



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

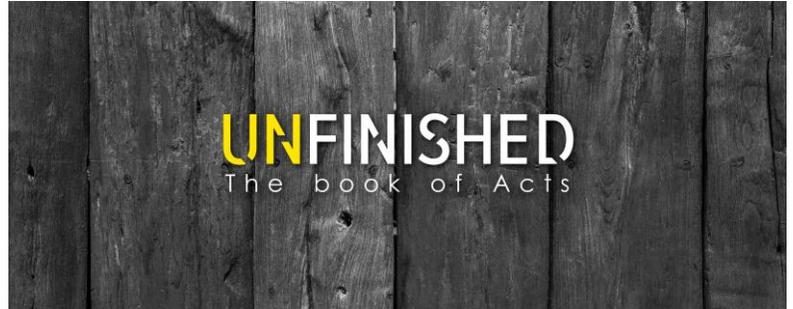
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Unfinished

Part 9: Bona Fide Believer or Pious

Pretender—Acts 4:32–5:11

Tim Badal | November 5, 2017



In the book of Acts, Luke chronicles the life of the early Christian believers, telling how they were responding to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and describing the ways they were continuing their mission of spreading this gospel to which they had been called. As we've seen in the first chapters, their early days were outstanding. They were witnessing signs and wonders, miracles and healings. People loved being part of the fellowship as they shared freely with each other.

In Acts 4, however, we see that trouble begins to brew. The religious leaders who had opposed Jesus during His ministry have now decided to arrest Peter and John, two of the leaders of the early church. The religious leaders threatened them, ordering them to no longer speak the name of Jesus. But God emboldened the disciples to continue to proclaim the good news of the gospel.

As we'll see today, however, the challenges to ministry did not come only from those outside, but some people within the community began to cause dissension and trouble because they chose not to live the life God had called them to. They began to realize that they needed to see that God's justice was applied even to their own number.

Let's begin reading with Acts 4:32 and go through 5:11:

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

⁵ But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." ⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹ But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Kids are all different. They come in different shapes, sizes, hair colors. But there are certain inclinations that are always true of all kids. One of those activities that seems to be true regardless of their gender or the year in which they are born is that of pretending. As young boys, my friends and I would make believe we were in game seven of the World Series, standing in the batter's box with

the game on the line. We would make the crowd noises, pretend to know what the announcers were saying, and then with great joy we would pretend to hit the game-winning grand slam.

The girls in our neighborhood did the same sort of thing. They would dress up and play house with imaginary tea parties. They would invite the boys, but we would refuse. So the girls would gather their stuffed animals to join their elaborate and elegant experiences.

Today as I watch my boys do similar things (well, not the tea parties), I think it's wonderful. I think it's great for young girls to dress up in their mothers' clothes and shoes, pretending to be adults. We smile at their innocence, remembering our own worry-free childhoods.

Suppose you were to drive into my neighborhood today and you see me—all by myself at 41 years of age—playing basketball in my driveway. As I'm dribbling, you hear me say, "There's Tim Badal. He's being double-teamed by LeBron. He's got Stephen Curry next to him. No, it doesn't look like he can pass to the left or the right. No—Badal goes to the hoop and slams it home! The crowd goes wild!"

Or let's say I come home from work and Amanda is having an imaginary tea party around the dining room table with stuffed animals. She's asking them, "How are the tea and crumpets?" I would think what was cute for Amanda when she was five is no longer cute now that she's 27. [Laughter] We all pretend, don't we, dear?

What you would do in either of these situations? You would call the authorities. You'd think we had a few screws missing. Something that was cute when we were kids is altogether crazy as adults. While we might not do this and gain the reputation of being weird, we still do a lot of pretending as adults. We pretend things about who we are or how we feel. We might pretend about our possessions, how much money we make, or how great our family is. While some of this might be considered okay, I would like to point out that some in this room are actually pretending spiritually. You're pretending to be something you aren't.

