
“A Holy Church for a Holy God”

Acts 5:1-11

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(Acts 5:1-11)

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ²With 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.

³Then 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? ⁴Didn’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.”

⁵When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?”

“Yes,” she said, “that is the price.”

⁹Peter 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.”

¹⁰At 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. ¹¹Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Core Idea: Our God who is holy has called His people, the Church, to be holy.

Good morning church. It is great to worship with you today. Tomorrow is the beginning of March which marks a year since COVID caused us to lockdown. Can you believe that? A whole year! We have all gone through trials and adjustments due to this pandemic. Just think of all the things you had to deal with this past year. And even though it’s been tough, we are trying to endure through it for this one purpose: to prevent this virus from spreading and infecting more people.

But what if I were to say that there’s a greater, more infectious disease than COVID? And it has infected all of us! We see that drastic measures have been taken in the hopes of eradicating COVID. In today’s passage, we see God taking measures to prevent our sickness from spreading further. So, if you have your Bibles, please open to Acts 5:1-11. I think it’s important for context to read a little bit before chapter 5. So, I’m going to start from Acts 4:32. Please follow along as I read.

[read: **Acts 5:1-11**]

This is the word of God. I’ve read through Acts many times. It’s a wonderful, historical book about the early Christian Church and how it grew, but I think I pause every time I read this passage. Why would Luke, the author of this book, include this story? What is he trying to tell us?

Just to be clear, this isn't just a story he came up with. This is history. These people existed. This really happened. Maybe the greater question that comes up after reading this story is: Why did Ananias and Sapphira end up dead?

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is not so much about them, rather it is about God. Luke included this story to teach us about the holiness of God. Now, when you think of holiness, what do you think of? The Bible teaches that to be holy means to be set apart, to be distinct, separate. To be holy was to be pure and untainted by the world's sickness or sin. The entire Bible illustrates how God is a holy God. He is absolutely pure, unstained by sin or evil. He is perfect in every way, and perfectly good all the time. Everything He does and says is right.

Not only is God holy, but God also commands His people to be holy. "Be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44). Paul reiterates this to the Christians in Rome: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, **holy** and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1). Perhaps Peter was thinking about Ananias and Sapphira when he wrote in His letter, "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance, but just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do" (1 Peter 1:14-15). That is why God has given us the Scriptures: to know this holy God and reflect His holy nature and His commands are for our good; to help us pursue holiness.

Here's the problem. We all fall short. We are all sinners; impure and tainted. We are prone to wander and disobey God. We are sick. And the sickness is sin. It's like the coronavirus. And it is a disease that infects and spreads. In today's passage, God is trying to protect His people from this sickness. And He acts swiftly to isolate and quarantine everyone else before it spreads. Ananias and Sapphira are used as a sign and warning for all Christians; back then and for us today.

There are three main points I will address today:

1. We cannot hide our sins from God (vv.3-4,9)
2. Sin is a serious matter to God (vv.5,10) and,
3. God has given us the remedy of sin.

POINT #1: WE CANNOT HIDE OUR SINS FROM GOD.

So, let's start with the first point: We cannot hide our sins from God. When we get to verse 1, it begins with "Now a man named Ananias...". The more accurate translation of the word "Now" is "But". Which implies a contrast. If you read right before chapter 5, the contrast is between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira.

Both sold property they owned and brought it to the apostles' feet to provide for those who were in need. But unlike Barnabas, Ananias kept back part of the money for himself, with his wife's full knowledge (v.2). The couple saw an opportunity. They could give to the church and gain praise and spiritual reputation while still making some money for themselves. Keeping back some money for their own was not a sin. Peter makes that clear in verse 4. Follow with me: "Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?" Nowhere were the believers commanded to give everything. It was voluntary. So then, what was the sin? Verse 3 gives us the answer: "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?"

The sin was lying. He publicly pretended that he gave all the money he got from selling his land. But there was a deeper sin; a sin that is more devastating. It was hypocrisy based on a desire for spiritual status. They desired the approval of men. They were people-pleasers. And they wanted their fellow brothers and sisters to praise them for their generous acts.

Their reputation was more important to them than their character. Do you see the hypocrisy? They sought their own glory rather than God's glory. You know, I confess that even as a pastor, not just a pastor but as a person, there is always that temptation. And perhaps many of us struggle with this sin.

Hypocrisy is a destructive force within the community of God's people. If Satan cannot destroy the church from the outside, he will attempt to destroy it from within. John Stott wrote that Ananias and Sapphira were thieves: "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." How many of us struggle with this? In doing good, we focus more on how we benefit from it.

The book of Acts shows us how God and the Holy Spirit worked among the community of believers. But it also warns us that there is someone else at work in the world and in the church. The early Church was not a perfect community, and neither are we. There has never been a time when God's people were perfect. Therefore, we need to be on guard against the work of unholy spirits, like Satan.

