

## The Fellowship Had Fakes

Acts 4:23-5:11

### Courage Without

In our last discussion in the book of Acts, we observed Peter and John standing before the Sanhedrin with a healed beggar. They had been given the command to be quiet; to never speak of Jesus again. Instead, they went back to their fellowship or assembly, and told the story. Then, we saw the body break out in a spontaneous time of prayer.

#### Three qualities of prayer

We could easily spend our entire discussion today, on their prayer. We are not going to do that, but before we get to a rather bad story, the rather dark news of this church's history, I want to point out a couple of things for you. Let me give three things about their prayer that struck me as I studied it.

#### Acknowledgment of God's power through creation

1. First, this body decides to begin their prayer by acknowledging God's power through creation.

Please look at chapter 4, verses 23 and 24, in the book of Acts, where we will pick up our story. The scriptures read,

*When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said,*

...

"... Lord, what are you doing? Why did you allow your servants, Peter and John, to be thrown into jail?"

No. They began their prayer, not by asking, "Why?" but by stating who. Look, at the last part of verse 24.

*... O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them*

When you face discouraging times, that is a good time to remind yourself of who God is.

#### Acknowledgment of God's predestination of conflict

2. This body also includes in their prayer, an acknowledgment of God's predestination of conflict.

An interesting thought emanates from these verses as they continue to pray. Look at verses 27 and 28.

*For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ...*

(note this),

*... to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.*

What an incredible perspective they had. "Lord, what has happened, has happened according to Your will. It may have caused a sleepless night for the church and we don't quite understand what's going

on, but we know You planned it according to Your purpose.”

Frankly, men and women, I think we are very vulnerable to discouragement and defeat, until we can see that conflict and trouble never come into our lives without the permission of God. Furthermore, those things never barge into your life without ultimately, fitting into God’s sovereign plan for your life, even though we do not understand it; even though it is a bad thing; even though it is a difficult thing.

The Bible never promises that everything that will come into our lives will be good. In fact, the Bible promises, in Romans, chapter 8, verse 28a,

*... all things to work together for ...*

(what?),

*... good ...*

### **A request for perseverance with courage**

3. So, in light of that, they throw in a third element that is as if they said, “Now, we’re going to end our prayer with a request for perseverance with courage.”

Look at verse 29.

*And now, Lord, take note of their threats, . . .*

.

(In other words, “You can handle it. You know what’s going on. You know what they’re saying. You just take note of their threats. But . . .”),

*... and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence*

My friend, nowhere in the book of Acts, or anywhere else in the New Testament pages, do you ever read of the church asking God to make the world a friendly place. Never.

This church sets a classic example for us, when facing persecution of its leadership. They do not pray here for the Sanhedrin to “get off their backs”. They do not ask God to give the political leaders in Israel sympathy for what the church is trying to do. And, although this may be a radical thought, they do not even pray for a conservative to replace Caiaphas in the Sanhedrin.

This is a classic example of a church under persecution, as it were, asking God, not to clean up the fish pond, wherein they swam, but to give them courage and boldness to rescue fish from that putrid society and rescue them for the clear, pure water of

the kingdom. That is what they were praying for in this verse,

*... grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence*

Now notice verse 31.

*And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.*

I love this. This early church, by the way, did not have the New Testament to confirm their prayer as the right kind of prayer. They did not have theological volumes on the sovereignty of God. They did not have centuries of church practice and faith to set the example for them. It is as if the sovereign God, who held the world in the palm of His hand, just shook His head a little bit and rattled the cupboards and the plates and the windows, as if to say to this early fellowship, “You’re praying the right prayer. You’re headed in the right direction. Keep it up.”

I think that this church, at this moment in time, is invincible. Verses 32 through 34 say,

*And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each, as any had need.*

Now, this is not communal living; this is community living. You cannot sell something you do not own, but, as the needs arose in the body, those who had assets would sell them and bring the money and lay it at the apostles’ feet, so that the needs of others would be taken care of. This is a challenge for the church today, not to retreat to the woods somewhere and establish a commune but, to have community care and concern for the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

You might say, “You know, I want that kind of community living. In fact, it’s one of the reasons I

wish our church weren't so large. I can't seem to wrap my arms around this fellowship. I run into strangers more often than I do people I know."

