

## **SCRIPTURE: Acts 4:36-5:11**

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet. Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet. <sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? <sup>4</sup> Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.” <sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup> Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. <sup>7</sup> About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” “Yes,” she said, “that is the price.” <sup>9</sup> Peter said to her, “How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.” <sup>10</sup> At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (NIV)

When you read in the **Old Testament** about the blood sacrifices and even death penalty for certain sins, it’s **obvious that sin was serious**. But sometimes we **operate on the assumption that while sin was serious then, it’s not as serious now**. We’re saved by grace, so it feels like we don’t need to be as concerned about sin.

But **being saved by grace does NOT mean that sin is less serious**: It just means that ANOTHER has born the judgment for your sin. Instead of animal sacrifices, JESUS HIMSELF died with your sin on HIS shoulders. Animal sacrifices are nothing in comparison! And **for all who take refuge in Him, you are forever free from condemnation!**

**But that truth does not mean that sin is no longer serious for us**. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira try to deceive others and God, and immediately die. God loves His Church too much to permit unrepented sin to spread.

**THEME: Lying to God is deadly serious. But as we confess and confront instead of pretending, God is honored, the church strengthened, and we are freed.**

**When we lie, or pretend to others and God, it’s like what Ananias and Sapphira are doing here, wanting to appear generous but actually motivated by greed and the**

applause of others. But **when we do that, we begin to close ourselves off from experiencing God's grace.** And **if hypocrisy continues unchallenged** in the church, it will infect the whole church's health and stifle its growth, and make it vulnerable to the enemy's attacks.

**This passage shows us God's fierce concern for holiness** in His Church, and calls us to reverent fear and honesty before Him.

**So in next few minutes,** we'll see what Ananias and Sapphira did, how Peter responded and what happened, and then ask how this was loving.

So in verse 1, Ananias and Sapphira **sell some land**, and even though they **keep some of the money**, they **act as if they're giving the whole amount.** They want public recognition AND their money.

At first this doesn't seem like a big deal. But it's contrasted with verse 32: **"No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own,** but they shared everything they had." **In contrast,** Ananias and Sapphira **"kept back"** some of the money as if it WAS their own—and used the rest of it to get recognition for themSELVES.

But it's even more serious than that. The **word translated "kept back" is translated "to steal"** in the only other occurrence in the New Testament. And it **also appears in the Old Testament.**

In **Joshua 7**, Israel was **ready to invade Jericho.** But before the walls fell down, God warned them not to take any treasure from the city; it was for God's treasury. But a man named Achan saw a robe, silver, and gold, and he took them and hid them.

You wouldn't think this would be a huge deal, but he was **stealing from GOD, and that sin was like poison** that would affect the whole camp.

After Jericho, the **next obstacle was a small city named Ai.** Nothing much to worry about; 10% of Israel's army could easily defeat them. But it turned out that THEY were defeated by this little city, and over thirty soldiers died.

**Had God abandoned Israel?** And then He told Joshua that the Israelites had sinned, stolen, and lied—taking what was devoted to GOD. "I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction....**You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove them.**" (Josh. 7:12, 13)

The next morning **God showed that it was Achan** who'd stolen...so he and his family were **executed.** His action had dishonored God, and led to over thirty men's death. **Only after**

his sin had been confronted, confessed, and dealt with were the Israelites able to defeat Ai.

**Ananias and Sapphira had in effect dedicated the whole income of their sale to God**, by giving the impression that they were giving it all. So in keeping back some of the money, they were **stealing what had been dedicated to God**. They were **giving for show, lying, and trying to use the church to meet THEIR ambitions**.

**What about us?** Ananias and Sapphira basically committed all the money to God when they made it look like they gave it all, but then stole back part of it. Do we make promises we don't keep? And they tried to make themselves LOOK generous instead of confessing greed and thirst for applause. Do we let others believe good things about us that aren't actually true....**portray an inflated image of generosity or godliness while hiding our true motives?** I know I recognize this tendency in myself—and that's not from God!

A **good barometer for our true motives** in giving is how we feel when no one recognizes what we've done. To the extent that hurts our ego, we may be operating out of the desire for recognition rather than love for God. Whenever we see that (and I'm sure each of us has it at times!), the only answer is to immediately confess, come clean, and turn from it to Jesus. Then, a good way to **STARVE the ambition for recognition is the spiritual discipline of secrecy**—giving or serving in a way that no-one except God can see. (And I have seen this at New Hope many times, in the ways many serve and give under the radar...such evidence of God's grace at work!)

**If we aren't finding our sufficiency in God, our lives will be a constant pursuit of the applause** of others...and it will never be enough. But as we trust in Jesus, secure in GOD's approval of us as His own son or daughter, we won't be driven by the need for public recognition.

So in Acts 4, God reveals to Peter what Ananias had done.

**Think of the temptation Peter might have felt at this point:** Here's a major donor to the church. It would be easy to receive the gift and ignore Ananias' motives and deception. But he doesn't.

He says: **"Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? <sup>4</sup>Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."**

**The central problem WASN'T that Ananias didn't give all the money.** He didn't have to sell the land at all, and even then he could have given as much or little as he'd wanted.

**The problem WAS that he'd lied.** He **PRETENDED** he was giving it all, but taken some for himself. **More than generosity, he was acting in greed and a thirst for recognition.**

And he **hid those motives** from others, **instead of coming clean.** That can be a huge temptation. **When I catch a glimpse** of some of my wrong underlying motives, I don't always feel like admitting it! **We all want to think of ourselves as good people, so when we see the sinful nature crop up, it's easy to pretend instead of confess.** But Prov. 28:13: "Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy." **An infection won't heal unless the wound is opened up and cleaned out.**

But Ananias was pretending instead of confessing.