Peter said, "Satan filled his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit" (v.3). In contrast to the Spirit-filled giving of Barnabas, Ananias was inspired by Satan. And the result was the sin of lying to the Holy Spirit. Peter mentioned that Ananias lied to the Spirit and then in verse 4 he lied to God; connecting that the Holy Spirit is God. So, he lied to God. All sin is a sin against God. **Brothers and sisters, how is Satan swaying our hearts? And are we giving into his temptations?** Ultimately, we are responsible for our sins.

Ananias and Sapphira thought that they could get away with this. It was a brilliant plan! They can receive the praise that they so desired as well as have some extra cash for themselves. And no one would know. Think about it, no one in the church would have questioned them. They were giving and being generous. They were helping others, but there was only one that knew what was at the heart of their actions. When Ananias brought the gift to the apostles, Peter confronted him but Peter could not have known what had happened. Peter couldn't read his mind and heart. It was the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit that revealed the sinfulness. Only God knew. Brothers and sisters, there is no sin we can hide from God. No matter how well you hide it from one another, we can't fool God. Are there any sins you are trying to lock away in the deepest closets of your heart? Maybe there are sins you're not even aware of. But God sees them all.

The Holy Spirit knows our every thoughts and deeds. It's like our lives are being displayed on a screen and the Spirit is watching everything unfold. There are no secrets or tricks. That's why God knows even when we are truly repentant or faking it. We can hide from everyone else, but we cannot hide from Him. And that's the first point.

POINT #2: SIN IS A SERIOUS MATTER TO GOD.

The second point is this: Sin is a serious matter to God. Now we get to the big elephant in the room. Ananias and Sapphira died and it wasn't Peter or anyone else in the church who put them to death; it was God. The ultimate cause of their deaths was God's judgment. We are left to wrestle with this. It's a sobering truth that God sometimes takes the lives of sinning believers. John MacArthur wrote that "Death is God's ultimate form of physical discipline for sinning believers. He [God] wants His church pure."

Not everyone who lies gets struck down immediately for their sin. So why did Ananias and Sapphira? Well, their deaths serve as a sign. Before Sapphira died, she was asked, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord?" She was testing the holy God's reaction to sin.

I think there is a danger here: God takes sin seriously because He is holy, **but we may underestimate God's holiness**. Ananias and Sapphira didn't take God's holiness seriously. We are supposed to worship Him with reverence, awe and respect, because He is holy and set apart, seated on His throne. That's exactly the opposite of what the couple did. In their worship they lied and tested God.

They underestimated God's holiness and God judged them. Their punishment may not seem to match the crime. But think about this:

Being a part of the Christian church, the two of them would have seen the activity and power of the Holy Spirit. By God's grace, they were saved and filled with the Spirit. They witnessed healings and miracles. They saw people coming to Christ and receiving salvation through the preaching of the resurrection of Jesus. They saw the generosity of all the believers. They saw what God can do. And yet, despite being recipients of God's amazing grace, they rejected it to seek their own glory. And therefore, they also experienced God's judgment. The couples' death is a picture of how God feels about sin. Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death."

Friends, this should be a wake-up call for us. Why? Because we are like Ananias and Sapphira. We may try to trick ourselves into thinking otherwise. But God knew that His people, every single person, would struggle with sin. We have received God's grace and have been saved. But sometimes we forget God. Our eyes have seen, and our ears have heard. But the desires of this world and sin blinds us and makes us deaf to the Holy Spirit. Church, are we inspired and transformed to live the holy life that God has called us to? Are we reflecting the holiness of God? Do not take the holiness of God lightly!

[Isaiah 6 – Isaiah's response to God]. Isaiah saw the Lord, seated on His throne. And the seraphim call out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory". When Isaiah hears and sees all of this, he cries out, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5). How should we respond to our sinfulness before a holy God? Like Ananias and Sapphira? Or like Isaiah?

Again, not everyone immediately dies when they sin. But God has given us a warning to take sin seriously and pursue holiness. We can see at what lengths He'll go to protect His Church and keeping it pure and holy.

If we're being honest, some of us might still find God's actions questionable or even offensive. In the beginning of this sermon, I said that the greater question was, "Why did they die?" But I think that's the wrong question we should be asking. That question reveals our ignorance of our sin and God's holiness. We shouldn't ask the question, "Why did they die?" Instead, we should wonder, "Why do we remain alive?" Sin is a serious matter to God. That's the second point. Now to our final point.

POINT #3: GOD HAS GIVEN US THE REMEDY OF SIN.

God has given us the remedy of sin. What is this remedy, this cure? God knew we could not obey His command to be holy. Only God is perfect and good. We needed deliverance from our sins. No matter how hard we try, no matter how genuine our efforts, we were deserving of God's wrath. We deserved death. But God, by His grace, made a way for us to be redeemed. Only someone who is perfect, sinless, and blameless could atone for our sins. And His name is Jesus.

