

May 2, 2021
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Acts
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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A SIGN IN THE CHURCH FOR THE CHURCH Acts 5:1-11

In December this past year, I experienced a new and not favorable revelation. Pat and I were with a couple grandkids (and their parents) at Dollywood. It was there that I realized for the first time that my body no longer does roller coasters. What a sad day. I love the thrill of the ride. There is the anticipation of what follows the click, click, click as the car on an old-time wooden coaster makes its way to the top of the first hill. Then the clicking stops, you crest the hill and it is sheer exhilaration going down a hill, up a hill, around the corners and more ups and downs.

Life is kind of like a roller coaster. We have good days and bad days. Or sometimes we have good periods of life and bad periods of life. Sometimes we can see excitement pending or we can see the terror of cresting a high hill and plunging into a fearsome valley, like the Valley of Humiliation or the Valley of the Shadow of Death. There are times when we wish life would be just a bit boring.

That is a fairly accurate picture of the early Church. Frankly, our experience in the functioning Body of Christ is generally pretty bland compared to what our forefathers, the first Christians, experienced. They never knew when there would be a miracle of God's grace, or a display of threats and beatings from human authorities.

Nor did the early Christians know when there would be a fearsome display of God's judgment. Up until the historical point of our text, the experience of the Church was generally quite positive. But because we live in a world of sin, and because even Christians can fall into Satan's deceptive traps, there was bound to be a situation when God demonstrated His concern for purity in the Body of Christ.

Toward the end of the last chapter, we learned about the incredible unity the Church experienced. They were so concerned for each other that they shared everything. In that context, we read that "great **grace** was upon them all" (4:33). The next thing we read is an illustration of that great grace as Christ worked through Barnabas to share with others through personal sacrifice. And then suddenly without warning we read about a similar incident that resulted in "great **fear** upon all who heard of it" (Acts 5:5).

This was the early Church. Jesus Christ was working in unusual ways as He laid the foundation for this amazing organism. Jesus called attention to the gospel message by doing miracles such as His messengers preaching in previously unknown foreign languages, healing the lame man, and delivering His messengers from prison. Those were demonstrations of great grace.

But Christ also needed to give an object lesson or two that would establish for life His desire for the purity of His Church. One of those lessons is taught in our text. The death of Ananias and Sapphira was totally unexpected and a real cause of fear. God does not consistently kill every Christian who drifts into sin. But this story demonstrates His desire for the Church. Donald Barnhouse said, "If God acted in the same way today that He did in the fifth chapter of Acts, you'd have to have a morgue in the basement of every church and a mortician on the church staff." We do well to learn from the example before us.

A Serious Problem (vv.1-4).

In this part of Luke's account of the early history of the Church, we read about a Christian couple who agreed to misrepresent themselves (vv.1-2). *But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 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 (vv.1-2).*

There is no reason for us not to believe that Ananias and Sapphira were genuine Christians. But as Christians are capable of doing, these two Christians had wrong motivations. To understand the source of those motivations, it is important for us to make the

connection between our story and the previous explanation of God's great grace toward His work and Church.

Looking back into the previous chapter, we are reminded that the messengers of the Good News had to preach it and teach it. Their choice was costly, as they were imprisoned and beaten. Nevertheless their resolve to tell the gospel was firm. Against that backdrop of sacrifice and suffering for the gospel, God poured out His grace upon them all (4:33) so that the people willingly shared everything. Reading the text we learn that God's grace looked like this:

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 and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:34-37)

Surely the citizens of the Church were quite impressed with this display of sacrificial kindness by the "son of encouragement." If we are honest about human nature, we will understand that the sacrifice by Barnabas attracted a lot of attention. It seems quite likely that word quickly spread through the Church about kind, gracious, generous Barnabas. He was suddenly a hero. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be heroes also. They too had a piece of property. They too sold it. *But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property (v.1).*

However, unlike the example Barnabas set, these two Christians were intentionally dishonest. Ananias sold the property, *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 (v.2).* The husband, the head of the household, his wife's God-appointed leader, kept some of the proceeds for himself. There is really nothing wrong with that as Peter will point out. The important issue in this statement is that the man's wife knew about it, and as we shall see agreed with his choice.

Then Ananias brought the remaining amount of money and laid it at the apostles' feet just like the other people had done (4:35) and just like Barnabas had done (4:37). The expectation was that the apostles would distribute the resources to those who had need (4:35)

and God's demonstration of grace would continue. As it was supposed to work out, Ananias and Sapphira would be heroes also. And that was the problem. Their action was not the real issue. Their attitude that led to their actions was the problem.

