

The Church Alive – A Little Sin and Great Grace Acts 5:1-11

1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 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. 3 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? 4 "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. 6 The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. 7 Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9 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." 10 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. 11 And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

Over the past several weeks I have started my messages by pointing out some astounding statements asserted by Luke. In Acts 4:32 we read, **"And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul..."** What a blessed unity and oneness that existed in that church! And then in Acts 4:34 we read, **"For there was not a needy person among them..."** We were captivated by the uncommon participation the early church experienced among one another. You see, these people were not just involved in a process. Sometimes we reduce church to a process. We can get ourselves so busy with the process of ministry; the administration of it all; the planning of it all; the execution of it all that we forget that church is not simply a process, it is being involved with people; it is being engaged with the lives of people; it is meeting the needs of people; its getting your hands dirty with people.

As we come to Acts 5:1-11, we are again "struck" [every pun intended] with such an astounding incident as recorded by Luke. But we are to be astounded for a different reason than before. This text speaks of the deaths of Ananias and his wife Sapphira; two affluent individuals of the early church. What strikes us however is the tragedy of this story found at the beginnings of the church. Up to this point, the book of Acts has been an unfolding of the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through the lives of the apostles and the people of God that resulted in the most phenomenal growth of the Church. Acts 4:33 well summarizes everything up until our text when it says,

And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

Blessing after blessing! Good thing after good thing has taken place for the community of God's people. The gospel of the resurrection was being proclaimed and abundant grace was upon all the people; scores of people coming to Christ. And then we have Acts 5:1-11; then we have the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. Our sensibilities ought to be struck as this account does not seem to fit with the narrative just before our text and even that which comes after it. What is Luke doing? What is he thinking by including a very depressing; very discouraging incident in the life of the church. This is nothing short of a great spiritual bummer. But there are three points from our text that lead us to learning not only why we have this story, but also of continuing this theme that began in Luke 4:32 of what God expects from His church. Here we have what God does not expect. Let us work through these three points.

I. A CONTRAST (Acts 5:1-2)

1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 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.

To begin with, you must know that our text is not an interruption in the flow of the book. Notice the transition of verse one where we read, *"But [in contrast to] a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property."* This ties our text with what we just learned a few verses earlier in Acts 4:36-37, namely that a man named Barnabas sold a field and gave the money to the apostles so that it could be used to help the believers who were in need.

No doubt that many people were verbally grateful for the generosity of Barnabas. Remember that his name was really "Joseph", but the apostles, perhaps because of acts like this, called him "Barnabas" which means "Son of Encouragement". This brings us to our Acts 5:1-11 text. This is not an interruption in Luke's thinking as he composes this history but rather this is to be recognized as important to the story. Ananias was obviously motivated by what he had just seen Barnabas do and decided along with this wife to follow that good example. So far so good! Barnabas had stimulated them on to love and good deeds!

But, there is a problem, for the spirit that motivated Ananias and Sapphira to their act was a totally different Spirit than found in Barnabas. Barnabas was moved by the Holy Spirit to do what he did and it resulted in the favor from both God and men. But Ananias, who was moved by a different spirit, an unholy spirit, a proud and perhaps jealous spirit; and for that, he received the judgment of God. And this, as we read, was no slap on the wrist. It was the most severe judgment - death! Can you even imagine the horror; the shock; this stunning turmoil? This is heavy stuff, but it reminds us that Luke is recording an accurate history of the early church. If Luke's purpose was to paint a purely rosy picture of what happened after Jesus left this world, why would he include a story that would possibly taint the church's reputation. Why would he include a story that might cause people to look upon God as being harsh and judgmental and would potentially cause offense to those who hear it?

How does this seemingly harsh, cruel, and devastating account [two persons died in the church] help promote the good news of the gospel of Christ. We constantly hear that God loves everyone? So how does this fit? Where is the grace of God? Do you know that there are actually some theologians who have concluded that this account is nothing but a legend, an untrue, mythical story because it paints both Peter and God as seemingly unforgiving and condemnatory. Poor Ananias! No opportunity was given to him by which to repent; he was ruthlessly struck

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dead! But the story get worse, for the apostles were not even sensitive enough to tell Sapphira about his death and when she sought out her husband, she too, without an opportunity to explain or repent, was struck down for her compliance with the lie. Peter knows nothing or proper pastoral care and compassion!?