I sometimes wonder what it would've been like to be alive in the first century; to be a part of the early Church where some were eyewitnesses of Jesus. There was this incredible fire that burned and spread like a wildfire. As the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles and disciples in the upper room on the day of Pentecost, that birthed the Church and as they boldly preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, thousands were being saved. It was the message of the resurrection of Christ that convicted the hearts of the believers. Christ's death paid the penalty for our sins and His resurrection gives us the faith to believe in the power of God and that Jesus is truly to Son of God and the Messiah. Jesus, the Holy One, gives us the assurance that at His Second Coming, we will be resurrected with Him for all eternity.

Because of the hope that comes from believing the Gospel message, the Church is able to stand firm in growing in grace and in holiness. Yes, this passage is a reminder of God's hatred of sin and how He acts swiftly to protect the holiness of His people. But we are not put to death because He is patient with us and slow to anger.

As R.C. Sproul wrote, “We forget that God’s patience is designed to lead us to repentance, not to become bolder in our sin.” If Jesus really went through the pain and suffering of the cross to redeem us, and we neglect that, and rather pursue our sin, what will it be like when we stand before God? Listen to what the author of Hebrews wrote: We must “pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?” (Hebrews 2:1-3).

It is only through Christ and His righteousness that we are able to stand before God, holy and blameless in His sight. If sin is like this COVID virus, Christ is the cure. And the Holy Spirit is the vaccine that protects us from getting infected or living in sin. And if God is calling us to be holy, by the power of the Spirit, we continue to live imagining the day when this sickness is eradicated and is no more! Every day I’m sitting at home, isolated from people, thinking about how COVID has impacted the world, and I can’t wait for the day this virus is eradicated. But imagine, one day, where there is no more sin. Imagine, God’s holy people, the Church, sinless. And just like we’ve all taken drastic measures to prevent the spread of COVID, that is what God was demonstrating through Ananias and Sapphira. God is teaching us the seriousness of this disease called sin. And the command to strive for holiness.

As we have received God’s remedy of grace and consider the warning He teaches us through Ananias and Sapphira, how are we to respond? Well, look with me to verse 5: “And great fear seized all who heard what had happened”. And verse 11: “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events”.

These dramatic deaths caused a great deal of fear, but it’s shocking to see that even in light of this, more and more people believed in Jesus (Acts 5:14). An article I once read defined the fear of God as “awe mixed with intimacy”. We are invited into the closest possible relationship with God, but this intimacy must never overshadow the majesty of who God is; namely that He is holy. To fear God doesn’t mean to be “scared” of Him, but rather, to have the wisdom to know that He is holy and sovereign, and we are not. Holiness and sovereignty demand respect.

In the hymn “Amazing Grace” by John Newton, there’s a line that says, “Tis grace that taught my heart to fear”. I think this is why Newton wrote those beautiful lyrics: As the fear of God increases, we understand more fully what we have been saved from and because of this realization and conviction, our fear of God leads to worship and wholehearted devotion. Think back to Isaiah. When he confesses that he is a man of unclean lips, a live coal was placed on his mouth by one of the seraphim saying, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (Isaiah 6:7). Christ is that coal for us! He has purified us from our sins and our guilt is taken away! And then after that, Isaiah is ready to obey what God’s plans are for him. The early Christian Church devoted themselves wholeheartedly to Christ and the Gospel and we, too, today must do likewise.

Many of us focus so much on God’s love and mercy and that’s very true, but, perhaps without a proper understanding of the fear of God, that is, being in awe and reverence of Him, passages like today’s may be difficult to comprehend. Without the fear of God, we are missing out on the fullness of who God is.

No doubt that the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira caused the church and everyone who heard what had happened to do a lot of self-examination, but that is exactly what God wanted for His people. Their deaths caused great fear, but it also made clear God’s strong desire for a pure and holy Church and that’s the same for us today.

CONCLUSION

Let me close with this. If you skip a few verses to 29-32, we read about how the apostles were put in jail and persecuted. The Jewish leaders are upset that they are preaching the Gospel message and making them sound guilty of killing Jesus. It’s to the point where they wanted to put the apostles to death but listen to Peter and the other apostles’ response.

Follow with me from verse 29:

(Acts 5:29-32) We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging Him on a cross. God exalted Him to His right hand as Prince and Saviour that He might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.

The Church is called to be holy. And even though we cannot gather physically, each of us are called to pursue holiness so that as the body of Christ, inspired and transformed by the Holy Spirit, we may grow in what God had intended His Church to be. Let us not compromise or make excuses for sinning. Let us not blame our circumstances like this pandemic but let us re-commit to being shaped into the likeness of Christ, the Holy One, so that we will live for His glory, and His alone.

Let's pray.