You might have a lot of reasons for your game of pretend spirituality. It might be to please your parents or spouse. Maybe you like being part of a church because of the programs or the relationships you have, so much that you're willing to put on the appearance of being a Christian. Scripture labels that "hypocrisy."

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautioned, "Beware of doing your righteous deeds before men." If you think about it, I'm doing a righteous deed right now before you. Jesus isn't saying we have to do everything undercover or incognito. But what He's asking is for us to understand our motivation for our spiritual practices.

Today we'll look at a good example, at a bad example, then at an ugly response. I thought about calling this sermon "The Good, The Bad and The Ugly." We see a picture of true generosity in Barnabas, contrasted with the giving of Ananias and Sapphira, who seem to be giving to make an impression rather than as an act of true generosity. And we will see that God responds by striking them down.

I want to first describe three important truths that come out of this passage:

1. Just as there were pretenders in the early church, there are pretenders in every church. Even in this healthy, vibrant early church in Acts 5—through which God is doing a great work—there are some people who appear to be spiritual but who are not. They seem to love God but are really all about themselves. It's easy in a church the size of ours to have pretenders among our members. I don't know who they are, because you can fool me and I can fool. But there are people here who are just going through the motions.
2. Just because there are pretenders in a church doesn't mean it isn't healthy. The important question here is what a healthy church does when it finds pretenders in its midst. As we'll see, the early church called it out. The health of their church wasn't determined by the absence of pretenders, but by the fact that they didn't let pretending become spiritually comfortable. Rather, they and we must continually call people to repentance, then exercise forgiveness for the sin of hypocrisy.
3. Back then and today, pretending and hypocrisy always involve visible "spirituality." The pretender is putting on a show for others to see. Hypocrisy requires an audience. I can't show hypocrisy to myself. I have to demonstrate it to others, yet I'm the only one who knows it is not authentic.

We all struggle with hypocrisy to some extent. So we must ask ourselves, "Why do I give? Why do I serve? Why do I sing or teach or lead or preach? Why do I attend a small group? Why do I read my Bible? Why do I pray?" Our text demands that we ask these questions of ourselves. We shouldn't ask, "What kind of Christian am I in the eyes of others?" Rather, we must ask, "What kind of

Christian am I in the eyes of God?" We can be so busy putting on our spiritual show that we forget God knows the motives of our hearts.

The people in Acts had been fooled, but God was not. Our text drives us to ask why we do what we do in the name of Christ. So today we're going to look more closely at the contrast between the two types of people found in this story.

Bona fide believers love to share generously.

All is good in the final verses of chapter four, but as I've said before, the book of Acts is all about contrasts. We see a good example of God moving in the hearts and minds of people. Then chapter five begins with that critical word— "But" —leading to the example of Ananias and Sapphira, who develop a plan to deceive the people—and we see how God responds. Bona fide believers love to share generously.

Clearly the heart of the Christian faith is a heart of giving. In fact, Christianity wouldn't exist without giving. We know God so loved the world that He gave (John 3:16). We would not be in a relationship with Him were He not the giving God that He is. He's given us life and breath, and He's now given us salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ.

So if we want to imitate this giving God, then generosity must be at the heart of what we do as well. It's a hallmark of who we are as believers. You cannot be a true Christian and not be generous. Knowing God's generosity in saving you, you can be nothing less than generous yourself.

The church in Acts has now grown to thousands of members, and we're told they *"were of one heart and soul."* Many of the new converts were from other nations, having come to Jerusalem to worship during the Feast of Pentecost. But now that they were believers, they stayed with the church so they could learn what their new faith meant and what it required, producing a lot of needs in that community. For this reason the church responded with generosity.

Generosity begins with dependence on God.

Acts 5:32 speaks of *"those who believed."* But what did they believe in? They believed Jesus gave His life for their salvation. They knew that Jesus Who was rich became poor for them. That was why they sought to follow His example of generosity and self-sacrifice. Generosity is always connected to gratitude.

