

No Fooling God

Scripture

Acts 5:1-11

¹But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ²with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³"Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" ⁵Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." ⁹Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.

Sermon

Today's sermon is my fourth in a series that is focused on the Book of Acts. I have wanted to preach this series because I think this book is important for any church, it is important for any Christian to read through and study because. By knowing what is in this book it can help us embrace be empowered by the Holy Spirit which was given to us to help us live out our lives as Christians in this world. This book is also important because it can help us determine ways in which we will engage the world as Christians as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Book of Acts is the story of how the Holy Spirit equipped and directed the early church to reach out into the world and share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today, I will be tackling probably one of the more difficult scriptures we can read in this book.

[Read Acts 5:1-11]

Up to this point in the Book of Acts, the church, known as The Way, has slowly been growing and gaining momentum. The Apostles had begun proclaiming the gospel message, and many were beginning to believe in Jesus. While proclaiming the message, the apostles had begun to experience some persecution from the Jewish leaders, but it was not really significant to this point.

As the faith community was building, many of the believers who were a part of the community came to see material things and possessions differently than the rest of the world. Instead of everyone holding tightly onto their individual possessions, they began to basically put everything together and it was all held in common by the group. A few persons who owned houses and land sold them and brought everything they received from those sales to give to the disciples to distribute amongst the believers. Because of all this, everyone had access to what they needed and "There was not a needy person among them" (4:34).

This practice of selling one's possessions in order to give money to those in need showed the believers' willingness to help other believers. While some were, not everyone was liquidating everything, nor was there any pressure to do so. These were freewill offerings, and it appears to have been practiced only here in the early Palestine church.

The Book of Acts even goes so far as to name one of these believers by name, a Levite named Joseph "whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas...[He] sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet" (4:36-37). This is where today's text comes in.

Upon seeing what Barnabas and the others had done, according to our text today, another believer Ananias talked it over with his wife Sapphira, and decided he would sell a piece of property he owned, but he chose to do something different than what Barnabas and all the others had done. With his wife's knowledge, Ananias brings to the apostles only a portion of the proceeds from that sale and places it at the apostles' feet. The others who had been doing this had brought everything and had given it to the apostles, but Ananias decides to hold back some of the proceeds for he and his wife.

The scripture does not say it, but it is implied in the text that Ananias brought this money and gave it to the apostles in a way in which he made it seem as if he was bringing everything he had gained from the sale and was giving it to God. He wanted to look like all the others, but in reality, was trying to deceive everybody with his actions.

Peter, who seems to be endowed with a kind of prophetic power seems to know what was in Ananias's "heart" with his gift. He rebukes Ananias for attempting to lie to the Holy Spirit. During his rebuke, Peter makes it very clear the sin of Ananias is not his failure to share his goods but his hypocrisy. Ananias tried to appear generous in his effort, but in reality, he was really being miserly and misleading. Peter not only tells him he was lying to the members of this new community of faith, but he was also trying to lie to God.

Upon hearing Peter's verdict, Ananias dropped dead and others took him off and he was buried.

Three hours later, Sapphira shows up. She seems to know nothing of what happened to Ananias, which seems a little strange. Even though it was customary to bury people on the day they died during this time period, normally the wife would know of the burial. Just like a good interrogator would do, when Peter first questions her, he does not ask if she knows what has happened to her husband. He does not want to cloud the waters with all the emotion first. He goes straight to the point and asks that she confirm the amount raised by the sale, and she does so, saying they sold it for the amount they gave to the church. Peter then rebukes her, placing her and her husband's offense against the Holy Spirit.

Upon hearing Peter's verdict and that her husband had died, Sapphira drops dead and the same men who just returned from taking her husband's body for burial takes her off too.

Clearly, this passage raises many difficult questions for us: What compelled Ananias and Sapphira to lie about their gift? Why would lying be punished by death? Was Peter's confrontation of Ananias and Sapphira too severe? What are we supposed to learn from this? There are no easy answers. Yet, if we are to be considered relevant in our world today, we must choose to wrestle with hard issues honestly and help people do likewise.

In today's text, Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, seems to use this story as a negative example of what community life in the church is supposed to be about. If Barnabas's actions embody God's favor, then Ananias and Sapphira's actions definitely embody God's disfavor.

Barnabas had been introduced in the previous chapter because he would be a major player in the immediate future of the church and is an example of a generous giver. But our human nature plays into this scene. Many believe that the positive response that came from the church and its members to gifts from people like Barnabas became a source of envy for others like Ananias and Sapphira. Desiring that same esteem from persons in the community, Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sell a piece of property, desiring to give some money to the apostles for the needy.

There was no demand by God or by the believing community that any member should give all they sold. As Peter asked, "And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal?" (Acts 5:4). But rather than openly give just a portion of what they had, the two conspired to pretend that they had turned the full purchase price over to the church.

Ananias and Sapphira could have given any amount of what they received from the selling price, but because they apparently desired the same esteem that Barnabas had received for given all, they pretended to give all the money they had received for the field. But in reality, they actually kept back part of the money.

While Jesus was on this earth, he warned the disciples and us to avoid practicing piety in order to be seen by others, and to not sound a trumpet before giving (Matthew 6:1-2). He also warned against greed and self-indulgence (Matthew 23:25).

Ananias and Sapphira's sin was not in the choice they made for the use of their possessions. Material goods are not the only things we humans can covet. We may more often covet personal attention, praise, and prestige. But, to use religious acts to gain worldly recognition is a serious sin. Using deception and lies to make the act appear greater than it is compounds the sin. Such an act is not simply a game of deception fooling our family, friends, or the church. It is also a lie told to God in the Person of the Spirit. Ananias and Sapphira were condemned because their deceit was a reintroduction of the hypocrisy which had corrupted so many of the religious people in Judaism.

