

Acts 4:31 – 5:16 (Sin is No Barrier)

“Real Unity & Fellowship vs. Fake Unity & Fellowship”

Defeat can come in 2 ways. Attack from the outside or collapse from the inside.

Michael Jordan & the Chicago Bulls – the Greatest Basketball Player of all time, and the dominant team of the 90s.

Yet Michael Jordan was actually an underachiever! His team was unbeatable on the court, and he should have won more titles. But after the 1998 season, the team broke up due to internal conflict between key people. And the Chicago Bulls have been cellar dwellers ever since.

They were unstoppable on the basketball court – but they were destroyed when the unity of the team broke down.

The ongoing work of Jesus has been unstoppable so far in the Book of Acts. Last week, external opposition and persecution was proved powerless! But in this next episode, will the ongoing work of Jesus be interrupted by the insidious corruption of sin from inside the church? Is sin a barrier to the unstoppable gospel?”

This is a passage about **the unity and fellowship** of the young church. Will the Unity and Fellowship of the church withstand the attack of human sin??

Will our church be destroyed or derailed by external opposition? Possible in some parts of the world, but unlikely in our country. **Could our church be** destroyed or derailed by collapse from within? By break down in unity and fellowship? Let's be frank: it's possible.

We'll see two options presented in this passage:

- Real Unity & Fellowship, in the power of the HS
- Fake Unity & Fellowship, prompted by Satan

1. Genuine, Holy Spirit empowered Unity and Fellowship

Read Acts 4: 31-35

This is an amazing picture – so what was actually happening?

- Real fellowship: real community, close relationships. (In a church of 5000 people, by the way). Yet needs were known and needs were met.
- Real unity:
 - o “One in heart and mind”

- They really felt that the needs of others were their needs. They identified with their fellow believers to the amazing extent that they gave up their money and possessions for other's needs.
- Real integrity in their faith: Words (v.33) and actions (v.32, 34-35), witness and compassion.

Have you ever been disappointed by advertising? Holiday locations are especially bad! The glossy presentation looks so good, but the reality didn't match the promise?

Not here – words matched actions, hearts matched hands.

Read Acts 4: 36-37

Barnabas:

- We already knew this was happening (from v34)
- Luke gives us a concrete example
- Also an introduction – Barnabas becomes a key picture in the book of Acts
- He captures the spirit of this community: The “Son of Encouragement”
- What is encouragement? It's thinking of others, and acting for their good. Putting others first. It requires a level of real relationship.
- There's an obvious contrast to Ananias & Sapphira – It's hard to miss Luke's hint! Who do you think we should try to be like?
- “Be like Barnabas, not like Ananias!”

What a picture! This is not usual human behaviour! What caused this?

From the passage (in addition to what's already been shown so far in Acts):

- v.31 They were filled with the **Holy Spirit**
- v.31, v33 **God's Word** & the testimony of the apostles
- v.34 **Grace**

Question: Must we do this today? No – there was no law! It was a voluntary response. Peter tells Ananias that his property was his own to manage (v3). The key is that “no-one claimed” their rights.

It was a voluntary response: Remember the enormous field of flowers outside the palace after Diana died? It wasn't organised, it was just a natural outpouring & response.

This was a genuine Unity - a genuine fellowship

If there's no law to follow, what's our application? We have the same influences in our lives today: What does **Grace** prompt in you? What does **God's Word** teach you? What does the **Holy Spirit** empower you to do that you couldn't otherwise?

We can have real unity and fellowship. Prompted by Grace, God's Word, the Holy Spirit, things can happen here amongst us that could never happen in the world!

But we need to be receptive, soft hearted, teachable, even bold as we live lives of Grace, learn from Jesus through His Words and trust the Holy Spirit as we obey.

What did they do that we might do today?

- They were “One in heart and mind”
 - o Heart: Knowing how people are going
 - o Mind: Building common beliefs & direction
- They “Shared everything”:
 - o Give abundantly vs. guard jealously
 - o Sold possessions vs. always need to buy more
 - o Giving to the needy vs. ignoring the needy
- A community of encouragement – Building people up, not pulling people down.

There is no place like the church, the people of God, when this Unity and Fellowship is in place! BUT -- It's not what the World encourages. Our sinful natures won't cooperate. Satan hates this. There is another alternative. Having seen the real thing, now Luke shows us the fake.

2. Fake, Satan inspired Unity and Fellowship

Read Acts 5:1-11

What was Ananias & Sapphira's sin?

- In appearances: Barnabas & Ananias did exactly the same thing!
- But Ananias & Sapphirs kept back part of the money, while claiming to have given it all.
 - They were seeking the credit and prestige of sacrificial giving, while avoiding the real consequences.
 - They were guilty of hypocrisy
 - In the background was a motivation of greed. But Peter says they could have kept some of the money, had they not claimed to give it all. So greed was not the central issue.
 - Their main motivation was to gain an undeserved reputation.
 - There was a lack of integrity between what they said and what they actually did. Between the appearance they portrayed and the true reality.

We've just seen real unity and fellowship – this is fake! Deliberately fake. The contrast is horrible!

The community of amazing unity and fellowship – such a glorious witness to the saviour Jesus...

... is being abused for selfish purposes in a calculated sham of greed driven hypocrisy.

