

CCH Sermon 12th July 2020

“Riches I heed not nor man’s empty praise”

- (screen share) Acts 4:33-34
- We come today to the next instalment of the exciting story of the first church.
 - And I have to say that rather like for Christians today, it continues to be a bit of a rollercoaster.
 - We’ve seen...
 - Jesus go **up** to heaven
 - the Holy Spirit come **down**
 - Matthias **replace** Judas
 - The good news of Jesus go **out** boldly
 - But now we see **three** waves of opposition.
 - You see there is an enemy called **Satan**, and he hates it when speak about Jesus, because this grows God’s kingdom, and weakens his kingdom.
 - And here in these early chapters of Acts we see...
 - **Persecution** (last week and next)- the Jewish leaders trying to silence the gospel with opposition.
 - **Scandal** (today) a moral compromise in the church threatening to discredit the gospel
 - **False teaching** (In a couple of weeks) the apostles getting so busy doing practical things that the teaching of the gospel gets threatened. More on that soon.
 - John Stott makes the point that all these are the same in the book of **Revelation**.
- So today we focus on fighting that second wave- moral compromise...
 - our story is in **two parts**, one seriously positive, and the second seriously negative.
 - In fact it’s very challenging indeed.
 - For each part, we’ll look at the **story**, a **question**, and **two lessons** for us today.

1) EXTRAORDINARY GENEROSITY (4:32-37)

- What we see in the end of ch4 is pretty exceptional. Let’s look first at the **story**.
 - Look at the unity and sharing in v32.
 - It’s like they saw their belongings as completely communal.
 - Extraordinary Generosity. But what is clear is that this was a gift of God v33-34a
 - It’s the work of God the Holy Spirit.
 - And what did he bring about? v34b-35
 - It’s amazing.
 - It’s not just sharing stuff that they don’t want- freecycle.
 - It’s not even giving from their earned income.
 - They are actually selling assets and giving the proceeds away.
 - And there’s an example of this in Barnabas (who will feature again in Acts- always a complete encourager- that’s what his name means). v34-35
- Well it’s very striking but is it a model for us today.
- And that leads us onto our **Q: Is ownership wrong.**
 - And the answer, I believe is no.
 - in v4, we are going to see that property is completely at the individual’s disposal.
 - This is not an enforced communism,
 - It is a voluntary sharing.
 - Elsewhere we read in acts of the early church meeting in one another’s homes, so some clearly still owned homes.
 - But what we do see is an extraordinary generosity, which we can learn from.
 - And that leads us onto our two main lessons.

- **The first is to drink deeply of the grace of God in Jesus!**
 - You see this wasn't something the early church dredged up from themselves.
 - It would be tempting to beat ourselves up and say I need to be more generous.
 - But before we focus on our activity, we always need to focus 1st on God's activity.
 - This generosity was empowered by God.
 - Look closely at v33. God's grace was powerfully at work in them all.
 - Before we seek to look horizontally, we need to turn vertically
 - To God, and to his resources.
 - Asking him for the grace, and mercy that we so desperately need.
 - It's actually the same in 2 Corinthians 8,
 - a passage which speaks of the generosity of the Macedonian Christians, who Paul commends as a model to others.
 - Paul appeals to the Corinthians by pointing them to Jesus...
 - *"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus, Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich". 2 Cor 8:9.*
 - We don't become more generous by beating ourselves up.
 - We become more generous by drinking deeply from the well of God's generosity to us in Jesus.
 - We remember how kind God has been to give up his most precious thing for us- not his money but his son, who died so that we might be forgiven.
 - That's why I'm so excited that in August we are going to take a break to spend 4 weeks looking at what I'm calling *"An Oasis of Grace"*
 - 4 weeks on Luke 15
 - The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost Son and how they teach sinners & saints about the undeserved riches in Christ.
 - I think it would do us all good, to step off the treadmill
 - And just focus on God's kindness to us in Jesus.
 - Like a pool of crystal clear cool drinking water in the desert.
 - And as we see his kindness to us, that will motivate our kindness to one another.
 - But once we see God's grace to us, we can **see your sisters and brothers** as family.
 - The early church shared the same Father.
 - And they shared the same Holy Spirit
 - And they shared the gospel of Jesus- they were united – *one in heart and mind* v32.
 - And that meant that they were brothers and sisters.
 - And like brothers and sisters share the same
 - cornflakes, computer games, cupboards and cupcakes.
 - We too can be extraordinarily generous with our
 - food, books, homes, gardens, cooking, cash.
 - Since our church started nearly 2 years ago, let me tell you a few examples of extraordinary generosity I've seen...
 - A wodge of banknotes given to someone who was struggling to pay for their car repairs.
 - 100 meals cooked for families with new babies.
 - two families asking to support families in the church hit by coronavirus.
 - the church council vote to give over 10% of our income to Christian and charitable causes outside the church, so that we can support people like Diego at Tyndale House who we met at our prayer meeting on Wednesday.
 - It is such a joy to give and to share.
 - Not just giving away the stuff we don't want (though I love our freecycle)
 - But giving away what we do want, so that it is real sacrifice.
- Read 2 Cor 8 to see more of that.

