

# God's Presence and Holy Living

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Acts 4:32–37

[32] Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. [33] And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. [34] There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold [35] and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. [36] Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, [37] sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (ESV)

Acts 5:1–11

[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.

[7] After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. [8] And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." [9] But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, 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. [11] And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. (ESV)

## Introduction

- Thus far in Acts, this just seems like the perfect church.
- In chapters 1-4, it really is difficult to identify any flaw, any blemish, any imperfection that might hinder this church.
- However, in chapter five all of that changes, as the story takes a dramatic turn. Suddenly this church doesn't seem quite so perfect.
- Sin enters the picture and God's judgment falls on this husband and wife, Ananias and Sapphira and they both die.
- Through this tragic event, we are reminded of the holiness of God, the sinfulness of sin and of how our own personal sin, can, if unchecked, hinder both the church's unity and the church's mission
- This passage teaches us that:the same Holy Spirit who saved 3000 on the day of Pentecost and the same Holy Spirit who healed the lame beggar, and the same holy Spirit who filled the church with other-worldly evangelistic boldness earlier in chapter 4, is the same Holy Spirit who takes sin seriously.

## 1. The sin

- It is important for us to understand that in this story, Ananias and Sapphira did not sin by withholding some of the money from the sale of their land.
- Church members were free to give as the Lord led.
- They were not required by the Apostles or by God to give all the proceeds to the church benevolence fund.
- Their sin was not in withholding the money, instead, they sinned by lying.
- They were guilty of deliberate deception for the purpose of self-exaltation. Their main concern was keeping up appearances and they were willing to lie in order to do so. This is a common human sin.
- You will notice that throughout the text, Peter identifies the Holy Spirit as the offended party.
- In plotting to lie, vs.9 Ananias and Sapphira tested the Holy Spirit.
- The Holy Spirit is God so in verse 5 Peter summarizes - "you have not lied to men but to God."
- Ultimately their Sin was against God. God Himself, the Holy Spirit was the most significant aggrieved party in this situation, not any person.
- This reminds us that all sin, both theirs and ours, is first and foremost against God before it is against any person.
- When we sin, yes we sin against others and we grieve others, but how easily we overlook the fact, that our sin, even when other people are involved, is ultimately against the Holy God of all.

## 2. The judgment

- Ananias and his wife Sapphira attempted to deceive Peter and deceive their local church family as well.
- As a consequence, God's judgment fell on them and they died.
- To Most of us, this strikes us at first as harsh. It seems severe. We think, "Why did God bring death to this couple for lying?"

Important Considerations:

*In reading this, it is helpful to remember that according to Scripture, all sinners deserve eternal death.*

- The apostle Paul says in Romans, "the wages of sin is death" – which encompasses both physical death as well as eternal death.
- What this means is, God didn't somehow give Ananias and Sapphira a raw deal.
- He didn't judge them more severely than they actually deserved.
- Passages like this should serve as a sobering reminder – we deserve God's judgment for our sins no less than Ananias and Sapphira.
- It should cause us to marvel at God's grace and God's mercy because we are not all that different from Annias and Sapphira.

*In reading this difficult story, it's important for us to recognize that this incident came at a unique and critical juncture in the history of God's saving plan.*

- At the time of this tragic event, you didn't have a countless number of churches scattered throughout the globe proclaiming the gospel like you do today.
- Instead, the Jerusalem church was the sole mission base for the continuing ministry of Jesus by the power of the Spirit.
- It is an understatement to say that a lot hinged on the success of the Jerusalem church!
- This was the "mother church" of all other local churches that have ever existed.
- If hypocrisy, pretense to godliness, and deception – was permitted to take root and spread in this community, the potential outcome could have been disastrous – disastrous not only for the testimony of the Jerusalem church, but also for the entire future of the Christian faith.
- It is not surprising then, that in vs.3, the Apostle Peter notes that the Enemy had his hand in this tragic event.
- Peter says that Satan himself had filled Ananias' heart provoking him to do this.
- God held Ananias responsible for his sin, but Satan was involved as well, tempting Ananias, and thereby seeking to undermine the purity of the church and the mission of the church.
- We would be wise to read verse three and take heed: Satan and his demons hate local churches that faithfully proclaim the gospel.

