



Sunday, August 20, 2023

Speaker: Pastor John VanderWindt

Scripture: Acts 4:23-5:11

Sermon: Prayer for Integrity

Let's open our Bibles to Acts 4. Today we're actually going through two different pieces in Acts. One is kind of a continuation of where we've been for the last few weeks with Acts and the next part is the reality of church. Mark [Mertick] talked about how we need each other and so on and that's important. And that comes through in all of this as well. So, in **Acts 4**, we're going to begin reading at verse 23. We went through to verse 22 last week and so today, we're going to start at verse 23. We'll continue to read to **Acts 5:1-11**.

It says this...

11 Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.' **12** Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." **13** When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. **14** But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.

15 So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. **16** "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. **17** But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

18 Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. **19** But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges!

20 As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." **21** After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. **22** For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

The Believers Pray

23 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. **24** When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. **25** You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

26 The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one. **27** Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. **28** They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. **29** Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." **31** After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

The Believers Share Their Possessions

32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. **33** With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all **34** that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales **35** and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), **37** sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Ananias and Sapphira

5 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. **2** With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? **4** Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. **6** Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. **8** Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." **9** Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. **11** Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Join me in prayer. Dear Lord, we come to You this morning and we thank You for Your goodness. We thank You as our sovereign God, the ruler of all creation. Lord, we are reminded of Your holiness. We are reminded of the need for community and for the beauty of community. Lord, we ask for Your grace as we look at how we, as a church, can serve You. Lord, we pray the word spoken today may be Your words, that you will open our ears, that You will mold our hearts, that You will soften our hearts to hear Your word. Lord, I pray that the word spoken may be Yours and that none of mine may come out. In Jesus' name. Amen.

As I said, we've got two very different pieces in today's story. We have the beginning piece, which is this aspect of prayer, and we have this ending piece, which is the story of community but yet it didn't always work really well. But we need to begin with prayer because, as we will see throughout this entire piece, it is prayer in the name of Jesus and actions in the name of Jesus, which come through in all things.

This week, as we've been gathering, we've been reading from **Matthew 28:18-20** which says, "**18** Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The early church, in many ways, practices that piece, that great commission that God gives. So we've got Peter and John who have just healed a man. They've spoken boldly, they've been taken to jail, they've been let out, and they've been ordered not to speak in God's name anymore. They say, "We can't do that." Then we see in **Acts 4:23** that as they're released, they go back to their own people and report what all happened. We spent a little bit of time reporting some of what happened today.

But notice, the first response from the people. **Acts 4:24**, "**24** When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer... " There's the first response. People have just been jailed. They've been told that they can't preach the name of Jesus anymore. Their first response is not, "Well, we'd better figure out a strategy on how to deal with this." The first response is prayer. And notice how the prayer begins. It begins with, "Sovereign God." This is the way they start their prayer. They begin with what Jesus told them at the beginning of the Great Commission. "All authority has been given to me."

So these disciples or apostles are the first people in the church. They go, "Okay, this has happened. We need to take this to the God of all authority. We need to take this to the God who is in charge of everything." We say in the Apostles Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." In this piece, they go on to say in **Acts 4:24-25**, "... you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. **25** You spoke by the Holy Spirit... " You are the Creator God. That is the way they begin their prayer.

Then they say in **Acts 4:25**, "**25** You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:..." "

They use scripture in their prayer. They admit and tell the rest of the world that the words of Scripture are God's words. And they use God's words back to God as a way of saying to God, "Yes, God, you are an authority. But yes, God, we also know that You know where we're at, and Lord, we are going to claim Your promises in Scripture." Going back to the Great Commission where Jesus ends it with, "I am with you, always."

Now let's think about our own prayers for just a moment. How often do we begin by acknowledging the God of all authority? How often do we use scripture within our own prayer? I guess if we're going to use scripture in our prayers, we have to know scripture as well. And by knowing scripture, you give God a vocabulary to speak to you. And you give yourself a vocabulary to speak to God. It's about a relationship of using words which are common to God's language. Think about it, anytime you have a relationship with a person, you want to know the language and the vocabulary which they understand and which they speak because, when using words that people are common with or in common with, they understand you and you can communicate well and you can develop that relationship. So scripture is an important part to become part of our prayer.