Let's say you're driving home from church today and you see a car broken down on the side of the road. You decide to stop and help them. You've decided to be generous with your time and assistance—why? I would contend that there was a time when it was you who was on the side of the road. You remember the helpless anxiety you felt as car after car drove by without stopping.

Another example is parenting. Much of the reason we parent as we do isn't just because we're great people. Rather, we remember that we were once young and dumb and needy as children, and we were grateful that Mom and Dad met our needs. We were glad to have a place we could call home. Someone was loving enough to give us what we needed. So in turn, we give these things to our children.

When we were a younger family—when Amanda was truly 27—we were enjoying a meal at Olive Garden with our boys. Noah was probably 6 or 7. It was one of those days when we were happy to be parents. The kids were doing well. Food wasn't all over the walls and others were not watching us, hoping we'd leave early. We just had a sense of God's blessing on us.

As we were eating, Noah said, "Hey, guys, look at that lady." Gratefully, he said it half-way quietly. "Look at that lady. She's all by herself. She looks sad and lonely. Dad, I think you should buy her meal." I said, "Son, use your generosity." But I agreed to do it, encouraged by my son's heart. So we told our waitress what we wanted to do and asked her not to mention it.

About 15 minutes later the lady was ready to check out and she was told her bill had been paid. She smiled, but she also insisted on knowing who had bought her meal. Finally the waitress pointed to our table. So we walked over, and I explained why we had decided to do this. Noah was right. She was lonely and sad. Her son had promised to meet her there, but then didn't show up. In fact, he had often promised this and then not kept his word. See, our generosity came out of our gratitude for not having to eat alone ourselves. We knew the value of having family with us. Generosity comes from realizing that once we too were poor and in need.

But here's the amazing thing: God's generosity isn't like that. He was never poor or broken or in need. His generosity is the result of His supernatural agape love that is His nature. He sees our need and reaches down to help us. So as His followers, our

generosity—like that of the early church—comes from understanding that we have received God’s grace and that without Him we can do nothing. Generosity begins with our dependence on God.

Generosity shows a devotion to the mission of God.

As Christians, why do we give? Looking at verse 32, we read, *“No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.”* This isn’t some socialist compound where, after you became a Christian, all your stuff was owned by the society and then everybody helped themselves to the pot. Rather, private ownership was still in force.

We read that Barnabas sold some property he owned. Others, including Ananias and Sapphira, sold their land. Peter in fact said to them, *“Did you not own this land?”* So what made these people *“one in heart and soul”* that they freely gave of their possessions?

The answer is that they were devoted to the mission of Christ. Verse 33 says, *“With great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”* Because these people had received God’s grace, they knew they were also to dispense that grace through the proclamation of the gospel. Because they had received great riches from God, they were to share His goodness by giving to all who had need.

Generosity is determined to see others’ needs first.

Acts 5:34 continues, *“There was not a needy person among them.”* Why? Because they knew the grace they had received. Today we should recognize that we too have received these riches of grace, and thus not allow people around us to remain needy. We sing, *“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind, but now I see.”* But what if we only apply that to ourselves and say to those around us, *“Every man for himself—figure it out on your own”*? No, when we’re recipients of God’s grace, we’re going to be generous because we see that God’s Kingdom is advanced through generosity.

So here’s another question for you. If someone had watched your life over the past 30 days, including having access to your checking account to see how your money was spent, what would they know about Christianity from your example? Would they be able to see that you’d been transformed by God’s grace? Would they see that your faith produced generosity? Or would they find that your life contradicted your confession? We need to be people who open our hearts, who open our hands and who open our homes—not because we’re forced to, but out of our realization that God has done this for us.

Generosity needs to be displayed by leaders.