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. – 1 Peter 5:8

- Ever since the earliest beginnings of the church, our Enemy has focused his attacks against the church on two main fronts — purity of doctrine and purity of life.
- If he can get churches to compromise on sound doctrine OR compromise on holiness of life OR both, he knows he can take those churches out and ultimately render them ineffective for the cause of Jesus Christ.
- This is why the Apostle Paul told Timothy “watch your life and doctrine closely...”
- Timothy and all pastors are to watch their lives and doctrine closely in significant part so that the people do as well, and the purity of the church is thereby preserved.
- May we be watchful. May we watch our lives, watch our doctrine, and watch against the Enemy’s attack.
- Knowing the uniqueness of this particular situation can help us process what happened here.
- The death of Ananias and Sapphira was an unusual and unique mercy at that time to that church.
- It was a unique and unusual mercy intended to repel Satanic attack and preserve the forward momentum of the gospel through that first generation of the Christian church.
- If this was God’s normal way of relating to believers, none of us would be alive.
- We can thank God for his mercy....
- Because of our sin, each of us is fully deserving of death. Because Jesus took our place on the cross, what we receive every single day of our lives is mercy.

### 3. The response

The response of the congregation to this tragic event...was fear.

“When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it (verse 5).”

“And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things (verse 11).”

“The resulting fear that the judgment creates is exactly what the passage seeks to engender—respect for God and for righteousness as well as a recognition that sin is destructive and dangerous.” -- Darrell Bock

- Sometimes fear can be a bad thing, something we want to avoid, perhaps something we at times need to repent of.
- But fear can also sometimes be a very good thing. Such is the case when when the Bible speaks of “the fear of the Lord “
- Here in this story of Ananias and Sapphira, I agree with Bock when he says, this passage is intended by God to engender fear – that is, it is intended to engender good

fear, the fear of the Lord where there is, a “respect for God and for righteousness as well as a recognition that sin is destructive and dangerous.”

- Many times when we think of what the local church IS -- we think of it as a place where we serve, give, hear the Word, worship, enjoy fellowship ... and those kinds of things.
- But there is another point here that we do well not to miss: The local church is a place where in a unique way, God's holy presence dwells.
- The local church is to be place on earth where God is to be most respected and most revered and most feared.
- It is also the place where God's people recognize that sin is an affront to God's holiness, is destructive, and is therefore to be taken very seriously.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

- Here again in 1 Peter you see this clear connection between the holiness of the church and the witness of the church.
- We have been called out of the realm of darkness which scripturally is Satan's realm, into God's realm, the realm of His light, in order that we might proclaim His excellencies.
- To remain in darkness and proclaim the One who belongs to the realm of light is hypocrisy and a contradiction.
- In the early church, God wanted to make the statement that “holiness matters” to His people and he sovereignly chose to use Ananias and Sapphira as the means to do so.
- When two of your fellow church members suddenly die, because they don't take sin seriously enough---I think you would agree, that serves as a real wake up call.
- Verse 11: “And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.
- I imagine everyone in that Jerusalem church, after Ananias and Sapphira died--- in the fear of the Lord, had some moments of prayerful, deep sober self-reflection.
- Note: this passage is not intended to promote servile, slavish, groveling fear. And we shouldn't fear God killing us if we lie. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- The intent of this passage is not to promote servile fear, but instead it is intended to promote the genuine fear of the Lord among the people of God.
- Should we be sobered, that God takes lying and all other sin seriously? YES, most certainly, we should. That's the point.
- The point is that God's community, God's church should care deeply about holiness because our witness, our testimony, our forward progress in the gospel hinges in part upon it.
- When God's people pursue holiness together, in the right fear of the Lord, that positions them to be used by God in ways that would not be possible otherwise.

## Conclusion

A final encouragement:

- Seeing that sin so grieves the Holy Spirit and can be so destructive to the mission of the gospel through us, I ask you, should we not take sin seriously?
- If there is sin you need to repent of Or that I need to repent of, May we not not trifle with it. May we not excuse it.
- Instead, let us see the Holy One as the primary aggrieved party and in the fear of the Lord, let us repent.
- God invites us today to repent and he also invites us to receive his forgiveness.
- The Lord is such a gracious Savior. He died in order that we might be forgiven of every single sin.
- He died in order that our consciences would be cleansed with his blood And he delights to give us grace today and every day..May we receive it.

## Questions for Discussion/Application

- Re-read the text, Acts 4:32-5:11 What initial observations and insights do you have from reading this text?
- In verse 5, Peter says to Ananias “you have not lied to men but to God.” What lessons can be drawn from Peter’s statement here?
- The wages of sin is death. How does this story point us to God’s grace and mercy towards us?
- From reading this passage, what impact do you think this event had on the early church?
- How important do you think growing in the fear of the Lord is to our daily walk with the Lord?
- What can we do to grow in the fear of the Lord?
- How can we help our children to grow in both their understanding of God’s grace and a right-hearted fear of the Lord?
- Consider taking time to pray that God would help us to take sin seriously and to grow in the fear of the Lord. Also take time to thank God for his lavish grace and mercy towards us in Christ.