Then they also do something else. In **Acts 4:27**, it says, "**27** Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." Anointed in Greek is "Christ." So your servant Jesus Christ, they've come against Him. And now they are attacking us. So in their prayer, they're also very honest and authentic about the situation.

We think back to **2 Kings**, in which Hezekiah has just been delivered a letter from the enemy. Hezekiah goes to the temple and Hezekiah says this in **2 Kings 19:15-16**, "**15** LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. **16** Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God." Hezekiah understood very clearly that the accusations against him and his nation were not against him and his nation. It was against God. So Hezekiah came to God and said, "God, you need to defend yourself because we can't." In many ways, Peter and John did the same. They were saying, "You can tell us to be quiet, you can jail us, but we need to speak the name of Jesus because Jesus has all authority in everything."

Then look at what they finally asked for. After they give God credit for being in all authority, after they share scripture, after they say, "Here's the situation and here's what we prayed for." **Acts 4:29-30**, "**29** ... consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. **30** Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." Amen.

Think about that as a prayer for just a moment. Right? Their prayer was to speak boldness to the people and to speak in Jesus' name. That the name of Jesus may be honored through signs and wonders. Remember that piece. Through signs and wonders, the name of Jesus is recognized. So they ask to speak boldness.

This week, we talked about teaching the commandments. We talked about what is intentionally taught. But also what is unintentionally taught. So sometimes when you look at a prayer, you need to look at what is not asked for. As much as we need to pray for protection about things and for God to protect us in our work and so on, notice they did not pray for protection from the enemy.

They didn't say, "Lord, protect us from suffering in your name." They said, "Lord, give us the boldness to speak Your name." I think they knew that suffering would come. So rather than praying for escape from the suffering, they were praying for boldness within the suffering. Wow. That's quite the prayer. That's a prayer of boldness.

And look how God responds. In **Acts 4:31**, it says, "**31** After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." God answered their prayer. In fact, He answered it with a shaking up at the beginning. "Just so you know, it's me who's giving you this boldness. I am shaking the earth to show my authority and I am filling you with the Spirit to give you boldness." So they went out and they spoke with boldness. So this is the beginning of the Church of Christ. Praying to speak with boldness for the name of Jesus.

Then we get a little picture into the inside life of the church. The church begins in this aspect of - if we go back to the greatest command - "Love God above all and love your neighbor as yourself." The people have been praying for the name of Jesus. And now in **Acts 4:32**, it says, "**32** All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had." This was a case of, "We love God. We will put our differences aside because we will be in one mind for the heart of God. And we love our neighbors because we share everything that we have."

We might think, "Wow, that's ideal." Some of us might think, "Hey, I could use someone to share with me." And we see later on in the church that the church in Jerusalem needed people to share and so Paul says, "He collects money from churches elsewhere to bring back to the church in Jerusalem." The message in this piece is, "Yes, we need to share."

But the message is, "We do community. We live in community together and we help each other in any way that is needed." So if someone is in need of something, we help them with that need. And that is a picture of the early church and community.

But then there's a story that gives us the reality of this. It says that Joseph was called Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement" and another translation has "son of exhortation" is one who speaks on behalf of God. And encouragement is speaking on behalf of God. So Barnabas is a Levite. And it's interesting that at this point, we notice that Levites have property in the Old Testament. Levites didn't have any property because God provided for them.

Barnabas is a Levite, he has property and he sells it. He brings the money and sets it at the apostles' feet. It is also to be noted that he does not give the money to the apostles but he puts it at their feet for all of the people who have brought money. So it doesn't belong to the apostles. The apostles are just in charge of the distribution of it. It is the distribution of it that they look out for - and we'll see later that they need help with - but it's brought to the church and the church then distributes the funds to those who need it.

So Barnabas sells some land and gives the money to the apostles. We don't know if this was a public event. We don't know if Barnabas said anything about it. Obviously somebody bought the fields so there is a transaction that happened and people know about it. But the idea is just that he did it. Luke has given us this little insight - and by the way, he's also doing a little bit of foreshadowing here because we see Barnabas later on in Acts again - but he brings the money to the apostles.