There's an insidious, secret reality behind the appearance. Remember Star Wars episode 1? There's a crisis in the Republic, and Senator Palpatine acts as a Statesman, gaining acclaim and promising hope –

but he's really a Dark Lord of the Sith, he's really seeking only personal gain, and actually plotting the downfall of the republic. His evil character really captures the insidious nature of hypocrisy.

See how Peter describes their sin:

- Satan filled their heart (v3)
- Lied to the Holy Spirit (v3)
- Lied to God (v4)
- Tested the Spirit of the Lord (v9)

So their sin was not mainly against the church, as much as they had abused the grace in that community for their own reputation.

Their sin was primarily against God.

What is God's response?

- God's response to Ananias & Sapphira's sin was shocking. Sudden. Dramatic. Terrifying.
- He caused Ananias and then Sapphira to fall down and die.
- As a result, "great fear" (v.5, v11) came upon the church.

- The ongoing work of Jesus was bringing about an incredible new way of life – Real Unity and Fellowship.
- But Ananias & Sapphira's actions corrupted this, distorted this, threatened to derail the young church in its formative stage.
- Remember, there was only one local church at this point.
- What would prevail? The influence of the Holy Spirit, the teaching of Jesus as the Apostles proclaimed God's Word, a community of grace? Or the greed and hypocrisy of human sin, inspired by Satan?

- God acted dramatically, drastically and decisively to restore perspective, to bring clarity, to demonstrate clearly that fakery was not an option in his church. The unstoppable ongoing work of Jesus would not be interrupted

- Imagine witnessing this. Hearing about it
 - o v.5 – Great fear seized those present
 - o v.11 – Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard
 - o v.13 – The event echoed through the whole city
 - o We today can't easily get the full impact of what it would have been like, but I hope you can begin to see how shocking it would have been.
 - o We today might respond by questioning God!! Theoretical issues like "How could he kill them", "is that loving", "were they Christians", "does this happen today?"
 - o I'm not answering these questions now (but please talk to me if you really would like to know), because that is not how people responded then. There was only one response – "fear".

A shocking event brings great clarity: A friend of mine made a change from a successful professional life into a whole new direction of Christian ministry after escaping unhurt from a serious car accident.

We want to get the point then! What did Ananias & Sapphira do, so that we can avoid it!?

- Hypocrisy. Fake Unity. **Fake Fellowship.**
- Seeking public reputation that does not match the private reality. **Fake Fellowship.**

Let's be practical then. Public behaviour, Sunday behaviour is not enough. If our public words, our Sunday words and actions are saying one thing, but in private we are saying and doing something different – that is **Fake Fellowship.**

What's the difference? Real Unity & Fellowship values all of our life, our words and our actions being consistent. **Fake Unity & Fake Fellowship values only the public appearance.**

Real Unity is hard because sin is not passed over. The apostles could have accepted Ananias and Sapphira's gift, couldn't they? "We know they aren't really as committed as most, but it's a lot of money, it's good to let them still be part of things..." That would have been **Fake Unity.** That is not the unity of a church that lives by grace, that is guided by God's Word, that is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

God made it very clear!! There is no place for fake unity or fake fellowship in His church.

So, we have two paths set before us – real, or fake. We have two sets of influences – The Holy Spirit, God's Word, Grace, or Satan, the World, our sinful natures.

3. What makes the difference?

How can we live in real Unity and Fellowship? We should all have sympathy for Ananias & Sapphira. If God did strike down every person guilty of hypocrisy today ... maybe none of us would be alive?! What guidance can we find in this passage to set us on the right path?

Read Acts 5:12-14

v.13 No one dared join (because of fear)

v.14 **Except** those who believed in Jesus!

- There were no nominal Christians. People either avoided, or believed.

- There were more and more believers!! The gospel is unstoppable!! Sin didn't stop it!!! In fact God used this event for good!!

- How could they join despite the shocking event? The gospel of Jesus overcame their fear.

Think of a Top Secret High Security area: Without the right credentials, you'll be arrested, mauled or shot. But with an entry pass, you can enter with complete confidence.

What was their entry pass, these “more and more men and women?” They “believed in the Lord”! They repented, put their faith in Jesus, and their sins were wiped away (Acts 3:19)

And so, they were equipped with all they needed to be part of the real Unity and real fellowship of this amazing community.

Remember what the Unity and Fellowship of the church was based on:

- Lives founded on **grace**
- Hearts responsive to **God’s Word** (the teaching of Jesus through the Apostles.)
- People filled with the **Holy Spirit**

So in Christ we can live together as he intended:

1. We can be generous and open hearted with our money and possessions
2. We can reject the lure of a good reputation and choose to be a servant instead
3. We can run from the hypocrisy of being one person in private and another in public
4. We can live together so closely that we know other people’s needs and can help meet them
5. We can be encouragers who build up instead of complainers who pull down

That’s Real Unity, not Fake Unity. That’s Real Fellowship, not Fake Fellowship.

Our lives are built on the grace of Jesus. We have all that we need in God’s Word, the bible. We have the power to live it the Holy Spirit.

The ongoing work of Jesus could not be stopped by sin in the book of Acts, and it can not be stopped by sin today.

We’ll pause for some private reflection – and if God has brought conviction through his word, please respond with repentance, thank Him for His grace and ask for his power to change.