Quite unexpected, no doubt, by the Christian couple and probably by the church at large, a Church leader was too intrusive (vv.3-4). Of course this was not all Peter's doing. It is true that God the Holy Spirit was working miraculously. *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?" (v.3).*

The moment Ananias brought the offering, God revealed the problem to Peter. We generally do not have this kind of insight. Yet, God does give discernment to people He chooses to give it to, for His purposes, for His glory. Again, this level of knowledge is unusual and in keeping with the miracles in the early Church. But still spiritual discernment that understands sin happens and why it happens is to be a trait of church leaders even in our age. Peter knew that Ananias presented a false scenario to the Church, and Peter knew it was because Ananias had yielded to Satan's influence. Mark this well: Satan will do everything in his power to disrupt the work of Jesus building His Church as much now as then.

In reality, as we read this very unusual story, we must realize that Peter simply did what Jesus gave him to do. He was "binding and loosing." When Jesus announced His plan to build His Church, He told Peter and the apostles, *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19).* That instruction might sound a little odd to us, but Jesus repeated his instruction before He returned to the Father. *"If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld" (John 20:23).*

Furthermore, in Matthew 18, Jesus explained how that principle works out in the assembly through the process of Church discipline. After explaining the whole process of confronting the sinning brother and then taking the unrepentant guy before the Church, Jesus repeated that same instruction. *"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18).* This is the principle:

Christ has given the Church His authoritative Word. Based on the truth of that Word, the Church and her leaders are responsible to determine what is true and what is false, what is acceptable thought, attitude, and behavior, and what is unacceptable. Our discernment and judgment must be hemmed in and governed by Christ's revealed truth in the Bible.

Peter's response to Ananias demonstrates how this works. Notice in verse four that Peter asked three questions and then leveled an accusation against Ananias. *"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 men but to God"* (Acts 5:4).

These questions shine the light of truth on the real problem. For example, *"While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?"* Technically everything we have is God's. But He commits the possessions of life to us to manage for His glory. In that sense, they are ours. We are free to decide how to use them, how to dispose of them.

The second question was, *"And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?"* Again, Ananias had the right to choose to sell the property or not. Having chosen to sell the property, he had the right to keep all the money or donate all the money. No Church leader was putting pressure on anyone to choose one way or the other about the liquidation and sharing of their possessions. In the will of God, Ananias was free to choose.

The third question, *"Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?"* Ananias and his wife chose to misrepresent the truth. They could have said, "We sold this property for \$20,000 dollars and have decided to give the Church half of it." That would have been perfectly acceptable. But secretly they chose to lie about how much they got for the property.

Now the problem was stated. *"You have not lied to men but to God."* All sin is against God first. That is what we read in David's confession to God. *Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment (Psalm 51:4).* Peter had uncovered the root sin or problem.

Uncovering such stuff is the work of church leadership. Peter, the other apostles, and all subsequent Church leaders are responsible to "reprove." That word is used several times as a descriptive verb for church leaders. The word is *elengo*, which means to state that someone has done wrong with the implication that there is adequate proof of such wrongdoing. It means to expose, refute, show one's fault, implying that there is a convincing of that fault. That is what Peter was doing. The Bible clearly teaches that this is part of spiritual leading.

Jesus promised that this is to be standard procedure in the Church. In that passage from Matthew eighteen that we referred to previously, Jesus taught *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother"* (Matthew 18:15). In the revelation Jesus told the church in Laodicea, *"Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent"* (Revelation 3:19). Uncovering sin and wrong is also the work of the Holy Spirit who often uses human instruments to this end. Jesus promised regarding Him, *"And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment"* (John 16:8).

In the letters from Paul, we find general instruction for the Church telling us that uncovering, revealing sin is the Church's work. *Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them (Ephesians 5:11). But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible (Ephesians 5:13).* That is also why we find the same instruction given to Pastor Timothy in particular. *Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching (2 Timothy 4:2).* And Paul gave the same instruction to Pastor Titus. *Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you (Titus 2:15).*

Peter simply did what Church leaders are supposed to do. The result was amazing.

A Shocking Punishment (vv.5-10).