Then we have this division in the chapter. As we know, chapters are added later because this is really part of the story. And **Acts 5** begins with the word, "Now.... "

If you read this in different translations or maybe in an older NIV, it is the word, "But." Which is probably a little better translation because when you hear the word "but," you often get this, "Here's one side **but** let me tell you something else about it." So here we have this total contrast in what is happening. Barnabas sells the whole land and gives it to the apostles. He's encouraging.

Now we get to Ananias and Sapphira . Ananias and Sapphira decide that they've got a property to sell. They are probably pretty active in the church. Probably fairly well known in the church. People with means, they've got extra property, they've got extra things. So they decide that they would like to give a little bit to the church as well. I don't know whether they saw, you know, people saying thank you to Barnabas for giving the whole thing to the church and, "That was so great of you." And everything else. But they somehow decided that, "Here's what we'll do. We'll sell the property. We'll give some of it to the church and we'll keep some." Which in all practical purposes, is great. They could keep the whole thing if they wanted to, as Peter says later on.

So we have to know from the beginning, this is not a piece in which God is saying through Luke, that everything you have, you have to give to God. That's not what he's saying. It is true - and we see this elsewhere in Scripture - that everything we have is God's. We have to be wise stewards of it. So we have to take care of it knowing that it's God's and give back to Him what He asked. But that's not what Luke is saying here. It's because Ananias and his wife decide, "We're going to keep part of it. We're going to stick together on this story. We're going to give part of it and we'll just tell everybody that we gave the whole thing." Now, the person who bought the property, if they were in the church, would know that. But they said, "This is what we are going to do."

So they bring it to Peter. They lay it at Peter's feet. I don't know the conversation. Luke doesn't give us that piece. But Peter in **Acts 5:3** simply says, "**3** ... "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? And notice at the end of **Acts 5:4**, he says, "**4** You have not lied just to human beings but to God." Peter, first of all, acknowledges that any gift that we give to the church is a gift to God. And when we give to the church, it is giving to God - it is not giving for the sake of other people. It is not giving to make ourselves look good or to feel good. It is a gift of gratitude to God. Peter says, "You've lied to God."

This is quite interesting coming from Peter who, a few weeks before, when asked if he knew Jesus said, "No." And actually gave an oath saying he didn't know. Here we see in **Acts 5:5**, when Ananias heard this - so Peter had just spoken - he fell down and died. Talk about signs and wonders. So we have it that it says in the end of **Acts 5:5**, "**5** And great fear seized all who heard what had happened." They take Ananias out and they bury him three hours later.

We don't know where Sapphira was in between this time. Obviously she hadn't been told yet that her husband had passed away. She came in and Peter asked her the same question. She says, "Absolutely. This is the amount we got for the property." And Peter says, "How is it that you could conspire together to lie to the Holy Spirit? The people who carried your husband out, they're at the door or they're coming soon. They're going to carry you out as well." So she died and they carried her out.

Sometimes you think, "Lord, why is this in Scripture?" In **2 Timothy 3:16**, it says, "**16** All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness..." So why this piece? As I said before, the issue is not the amount given. The issue is the motivation behind it. The issue is, "Why did he choose to lie to the Holy Spirit? What was he looking for?" And notice how Peter says, "Why have you allowed Satan to fill your hearts?"

The church is on the move and the church is moving. And here, we see one attack. This attack doesn't come from the outside. This attack comes from the inside. If we think about this, Satan often works that way, doesn't he? Remember, we talked about in **Acts 4:32**, "**32** All the believers were one in heart and mind." Satan often, instead of attacking from the outside, comes from the inside and says, "How do we divide? How do we create division within the church?"

How do we get people to think more about themselves than the name of Jesus?" So Luke includes this piece as a warning.

I'm thinking it's a pretty serious warning because I'm thinking, "Okay, where do we stand with this as a church and as individuals? Are we faithful?" Ananias was struck dead immediately. Some of us might think, "Well, that's kind of harsh. I mean, like, seriously, Lord, you let Peter go. He denied you three times. How come that went through?" And then we say, "Well, you know what? Actually, in many ways, Jesus is being gracious because he's setting a clear example of, "Remember my holiness."