This kind of generosity needs an example and it especially needs to be displayed by leaders. The people in Acts were giving to each other, sharing their goods, and doing it anonymously. But we see in verse 36 a specific giver is mentioned—a man named Joseph whose name would be changed to Barnabas.

Apparently his gift was sufficiently significant that it came to the attention of the apostles. You might think it wasn’t good that he was specifically noticed, but here’s why I think Barnabas’ name made it into our Scripture. First, his new name meant encouragement—which implies that his gift was a true encouragement to the church. He also lived up to this name in later accounts in Acts where we will see that Barnabas was actually a leader in this fledgling church.

The second reason he might have had attention called to him was that leaders are held to higher standards. It’s possible that Ananias and Sapphira were also leaders in the church—given how severely God chose to deal with them. Instead of being a godly example, they became a negative example. In any event, we can see that leaders set an example for others.

Noah and I were recently watching an old war movie where the general said to his troops, *“I will be the first one on the battlefield and the last one to leave.”* That’s leadership. Good leaders don’t tell people to do things they won’t do themselves. They shouldn’t say, *“You give; I’ll watch.”* Rather, they should encourage others to imitate them as they imitate Christ.

Barnabas showed good leadership. Notice, he didn’t give everything he owned. I don’t believe God expects us to give everything. It says Barnabas sold a field that belonged to him. It didn’t say he sold all his land. Apparently his gift was significant enough to encourage others to similar actions.

I will tell you that Amanda and I have sought to set a good example for you over the past 15 years we’ve been in leadership. We’re not perfect. But leaders must show their leadership through generosity, not only in giving money to the ministry of the church, but also in giving time to people and even opening their homes in hospitality. We should also be generous in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. As much as possible, we should have a good reputation both inside and outside the church.

Generosity demands trust.

I've told you before that when phrases are repeated in Scripture we should pay special attention to them. Three times in our text today we're told the gifts were laid at the apostles' feet. That takes trust. These people were selling their assets. This means that in today's dollar value hundreds, thousands, maybe tens of thousands were being raised in this young church, then brought to the apostles by these humble, gracious people.

Why did this demand trust? Well, although the apostles had a good reputation, we should remember that their original treasurer, Judas, was stealing money. Even with Jesus overseeing the affairs of the group, money was still being taken from their money bag.

Think of how often churches today are impacted because someone has their hand in the treasury. Leaders need to realize that every dollar given to the church belongs to God. Between our four campuses at Village Bible Church, we process about two million dollars each year. That's a lot of money which provides a temptation for theft, embezzlement or pilfering. When you bring gifts to the church—"laying them at our feet"—it means you trust us to use these gifts wisely and honestly.

As a side note—as our church grows, the pastors need to be held accountable. I can't tell you how frustrated I am when I see megachurch pastors living in mansions and driving expensive cars. That's not wise. Leaders need to be as generous with their gifts, no matter how large their churches. They need to be examples of contentment with moderate living styles.

We also need to be careful that the use of the funds in our church is not overseen simply by one person. There needs to be checks and balances in our decisions to protect our resources. So in every phase—collecting, counting, depositing, accounting and spending of our tithes and offerings—there needs to be a check and countercheck and third check to insure honesty. We also have an annual visit by an outside accounting firm to look over everything.

Why do we do this? Because we realize we need to be trusted by those who are generous with us. I'm so thankful for our stewardship team, our finance team and our treasurer, as well as all the people who are over these areas. I'm thankful the money doesn't go through my hands—or that I don't even have to be near those processes. That way you can know that in a church like ours, your trust is merited. Every penny goes to the Kingdom work. Generosity demands trust.

Pious pretenders love the show and are greedy.

This brings us to our second case study: Ananias and Sapphira. In my Bible, chapter four ends on page 912 and chapter five begins on page 913. That means I have to turn the page to see this contrast—and it gives me whiplash. What was so good in chapter four is so bad in chapter five. Ananias and Sapphira aren't bona fide believers who want to share generously. Rather, they are pious pretenders who love the show and are greedy.