Do you feel that way? You probably do not know the people around you. Well, be encouraged by the fact that the church in Acts, at this point in time in their history, numbered between ten and fifteen thousand people. They had twelve apostles on full-time staff! And they were about to enlist an entire body of men that probably established the "deaconai".

The deacons would do nothing more than administrate the financial needs of the widows, as there were so many of them. This was an incredibly large organism and, according to Acts, it was growing every single day. But, I think, the key was that no one ever joined the church in Jerusalem with the attitude of, "Okay, here I am. Now, what can you and God do for me?" I think they came in with the attitude of, "Okay, here I am. Now, what can I do for God and what can I for you?"

Church researchers have come up with an interesting statistic. I do not know what they do with their lives, but they come up with stuff like this. They determined that you can know seventy people in a church. It does not matter whether your church has seven thousand or seven hundred attending, you will only know about seventy people by name.

I would like to think that the size of our church establishes the potential for meeting your needs and also for giving you a variety of ways in which you can minister to the needs of others.

### **Three elements of Barnabas' gift**

Now, that is what was going on with this church. This kind of church, by the way, is extremely contagious. The church in Jerusalem was infected with joy and passion for the cause of Christ. Look at verse 36, which is another "good news first," before we get to the bad news. This verse is an illustration of the joy and sacrifice in this church.

*Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement),*

Joseph is a model for us. Let us stop at this verse, because it tells us a few things. It tells us that Joseph has received a nickname from the apostles; not from the church, but from the apostles.

This nickname is like a name you might have for your son. You might say, "Hey, Champ!" and, in that nickname, have a message you are conveying to him. You might call your wife spontaneously from work and say, "Hello, Sweetheart . . .". She might be so surprised she wonders what trouble you are in, but at any rate, you have that little pet name for her.

Well, "Barnabas" became Joseph's nickname. It means, "Son of Encouragement". He earned the nickname evidently, because he was always encouraging the apostles. He was the person who had his arm around them, and, I think, around the people in the body as well. In the vernacular of our day, it might be the nickname "Sunshine," "Hey, Sunshine, how ya doing?"

Every church needs individuals like this. In fact, as I thought about Joseph, I thought of two kinds of individuals in the church. There is one kind of person that, when you see them coming down the hallway toward you, you say, "Oh boy!" Then, there is another kind of person that, when you see them coming down the hallway toward you, you say, "Oh no." What kind of person are you?

Now, Barnabas gives a gift. Let me give you some points about his gift that stand out. Look at verse 37.

*and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

### **His giving was spontaneous**

1. The first thing that strikes me about this act is that it was spontaneous.

What I mean by that is that it was not forced. This is the kind of giving that emanated from a heart of love for the Lord and the Lord's church. Nobody called him and said, "Barnabas, we know you own that piece of land over there. I think you ought to sell that and give the money to the apostles. That would be the right thing for you to do."

No, Barnabas acted first. Evidently, it was his idea and was a spontaneous act of love.

### **His giving was sacrificial**

2. Secondly, Barnabas' giving was sacrificial.

Verse 37 says that Barnabas owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money to the apostles.

The contrasting story, that we are about to get to, implies that Joseph, or Barnabas, brought *all* the money and laid it at the feet of the apostles. He, evidently, held his possessions loosely.

I read of Corrie ten Boom, a woman that you may be familiar with, who endured the horror of a Nazi concentration camp. She once wrote that she had learned, through that experience, not to hold tightly to things because it caused too much pain when the Father pried her fingers loose.

I think Barnabas was that kind of man. He was not clinging tightly; there was no pain involved in giving something of his treasure to the Lord.

### **His giving was selfless**

3. The third thing I noticed from Barnabas was that his giving was selfless.

What I mean by that is that is was not flamboyant. Barnabas did not come into the assembly with the announcement, “Everybody, listen up, I’ve got a gift to give. You know that piece of land that’s been in my family for years? Well, I sold it and I’m giving the money.”

