

Ananias and Sapphira

Acts 5:1-11

This is a very familiar story from the Bible, a very striking story. Actually, for many people, it is a very troubling story. A very unsettling story. The names of this couple are known by almost all Christians, most anyone familiar with the New Testament or the book of Acts in particular. Ananias and Sapphira. And they are known, of course, for one thing—they died. More fully, God took their lives, on the spot, for the offense of lying to the Holy Spirit. I don't want to say God killed them, for the word "kill" implies moral offense and guilt, none of which can be attributed to God. But God ended their lives. God struck them dead, literally, personally, immediately, and without any opportunity for either a defense or a confession.

v.5 "Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last."

v.10 "Then immediately she [Sapphira] fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband."

Now, I don't think it is helpful to do much speculating about whether or not they were believers. There is nothing here to indicate they were unbelievers, nothing here to suggest that they were immediately condemned to hell for their offense. The focus is upon the church, and there is no suggestion or implication of any betrayal to the church. No sense of any denial of God. Just the foolishness of sin which brought about the swift and definitively judgment of God. God took their lives.

Let's look first at the context in which all of this came about, reviewing what we studied last week as well. Given the great encouragement of the description of the church as the last chapter ends, this account of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira

is all the more striking. Remember,

Acts 4:32 "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. 33 And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. 34 Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need."

Such a praiseworthy situation. Such a marvelous description of a healthy church doing what a healthy church should be doing.

Acts 4:34 "Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need."

That is the context for the actions of Ananias and Sapphira.

I. THE CONTEXT OF A TERRIBLE SIN.

People were taking care of one another. Willingly, voluntarily, generously. Luke even describes one specific, personal example.

Acts 4:36 "And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, 37 having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet."

And chapter 5 introduces another example, a married couple, doing the same thing.

v.1 "But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession."

Obviously, so far so good. To say it plainly, what is so obvious is the...

A. Practical love for one another in the church.

We studied all of that last week. Remember how the description began,

Acts 4:32 “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.”

All “those who believed were of one heart and one soul.” They shared their lives together. “They had all things in common.” What’s mine is yours! That is the spirit that prevailed within the church, and what a glorious experience that must have been. “They distributed to each as anyone had need.” It is exactly what the apostle John would later urge upon his rulers,

1 John 3:16 “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

They were living out their faith, in such a practical demonstration of love for one another.

Let me note something else here to which I referred last week as well, and let me emphasize it a bit before we go any farther this morning. In this context of loving devotion to one another, there is still the obvious...

B. Commitment to the freedom of private ownership and stewardship.

Look at verse 4, which record Peter’s words as he brings a rebuke to Ananias for lying. But look at his emphasis, which clearly identifies the offense of Ananias.

v.4 “While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?”

Was it not your own? The land belonged to Ananias and Sapphira. It was theirs. Before they sold it, they had the right to claim ownership. As I have mentioned, there is no appeal to the political ideology of modern day communism or socialism. There is no sense that they “owed” anything. They weren’t being taxed. No burden of obligation was being placed upon them. They were not required to sell the land, nor would they have been sinful to retain the benefit of ownership of the land. It was theirs. “Was it not your own?”, Peter asks. And the obviously implied answer, “Yes, of course it was!” That’s the point.

“Was it not in your control?” Yes, of course it was, a point we could relate to the concept of stewardship. In a technical but theologically accurate sense, we ought to recognize that we don’t actually own anything. God does. And so we read,

Ps. 50:7 “Hear, O My people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you; I am God, your God! 8 I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices Or your burnt offerings, Which are continually before Me. 9 I will not take a bull from your house, Nor goats out of your folds. 10 For every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine.”

So even when you acknowledge that God himself owned the land, the point is still that Ananias and Sapphira had control of it! They were the stewards to whom God entrusted the land. They rightly exercised control of it, and they were free before the Lord to do whatever they wanted with the land. Thus in this broad

context of no one claiming that “any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common,” even when we read in verse 34, “for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet,” even then, private ownership and stewardship of our earthly treasure is affirmed.

v.4 “While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?”