- So can I say 2 things as we seek to learn from this generosity...
 - **First to those in need:** Please say when you are in need.
 - I know it's hard.
 - Have a quiet word with Simon, running our hardship fund.
 - Have a quiet word with your lifegroup leader or me.
 - IF we don't know one another's needs, we can't help.
 - Do you need help moving furniture
 - Do you need help clearing your garden
 - Could you really do with a meal
 - Are you lonely and want someone to phone.
 - PLEASE SAY!
 - I know it would be nice for people to spot everything!
 - **those in need:** Please say when you are in need.
 - **To those in plenty.** All you have is a gift from God- will you share it with family?
 - It is such a joy to give
 - The early church wasn't so outward focused that it didn't look after its own.
 - And we must be
 - loving **Christ**
 - loving **Huntingdon**
 - but also **Loving one another.**
 - Meditate on God's goodness to you
 - and that will open up your palm from holding onto your money or your possessions too tightly.
 - **▲ I've recommended to some of you the teaching of Paul Tripp.**
 - As a young pastor in a small church in the US with 2 small kids he was struggling to make ends meet.
 - And he found an anonymous letter in the mail with a cheque for \$100.
 - As he was already thinking of 100 ways of spending it
 - his wife said *"Paul, we're doing okay, and we weren't expecting this money. Why don't we give it to someone less fortunate?"*
 - It was incredibly painful for Paul, but he realised that God was giving him more than \$100 but a window onto his heart to see his own selfishness and the idol that money had become.
 - He says we can either view ourselves as containers or conduits.
 - **Containers** that hoard to make our lives more pleasurable.
 - Or **conduits** that pass on, and bless others.
 - Lord, you were rich beyond all splendour,
yet, for love's sake, became so poor;
thrones for a manger did surrender,
sapphire-paved courts for stable floor:
Lord, you were rich beyond all splendour,
yet, for love's sake, became so poor.
 - **Now As I close this first point can I just clarify something...**
 - If you are a guest this morning, we don't want your money.
 - We want you to discover the grace in Jesus Christ.
 - Christianity is a free gift.
 - You don't buy your way into God's Kingdom by being generous.

Well we move from the **positive** example of Barnabas and others (EXTRAORDINARY GENEROSITY) , to the shocking, serious, sobering **negative** story of Ananias & Sapphira...