No, we are not given the idea that there were any strings attached. He did not say to the apostles, “Look, gentlemen, I’ll give you that money but, you know, when we build that auditorium, maybe you could just kind of call it ‘The Barnabas Memorial Auditorium’.”

That is, by the way, how money is raised in America. Millions are raised by attaching the gift to the name of the giver in some public way.

Now there is no doubt in my mind that, with a church of 15,000 people, someone slapped him on the back and said, “Way to go, Sunshine! Man, that’s just like you. Barnabas, what an example you are. How encouraging that you did that. What a model for us all.”

I have no doubt that people sent Barnabas notes and thanked him. He was gaining in popularity among the body. I do not think that is what he had in mind, but he was just sort of cream, he was rising, as it were, to the forefront.

This church, at this moment in Jerusalem, was incredible. It was joyful; it was contagious; it was effective.

## **Corruption Within**

Do not ever think, however, that just because a church becomes that kind of church means that the enemy of the church has surrendered. The roaring lion never retreats, he just withdraws for a moment and changes his strategy. If Satan cannot conquer the church from without, he will seek to corrupt the church from within. That is exactly what is going to happen next.

The next verse, in chapter 5, verse 1, begins with the word “but”. Underline or circle that word. I think it is an unfortunate chapter division, because these two stories are ones that Luke intended to contrast. He begins with “but”; that is, “in contrast to what you have just seen in Barnabas”. Luke writes,

***But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,***

The implication is, “also”. Barnabas sold his property and then, Ananias and Sapphira sold their property too. They did the same thing as Barnabas.

Now look at verses 2 through 4a.

***and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles’ feet. But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? . . .”***

I find it interesting, ladies and gentlemen, that the very first problem the church had to deal with was not immorality; not embezzlement; not anger; not even defection. The first problem the church had to deal with was hypocrisy.

The word “hypocrite” is an interesting word. It is actually an English word that comes directly from the transliteration of a Greek word, “hopocrites”. We still do not know all that it means.

When translated, “hopocrites” or “hypocrite” means, “actor”. It emanated from the Greek stage, where the actors wore masks. In the early days of Christ, most of the drama that occurred on the stage was done by actors who had masks in front of their faces. You might have seen the traditional icon of the stage that consists of two masks. One mask is of a man frowning a deep frown and the other is of a man smiling a broad grin. That emanates from the Greek stage. The masks allowed the actors to represent gods and also allowed them to represent several people, so

that they did not run out of stage crew. The masks hid who they really were, which allowed them to act as if they were someone else.

“Hypocrites” or “hypocrite,” therefore, in the English language, eventually came to denote someone who was acting as if they were someone or something else. “They’re hypocrites” means, “They’re actors.” They look spiritual, but it is an act. They look moral, but it is a mask hiding dark secrets.

One of the first things we can learn from this passage, ladies and gentlemen, is that it is possible to look good and not be genuine. Ananias and Sapphira looked spiritual and their personal financial sacrifice looked good. But, as we will see in a moment, they were simply hiding great hypocrisy.

If anybody ever says to you, and they have said it to me, “Well, the reason I don’t go to church is because there are hypocrites in there.”

Well, their argument is, in fact, hypocritical. The first thing that comes to my mind, and I have not said it yet, is, “Well, don’t let that hold you back, there’s room for one more.”

The tragedy, though, is that there is truth behind that statement. We used to ask the question, “Where is an honest person in the community?” Now we ask, “Is there an honest person in the church?”

In the fading days of our generation, the reputation of the evangelical church, as one author said, “has been rushed into intensive care and we’re not sure its reputation is going to survive.”

### **Two characteristics of Ananias’ gift**

Let us look at two things about Ananias and Sapphira before we draw too many applications.

### **Their giving attempted to make themselves look pious**

1. First, their giving attempted to make them look pious.

What Ananias and Sapphira wanted, by the way, was a double portion, or a double blessing. That is, they wanted to gain the spiritual prestige for having given sacrificially and yet, they wanted to keep some of it back so they could also gain financially. They wanted both and so, they acted as if they gave it all.

