

9 Marks of a Healthy Church (Part 2) – Acts 4:32-5:11

Acts 5

This is the second half of the passage we started last week, where Luke *describes* the early church for us. And in doing so, he gives us 9 marks or 9 characteristics . . . That we'd do well to imitate in *our* church. 9 marks to evaluate ourselves, and grow.

We covered **6 of them** in Part 1, including:

1. Widespread unity
2. Selfless Sharing
3. Powerful Evangelism
4. Significant Favor
5. Crazy Generosity
6. Charitable Compassion

Marks of a healthy church. All from v32-37 of ch4. And all by way of *positive* example.

But Luke starts the very next verse with the word “but.” Which clues us in that something different is coming, something negative. And sure enough, it does.

➤ Having just cited Barnabas as a *positive* example of crazy generosity, Luke says in 5:1 – [1] *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 man 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.*

Wow! That's hard core. Shocking. Especially so in light of the Santa Claus image we've forced God into. Where all he does is smile and pat us on the head.

Or gently shake his finger when we do something wrong.

Clearly that's not the case. Clearly he's *passionate* about our holiness. Clearly he's *zealous* for our honesty.

Which leads us to the 7th mark of a healthy church:

7. Honest Integrity (5:1-6)

So often we think God left his justice and judgment in the *Old* Testament. I've even heard people say it.

“Oh that's the God of the Old Testament. He doesn't do those things in the New. He's loving, gentle, kind, patient.” And all those things are true.

But so are the other things. Like his wrath toward sin, and firm discipline, and passion for our purity. Especially our integrity. He's passionate about it.

So much so, that he took the life of a man who lacked it.

And this isn't the *only* place we see it the New Testament. The Apostle Paul talked about it as well. In his teaching about The Lord's Supper. **1 Cor 11:29-30**.

Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body [without examining yourself for sin, and confessing it] *eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.*

Even on *this* side of the cross, it's not outside God's prerogative and character and way, to discipline us for sin. Physically. (**Heb 12:7b,10b**)

For what son is there whom his father does not discipline . . . but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.

Make no mistake. God disciplines us for sin. Often times internally, due to the misery of our conviction; and sometimes externally in the misery of our lives.

But he's never punitive for the sake of being punitive. He never disciplines us just to punish us, or satisfy his anger. It's always for our sanctification as well.

I even wonder sometimes whether God takes our lives prematurely in order to prevent us from making shipwreck of our faith. I wonder.

And if he does, it's a grace. A blessing.

I'd much rather have a short life here and a long one in *heaven*, than a *long* one here and *eternity* in hell.

Whatever the case, God *disciplines* us for our sin on occasion. Including our lack of integrity. Like Ananias. A lack of integrity he demonstrated 4 ways.*****

Let's see if we can find them. V1.

➤ *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* [there's the first indication of sin] *some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

Honest *integrity* is a mark of health, **not** . . .

Deception. That was their first sin. They *kept back* or set aside in a secret way, part of the sale price. And then gave the rest as if it was *all* of it. Like it says in v2b.

They *brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.* That's deception.

Second, is **hypocrisy**. The exact *opposite* of honest integrity. V4.

Speaking to Ananias, Peter says – *While it remained unsold* [the property], *did it not remain your own?* It's a rhetorical question to say, “It did. It was yours.”

Affirming the possession of private property by the way, as something good and beneficial.

And after it was sold [Peter continues], *was it not at your disposal?* It was.

Ananias didn't *have* to give the proceeds to the church. It was voluntary.

And then he finishes with a third question – *Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?* What deed?

Giving their gift as if it represented the entire sale price. As if they were just like Barnabas. It was hypocritical. Anything *but* honest.

➤ Third, was their **failure to resist**. That's the 3rd sin here that clues us in to God's passion for our integrity. V3.

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?

It's an interesting question. And I *don't* think Peter is literally asking Ananias to articulate the motives of *Satan*. *Why has Satan filled your heart?* That's obvious. He's the father of lies. It's what he does.