That’s the context. Now let’s look at,

II. THE SINFULNESS OF A TERRIBLE SIN.

Specifically, this is what happened.

v.2 “And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part 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 keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?”

Just to make it plain what happened. Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of land. They kept some of the proceeds from that sale for themselves, which, to emphasize what I just said a moment ago, they had the right to do. But here is the sinfulness—the context makes it clear when the “brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet,” to use the exact words from the end of chapter 4, when Ananias and Sapphira brought the proceeds to the church to give to those in need they kept back part of the proceeds secretly. They brought only some of the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. But they pretended that it was all of the money.

I would emphasize the sinfulness of that action in two ways. First, by noting that what Ananias and Sapphira did was,

A. A pretense of righteousness.

In other words, they pretended! They pretended to be righteous. They pretended to be godly. They pretended to be generous. I think that it is fair to say that they wanted to have that appearance in the eyes of others. They wanted to be seen in that very favorable light. They wanted to be recognized and honored. And please note just how completely different that motivation is than what we studied last week in,

Acts 4:32 “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul...”

That’s what makes this sin so grievous, so heinous. They pretended to be “one heart and one soul”, but actually they were seeking to advance and promote their own honor and their own prestige. They were exalting themselves above the others, by this pretense of righteousness. That’s is what makes this offense so serious.

Have you ever known someone noted for their generosity, but whose heart is eventually revealed as being proud and selfish? I certainly have. And they are danger, especially in the church where their outward actions might seem particularly noteworthy. But this is Jesus would say of such people,

Mat. 23:27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

It’s not hard for me to express such strong indignation with regard to such people, because that is exactly what Jesus does! “You are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.” And Jesus had other words for those hypocrites as

well,

Mat. 23:25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.”

It is fair to say that Jesus reserves his hardest criticism for such hypocrisy, and here in Acts 5, he actually takes their life, ends their life on earth, in order to spare the church of such a dangerous influence. It is of no small concern, and of no small danger. What Ananias and Sapphira did was a horrible act of sinfulness, one against which we must all, always be on guard—the pretense of righteousness! It is the polar opposite of that attitude to which we are called with reference to one another. Rather than a pretense of righteousness, rather than an outward show of an apparently good deed intended for your own honor, this is the true description of a godly heart,

Phil. 2:1 “Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, 2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

“Let each of you look out not...for his own interests, but...for the interests of others.” We are to take the form of a

bondservant, as did Jesus! We are to serve one another. We are to submit to one another. We are to honor one another. We are to love one another. We are to live out our Christian lives “with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,” as Paul writes in Ephesians 2. “In lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.” Ananias and Sapphira violated all of that.

There is a second aspect to their sinfulness made obvious here as well. Not only was it a sin in the context of the fellowship of the church, a sin of pride and self-promotion, it was a sin against God. Specifically,

B. Deception toward God himself.

Peter certainly emphasizes that.

v.3 But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? 4 While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.”

We see the same judgment with reference to Sapphira.

v.9 “Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.”

There is an obvious reference here to Peter’s declaration that the Holy Spirit is God, and I mention that because it is an important point, not because I think any of you are tempted to deny that. Peter assumes it, as I rightly do in this context. Lying to the Holy Spirit is lying to God. Here the emphasis is upon that deception. That lie.

The obvious implication is that Ananias and Sapphira are presenting this monetary gift as the full and total proceeds from the sale of the land. As I've emphasized, they had the right to give whatever portion of the proceeds they wished, for the property belonged to them and was under their control. Their sin was to lie, to give only a portion of the proceeds and to declare that gift to be the full proceeds from the sale. They lied to the Holy Spirit!

And notice Peter's appropriate reference to the father of lies, whose name is Satan!

v.3. "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?"

I wish to emphasize here just how serious a thing it is to lie. When Ananias lied, Peter declared to him, "Satan has filled your heart." That lie, of course, is made more heinous because it was a lie to God. "Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit."