In **Exodus 32**, there is a story of the golden calf. Moses went up Mount Sinai and got the 10 commandments from God. As he's up there, he hears this noise. So he comes down and he sees that the people have created this golden calf. When he gets down, he goes to the Levites and he gives them permission to take a sword and to kill people who participated in this. Interestingly enough, there were 3,000 people killed that day. The same number who came to Christ on the day of Pentecost. But at the time of Mount Sinai, God had just given the 10 commandments, he had just taken them out of Egypt, he had just told them, "I am God alone. There is only one God and that's me." Then they go and build a golden calf. God's going, "I guess you didn't really get this, did you? Let me prove to you the fact that there is only one God. I need to make this clear."

And now, we have in the New Testament with the beginning of the church where God says, "I have made you holy through the death of my Son and you are to live holy as a church. In the name of Jesus." Not your name. Not the building's name. Not the organization's name. But in the name of Jesus. Ananias was like, "Well, hey, I can do this. I can give to the church and get some credit for myself." And God says, "You don't get it, do you? It is in my name. You have to remember that I am a holy God. Don't take that lightly. As a holy God, I've got all authority as well. I can strike you down at any time." So He did with Ananias and Sapphira.

John Knox, a famous reformer once said, "'I have never once feared the devil, but I tremble every time I enter the pulpit.'" Because he remembers that he's speaking on behalf of a holy God. And I'm in that same place. I invite you, as you communicate with other people around you, when you teach all He has commanded, remember that you are teaching of Jesus' commands and not our own.

When David had sinned, he begins **Psalms 51** this way, "**1** Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. **2** Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. **3** For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Then he says in **Psalms 51:4**, "**4** Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge."

We need to remember that God is a holy God. He is completely right in his verdict and we need to come to Him in compassion, asking for His compassion and for His grace.

On Friday night, as we were ending this, Glenn gave us verses from **Romans 8**, because when Jesus says at the end of **Matthew 28:20**, He says, "... surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Paul expands on that in **Romans 8:37**, "**37** ... we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Peter and John knew that, the apostles knew that, and that gave them the courage to speak boldly because they had the Spirit of Christ in them. He says, "**38** For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, **39** neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

These people were seized with great fear. But God says, "Do not let that fear keep you away." That fear is that healthy respect of God's holiness because you need to know that there is nothing... absolutely nothing that can separate us from His love. When you think about that and the messiness of our lives, we say, "Thank you."

That also tells us about how we need to be a community. We need to do community in an authentic way. That doesn't mean you spill out everything to everybody. It does mean that you share your hardships. That you find people around you to walk this journey with you. To hold you up in prayer. To encourage you. To sometimes hold you accountable so that we together may help each other grow and live and be the people that God has called us to be.

Then we can live as a community. We can share with the community as we did yesterday and see how God works and blesses the community. So today, rather than leaving thinking, "Oh, I need to be so very careful," I want to share a few verses from **Isaiah 55:6-7**, "**6** Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. **7** Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."

That's an invitation. God is saying, "I invite you to come to me. I invite you to come to me with your mess, your sin, your wrong motivations, and anything that might be putting enough space in between you and God. He says, "I will help clear that away so that we can have a relationship which is not hindered by sin in between us." Then it says in **Isaiah 55:8-11**, "**8** For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. **9** "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. **10** As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, **11** so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

And this is, in many ways, a way in which we should live today. It says in **Isaiah 55:12**, "**12** You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

I know, some of you are starting to go, [song] "You shall go out in joy and... " You can keep on singing that song this week. Remember that even though we often have faults, God says, "Nothing will separate us." But don't take it lightly. Work at it. Ask Jesus to help you with it. Ask a fellow Christian to walk alongside you and say, "Let me do this journey with you. We are a community as a church and we will go out with joy."

Join me in prayer. Dear Lord, we thank You for the community that we have as a church. We thank You, Lord, for the joy that we can have in Your name. Lord, we ask that You will give us boldness to speak Your name and that we too may see Your signs and wonders. Lord, we pray that You will give us discernment, that we may see within ourselves and within Your church where Satan may be attacking. Lord, may we speak boldness against it, to honor You and all that we do. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*