

Gospel Triumph: The Enemy Within – Acts 5:1-16

There's no name in American history more synonymous with treason than Benedict Arnold. You may know nothing about him, but you know the name means traitor.

Arnold was born in America while it was still the 13 colonies under British rule. He fought in the Revolutionary Army and earned the trust of George Washington to such a degree that Washington put him in charge of West Point, a key American stronghold. Arnold had already been in contact with the British and was relaying information to them when he was placed in charge of West Point. He planned to surrender the fort to the British in Sept. of 1780 in exchange for a payment from the British government. It would have happened except that a British Major was captured who was carrying papers which revealed the plan. The Major was hanged but Arnold escaped to the British and wound up fighting for them against his old boss.

Internal threats are often the most devastating. They are unforeseen and unsettling. If you've been a Christian for any length of time you've probably know someone who seemed to be following the Lord who eventually defected and ended up denying Christ. Or you've been in a situation where a leader turned out to be an internal threat to the work of the Gospel in the church. Those are hard situations to handle, and we are often left asking, how could this happen? It's vital that we don't respond by growing cynical toward God and the church and I think this passage can help us to avoid that self-destructive response.

This passage helps because it reminds us that God will not ignore internal threats to His Church. In fact, in His own timing He will handle them, and He will continue to build His Church. So, in Acts 5:1-16 we are going to see **2 Ways that God Handles Internal Threats to His Church.**

1. He Guards His Church (vv. 1-11)

Up to this point in the book of Acts the early church under the leadership of the Apostles has experienced incredible numerical growth while also encountering some external opposition. Over the last few weeks, we've looked at the story where a lame man is healed and the Apostles are arrested and ordered to stop proclaiming Christ.

Last week at the end of Acts 4 we saw the believers come together and pray in great unity to God about their circumstances. Look at 4:29-31. God is clearly with them, and you can see His work demonstrated in their sacrificial generosity. Look again at 4:32-37. At the end of this summary description, we see a clear example in Barnabas of the sacrificial generosity that defined the early church. The early Christians faced opposition from outside and met it with faith in God and radical giving to one another.

As we begin chapter 5, we find a new kind of threat to the work of the Gospel and it comes from a couple who present themselves as united in purpose with the rest of the believers. Look at verses 1-2. No doubt Ananias and Sapphira had seen others do this exact thing. Maybe they had even watched Barnabas do it. The exact same language is used at the end of verse 2 as we saw in 4:37.

But notice that they kept back part of the money from the sale. This doesn't initially appear to be a problem, and it wouldn't have been, except for what we read in verses 3-4. There's a lot going on here!

Peter makes it clear that keeping back part of the money wasn't a problem and not selling the property wasn't a problem. The problem is that Ananias and Sapphira had presented the money as the whole amount when it wasn't. They wanted the praise and acclaim of the people in the church and so had lied. Notice that Peter points this out twice. They have lied to the Holy Spirit and have lied to God. To lie is to tell a falsehood with the intent to deceive. They knew exactly what they were doing here.

Notice what was behind this. In verse 3 Peter says that Satan had filled their hearts to lie and then in verse 4 Peter says that they had contrived this deed in their heart to lie. So, which was it? Both. Ananias and Sapphira were under the influence of Satan's schemes of pride, self-centeredness, and deceit, and they had also given into the sinful desires in their own hearts to lie.

Now, it may not seem like this is that big of a deal, but that only shows our lack of understanding of how significant a problem deceit and lying are in the church. The great unity experienced thus far in the church would have been blown apart had this disease been allowed to go unchecked. The church is the pillar and buttress of the truth, and we are meant to be people of the truth and speak the truth to one another. Listen to Ephesians 4:25. Colossians 3:9-10.

God cannot allow this to go on and so He acts. Look at verses 5-6. Whoa! This might seem over the top to you but let this shape how you view God's care and concern for the holiness of His Church. When Peter says to Ananias that Satan has filled your heart this is the same language used in Luke 22:3 of Judas Iscariot. In other words, this is a massive threat to the work of the Gospel and the unity and purity of the church and God deals with it accordingly.

Let's find out what happens to his wife, Sapphira. Look at verse 7. Clearly her husband hasn't come home to report on his meeting with the Apostles and so she comes to find him. Look at verse 8. Peter gives her a chance and she stubbornly sticks to her lie. Look at verse 9. Make note of that language of testing the Lord in verse 9. We'll come back to that in a second, but first look at verses 10-11.

