

Text: Ac 4.36-37

Proposition: The New Testament requirements for giving are spiritual, not legal.

The next part of Acts 4-5 that we are covering seems like a return to the narrative. Of course, in a way it is, but the two incidents recorded serve a different purpose than advancing the narrative of the Book of Acts. That thread will not pick up until we see the chief priest “rising up” in 5.17.

These two stories of giving are illustrations, a positive and a negative, of the spirit of the church we looked at last week. They are illustrations of the general condition of church life.

We are just going to look at the first example today, the incident of Barnabas and his donation to the church. The example does two things for us. One is to illustrate the spirit we were just talking about, the second is to introduce Barnabas to the narrative.

Introducing Barnabas to the narrative brings up this note: Luke’s style is to use this method to introduce new characters to the narrative in an incidental way. If this were all we were to know about Barnabas, he’d largely be a forgotten figure in the life of the early church.

But here we meet him, and it turns out that he becomes a significant player in the story going forward. This is often the case with these kinds of introductions. We’ll see it with Stephen and then with Paul and with others along the way.

What is the big deal of what Barnabas did on this occasion?

The big deal is his generosity in giving to the needs of the congregation. We talked about this spirit last week:

- Heart and soul ONE (unity of heart and soul)
- Generosity
- Grace
- and Power

Here the specific thing highlighted is the generosity of Barnabas, but it speaks to the spiritual work that is going on in the church. The believers *all* had this spirit (or else, they imitated this spirit, as we shall see next week).

Our title:

The Heart of New Testament Giving

Read Ac 4.32-37

Proposition: The New Testament requirements for giving are spiritual, not legal.

I. Barnabas, an illustration of the spirit of the early church

A. Brief biography of Barnabas

1. Name: Joseph
2. Birthplace: Cyprus
3. Tribe: Levi
4. Nickname: Barnabas
 - a. Given by the apostles
 - b. Luke says the name means “son of encouragement” – a term which describes his character
 - c. Scholars are confused here, because while “bar” means “son”, no one knows exactly what “nabas” means
 - d. Since the Bible says it means “encouragement,” it must be related to that meaning somehow
5. Character: an encourager, one who comes alongside (a paraclete)
 - a. We see Barnabas entering this role throughout the book
 - 1) He takes in Saul and encourages him when others were suspicious
 - 2) He goes to Antioch and disciples new believers in the church there
 - 3) He takes along John Mark after he failed on the first missionary journey
 - b. We could call this kind of character a “pastoral” character

- B. Compare the preceding description with the description of Barnabas
1. Notice the parallels between 4.34-35 and 4.36-37
 - a. Generically, “all who were landowners” (34) would sell their property, bring the proceeds and “lay them at the apostles’ feet” (35)
 - b. Specifically, Barnabas owned a tract of land, sold it, brought the money, laid it at the apostles feet (38)
 2. The gift of Barnabas is not the *only* such gift, but it is the one selected as the example (no doubt because of Barnabas’ later prominence)
- C. Recall that the giving was the evidence of the spirit of the early church
1. Verse 34 begins with “for” — it is evidence for the statements about church unity in vv. 32-33
 2. The giving of Barnabas could thus be characterized as:
 - a. Generous
 - b. In the spirit of the Christian church
 - c. And voluntary – the fact that it is noteworthy is evidence that it is voluntary

“Barnabas would not have been cited as an example of sharing if the practice had not been voluntary.”¹

II. Giving in the OT in contrast to the giving of the early church

- A. The OT regulated giving among the people of Israel by the laws of the tithe
1. The practice is mentioned before Moses’ law came in, but it was regulated for the nation by Moses’ law
 2. First mention: specific demands given: the “tithe of the land” (Lev 27.30-32) [read this one]
 - a. The “seed of the land, or the fruit of the tree” (*i.e.* the harvest) (30)

¹ *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2089.