We know nothing else about this couple. As quickly as they appear on the pages of Scripture, they disappear. We know they, like Barnabas, sold some property and laid the money at the apostles' feet. Everything seemed the same, except that Acts 5:2 tells us, *"With his wife's knowledge [Ananias] kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet."* And this sin led to the immediate judgment of God. The couple paid for their dishonesty with their lives.

So what went wrong? First, no one told them to give. It wasn't required. So their sin wasn't that they refused to give when they should have. They were giving voluntarily out of their generosity. Second, their sin wasn't that they gave only a portion of the proceeds of their property sale. That was also a voluntary decision. It would have been fine if, let's say, the property brought \$1,000 and they decided to give only \$500 to the church. Their sin was that they told the people that because they loved the church and loved God, they were going to give the entire \$1,000 to church. People were led to believe they were as generous as Barnabas. But as they ate their pot roast after church, they had a little discussion. "You know, \$1,000 is a lot to give. You were talking, dear, about some new drapes and a new hat. I still need some new tools for my workbench in the garage. Listen, let's tell everybody we're going to give \$1,000, but then really only give \$500. That way we'll be helping the church, but we'll be helping ourselves as well. What people don't know won't hurt them. Besides, maybe we'll get the same honor that Barnabas got. Maybe they'll change our names as well to indicate how good we are."

Greed makes us put on a mask.

When greed entered their hearts, it caused all kinds of issues. Greed is one of those base sins that leads to other sins. First, it makes us put on a mask. They began to play a part that wasn't a true depiction of who they were. They had become hypocrites, wanting people to think highly of them. They wanted to be known as "dollar givers" when they were only giving dimes.

Some years ago I was catering an event in a prestigious subdivision. It was the first party we had done for this family. They lived in a beautiful home that would take your breath away. As I was setting up for the party, a moving truck pulled up, which seemed odd, because I'd been told the family had lived there for some time. I couldn't figure out why they were bringing in furniture that day. As I watched, they brought in cutlery, vases and other items, as though they were staging the house for something. Since I was just the caterer, I kept quiet. But as the delivery people were leaving, I asked them, "Did they just move in?" He said, "No, they've been here for a while. But this is our new clientele." I asked, "What are you talking about?"

He told me, "We do this all the time. They rent furniture and other things for 24 hours. They've probably overextended themselves buying this house, so they can't afford to put anything in it. But now that their family and friends are coming for this party, they need to appear as though they have these things. Once the party is done, it all goes."

You see, we put on masks to appear to be something we aren't. "Look how rich I am. Look how successful I am." Along with our possessions, we also do this with our emotions or with our families. We put on masks to hide who we really are. This is what Ananias and Sapphira did.

Greed makes us the most important priority.

Ananias and Sapphira were primarily worried about taking care of themselves, rather than being concerned about the needs of others. Greed is always about us; it's never about others.

Yesterday I got a flier from Sam's Club, so I was looking at all the Thanksgiving sales and, to be honest, the greed in my heart lit up. Wow, I thought, I could have this. I could have that. The crazy thing is that I have most of the things they were advertising, but these are bigger and better and newer so they tugged at me. Greed always makes me the priority instead of God or others.

I was talking about this with my son Joshua yesterday. One of the reasons we as a family intentionally give is to combat greed in our lives. We pray, "Lord, we want You to be number one, not our desires—not what we drive or where we live or the clothes we wear or the TV we have." It's not about me. I'm not the most important priority—He is.

Greed makes us practice deceit.

Third, greed causes us to become deceitful. Peter accused Ananias and Sapphira of keeping back some of their proceeds. The word translated "keep back" literally means pilfering or embezzling. He essentially says, "You have stolen from God. God gave you something, you said you'd be giving a certain amount, but now you're stealing it back."