Rather, I think he's asking him why he *allowed* Satan to influence him. Why he *allowed* him to fill his heart with deception and hypocrisy.

And there's really only one answer – he didn't resist. He didn't defy.
Resist the devil and he will flee from you the Bible says (James 4:7). Resist.
Based on Peter's question, Ananias did anything but. Because Satan *filled* his heart. Which means Ananias was either *careless* in his walk, failing to be sober and vigilant, or he was flat-out *rebellious*.
“I don't *care* about holiness. I don't *care* about obedience. I'm going to sin and like it. Lie and love it.”

➤ Ever been there? I sure have. And it's sinful.
Allowing Satan to get the best of us is sinful. Allowing him to influence us is wrong. Especially when all we have to do to make him flee, is resist.
We don't have to know his ways, we don't have to speak some mantra, we don't have to rebuke him in the name of Jesus, we don't have to bind him at the door . . .
We don't have to map some demonic hierarchy, we don't have to turn off the lights and light a candle, and we don't have to visit a deliverance ministry.

We just, have, to resist. “I'm not *going* to sin. I'm not *going* to succumb. I *love* holiness. I *love* Jesus. I want to do what's *right* in my life. God *help* me.”
That's all it takes. Resistance. Something Ananias and Sapphira failed at.

➤ And 4th, they lied. Deception, hypocrisy, failure to resist, and **lying**. That's the 4th way a lack of integrity was demonstrated. V3
Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? Peter asked.
Implying that their lie wasn't just to Peter and the church, but to God.

Like King David prayed a thousand years earlier. In Ps 51. *Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.* (4)
David sinned against another woman by *sleeping* with her, and against another man by *killing* him.
But that *paled* in comparison to his sin against *God*. The *giver* of life and the *giver* wives. That's the idea.

And so too with Ananias. “*You have not lied to man* [Peter says in the v4b] *but to God.*”
Identifying the Holy *Spirit* as God. Do you see it?
He says in v3 – *Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?* . . .
And then in v4b – *You have not lied to man but to God.* (Summary)
The point being, they lied.

➤ 4 sins. Demonstrating a lack of integrity. Even the failure to resist Satan. Because they acted like they were.

All of which shows us by way of negative example, that God is passionate about honest integrity. Making it a mark of a healthy church for sure.

➤ How about you? Are you healthy in that respect? Or do you need to repent?
If so, don't delay. Restoration awaits. And so does our health.

8. Intentional Accountability (5:7-10)

V7 – *After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened* [ignorance is definitely not bliss]. [8] *And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.”* [She lied too.] [9] *But Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?*

“How is that you have conspired together, to see if you can get away with all this? As if the Holy Spirit doesn't know or care.”

“As if his passion for your purity and our integrity is weak.”

That's the idea. “How could you?” He intentionally confronted her.

And it was followed by consequences.

Behold [v9b], *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.*

Intentional accountability is a mark of a healthy *church* just like it's a mark of a healthy life. No accountability, no improvement. No growth. No righteousness.

At least not very much. Because most of us, left alone, do as little as we can. And certainly don't rise to God's best.

That's why even *professional* athletes have coaches.

Left to ourselves we tend to do only what's easy. And often what's wrong. We regress to the lowest common denominator.

So we *need* accountability. To not only avoid *sin*, but grow in *holiness*.

➤ Unfortunately, most of us have an incomplete *understanding* of accountability. And there's nothing intentional about it.

For instance, we tend to think of accountability only as transparency. “If I'm open about my sin and struggles, I'm being accountable. There.”

“If I show up and throw up, I'm good.”

When in fact, that's only *one* aspect of intentional accountability. 1 of 4.

But it does *start* there. Intentional accountability starts with **transparency**.

Where we get with a group of like-minded believers to confess our sins to one another (Js 5:16), and express our aspirations; our desires for spiritual *growth*.

But if that's where it stops, it's not much good. And it's definitely not accountability.