- b. The harvest could be redeemed (offered in cash) by adding one/fifth the value to it (31)
- c. The “tenth of the flock” – which had no redemptive opportunity (32)

Key things to note: the tithe was a legal requirement on all Israelites.

- 3. Direction of the tithes: to the tribe of Levi, for their support, since they had no inheritance in the Land (Num 18.21-32) [Levites were to tithe the tithe for the support of the priests]
- 4. Place of tithing (Dt 12:5–7, 11–12, 17–18) — ultimately it would be Jerusalem
- 5. The year of tithing: every third year [suggests tithe collected every three years] (Dt 26.12-15)

B. The purpose of the OT tithe

“In the Old Testament the purpose of the giving of a tenth was to meet the material need of the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless (the orphan), and the widow (Deut. 26:12–13). The tithe was an expression of gratitude to God by His people. Basic to tithing was the acknowledgment of God’s ownership of everything in the earth.”²

C. The requirement of the tithe

- 1. It was a matter of law
- 2. To withhold it, Malachi says, is to rob God (Mal 3.8-12)

D. Contrast with the voluntary giving of Acts 4-5

- 1. Voluntary giving proved by the mention of Barnabas’ gift: he didn’t have to give it
- 2. Voluntary giving proved by Peter’s comment to Ananias (5.4)
 - a. He didn’t have to sell his land

² “Tithe” in Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary: Completely Revised and Updated Edition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

b. He didn't have to give the entire price of the land

The point of this is to show that the Old Testament required very specific giving, whereas the early church is practicing voluntary giving.

III. The NT principles that govern giving in the Christian church

A. Every reference to the tithe in the NT refers to OT practice, but the NT doesn't require the tithe

B. The major teaching passage concerning giving in the NT is 2 Cor 8-9 — key principles from that passage:

1. The planned offering is mentioned (8.1-6)

2. Corinthian participation is urged, but not as a command (8.7-8)

a. Urged as a matter of love for the Lord Jesus (8.9)

b. Urged as a completion of their pledge (8.10-11)

3. Key principles stated in chapter 9

a. There is a bountiful harvest to the bountiful giver (6)

b. The NT requirement is not grudgingly (as a duty to law) but cheerfully (as a glad opportunity to serve) (7)

c. Evidence of faith in God for God's provision (8-11)

d. Giving is not only for the immediate need or specific purpose, but is also for worshipping God (12)

e. Giving encourages other believers and strengthens the bonds between them (13-14)

C. The other major teaching passage is in 1 Corinthians 16.1-4

1. Here Paul instructs the church to give the offering regularly, on the first day of the week (*i.e.* Sunday)

2. The practical-minded apostle teaches regular, systematic giving by this means

Conclusion:

To sum up — NT giving is not a matter of legal regulation and duty.

NT giving is:

- Systematic
- Generous
- Grateful (to God for salvation in Christ)
- Glad
- Worshipful
- Spiritual
- Strengthening

You may know that I do not often preach on this topic – it could be seen as self-serving. But I believe we should preach on the topic when it comes up in our regular exposition.

The thing to get out of this message and the example of Barnabas is this:

- In the New Testament, giving is material evidence of the inner spiritual work of God in our hearts.
- It is possible to “fake” spirituality by giving (as we will see next week), but really spiritually minded people give to the Lord *generously* because they are so grateful to God for what he has done for them.

Our message today has been for Christians. Our philosophy of giving is that we don't expect or even really desire our visitors to put money in the offering plate (although we don't turn it down!).

But we do believe that Christians should manifest their faith and exercise their worship by giving to the Lord who gave so much for them.

If you are not a Christian, the gratitude to God that is displayed by God's people giving to God's work ought to stir up in you an interest – why are these people behaving in this way?

Here is why I give to the Lord's work:

- I know I am a great sinner.
- I know that God sent his Son, Jesus, to pay the penalty of my sin
- I know that by faith in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, my sins are forgiven, I am guaranteed a place in the resurrection, I will live with my Saviour forever.

I give because I love Jesus Christ. I hope you love Him too.