our courage to preach the demands of the gospel. But all that is left is a milquetoast message of "live and let live".

As a result, we will seek to balance this passage with the grace and forgiveness of our God while discovering the demands this passage places on our lives of faith.

Perhaps the most important point is that, despite our first impression, there is nothing in the text that indicates a harsh penalty from God.

Nowhere in this text are the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira attributed to the power of God or even Peter. It is true Peter shows no sympathy, but neither does he invoke some curse to cause their deaths. This means we are left wondering what caused their deaths. Perhaps it is not too far of a stretch to believe it was extreme shame combined with a bad heart.

But there is also a theological lesson.

Rather than sin leading to divine punishment, sin itself, and its natural consequences, are its own punishment. In Proverbs 8:36 God declares,

*All who fail to find me harm themselves;  
those who hate me love death.*

Ananias and Sapphira knew they were becoming a part of this new community in which everyone was entrusting everything to God, but they held something back, which meant they held back on fully giving themselves over to the Lord's protection. They were trusting in God *and their money*. And that's the problem.

It is a delusion that the money in your bank (or anything else in your life for that matter) will offer you something that God cannot. In a very real sense, failing to give according to **your conscience**, not your preachers', not your parents', but yours, is failing to trust in God which is in and of itself death.

Failing to live a life of generosity with your finances, with your time, with your whole being is a recipe for a miserable life!

If the movie *It's a Wonderful Life's* lead character was Mr. Potter, it is easily could have been titled... *It's a Miserable Life!*

Perhaps even worse than Scrooge in his miserliness, Mr. Potter is the most cantankerous and wretched character ever to grace the big screen. He revels in the misfortune of others and devotes his life to using disasters in others' lives to line his own pockets!

I would wager you know someone like this. Not the caricature that is Mr. Potter, but someone who is so terrified of the future and everyone around

them that the only solace they can find is in the bank. And, because of it, they have spiraled into loneliness and despondency.

Ananias and Sapphira died from hearts shriveled by fear. They failed to give to the community and, as a result, others went hungry. We must not; we cannot do the same.

This town has a shocking need. The poverty rate in this city is a horror. The racial disparity is a shame. And you and I have been commanded by God, by our Lord, to go and be generous so that no one goes without.

It is not a sin to be wealthy. It is a blessing from God. But it is a sin to hoard it and to hold on to it.

But you know this already. You know that when you are generous, your heart feels whole. You feel complete. You feel peace knowing you are doing the right thing.

It is summed up in Second Corinthians 9:6,  
*The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly... and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*

This is not the promise of financial riches but something of infinite more value: the presence of God in your heart.

To be generous, sacrificially generous, is to imitate Christ who gave it all on the cross. To sow generously in the lives of others is to live your purpose for being on this planet.

I have everything, and I mean that. Everything. Everything any reasonable person could want.

A wonderful family. A wonderful home. A fantastic town to live in and a place to go to everyday, filled with beautiful people trying to do their very best for His sake. And since I have everything, it means I owe everything, all of it, every bit of it to God.

First Presbyterian is the same way. As a church we are phenomenally blessed.

And as we look at the challenging story of Ananias and Sapphira, we must ask ourselves... Are we giving as generously and sacrificially as the Lord our God calls us?

Recently, on a Wednesday evening as Kirk Neely was teaching on prayer, a young man challenged us to do just that. Give everything away in order to be faithful to Christ. Literally sell it all!

Pastor Craig was there.

This young man was jogging through our campus and started shouting obscenities at us!

He was cursing us because of the size of our buildings. He said that we should sell the entire campus, everything, and give it to the poor. He said Jesus would be ashamed of us, that Jesus would spit on us, and that we were the worst kind of Christians.

And for just an instant, I thought...maybe we should. But which parts would we sell?

...Should we sell the Mobile Meals building that feeds 1500 people a day?

...or the Clark Building which cares for children during the week?

...or perhaps the upstairs which houses seniors from the community for friendship, education, and recreation?

...or perhaps the church gym, in which people from over the community come to play basketball?

...maybe some of the offices in which Kirk Neely offers counseling for those in crisis?

...could we get rid of the Columbarium, which serves as a place of solace and comfort for those who have lost loved ones?

...perhaps it should be the Arthur Center, which not only hosts community education events, but is used to distribute meals to the needy four times a month?

So, let our generosity in all things, but especially in our love and grace, be equal to that of our Lord. Amen.