

“THROUGH THE BIBLE”

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ACTS 4:32-6:15

In the early chapters of Acts we find *divine mathematics* at work. In Acts 2:47 we're told, "The Lord **added** to the church daily those who were being saved." In Acts 6:7 Luke tells us, "The Word of God spread, and the number of the disciples **multiplied** greatly..." God *adds* in chapter 2. He *multiplies* in chapter 6. And God never **divides**... it's man that does that! But in Acts 5, God does do some divine **subtraction**.

Two pastors were once chit-chatting about their respective churches. One pastor asked his buddy, "Have you had any additions to your church?" His friend replied, "No, but we have had some blessed subtractions." Tonight, we've got a killer of a passage - a real drop dead Bible Study. It's a knock out. As new believers, Ananias and Sapphira, were just dying to get into the Bible - tonight we're going to discover how they did just that.

Let's pick it up in Acts 4:32, "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common." Some folks claim the early church practiced a form of communism. Not true. *Communism* is a forced system of sharing and spreading the wealth. What existed in Acts was "Common-ism." It was a voluntary sharing. Here's the difference between *communism* and *Christianity*. Communism says, "what's yours is mine." Christianity says, "what's mine is yours."

Verse 33, "And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all." I love this description. It sums up life in the early church - *great power* and *great grace*! But *great power* and *great grace* are sustained by *great purity*. Hypocrisy can undermine God's blessings, as we're about to see...

"Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid *them* at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need." The church now numbered over 5000 people. Explosive growth had taken place in a short period of time. Many of the new converts were Jewish pilgrims who'd come to Jerusalem for the feast. They had no place to stay, and nothing to eat. Yet they needed to remain in the city for a few weeks to get grounded in their newfound faith. Wealthier believers liquidated their assets to finance these extended stays.

One such man was named "Joses"... "And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold *it*, and brought the money and laid *it* at the apostles' feet." The OT Law prohibited the tribe of Levi from owning land – their priority was the Temple service - but apparently the

Law had been unable to tame the heart of Barnabas. He insisted on ownership. But what the Law failed to do, the love of Jesus accomplished. When Jesus filled his heart, the contents of his wallet were not as important. The love of Jesus turns the *greedy* into *givers* - *misers* into *philanthropists*. Here Barnabas bows at the apostles' feet. Later he'll become one.

Chapter 5 begins, "But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession." Here's the All-American couple living in Jerusalem. In High School, Ananias was the captain of the football team. Sapphira was the homecoming queen. They drove a Mercedes to church every Sunday. Dressed in designer jeans. They lived on a golf course in the suburbs - even had a TBG group meet in the home. Ananias was a deacon! This storybook couple was the epitome of respectability - the poster child for conservative, evangelical success. *They even dabbled in real estate...*

This is what made them so uneasy. The folks at church had gotten serious about following Jesus - even to the point of it lightening their wallet - Mr. and Mrs. Country Club felt threatened. *What happened to moderation?* Believers were selling off possessions and pooling resources. Ananias and Sapphira liked *playing religion*, but this was looking like real giving and commitment. They didn't like the encroachment on their lifestyle. Here was their quandary... They weren't about to relinquish control of their property, but they didn't want to appear stingy or materialistic. And for this couple "image was everything." They couldn't tolerate looking unspiritual...

So here's what they did, verse 2, they "sold a possession, and he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet." Realize God never *required* selling off property and giving it to the church. This was strictly voluntary. Neither did God tell Ananias to give *all* the proceeds from the sell of his property. He could've donated a portion - *and said so*. It didn't have to be *all*. Ananias' sin was *to give part, but then claim to give all*. He lied!

And he gets busted, "Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? Ananias' giving was designed to *impress people* rather *please God*. It was about *image not integrity*. Apparently, God could've tolerated their *stinginess and materialism*, but what He couldn't allow to gain a foothold was *hypocrisy*. Here were two people more concerned with *looking good* than *being real*. It was *style over substance...* and this is the blight of our modern church.