Brothers and sisters, when we are greedy for ourselves, we aren't just pilfering from others who may have needs—we actually pilfer from God Himself. God has given us good things not just to keep them for ourselves, but as a means to be generous with those around us.

Greed also gives the devil an opportunity.

We see in verse three that Satan has taken advantage of this opportunity. Never forget that all forms of greed come from the devil himself. He was the first greedy individual. He was an angel who worshipped God until he became greedy for God's glory, wanting it for himself. Greed always begins with the devil.

Peter nails it with what he tells Ananias: "*Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?*" This is important. Some of us are giving the devil an opportunity in our lives because we're just plain greedy. Our families are in disarray. Our kids and our marriages are in disarray. Our checkbooks are in disarray, because instead of receiving the blessing of God, we're getting the curse of the devil. We're buying into his money management principles instead of God's.

Greed also grieves God.

Notice that verse three also indicates that we grieve God. Peter said to Ananias, "You've lied to the Holy Spirit." In verse four he adds, "*You have not lied to men but to God.*" It wasn't that Peter himself was offended. He told Ananias, "This issue is between you and the Lord. You've grieved Him." That tells us that God has a stake in how we handle our money—what we spend and what we give.

This leads us to ask, "Are we glorifying God with what we do with our money, time and energy, or are we in fact grieving Him?" We're doing either one or the other. We had seen God glorified in the previous chapter; now we see the grieving of God.

Action steps

What do we do with what we have learned? Let me give you three action steps if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, and I have one action step for those who have never embraced the gospel in their lives.

Remember that God provides you with everything—release some of it!

Why are we holding on to His blessings? Lamentations 3:23 tells us that God's mercies are new every morning and that His faithfulness toward us is great. We receive and receive and receive. But Christian, how can we be recipients of God's love, mercy, and grace and then not share it in return?

Here's your assignment this week. Go to your kitchen sink, grab a sponge, fill it with clean, soapy water and put it on the counter. Let it sit there and then tell me a week later what it looks like. It will be filled with mildew and it will smell bad. God has made us sponges that are to be continually wrung out. He wants this done with our finances and with our time. God doesn't want us to fill up on all His blessings and then just keep them for ourselves. He wants us to "wring them out," using them for His purposes.

Remember that God isn't playing games with sin—repent quickly!

This should be a passage that calls every one of us to get on our knees and say, "God, I am sorry. Please forgive me." We know that in some way this past week, we've been like Ananias and Sapphira. All of our wrongful thoughts and bad decisions had a death penalty tied to them. But God in His amazing grace and awesome love for us gives us the opportunity to repent. So do it quickly, before it's too late.

Remember that giving is an important practice—resolve to do it!

We saw in chapter four that in many ways giving was energy behind their expanding ministry. Today, we need to be part of that as well. Giving is contagious, encouraging others to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Our giving changes lives and marriages and families. We can help people get out of addictions by showing them the love of Christ. Giving is an important practice, believer, so resolve to do it.

Here's a statistic I want you to know. Village Bible Church is maintained by 60% of its regular attenders and members. Throughout the year, 40% of those who call Village Bible Church their home have never given to our ministry. You might think I'm putting guilt on you. Okay. But a true Christian is someone who is generous, so let's resolve to give.

Remember that God's punishment for sin is severe—run to Him and find mercy!

For those who may be new to Christianity or new to the church, this is a hard one to swallow. God's punishment is severe and we must run to Him for mercy. In this story today, we have seen the judgment of God on sin. It's a dark passage, especially when compared to the light passages that precede it.

Maybe you're living in sin or rebellion. If so, God is now calling you to run to Jesus to find mercy. Find mercy in the One Who covers sin. Maybe you're thinking, "I don't know how to do that." If that's you, don't leave here today without knowing Who Jesus is and what He has done. Grab me by the Welcome Center after church. God's mercy can save sinners like Ananias and Sapphira from the punishment they deserve.