2) EXTRAORDINARY DISHONESTY (5:1-11)

- You can so easily imagine the conversation at bedtime in Ananias and Sapphira's home.
 - *"Did you hear about Barnabas?*
 - *What's that my love?*
 - *Barnabas, he sold a field and gave the proceeds to church. 50 thousand!*
 - *Wow- impressive.*
 - *Wouldn't it be nice if we were remembered for something too?*
 - *Well we could sell the olive grove outside Jerusalem. The one your gran left you.*
 - *It's worth a few shekels.*
 - *75 thousand actually. It was just valued.*
 - *But that's our retirement fund. But then the Lord loves a cheerful giver.*
 - *Only trouble is can we afford it?*
 - *Well we can keep a bit back, no-one will know. Give 60 thousand and we'll have still outshone Barnabas. And it would be quite useful to have a bit more cash in hand for the summer holiday, there'll be 15 thousand small change.*
 - *Alright, sneaky idea. I'll give the estate agents a call".*
- So when we read v1& 2 it looks so similar to Barnabas.
 - But it's so different. Behind the scene the motives are so different.
 - Watch it unfold v3-4.
 - Verse 5 is shocking.
 - The poor younger men who were on the church cleaning rota that week. v6.
 - But that wasn't going to be the last dead body they cleared up that day.
 - v7-11 second grave.
 - What a shock to the cleanup duty lads that day. They've just come in and there's another body.
- Now here's the question. Why such a harsh penalty, after all they had been extremely generous. Perhaps, others hadn't given anything at all.
- But we need to get a few things straight....
- 1st) The sin for which they were judged wasn't a lack of generosity, it was lying.
 - *(I've called the second half extraordinary dishonesty not extraordinary stinginess)*
 - v4, their 75k shekels or however much it was all theirs to do what they liked.
 - No-one was forcing them to give any or all of it away.
 - But they decided to be deceitful about it.
 - v3. Lied to the Holy Spirit
 - v4. lied to God.
 - You see when you lie to others, you are lying to God.
 - And v9 you are testing the Spirit of God, because you are presuming on him not to take your sin seriously.
 - Lies are serious.
 - Because it is such a destructive sin.
 - They may make you look good, but
 - They ruin friendships, families and church fellowships.
- But still. did they need to die?
 - Well actually every sin deserves death.
 - And it's only grace and mercy that keeps us alive from one day to the next.
 - It's why we desperately need Jesus and his grace that forgives us and changes us.

But I wonder if there's an added issue...

- We are in the very earliest days of the church, and the church needs to learn (just like the early OT church did with the very similar story of Achan in Josh 7) that sin matters.
- This judgement of God was a kindness not only to root sin out of the church, but to stop it from spreading to others.
- Look at verse 5 and verse 11.
- When one person's slackness over sin is judged, it makes others sit up and take notice.
 - "There but for the grace of God go I".
 - ▲ a mobile phone at a wedding.

And you see I think this is the power of the story for us today. And onto our first lesson.

1) FEAR GOD.

- Which of us hasn't said or done something on the spur of the moment to try and look more impressive?
- And which of us has used our wealth perfectly?
- I'm so challenged by this story, because it could have been me.
 - I am so easily swayed by what people think
 - I act differently and sometimes sinfully to make myself look better.
 - And I have been given so much relative to most people in our world and our community.
- Lord have mercy.
- This story makes me also fear God
 - And I hope it does the same for you.
 - Our God is a consuming fire.
- He's still "our God", and we are his and forgiven freely by his grace the moment we trust in Christ.
- But we dare not presume on that grace if we don't want to be sorely disciplined.
- Lord have mercy on us.

2) BE CAREFUL IN YOUR GODLINESS

- As one writer puts it, wherever "wealth is involved, sin is not far away".
 - How are you going to use your money?
- And husbands and wives.
 - You can be such a force for good and for the gospel
 - But you can be such a force for evil and for giving a foothold to Satan too.
 - Be careful in your godliness.
 - It would have been easy for Ananias and Sapphira to kid themselves that because they were being generous, it gave them licence not to be careful in the small things.
 - And it's easier to sin when your spouse agrees with you.
 - But be careful in your godliness.
 - Grace is not a license for immorality.
 - Be careful in your godliness.
- **ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO YOUR SPEECH**
 - Your speech is an outflow of your heart
 - And if your heart loves the praise of man or money
 - then your speech is going to start bending the truth to for you.
 - And we see here a complex cocktail of
 - money
 - looking impressive before others
 - lies.
- Why don't we turn all this to prayer asking for God's help with our **money**, with our **marriages** with our **mouths**. [STARTING WITH CONFESSION].