And yet, I say to you, it is because of all these things that the accuracy of the account is proven to be true. Luke interweaves this incident of judgment among many other narratives that point to the spread of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people because he wants us to know that the Spirit at work among God's people is a HOLY Spirit and God will not be diminished or tainted by human sin! To borrow from CS Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, God is NOT safe. And the moment we forget that; the moment we begin to treat Him as less than He is, we put ourselves in harms way. God is NOT safe. But to our wonder, He is holy and He is good. And the wonder of this text is not so much, "Why did God strike down two people for such a seemingly small sin?" But rather the question ought to be, "Why doesn't God strike us all down for committing sins that at times are even worse than that of Ananias and Sapphira?" What sins, little or large, do you dare bring into this place without fearing Him who desires and expects His Church to be pursuing holiness and purity? Have allowed yourself to be lulled into thinking that God is safe and your actions; your attitudes; your little lies; your fits of anger; your bits of jealousy, or your shades of hypocrisy do not matter to God? God expects His Church to be holy and pure. Barnabas sought that. His motives were governed by the holiness of God. Ananias and Sapphira's motives were to be governed by human desires. What governs your motives today? As we will see from our text, God will not be mocked and so to our second point...

II. A CONFRONTATION (Acts 5:3-10)

3 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? 4 "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. 6 The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. 7 Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9 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." 10 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.

We have already alluded to much of what has taken place, but here we read about Peter's confrontation with Ananias calling him out verses 3-4 saying, **3 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? 4 "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."** Very quickly we get to the crux of the matter. Please notice that the crime here is not that Ananias and Sapphira did not give enough; nor even that

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they held back a portion of the sale price for themselves. The property was theirs to do whatever they wanted. The crime is stated clearly; they lied to God. These verses are pointed in revealing to us that the Holy Spirit is in fact God. There is an equating of God to the Holy Spirit and so the early church is reminded that the Father, the Son and the Spirit is the One true and eternal God.

What was the lie? The lie was that Ananias and Sapphira sought to make themselves look better than they were before God and His people. Here we have the sin of hypocrisy. May I ask you, what is one of the main reasons a person gives for not participating in church? Do you not hear people say, "The church is full of hypocrites! It is full of people who say and do one thing at church then live in complete contrast to that at home, at work, at school or wherever they find themselves. *Hypocrisy is a lack of consistency in one's walk with Jesus.* Hypocrisy is a vicious and most destructive force within a congregation of believers. Let me warn you that the devil is unable to destroy the church from without, he will endeavor to destroy it from within. What was the crime of Ananias and Sapphira? It was not so much that they were misers, but rather that they were thieves. As pastor/theologian John Stott noted, "They wanted the credit and the prestige for sacrificial generosity, without the inconvenience of it. So, in order to gain a reputation to which they had no right, they told a brazen lie. Their motive in giving was not to relieve the poor, but to fatten their own ego." This does not happen in the church today, right?

I believe this incident is recorded by Luke to point out the fact that while the Holy Spirit is truly and effectively at work in and through the lives of God's people, there is yet another spirit which is also active and at work both in the world and in the church and we must learn to discern between the two different spirits which both are seeking your allegiance. Acts 5:1-11 is a yellow caution flag reminding us that neither the early church, nor the church today is a perfect community. From the very beginning of the church up to today, we are a people who must be on our guard against the influences of this unholy spirit that seeks to undermine and destroy the fellowship of the congregation.

There is an interesting similarity between Ananias here in Acts 5 and with Achan in the book of Joshua. Please turn to Joshua 7. In both of these stories we find that a simple, single act of deceit interrupted the victorious progress of God's people. You know the story of Achan, how after the glorious conquest of Jericho, Joshua ordered that all of the spoils of the city were to be devoted to the Lord. The people were to keep nothing for themselves. The wealth and goods of Jericho were to be an offering to the Lord. But then, in Joshua 7:1 we read:

But the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully in regard to the things under the ban, for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, took some of the things under the ban, therefore the anger of the Lord burned against the sons of Israel.

If you know the story, the sin of Achan did not result in harming only himself. Achan's crime resulted in Israel defeat in their next battle at Ai and the deaths of some 36 men. And like Ananias, when the sin of Achan was discovered, he was punished by being put to death, along with his entire family. Beloved, God is not safe when it comes to sin! The Lord will not be mocked. He will not tolerate sin. There are some who say that the God of the Old Testament is a vengeful and hateful God and that the God of the New Testament is a God of love and grace, but such have never read the whole book! The Bible is not two revelations of God, but one. The God of the Bible is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Sovereign One. He is

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the Holy One. Without His grace, we are all the same as Achan at the battle of Jericho, we are all like Ananias and Sapphira in the early Church, and we all deserve the same judgment; death. It is no wonder that our text concludes in Acts 5:11 by saying, *"And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things."* This brings us to our final point...

III. A CONSIDERATION (Acts 5:11)

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

Beloved, verse 11 summarizes the only good and proper attitude of believers. We are to fear the Lord. This does not mean we are to be scared of the Lord and see Him as some cruel and unapproachable despot. Let me give you a good working definition to what it means to "fear the Lord." To fear the Lord is to have the knowledge that God is holy and sovereign [pure and without sin; in complete and total control] and we are not. This holy splendor and high sovereignty demands our reverence. While the Lord is not safe, yet we know from the Scriptures that the Lord loves us and we can love Him because the grace He has shown us in Jesus Christ. By undeserved grace, the Holy Spirit of God comes into us, He awakens our hearts and minds, making us painfully aware of our stubborn and sinful wills and therefore of our need to know and experience the life transforming power of His love.