Metaphorically, Ananias, on that morning, evidently grabbed his mask and put it on real tight and said, “Sapphira, how do I look?”

She said, “Oh, you look good. You look just as spiritual as that old Barnabas does. I’m convinced that you’re going to look so good that when you go to that assembly and give the gift, they’re going to come up with a nickname for you too. Out of a church of 15,000 people, we are going to shoot to the top. You look good!”

They looked respectable. They looked spiritual. But, Ananias and Sapphira were acting.

A few years ago, someone in our fellowship gave me all the writings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle was the creator and author of *Sherlock Holmes*. The man was evidently, an interesting man. I read that one day, as a prank, he sent a telegram to some of his closest friends and esteemed associates, all of the whom were well respected in the community. The telegram simply contained these words, “Flee at once, all is discovered.” Within twenty-four hours, twelve of the men had fled the country.

What if you received a telegram like that? What if you received a telegram that simply said, “You’ve been found out.” What would go through your mind?

Were Ananias and Sapphira Christians? We need to stop long enough to answer that question.

I believe they were. I believe this because they were part of those who believed and were baptized evidently, as Acts, chapter 4, tells us. They were also involved in the strategy of the church to care for the needs of those who had financial difficulty. And, they were present to observe the manner of Barnabas’ gift. I think the lesson for the church to be pure and authentic would fall short if this event only involved two unbelievers who were judged.

According to I Corinthians, chapter 11, and I John, chapter 5, by the way, it is possible for a believer to die an untimely death as a result of unrepentant sin. I realize that that is a sobering thought and yet, the truth is, God’s ultimate form of physical discipline is physical death. In fact, of those who were unrepentant of their sin in the church in Corinth, Paul said, according to I Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 5,

*I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

There is no wonder in my mind, as to why the apostle Paul said that the first piece of armor to strap on, as you are about to engage the enemy in battle, is the piece of armor we call the truth. God disciplines His children with His word. If that does not get our attention, He may take us to the woodshed. If that does not get our attention, He may take us to the wooden box.

### **Their giving overlooked God's perceptiveness**

2. Secondly, the gift giving of Ananias and Sapphira overlooked God's perceptiveness.

This is especially interesting when you think about the fact that they had been in the prayer meeting that had acknowledged God's sovereignty in taking note of the threats of evil men outside of the church. If God could take note of the evil outside of the church, wouldn't they think that God could take notice of the evil within the church? Of all the things that they were, what they were not was bright. They thought they could fool God, who was moving with such miraculous power. How foolish sin is.

Look at verses 4b through 6 of chapter 5. Peter says,

*“. . . Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God.” And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.*

Can you imagine being in the assembly that day? Let me read what one author wrote.

*God's judgement came as a thunderbolt. He had been present in their home. He had heard their conversation. He knew the market price of the property. He knew all about their conspiracy. He was there when the land was put up for sale, there when the bargain was struck, there when the deed of sale was signed. He knew how much was paid for the property. And He was present when the deposit at the bank was made. He knew how much the couple had decided to give and how much was still in the bank. He was present when Ananias kissed his wife 'goodbye' that morning. He saw the knowing look that passed between them. He walked beside*

*Ananias all the way to the assembly, prodding his conscience, troubling his soul. He stood sadly and silently by as the deception was consummated and then, He flashed the whole lying picture into unsuspecting Peter's mind, giving him an instantaneous gift of discernment and told him what to say. How inexpressibly solemn. How easily we forget that the Holy Spirit knows all the mundane details of our lives.*

Continue to verses 7 through 8a.

*Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, . . .*

(this was all part of the plan),

*. . . and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, .*

*. .*

Now, that indicates that Sapphira said something for Peter to respond to. Luke does not tell what she said. However, can you imagine this scene? She has entered three hours after the time her husband had come and all of the events had occurred. This was part of their plan. They wanted prestige and appreciation; they wanted acknowledgment; they wanted to get to the top, as if there was any top to get to. They had planned it so that it would not look anything like they were after attention. So, "I tell you what, honey, you go ahead and you take care of it. And then, I'll come, three hours later, real nonchalantly, and just join the party."

