

“The Church: the False and the True”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 7/12/2020

Text: Acts 4:32 – 5:11 at FBC of Newport, NH

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

3 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? 4 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."

—Acts 5:1-4 (NIV)

The description of the Church in the book of Acts at the end of chapter 4 is a lot like the one in chapter 2. It emphasizes the work of the Apostles amidst the overall context of the believing community and its care for one another.

Specifically it mentions Barnabas and his willingness to sell a field and give the entire proceeds over to the Apostles for them to do with as they wish. The Holy Spirit fills this fellowship with the heart attitude and acts of Jesus Christ. This is no small picture of only one or two individuals being transformed by Christ. This is a whole community, offering humanity itself a second chance through Jesus.

But then comes chapter 5 (maybe a bit like chapter 3 in Genesis). Everything was going great until Satan used his favorite weapon of deception and lies to infiltrate this body of believers. Obviously he had failed against Jesus, so now he's turned his attention to the Church. And where the direct approach of threatening Peter and John did nothing, here we have an indirect attack. And this time he almost succeeds.

Satan fills the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira with the fruit of a lie. He gets them to believe more in their own self-righteousness than in the righteousness of God. They conspire against God's Holy Spirit in order to replace the true workmanship of God's Spirit and grace with the shoddy, "close-enough-for-government-work" kind of human spirit that cuts corners and uses inferior materials. All to benefit themselves at the expense of others. Even at the expense of lives, as buildings crumble and bridges collapse instead of standing strong. This is what the evil one would love to see come of the Church. And he finds willing accomplices in Ananias and Sapphira. I can just hear this husband and wife rationalizing to each other:

“We can’t give all that money to the church! That land’s too valuable. But we don’t want to look like we’re holding anything back, because everybody else is being so generous. So, why don’t we hold back half the money and just tell everyone we’ve given the whole amount! Who’s going to know the difference? What harm will it do? This way we keep up appearances and our money.”

From their point of view, it was a perfect plan. From God’s point of view, however, it was undermining the true work of God’s Holy Spirit and abusing the very grace of God that saves us from our sins. It was such an unnecessary lie, too, as Peter pointed out. And a direct insult to God. It’s Judas all over again, putting personal gain to the forefront with no real thought or care for the cost to everyone else, especially to the name of Christ.

Now, if God’s grace through his Son Jesus isn’t enough for Ananias and his wife so that it has to be supplemented or replaced by deceptive efforts of self-righteousness, then what’s left? What’s the end result?

God gave them, and everyone around, a little preview. Judgment Day. Not the full length movie; just the preview. There was no parting of the clouds, no thunder and lightning. There was no great white throne and no opened books accounting for every bit of one’s life. But there was a call for an accounting in the light of God’s truth. God gave Peter the truth about Ananias and Sapphira’s plot to deceive the Church. That’s it. And that’s all it took. Peter then confronted them individually with this truth and called them to account for, not only lying to the Church but to the Holy Spirit—to God.

It would appear this truth killed Ananias. And then it killed Sapphira.

Consequently, instead of the reputation of the Church being cheapened by the hypocrisy and self-righteousness of these two followers of the father of lies ... Now the reality of God, the consequences of lying to God’s Holy Spirit and the seriousness of the witness of the Church were all being elevated even higher than before. There was a proper fear of the Lord going through the Church—and through the general population as well—at the news of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira.

As it echoes in our ears this very day, consider these words from the book of Hebrews.

26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. 28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

—Hebrews 10:26-31

You might be tempted to think Ananias and Sapphira were treated too severely. Why didn't God just warn them, forgive them and carry on in peace and harmony? But that's just the point here. Ananias and Sapphira were undermining the very source of their salvation by embracing, rather than confessing, their hypocrisy. They were banking on getting away with the sin of their complete falsehood, not by the grace of God, but by the fact that judgment would surely be a long way away. (Maybe even *never* if they thinking with no real belief in God at all).

But God surprised them, which is how judgment comes. Consequently they had to stand before him without appeal to the grace of Christ. And they couldn't stand it. They died. I suppose we can point out that they didn't die the "second death," so if they did have faith and this was just a lapse, there's room for Christ to keep them from the lake of fire in the end. But that's between them and God. I would not want to put my weight on that view. That's to miss the sobering warning of their deaths in the first place: there is no room for another Gospel and another Savior in the life of a believer. There is no room for hypocrisy when it comes to the holiness of God and God's people. That's playing with hellfire.

God is addressing here the serious conflict of professing the name of Jesus while practicing a life in contempt of Jesus. This is what's at the heart of the Judaizers, who tried to teach the Gentile believers that the New Covenant grace of God needed the rules and regulations of the Old Covenant of Judaism. It is also at the heart of the Corinthians who tried to take the grace of Christ and turn it into a license for practicing the worst of sexual sins. The 'gospel' of Ananias and Sapphira was to live as if the Good News of Jesus was a popular fad to be followed by appearances only, while driven only by a personal concern for oneself.

Don't be fooled on this fundamental matter of hypocrisy. We all are tempted by it. We may even give in at times. Don't delay in dealing with it. And don't deal with it in any way apart from the grace of Christ whose Gospel is the only way of our salvation.