What we learn from our text is that if we are not controlled by the Holy Spirit, as was Barnabas, if we do not live by faith, then in everything we do is only going to result in the further incurring of the wrath of God against us, which is what we saw in Ananias and Sapphira. Turn to Romans 2. Only the person who has the Holy Spirit can do the good God requires of us because it is in effect the Holy Spirit doing the work. In Romans 2:8 we read:

but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

And then, dropping down a verse to Romans 2:10 we read:

but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good...

This is the good worked in us by the Holy Spirit. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that there are three criterion for a human work to be considered "good". First, a good work must proceed from a true faith; that is, only believers are capable of doing anything that pleases God. Second, a good work must be performed according to the law of God; that is that what is done must not contradict anything we find in God's Word. And finally, a good work is done to God's glory; that is, it does not seek to promote or point to self but to God. Apart from the influence of the Holy Spirit, no one could ever meet these demands. Where did Ananias and Sapphira fail in their actions? Most specifically they failed in this last area as their "good work" was not done to the glory of God but in reality, for the glory of themselves.

But the great question of our text is why were Ananias and Sapphira put to death for their actions? For when we really think about it, we are all guilty of at least the same sin and at times seemingly worse sins than this. Why is it that we do not see more people being struck down in the middle of our church service for sins small and large? And the answer to that question is this, it is the great grace of God. By grace you come and worship the Lord today! By His grace, His

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undeserved favor, you can open your mouth and sing His praises and speak to others of His goodness. Turn if you would to Psalm 103. I love a recent quote I read by Paul Washer. He defined grace this way; *"no sin unforgiven, no promise unfulfilled, no moment out of His control"* – this is grace. Consider the wonder of the words of Psalms 103:10, you have heard them before:

He [the LORD] has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

What do your sins deserve today, right now? What reward do your iniquities warrant you today, right now? But, praise the Lord, God does not deal with us according to our sins. Beloved, this is grace. Grace is not something we demand from the Lord. Grace is not something we earn from the Lord. But why was grace withheld from this couple? Why were they made to pay for their sin by death? Do you think there is an easy answer? In part, I must tell that the answer to such a question is left to the Lord Himself. But I do know that this reminded and caused the early church to have a proper fear of the Lord and even a proper fear of sin. And so the same is true for us. In addition, let us not forget that this incident is sandwiched between a number of remarkable miracles.

Let me tell you that miracles are a reflection the way God intends things to be. When a miracle happens, it is a revelation of the peace and presence of God coming upon a person or a circumstance that had been destroyed by the Fall of man into sin. What miracle happened just before this Acts 5 incident? In Acts 3 we learned how Peter healed a man who had been crippled from birth. This man experienced the peace and presence of God in his life. Then, right after this account of Ananias and Sapphira, we read in Acts 5:15-16 that the apostles were healing many people and that some even brought their sick into the streets so that ***"when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them"*** as they lay in the street.

We often think of miracles as something extraordinary, right? Yet in reality, miracles are simply reaffirmations of what is supposed to be the normal and good of what is being restored to believers because of Christ. Miracles are manifestations of the coming future kingdom within our present reality. What does this have to do with Ananias and Sapphira? Well, if the coming Kingdom means the restoration for mankind and creation and all that God chooses to bless by His grace, then it also means the inevitable destruction of all that which is evil. We all deserve death, but by grace we are saved. The death of Ananias and Sapphira, while seemingly extraordinary from one perspective, is actually normal from a Kingdom perspective. Jesus is building His kingdom and the destruction of evil is as real as the restoration of mankind and creation. So why them and not others? That is not a question to which we are given an answer. Our only response to all of this should be, "Save for the grace of God, there go I." Every little sin that deserves the punishment of death is met with the grace of God.

And this is the point of our text; that through the harsh but deserved punishment of Ananias and Sapphira, we are reminded to open our eyes further to the grace of God in Jesus Christ towards us. God has come to us in his Son so that He might begin to usher in the new creation. In this new Kingdom, all that is "good" is good because of the grace of God. And all that is "evil" is ultimately destroyed. Grace is poured out upon those of God's choosing. And this reminds us that every day that we wake up and go through our routines is nothing less than a gift of His grace. Every moment is to be relished and regarded as the undeserved favor of God to

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us. Have you acknowledged grace today? We acknowledge the grace of God and bring glory to God by repenting of our sins, agreeing with God that we have failed Him and followed our own ways; and then asking for a fresh realization of His Holy Spirit at work in us to guide us in how we live. Remember then that God is sovereign and He is holy. It is God who fills us with His HOLY Spirit so that what we do for Him, for His people and for a world that needs to hear about Him is actually about Him and not about us. I pray that we each would become true agents of the grace of God to glory of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

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