It also requires **goals**. Establishing concrete objectives. Things that are specific, measurable, achievable, and compatible. SMAC goals – S.M.A.C.

Fail to establish goals in your discipleship, and you'll fail.

Third, is **follow-up**. You to your group and your group to you.

You can have all the goals in the world and display all the transparency of glass, but if there's no follow-up, like Peter followed up with Sapphira . . .

There won't be growth. There won't be sanctification. You'll be the same person next year as you were last year.

And then 4th, is **consequences**. Referring to costs or penalties that you agree on *ahead* of time, if you don't *achieve* your goals.

Like putting Covenant Eyes on your computer if you look at pornography. It's a consequence. Or removing social media from your phone if you obsess on it.

Or limiting your TV time if you're not having devotions.

All consequences, and all necessary. Otherwise, accountability it's just reporting. The *furthest* thing from what we find here.

4 parts (**Summary**). And things that might call for some action on your part.

Like getting in a discipleship group in the first place. A men's study, women's study, Small Group, Alive & Free.

Or maybe you need to make some changes to the group you're *in*.

Whatever the case, be intentional. No accountability, no growth.

And then last, the last mark of a healthy church we find here, is . . .

9. Godly Fear (5:5b,11)

V5b says – Ananias *fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.*

And after Sapphira died, it says the same thing. In v11. *And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.*

There was great *power* in the church, there was great *grace*, and there was great *fear*.

The question, is fear of what? And the answer, is fear of the *Lord*. Fear of his *judgment*. His wrath. His discipline.

But once again, that's just part of it. To fear the Lord, means to show reverence, awe, trepidation, and submission. **R.A.T.S.**

I know, it's not a very *spiritual* acronym, and I could reverse it to spell star, but that's not the order that seems intuitive to me.

➤ So bear with me and let's take each of those in turn. Starting with . . .

Reverence for his greatness

To fear the Lord means to humbly respect and admire his great work, great knowledge, and great glory.

That seems to be the implication of verses like **Proverbs 1:7**. That says . . .

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools [on the other hand] despise wisdom and instruction.

Fools *despise* the great wisdom and instruction of God, while the wise revere it.*****

It's reverence for his greatness. That's the first aspect of fearing the Lord.

Second, is . . .

Awe of his power

2 Chronicles 17:10 says – *The fear of the LORD fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were around Judah, and they made no war against Jehoshaphat [the king].*

Why? Because awe of God's power kept them at bay. His power to establish

Jehoshaphat in the *first* place, and his power to defeat them.*****

So fear of the Lord means awe of his power.

Third is . . .

Trepidation at his wrath

Or trembling at his justice when it comes to sin. Shaking in our boots.

Prov 16:6 says – *By the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil.*

Why? Because we tremble at the potential discipline or wrath he might dispense.

Like the *fearful expectation of judgment* and *fury of fire* that awaits those who *continue* in sin (Heb 10:27).*****

So part of fearing the Lord is actual fear.

And if it weren't for his mercy and his Son, that's *all* it would be.

And then last, is . . .

Submission to his authority

Like **Psalms 34:11** implies – *Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.*

I will teach you what the Lord requires and how you should live; how you should follow and submit to him.

And **Is 11:2** says, speaking of Jesus . . .

The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him . . . the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. [3] And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

And since a significant part of the life and ministry of Jesus was joyful submission to God's authority, that must be part of what it means.*****

Reverence, awe, trepidation, and submission. Godly fear.

And when the quantity and quality is *great* among us, it's a mark of health.

➤ Because God's not Santa Claus. And passages like this are a sobering reminder to take him seriously.

Don't mess. He won't tolerate sin and complacency forever. (**Summary**)

Practice *honest* integrity. Pursue *intentional* accountability. And by all means, cultivate godly *fear*. Our health depends on it.

Prayer – *Have mercy on [us], O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out [our] transgressions. Wash [us] thoroughly from [our] iniquities, and cleanse [us] from [our] sin! (Ps 51:1-2)* We fear you, and rest in you, and love you, and rejoice in you, all at the same time.