Peter grills Ananias in verse 4, "While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." Notice in verse 3 Peter tells Ananias he *lied to the Holy Spirit*. In verse 4 he says Ananias has *lied to God*. Obviously, the Holy Spirit must be God. Here's one of many biblical proof texts for the deity of the Holy Spirit.

"Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last." Here's a genuine case of being "slain in the Spirit." And I doubt if any of us want to share this fate. God struck Ananias, and he took a final, dying gasp. "So great fear came upon all those who heard these things." I'm sure. "And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him." In ancient Israel corpses were disposed of quickly. No need to risk a stench or disease. They didn't even take time to notify the next of kin.

I mentioned “great grace” and “great power” were cornerstones in the early church. But there was one more... “great fear.” Church was serious business. Hypocrites who went to church, came home repentant, or in a body bag. Play at religion – be a poser – *claim to be more than you really be* – and God would take issue... And the neighborhood respected the high standard.

Satan is sneaky. In Acts 4 he tried to silence the church through threats and intimidation. But they dropped to their knees and prayed for boldness. Now in Acts 5 he tries a different method. *Intimidation failed, so he tries contamination.* Satan tries to water down their faith - dilute the commitment. He infiltrates the church with hypocrisy. If he can't beat us, he'll join us. But Peter looked right through Ananias - and challenged him, “*why has Satan filled your heart?*” Peter sees that Satan is behind Ananias' deception.

Today, weak-kneed saints will question God's severity - was it really necessary to deal so harshly? If God used the same standards today we'd sing the chorus, “*All to Jesus I surrender...*” - and folks would drop like flies! *Wages Funeral Home* might have to bring a truck over to haul off all the bodies. When God launches a new movement He uses a flurry of miracles to authenticate. In Acts it was *a rushing mighty wind, flames of fire, healing of the lame man* - but then God deals harshly to preserve the work's integrity. When God brought Israel into the Promised Land he worked miraculously at Jericho, but the next battle was Ai, where the sin of Achan cost them a devastating defeat. God had to judge Achan and rid the camp of hidden sin. This is the pattern in Acts. He wanted future generations of believers to understand the priority He places on purity and integrity. Spiritual pride, and deceit, and two-faced spirituality are sins that short-circuit God's work.

Verse 7, “*Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.*” She'd probably been shopping at the mall. But she's in on the duplicity. Verse 2 says she was a co-conspirator. “*And Peter answered her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?” She said, “Yes, for so much.” Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.*” Notice her sin – *she “test(ed) the Spirit of the Lord”* – she challenged God's omniscience and discernment. The fact she lied and thought she could get away with it was a slap in the Spirit's face. You can't hide the truth from God.

I read of restaurant in New York City that built its business on hypocrisy. Husbands bring wives - boyfriends bring girlfriends - couples are seated and handed a menu. But what the girl doesn't know is that the prices in her menu are triple the cost than those on the man's menu... So, when he leans in, and tells us to order whatever she wants - she's deceptively impressed. Yet this is dangerous. When she finds out the truth it can backfire! In the case of Ananias and Sapphira God knew what was up from the start. He sees our motive. Cover ups don't work. They should've come clean.

Verse 10, “*Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband.*” The golden couple were buried in adjacent plots. “*So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things. And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch.*” After

Ananias and Sapphira the church was on its best behavior. “Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.” Apparently, this slowed down the growth rate, but intensified the respect. Grace was still shown. But people realized God takes faith seriously. The Church in all eras needs to be careful about dumbing down the standards of holiness. When we lower the bar we lose the public’s respect. In every church there needs to be both “great grace” and “great fear.”

And it didn’t take long for the church to begin to grow again. “And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women...” The Law of the Vineyard applies to churches – just as it does grapes. Rather than *more foliage* the vinedresser is after *more fruit* – so he prunes the sucker shoots that bleed off valuable sap. The same applies to church life. At times a church has folks who hang on with a hypocritical, or contentious, or bitter spirit. There comes a point when God has to lop off the bad apples. After Mr. and Mrs. Ananias “dropped out” a new surge of folks were added.