Please note the severity of that offense, the severity of the sinfulness of lying. And note that this lie was not simply to the apostles, but to God himself! It is grievous to see how quickly, how easily the world in which we live can be given to lies. It is grievous to note how often, how easily the church can imitate the word. And it is of grave danger to fail to realize that, ultimately, our lies to one another become lies against God himself.

Please don't ever justify lying. Please don't ever think it is the lesser of two evils, or, someone, a necessary evil. Please don't ever think there is such a thing as a little white lie. Please don't think that lying will ever bring you honor or reward, or enable you to escape some sort of trouble or conflict.

This is what Jesus says about the devil, rebuking those who

rejected Jesus.

John 8:44 "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."

The devil is a murderer, and the devil is a liar. "When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

And Ananias and Sapphira lied to God the Holy Spirit and we see exactly what happened to them.

III. THE CONSEQUENCES OF A TERRIBLE SIN.

v.5 "Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. 6 And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him."

That same experience came upon his wife.

v.9 "Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband."

I dare say that many people today would have no willingness or ability to recognize this aspect of a holy God in responding to lying, or any sin. Many people today would be horrified to have to admit that God did this, and that he might still do so today! This is not contrary to his character nor a contradiction of his own holiness and righteousness. Rather, this is a righteous response to a terrible sin.

As I said at the outset, I find nothing in this passage that would imply a judgment of eternal condemnation to hell. Rather, what is before us I would describe as,

A. The consequential discipline of a holy God.

God hates lying!

Prov. 6:16 “These six things the LORD hates, Yes, seven are an abomination to Him: 17 A proud look, A lying tongue, Hands that shed innocent blood, 18 A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that are swift in running to evil, 19 A false witness who speaks lies, And one who sows discord among brethren.”

Prov. 12:22 “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, But those who deal truthfully are His delight.”

And ultimately, this is the great separation of all men for all eternity,

Rev. 22:14 “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. 15 But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie.”

So here, in the context of a healthy church caring for one another in all the good and practical ways we have seen, when that fellowship is threatened by self-seeking liars, God protected and preserved the well-being of the church by his own immediate action. When Ananias was rebuked by Peter, we read that he “fell down and breathed his last.” When his wife lied in exactly the same way, Peter said to her, “Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband.”

I would apply the warning and the encouragement of Hebrews 12 at this very point,

Heb. 12:5 “And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; 6 For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.”

The Lord chastens his children, he disciplines the ones he love. The NKJV translates verse 6 well, emphasizing the seriously of that discipline, “For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.”

Ananias and Sapphira died, on the spot, because they lied to God in the foolish attempt to appear righteous before the church. And Acts 5 doesn’t leave us wondering to speculate what the effect of that action might be.

v.5 “So great fear came upon all those who heard these things.”

And, v.11 “So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.”

I might respond, a little light-heartedly, “No kidding.” Can you image being there? Can you imagine witnessing the immediate death of a husband and wife for the offense of lying to God in their attempt to appear righteous? Fear is a good word to express that response.

B. Godly fear in the presence of the power of God.

The fear of reverence. The fear of respect. The fear of honor. This is how God expresses his holiness, righteousness. He cannot abide sin. He will not tolerate it. And he will discipline his children. And ultimately, he will certainly judge and condemn those whom he does not receive and love as children. And we

should stop and take note.

Can God still do such a thing today? Certainly. I don't have apostolic authority to speak for God or to speak in God's name, but does God ever remove people from the fellowship of the church, by death, in order to bring both discipline to them and protection and well-being to the church? Well...yes. I have to say that he can. And my purpose in emphasizing such a severe and sober warning is so that we might resist the temptation to take our sins lightly.

I'll go back to,

Heb. 12:5 "And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; 6 For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives." 7 If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? 8 But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. 11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

With this sober awareness of the power of God, let me end by reading the verses that begin that chapter, and let these words be your great hope as you see to put aside the sins of your own life;

Heb. 12:1 "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so

great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."