And in trying to deceive fellow Christians, he was **actually lying to GOD.** Jesus so closely identifies with those who belong to Him, that **how we treat them IS how we're treating Jesus.** When we deceive a fellow Christian, we're lying to God.

But that's foolish, because **we can't deceive God.** The only right response is to own up to our true motives whenever we recognize them, turn them over to God, and turn to Jesus.

**The longer we keep on pretending instead of confessing, the more we set ourselves up for a bigger fall.** It's like in sitcoms like *Seinfeld*, when Jerry tells a lie about something, and then to avoid owning up to that first lie, he keeps making up more and more lies to give his story credibility. Just making it worse.

**This was actually one of my biggest fears in becoming a pastor:** That I would start to create a façade of "godliness" without the reality...and that I'd be afraid to come clean because it would mean losing others' respect. **It's so helpful to have my wife, friends and mentors to help keep me honest. No matter where you're at right now, you MUST begin to let yourself be known by other trustworthy Christians**—with whom you can be real about your motives, and who will help you confess and turn from sin to God.

**As we recognize that God knows us—including all wrong motives—we see that we can't and don't need to hide,** because He's already dealt with our sin at the cross. We can simply come to Him as we are, confess, and receive His forgiveness...that frees us from pretense and hypocrisy.

**So Peter confronted Ananias' sin as soon as God revealed it.**

But isn't Christianity about grace? Isn't Peter being judgmental here?

**Gracious and truthful confrontation can actually be a gift**—both to the person confronted, and to all others affected. **My wife knows me well, and can see if something's bothering me and I'm just pretending a smile. Initially, I might not want to share,** and part of me wants to pretend everything's ok. But when she gently persists in asking me what's going on, it's actually FREEING. **I have the opportunity to come clean and share what's weighing on me. I no longer have to hide.** Even though that might be a hard conversation, it's far better than trying to maintain the façade. **When we're confronted for something we've been hiding that needs to come into the open, we are given the opportunity to break free from that lie.** So **when we gently call each other away from hidden sin and towards Christ**—as long as we know our own desperate need for grace—it can be a gift.

**At New Hope, we know that the church should be a hospital, not just a fortress.** But in **RIGHTLY** not wanting to be the legalistic "sin police", do we sometimes also forget that sin is toxic? How might we be NOT loving others by calling them from sin and to Jesus? **If a hospital accepts patients** but turns a blind eye to illness, it'll just spread!

**Like Israel wasn't able to stand against Ai** until they addressed Achan's sin, **the Church won't be equipped to stand against the enemy** if there is persistent unaddressed sin and hypocrisy.

But remember that **you are equipped to confront sin in others only to the extent that you are humbled by an awareness of your OWN sin, and steeped in Jesus' GRACE to you.** WE first need to be humbly HEARING others when they point out areas in our lives that aren't in line with God's character, and confessing. (That **begins with truly listening to your closest friends, parents, or spouse.**) And please **don't hesitate to approach me** if you recognize an area of persistent sin in my life!) And **we need to truly get to KNOW each other,** or we'll jump to many wrong conclusions.

**Back to Acts 5...**After Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira, they immediately died.

It could be that Ananias died from the shock of being found out. But it does seem like this is **God's judgment** for their deception. But **how is THAT loving?**

First, **God may be guarding His honor.** They lied to God, and that was serious.

Second, **their deaths show how serious their sin was.** And even though this isn't always the immediate consequence, does NOT mean it isn't still serious.

And third, **this kept their sin from spreading, and harming others** like the Israelites who died from Achan's sin.

As an aside, **were Ananias and Saphira Christians?** Ultimately, we don't know. They may have been, but lost a great deal in listening to Satan instead of God. **God may have been protecting the church by disciplining(???) them—even as believers—in this way.** (See 1 Cor. 11:30)

Finally, in verse 11, we see the result:

**“<sup>11</sup> Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.”**

**Fear can be good.** It's "fear" of getting sick that makes us wash our hands after touching someone who's sick. **There IS a healthy kind of fear of consequences of sin.**

**Knowing the One who forgives us and has given us a new heart, we must RUTHLESSLY repent of sin whenever we see it in ourselves, and persistently call each other away from sin and to Jesus!** That might mean being willing to say "I'm wrong" right in the middle of an argument with a sibling, co-worker, or spouse. Or it might mean owning up to our wrong motives and asking a fellow Christian to pray for us.

## **GOSPEL CONCLUSION & INVITATION**

God removes Ananias and Sapphira from the church on earth, because their sin was toxic.

**And thank God He doesn't tolerate sin! If He left us to go our own direction,** our own self-centeredness would forever separate us from God and yield only judgment. **But God judged our sin at the cross!**

**If your refuge is not in Jesus, YOU will have to bear the eternal judgment for your sin. But looking to Jesus, you are free from condemnation. If you haven't yielded your life to Him, I urge you to do so now: He is the only refuge and source of everything good. And if you belong to Him, you can experience more and more freedom as you confess alongside other trustworthy Christians...and as you abandon the deceit you still find in your life, and cling to Christ.**

**But remember, your salvation is not in perfectly confessing your sin, or in perfect honesty. Your salvation is in JESUS. And as you yield yourself to His grace and Lordship by confessing instead of pretending, HIS truthfulness, HIS love, and HIS grace will more and more define you, and you will have greater assurance that you belong to Him.**