“So that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.” Not only was there a surge of people, but of power! We learn in the book of Acts that **purity and power go hand-in-hand**. As soon as God gets rid of sin in the camp, the camp erupts with people and power. Miracles occur. The sick are healed. Demoniacs are delivered.

And this passage shows just how far Peter has come. A few months earlier ole Pete was sitting in the shadows – weeping bitterly that he had denied his Lord - afraid of being arrested. Now he’s so associated with the living Lord Jesus people have connected his shadow with supernatural healing. I don’t believe there was anything miraculous about Peter’s shadow. But folks were healed because it triggered for their faith. It was a point of release. Faith can be nebulous and vague until it has a focus. This is why we practice the laying on of hands when we pray. It’s a rallying point for faith. Peter's shadow brought substance to people's faith. Folks were healed.

Verse 17 “Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.” This was a different form of the laying on of hands. “But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.” Notice, the angel defines Christianity as a “life.” It’s more than a set of doctrines, Christianity is a *lifestyle*. It’s a way to live your life.

“And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught.” They sure didn’t beat around the bush. The angel told them to stand in the temple and preach. The very next morning they report for duty. Here’s a quiz for you geography buffs - “What’s the world’s largest nation?” Answer: “**Procrastination**.” More people live there than in any other state. When God gives orders don’t *hesitate*... or *procrastinate*... just *activate*!

“But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.” They send to the

prison for Peter, but he's in the Temple preaching the Gospel – courtesy of the angel's *early release program*. “But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, saying, “Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!” Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. So one came and told them, saying, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” Surprise!

Verse 26, “Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. And when they had brought them, they set *them* before the council.” This council was the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court – their Supreme Court. “And the high priest asked them, saying, “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine...” What a compliment to Peter and the apostles. They'd filled the city with the Gospel. This is our goal to flood our city with the good news of Jesus.

They also accuse Peter of “intend(ing) to bring this Man's blood on us!” What a short memory. The High Priest forgot his own words when he asked Pilate to release Barrabas. He said of Jesus, “His blood be on us and on our children.” Peter isn't going to let him forget what he asked for that day.

“But Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men...” Later in his letter, Peter writes, “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man... for this is the will of God...” Peter was no anarchist. He believed that submission to the governing authorities is a Christian virtue. If we can't submit to human government – an authority we can see - how can we submit to God's government - an authority that's invisible? Peter believed in paying taxes, and driving the speed limit. He obeys civil authority, as long as its demands don't conflict with the will of God. But when that happens, suddenly, you have a choice – *will you obey man or God?* And Peter says that's no choice at all - its always better to obey God! When the day comes when the County commission tells us we can't share the Gospel on a public sidewalk, or in a county park - then its time to buck the system. God has commanded us to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. If God's commands conflict with a county ordinance, then so be it - lock us up. *Divine decrees take precedent over governmental ordinances.*

And Peter renews his preaching efforts with the Sanhedrin themselves... Verse 30 “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.” Wow, what boldness! “Him God has exalted to His right hand *to be* Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and *so also is* the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.” The greater their threats the braver Peter becomes. He breaks their laws before he leaves the room. And “When they heard *this*, they were furious and plotted to kill them.”

“Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while.” Gamaliel wants to speak privately... Jewish sources tell us Rabbi Gamaliel was the preeminent scholar of his day. His contemporaries called him, “*the beauty of the Law.*” At his funeral it was said, “*the glory of the Law ceased and purity and abstinence died...*” Gamaliel was well respected by all the Jews, both his fellow Pharisees and even the rival Sadducees.

As a side note, according to Acts 22:3 one of his students was a Jew from Tarsus, named Saul – who'll later become Paul.

This Gamaliel "said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about 400, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed." We know very little about either Theudas or Judas, but that's Gamaliel's point. They created a stir, but it was short-lived. It died out quickly.