Quite frankly God killed two Christians (vv.5-8, 10). *When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose and*

wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him (vv.5,6). Two members of the Church received fatal discipline. It was not that Peter scared them to death. Rather, immediately upon hearing Peter's rebuke and accusation, Ananias expired on the spot. It was another miracle from God. A bit later we read that immediately upon being confronted Sapphira did the same. *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 (v.10).*

We are not surprised to read that a lot of people heard about this divine execution. Even without social media word spread quickly. One can only imagine the rumors, the aggrandizing of the true incident as it was reported. We do not know how many people other than the apostles were present. The text does indicate that at least some young men were there.

That others heard was the point for God's action. In this spectacular event, God established His view of purity in the Body of Christ. In the same way that God established His view of sin at the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and His dealings with Israel. The important question is, "Are we listening to God as He speaks?"

Peter explained the problem (vv.7-9). He gave Sapphira an opportunity to confess and tell the truth. However, as happens too often, she rejected the opportunity. *After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much" (vv.7-8).* Peter gave Sapphira opportunity to tell the truth but she chose to side with her husband against God and against the Church.

Therefore, Peter explained the sin and the consequence of the sin. *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" (v.9).* Here is the clear statement of the problem. This Christian couple agreed to test (in a bad way) God the Holy Spirit. The word for test is *peirazo* which means to tempt toward sin or failure. It is the word used to describe Satan's efforts against Jesus in the wilderness. For these Christians to lie to the Body of Christ was to try to get the Holy Spirit to approve of their sin.

A Sobering Response (v.11).

The end result of God's miracle was great fear. *And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things (v.11).* As one might expect, God's swift judgment caused fear. This idea of fear is avoided at all costs in our feel-good generation. The result is a serious imbalance in the Church. True fear of God's righteous discipline is as important as joy in God's amazing grace in order to stay in the middle of the road to the Celestial City.

Furthermore, the fear God instills is intended to move us toward good. Fear is a great motivator to do right. That is why the Bible is full of instruction and illustrations of how God intends to use authorities in our lives to generate respect. When we respect (right fear) God, we will respect (right fear) the authorities He has ordained in our lives.

We should end this study by making a fair application of the principles in this story. Do we intentionally misrepresent our spiritual condition? It is so easy to live in sin, for self, and opposed to God all week and then put on our "mask of righteousness" for Sunday. It is sad that many Christians are more concerned about what their peers think of them instead of what God thinks and knows about them.

Another important question is, "Do we believe God is still God?" Do we actually serve this same God? It is true that God does not often work in stupendous miracles like He did as He planted the Church. But the same God is still offended the same by our sins. How many times have we deserved for God to strike us dead but in His grace He chose not to? An honest view of the God of the Bible will help us avoid what He calls an abomination.

And finally, do we really expect God to work according to His word? What does that mean? In what way? Well, according to God's Word there is a sin unto to death for Christians. John wrote, *If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life – to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death (1 John 5:16-17).* Does God do that?

This is not the unpardonable sin. Jesus described the unpardonable sin this way: *"Therefore I tell you, every sin and*

blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:31-32). The unpardonable sin is rejecting the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. That sin is to conclude the Holy Spirit’s work is useless and reject it. Obviously, the person who does that will never have pardoned sin and will spend eternity in hell.

The issue at hand is sins Christians can commit to the point of serious judgment, even death. In that vein, there is a dangerous sin against the Body of Christ. Paul warned us in the context of the Lord’s Supper: *Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world (1 Corinthians 11:27-32).* The warning is to exercise care not to despise the Church, the assembly, the Body of Christ (which was the sin of the church in Corinth). The result was literal sickness and literal death.

Of course, not all sickness and death of Christians is evidence of God’s displeasure. Rather the lesson for us is that we should maintain a healthy fear of God’s righteous judgment so that we can enjoy the innumerable expressions of His grace and kindness. Right fear of God paves the pathway for enjoying God’s blessings.

“The idea of going through life fearing both God and the consequences of sin seems unattractive in our age where people are so devoted to good feelings. Fear is considered a bad feeling, and therefore people think it is wrong. If the Bible views living in fear favorably, we must reflect on it if we are going to convince people of the relevance and attractiveness of the Christian way in today’s society. Actually, fear is a friend that alerts us of the danger of sin. But we live in a world where many think that enjoyment is possible primarily through what the Bible calls sin. People who think this way consider fear as a spoiler of fun and of good feelings.

They are wrong. The only way to truly enjoy life is to live it in the way ordained by the Creator of joy. Joy is a key theme in the Bible, and just as the world pursues it, Christians can indeed legitimately pursue joy within the context of our relationship with God.” (Adjith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary*, “Acts,” Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998, 206-207.)