In Sapphira's lie we see the full extent of their desire to use the church for their own selfish ends. Peter says that they are testing the Lord. This is what Satan did in the wilderness to Jesus. They are putting God to the test by provoking His judgment. They are acting like God is not holy and a God of truth and seeing whether or not God will act like He is holy.

And out of their testing of God comes a major lesson for us in this. God cannot be manipulated. Hypocrisy doesn't go well with God. You cannot claim Christ and try to get some of the benefits of the church and then live under the cover of darkness as if God is not holy. Scripture has a multitude of examples of those who test God and come up woefully short. This passage is interesting because twice it uses this very rare Greek word that is translated "kept back". You know where else that word is used? In Joshua 7:1. Listen.

When we see God respond to this situation, it ought to bring about the reaction in us that it does in the early church. Look back at verse 5 and verse 11. This is not abject terror, but it is a healthy reverence and respect for God. I told you a few weeks ago about a pastor who pursued adultery and deceit in his life for several years and it finally got brought into the open. That situation was sobering and fearful for me and I think for a lot of other people as well. That's the right response. Don't trifle with God.

In C.S. Lewis's book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, several children enter a magical world where animals talk. They are preparing to meet the King of this world named Aslan and here's how the conversation goes:

“Who is Aslan?” asked Susan.

“Aslan?” said Mr. Beaver, “Why don’t you know? He’s the King. . . It is he, not you, that will save Mr. Tumnus. . . ”

“Is—is he a man?” asked Lucy.

“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh!” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

Now, we have to ask this question before we move on, were Ananias and Sapphira believers? I think the answer is no. They may have thought they were or they may have just been attracted to the miracles and community, but their actions and the fact that Satan filled their hearts indicates that they were imposters. No doubt they appeared to be Christians, but their actions revealed the true nature of their hearts. And this is why God guards His church. Let’s move on to our second way God handles internal threats.

2. He Grows His Church (vv. 12-16)

When internal or external threats to the church arise, God will often demonstrate His commitment to the Church even more clearly. Here in verses 12-16 we have another summary passage. It’s interesting in the flow of the book of Acts we have two summary passages surrounding the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Internal threats to the unity and growth of the Church may come, but God stands committed to working in His Church and growing His people.

Look at verses 12-16. Now, the Apostles are the ones performing the signs and wonders, and this is the pattern that continues throughout the rest of the NT. So, when verse 13 says that none of the rest dared join them, it’s talking about the other believers being hesitant to try and participate in the signs and wonders. But

this clear display of God's work authenticated the message they were proclaiming and that message brought more and more people into the church. Look again at verse 14.

It's vital that you understand that the miracles were not saving anyone. Their role is to authenticate the message proclaimed by the Apostles. It even says in verse 14 that believers were added. We saw this in Acts 2 and 3. Peter and the other Apostles preach the resurrection of Christ and call people to repentance and faith and people turn from their sin and trust Christ. This is how the church grows, not by healing and miracles.

But the point here is that the church continues to grow. I was reading an article this week about the decline of Christianity in Europe and the US and the rise of those they call the "nones". They check the "none" box when asked what religion they subscribe to. The article made the point that this decline may be real in the West, but not in the global south. The gospel message and the church have been prominent in our corner of the world for a long time but we are seeing a shifting of the center to South America, China, and Africa. And this growth of Christianity globally should be an encouragement to us as we see God's commitment to His church in Acts 5. No matter what threats the Church faces, God will grow His people.

So, what should your response be to this passage as a believer? Let the sober reality of God's judgment on deceit drive you to the truth. Be honest and be real. Be committed to learning the truth and speaking the truth. And while you respond in sober reverence to God, respond in joy and confidence that He's still working and will continue to work among us. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Question – 11/24/24

- Why are internal threats and traitors often more devastating than external threats?
- What are some ways that you have dealt with internal threats to the church?
- How does Acts 5:1-16 tie back to Acts 4:32-37?
- Why do you think God responds to this lie by putting Ananias and Sapphira to death?
- What does it mean to put God to the test? How might a person do this today?
- Have you ever experienced the fear that is described in verses 5 and 11? Would you be willing to share it with the group?
- How can God be both “not safe” and “good”?
- In what ways does this picture of God challenge our current perceptions of God?
- What are some practical ways we can encourage truthfulness and honesty in the local church?

- What are the greatest challenges to openness and honesty within the church?
- What's one principle or truth from this passage that you can use this week to encourage a fellow believer?