But was Ananias and Sapphira's punishment too severe? Today we might think so, but in our society today, do we not tend to be lack in our punishment, especially in the church? Do we even have any kind of punishment in the church? A lot of times there is not a single consequence for sin, but sometimes, there is.

The church, the community of faith we find in our text today was just starting. They were laying the foundations for this new path the Holy Spirit was taking humanity on, and unless a strong foundation was laid, the new community would fail and crumble. If Satan had been allowed even just an inch at that point, I think things would be a lot different today. God knew that the church could not survive unless its people had high standards and this included honesty.

This story seems to echo another story we can find in the Bible in the Old Testament. In the Book of Joshua we can read about Achan who disobeyed God by keeping some of the spoils of war and hiding them in his tent after the Israelites had been told to destroy everything they found in the city of Jericho when it fell. Scripture notes that God held all of Israel responsible for Achan's singular act and many Israelites died because of it. God told Joshua, "Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I imposed on them. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have acted deceitfully, and they have put them among their own belongings" (Joshua 7:11). Only the death of the transgressor allowed Israel to move forward again.

In light of the above, how serious would people in the early church have considered Ananias and Sapphira's deceit to be? They would have known the story of Achan. At this point, the church consisted only of converted Israelites. What detrimental consequence might the entire community have suffered due to Ananias's and Sapphira's actions if it was allowed to go without notice?

Some read our text today and accuse God of being harsh. They might say, "I thought God was supposed to be loving and forgiving. I thought all that wrath stuff was for Old Testament times."

With the emphasis we put today on grace and mercy, it is easy to overlook the equally important truth of God's holiness. We must remember that God has not changed (Malachi 3:6). He still hates sin as much as He ever did and He is especially offended when His own people cut moral corners and try to hide behind the cloak of forgiveness.

I do know we can be grateful that God does not seem to deal with people like He did during this time in the church's history. If God dealt with people today as He did in our text today, every church would need a morgue in the basement and a graveyard close by. I can say with all honesty I most likely would have not even come close to answering my call into the ministry if part of the job description had included being a mortician, if I had even made it to that point in the first place!

One of our struggles is that the church has always attracted people with impure motives. There have been hucksters who wanted to profit financially from religion. There have been power mongers seeking control. There have been self-centered persons who want to be pampered and cared for. And there have been glory seekers who want to be noticed and affirmed for their "holy" acts.

Ananias and Sapphira, a married couple in the Jerusalem church, fell into this last category. They concocted a plan whereby they hoped to give a little to God but get credit for a lot. Their scheme was dishonest, their focus was in the wrong place, and God's judgment was swift and severe.

I think the main lesson we can take away from our text today deals with honesty.

While ethicists and theologians debate about what types of lies are more or less harmful and whether they can ever be justified, Christians know that God holds us to a higher standard. Paul wrote that, in Christ, we are new creations (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). We are set apart. But despite our being set apart, being commanded to not "testify falsely" (Exodus 20:16), and being told to get "rid of lying" (Ephesians 4:25), God's people have always struggled with the temptation to lie. We see lies and cover-ups over and over again throughout the Bible, beginning with the garden of Eden, in King David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had Uriah killed, and in today's text.

Most all of us have lied about something at one time or another. But as we mature in faith and discipleship, we must remember that claiming the name "Christian" means putting away things that hurt our relationship with God and with others. When we do make mistakes (and we all do), we must stop, repent, and be accountable to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We need to be honest not only in public, but also in private as well. It would be lying to leave something out of a story, tell a half-truth, twist the facts, or invent a falsehood. God warns us against such deception. Lying to each other disrupts unity by creating conflicts and destroying trust. It tears down relationships and will lead to open warfare wherever it surfaces, but especially in the church. Ephesians 4:25 says, "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another."

One of our biggest struggles is we live in a world where deception is a way of life for many people in our world today. God's people must not give in to what the world is doing! We might

fool our family, friends and neighbors for a while, but the fact is we will never be able to fool God.

Let us strive to be different than the world around us. Let us look to God for what His will is for us, our families, our friends, and our church. Let us repent of any sins in our lives and accept the sacrifice Christ made for us on the cross. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to work its power in us and bring about the new creation in each of us so that we may live our lives more and more like Christ did when he walked this earth. Let us be the people God created us to be.

Objective of Sermon

Sermon Series on Book of Acts – We might fool people around us but we can never fool God.



Sermon Notes

Things I would like to remember from today's sermon:



Prayer Journal

Use this weekly prayer to help you begin your time with God each day:

Replace this text with short prayer to pray for the week.

My Prayers for this week:



Grow-Pray-Study

No Fooling God

Sermon Notes

Acts 5:1-11

I. Heading

- a. Replace with quote.
- b. Replace with quote.

II. Heading

- a. Replace with quote.
- b. Replace with quote.
 1. Replace with quote.
 2. Replace with quote.
- c. Replace with quote.

III. Heading

- a. Replace with quote.
- b. Replace with quote.

IV. Closing

- a. Replace with quote.
- b. Replace with quote.



Monday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.



Thursday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.



Tuesday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.



Friday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.



Wednesday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.



Saturday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.

Sources Used

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Book of Acts Sermon Starters Week 9 - Soliciting Celebrity (Acts 5:1-11); Article on Discipleship Ministries website; <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-9>

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