Sapphira had no idea that they had just buried her husband. She had no idea that, for three hours, the church had been mourning the loss of its brother. She had no idea that the church was still reeling from the swift punishment of God and the discipline in the life of one of their own.

As Sapphira walked in, I imagine there were whispers of, "Here she comes. Shh . . . shh . . . shh . . ." People all around the assembly kind of quieted down. I imagine she noticed that. Perhaps she thought they were all quietly looking at her because of the gift that had been received. Surely this was the admiration that she and her husband had wanted. She was now on center stage with her mask firmly on.

Sapphira does not see her husband anywhere. Maybe she looked around, as she walked toward the apostles. Perhaps she thought, "Well, they've probably already taken him into some closed door

meeting to develop strategy with other leaders for the church.”

With contrived humility and sweetness, perhaps, Sapphira said, “Have you seen my husband? Has he given the gift, our sacrificial gift, to the church? How we love the church. We love this church. We’re so happy to give what we gave.”

Something related to that was spoken by her, because Peter then responds, point blank, in verse 8b, “Sapphira,”

*Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price? . . .*

Now that is a strange question. Why would he ask her that? Surely Sapphira’s mind now begins to wonder, “Did Ananias change the story? Did he forget the price that we had agreed upon to tell the apostles? Did he make it larger because of their approval? Did he minimize it? Why would he ask me about the price of the land? That doesn’t fit this scene.”

Perhaps, at that moment, the Holy Spirit prodded Sapphira’s heart, “Tell the truth. Stop acting.”

After a momentary pause, perhaps, Sapphira responds, at the end of verse 8,

*And she said, “Yes, that was the price.”*

Continue to verses 9 and 10.

*Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.” And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.*

Whew! Do not ever forget the potential price of wearing a spiritual mask! That is the lesson the church in Jerusalem learned that day. Two fresh graves were worth a million sermons on honesty.

Why would God move with such swift response? Maybe the context will help a little, but I was helped by some of my friends in my library who talked about this. They wrote that when Israel first moved into the land of Canaan, the first thing they had to deal with was deceit. As Achan stole what had been forbidden and hid it in his tent, God moved swiftly and taught the nation the importance of integrity and authenticity as His people. Now this new thing, called the church,

which has recently moved into the new dispensation called grace, learns the same lesson. Integrity and authenticity are not optional, they are essential for the church.

## Application

Let me tie our study together with two thoughts. We will look at another verse in just a moment, but let me give a couple of principles of application.

### **The joy within a church family is enhanced when its members refuse the temptation of spiritual masks**

1. Number one, the joy within a church family is enhanced when its members refuse the temptation of spiritual masks.

Has it ever occurred to you that everyone you see in church today is facing a battle somewhere? Everyone. Everyone is facing a challenge somewhere. It might be in their personal lives, their marriage, their parenting, their business. It might be loneliness. It might be temptation. The church is the kind of place, or it should be the place, where we can admit that kind of thing. Church should be a place like that.

If you are engaging in a battle, tell someone in church. Now I would not suggest that you tell a perfect stranger – they might faint. Tell someone you know. Tell someone like your Sunday school teacher, a spiritual friend, your pastor, or perhaps someone who has been a mentor to you.

If someone tells you something like, “I’m facing a battle,” do not pretend when you say, “I’ll pray for you.” Do not put on that spiritual response of a mask that says, “Well, bless your heart, I’ll pray for you,” and then never think of them again.

Frankly, Ananias and Sapphira were vulnerable because they did not hold each other accountable. Whether it was Ananias or Sapphira who first came up with the idea, the other one should have immediately rebuked them. Sapphira should have said, “Ananias, shame on you for thinking of that.”

Ananias and Sapphira should have kept each other in check. As one man said, “We *all* need someone in our lives we cannot fool.”

If you are married, you are blessed if you have a wife or a husband that you cannot fool. You are in trouble if you do not.