"And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing, but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it - lest you even be found to fight against God." If it's of man it will go the way of Theudas and Judas, but if it's of God you can't defeat it. And why would you want to? Who really wants to fight with God? Gamaliel gave the Sanhedrin some wise and open-minded advice. In fact, I wonder what Gamaliel would tell us today - 2000 years later - now that Christianity has transformed cultures, and birthed civilizations, and effected countless generations, and spread to the four corners of the globe? I'm sure he'd conclude that this Jesus movement was of God after all!

Verse 40, "And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten *them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go." Rather than execute the apostles, they roughed them up - had them flogged. It was one more try to shut them up. And you got to love their reaction! No apostolic pity parties here! "So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

I love how Winston Churchill defined a fanatic. He said, "A fanatic is someone who *can't change his mind and won't change the subject.*" That's the apostles! How do you stop guys who interpret a *beating* as a *blessing*? Throw them in prison and they praise God. Shame them and they take it as an honor. Try to silence them, and they grow more public and vocal. The disciples recalled the words of Jesus, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven..." How do you defeat people who live for heaven's reward? *You don't!*

Chapter 6, "Now in those days, when *the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.*" Remember divine math... God *adds* – *multiplies* - even *subtracts* - but He never *divides*. It's members of the church that stir up division. I've heard of churches splitting over the color of the carpet, or whether a guitar or piano led worship, or the location of the water cooler. Trivial stuff. Obviously, there are issues worth fighting for, but how often have churches divided over picky, petty matters? Superficial stuff cocks us sideways.

Acts 6 is the first church squabble. The Church at Jerusalem had a *breech over bread*. The dispute erupted over whether the *Greek widows* were getting a fair share of the *groceries*. The conflict was over a *minor matter*, but as these situations often do, it had escalated to *major*

proportions.

The word "*Hellenist*" referred to Jews who'd embraced Greek language and culture. The Hebrew purists resented these people. They considered them compromisers. There was a natural tension between these two groups. So when there seemed to be inequities in the distribution of the church's benevolence the Hellenists were quick to call foul and accuse the Hebrews of discrimination. It was an ugly, volatile situation and had the potential of permanently thwarting the *rapid expansion* and *righteous harmony* of the infant Church... *Disaster was averted because of some wise leadership...*

Verse 2, "*Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables."* The complaint was trivial, but the problem was far more serious. The apostles were stretched too thin. They were being asked to do it all. They were hammering out sound doctrine – teaching the people – fighting the Sanhedrin - discipling new believers - *now they're suppose to wait on tables?* It was just too much... And pastors today face the same dilemma.

Everybody wants me to be there... every time there's a meeting, or a wedding, or a funeral, or a special event, or a member heads to the hospital, or a teenager gets into trouble, or you have a squabble with your spouse... People want their email answered... their phone call taken... their invitation accepted... *Pastor, can spare me just a few minutes of your time...* And oh yea, we need two quality Bible Study every week! *That's a given!* I'm not complaining. I'm just saying it can get to be a lot. This is why I don't even want to know the burn out rate for pastors. It's astronomical. If a pastor is going to survive he has to learn to say "*no,*" *prioritize, find help, delegate.*

And this is what the apostles do in Acts 6... They realize they're the paper jam - the bottleneck in the life of the church. If they don't get other people involved in ministry they're going to hinder the work they're trying to advance. Their priority is clear. "*It is not desirable that we... leave the word of God...*" The ministry of the Word – its study and teaching - is every pastor's top priority. The Bible calls itself *a fire, a food, a sword, and a hammer.* It's God's revelation to man. Without it we would be lost, defenseless, and hopeless... Duffy Daugherty, long time coach of the Michigan State Spartans, once told his team, "*Men, when you're playing for the national championship, its not a matter of life and death. It's more important than that.*" That's a sky-high priority, yet that's how every pastor should feel about teaching the Scriptures. From week to week other needs seem more *urgent* than preparing another Bible study, but in God's wisdom none are more important for the health of a church. The apostles knew this, and sensed it was time to delegate.