The problem with these two was the fact that they did not hold each other accountable to honesty and integrity. Ananias and Sapphira moved toward this plot and this plan. They came up with the idea. They discussed it around the kitchen table. They sold the property. They agreed on their story. And, they went into the assembly to do nothing other than gain prestige and attention; to gain prominence in the assembly.

A fellowship of authentic believers is one where the members choose to drop their masks and come in, warts and all, with the understanding that all are clay and none have “arrived”. The fact that I am about two and a half feet higher than you does not mean a thing, by the way. We are all on a journey; we are all learning; we are all failing; we are all growing, and the church ought to be the kind of place where that can be done.

### **The effectiveness of a church family is empowered when its members reflect the character of its Savior**

2. Secondly, the effectiveness of a church family is empowered when its members reflect the character of its Savior.

I say that simply because integrity and evangelism are powerful companions. This is an age where our American culture is asking for a model, for something authentic, for real people. But, at this moment in our lives, my friends, the church has slipped somewhere down in the list of the people who can provide that model. We, as one man wrote, who used to tell the world to repent, are now being told by the world that *we* ought to repent. The tables have been turned.

Have you ever thought about the fact, ladies and gentlemen, that the reputation of your church is whatever *your* reputation is? How are we, as a church, doing? Is this fellowship a place of integrity? Is it clean or is it off-color? Is it humble or is it power hungry and racing for another rung of the ladder? Is it credible or is it untrustworthy? Is it pure or does it have a dirty mouth?

Well, let us forget our church for a moment and realize that the reputation of Jesus Christ happens to be what *your* reputation is in the world. Wow! How is He doing?

Notice verse 11a, here is their reputation. I find this fascinating.

***And great fear came over the whole church, .***

..

Now this is unfortunate, in a way, because in the previous chapter, there are the words, “great joy, great rejoicing”. Now there are the words, “great fear”.

Continue in verse 11.

***And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.”***

Skip to verse 13.

***But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem.***

The people might have asked, “Where are you going to church?”

“Well, I go to the church in Jerusalem.”

“You do? I wouldn’t join that church if you paid me.”

“Why not?”

“Well, do you know what they do to liars over there? ‘Boom,’ funerals! They don’t put up with dishonesty there, is what I’ve heard. You can’t be a fake in that fellowship.”

How do we gain that kind of esteem from the watching world? How do we gain that sense of awe and respect because we have gained such credibility?

I will tell you, we will not gain that by going on a witch hunt, within our church, for all the hypocrites, and then, line them up and shoot them. We would all have to stand in that line. We gain that kind of credibility and esteem; God, through us, creates that kind of awe, as we establish the credibility and character of our own personal reputation. And, as we join together, the collective sense of our character and reputations establishes a church that is known for its integrity and honesty and purity.

When you say you will do something, do it. When you fail at something, admit it. Do not claw and scrape over and above everyone else. Have a sense that God is at work and settle for nothing less than the holiness and purity of God. Let this so establish itself in your character that it emanates from you before a world that is needy and watching. We start with ourselves.

Let me read some words that were found on a tombstone. They were on the tombstone of an Anglican bishop who was buried in Westminster Abbey a few generations ago. I think these words give a good summary for us. This is where we start; this is what we are to do.

*When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits, I dreamed of changing the world. As I grew older, I discovered the world would not change. So, I shortened my sights somewhat and decided to change only my country. But, it too, seemed immovable. As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt, I settled for changing only my family; those closest to me. But, alas, they would have none of it. Now, as I lie on my deathbed, I suddenly realize, if I had only been changed, then, by example, perhaps I could have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would then have been able to better my*

*country, and, who knows, I may have even changed the world.*

Where do we begin? We begin with the person seated in your seat this morning. That is where we begin. And it will take people willing to go against the current of the traditional church way of doing things. It will take people willing to come in, lose the masks, and ask God to go to work. And, as we interact with each other, we treat each other as people facing challenges and trials, joys and sorrows. Then together, we create the kind of credible reputation and character that, as the world looks on, it has to say, "Those people are real; they're different." This is not so they will glorify us, but so they will look to the God whom we claim is the only true and living God and bend their knee to Him too. May that be.

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