Verse 3 "*Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*" This whole matter was about the "*daily distribution.*" The Greek word for "*distribution*" is "*diakonos*" - same word as "*deacon.*" That's why these seven men were considered the Church's first deacons. Note, the early church had a simple leadership structure... The apostles or elders *led and fed.* The deacons *served.* - Elders take care of *spiritual needs.* Deacons handle physical needs. - Elders *oversee.* Deacons *undergird.*

Also notice the spiritual qualifications given to men who waited on widows. They had to be,

"of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." The church has no menial jobs. Every person we served is bought by the blood of Jesus. Thus, everyone should be treated with love and wisdom. Churches today often have the wrong focus when it comes to church government. They're rigid in regards to structure, but compromise on the character of the men who occupy that structure. Whereas, the NT is flexible regarding structure, but unwavering when it comes to a leader's character.

Verse 5 records the church's reaction. *"And the saying pleased the whole multitude."* A major schism was averted. *"And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip* (the next two chapters are about Stephen and Philip), *Prochorus* (was a long time assistant to the Apostle John, and died a martyr's death), *Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch...*" This *"Nicolas"* may've ended up a bad apple. Some Bible teachers identify *"Nicolas"* with the heresy that's spoken of in Revelation 2-3, *"the sin of the Nicolaitans."* *"Nico"* means *"ruler"* - *"laos"* means *"people."* The *Nicolaitans* practiced a bullying form of leadership. Could it be that Nicolas rebelled against his role as a deacon – and wanted power and authority. Rather than remain a servant he became a tyrant.

One other point - later, elders are appointed by fellow elders. But here deacons are selected by the church. Peter said, *"seek out from among you..."* And in light of that, it's interesting that all seven deacons had Greek or Hellenistic names. This church chose servants that the perceived victims would be able to trust. What was important in the church was *equity* and *unity*.

According to verse 6 the deacons were *"set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem..."* The apostles' decision to prioritize God's Word and delegate these simpler tasks unclogged the bottleneck. It spawned a new season of growth.

"And a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." In first century Israel 8000 priests served in the Temple. The Jewish priesthood was limited to one family – a select group – descendants of Aaron. But in Christ everyone is in on the action. The Holy Spirit was poured out on all believers. Now the ministry is being delegated. Soon *every member will be a minister*. Christianity taught the priesthood of every believer. In Christ each of us has a direct connection with God. A priest is no longer needed. Perhaps this resonated among the Jewish priests. They knew Judaism's limits. These priests also saw how the Temple veil was torn when Jesus died. It was a sign. In Christ, the separation between God and man is finally over.

Verse 8, *"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people."* *From table waiter to miracle worker* – apparently, God rewarded Stephen's faithful service with a broader and bolder ministry. Stephen was faithful in a little and God rewarded him with greater.

"Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen." The *"Freedmen"* were Jews whose fathers had been Roman slaves, who won their freedom. Apparently, they rallied together and formed their own synagogue. For some reason they had a beef with Stephen. *"And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses*

and God.” They hired perjurers! “And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon *him*, seized him, and brought *him* to the council.” (or the Sanhedrin).

“They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us. And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.” Spurgeon use to say to his Bible college students, “Men, when you teach on heaven, let there always be a glow on your face, a gleam in your eye, and a grin on your lips... When you teach on hell, your normal face will do.” Well apparently, Stephen had a certain glow about him.

Exodus 34 tells us after Moses spent time in God’s presence a visible sheen or sparkle or luster lingered. Call it the *divine shine*, the *Mo glow!* Evidently, God’s glory had a comparable effect on Stephen’s countenance. The similarity between Moses and Stephen should’ve said to the Jews that rather than contradict Moses, Stephen was acting in harmony with him. We’ll study Stephen’s testimony before the Sanhedrin next time...