

Main Idea: In Acts 5:1-11 we read the account of the day that great fear seized the church. It’s the story of Ananias and Sapphira and involves three scenes.

- I. Scene #1: We see the crime (1-2).
 - A. This couple did some things right.
 1. They gave to the church.
 2. They submitted to the church leaders.
 - B. This couple did something very wrong.
 1. The problem wasn’t what they gave.
 2. The problem was what they *said* they gave.
 - II. Scene #2: We see the confrontation (3-10).
 - A. Peter exposed Ananias (3-6).
 1. There was a heart problem.
 2. There was a tongue problem.
 - B. Peter exposed Sapphira (7-10).
 1. She tried to fool people.
 2. She could not fool God.
 - III. Scene #3: We see the consequences (11).
 - A. It shook up the church.
 - B. It shook up the community.
- Take Inventory: Three things to consider...
1. God takes sin seriously, and so must we.
 2. The time to take care of sin is now.
 3. Never presume upon God’s mercy.

Scripture Reading: Joshua 7

I want to begin this message by going to the end first. In the final verse of the passage we’ll be considering today we read the words, “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.” That’s Acts 5:11 in the NIV. In the ESV, “And great fear came upon the whole church.”

That’s not exactly something you expect to experience at church, is it? Fear? Great fear? But it’s exactly what you ought to experience if God does what He did at this church.

You say, “What caused this great fear?” In a word, *sin*. A man and his wife, good church members in the eyes of all who knew them, *sinned*. And the consequences were immediate and devastating, so much so that as a result, great fear seized the church.

This is not a Psalm 23 passage, for rather than removing fear, it creates it. Yet it’s for our good, as is every portion of God’s inspired and profitable Word.

Yes, we need Acts 5. I need it. You need it. This church needs it. For it produces the kind of fear we need, as it reminds us of the seriousness of sin and the danger of abusing grace.

Far too often we’re like the husband in the story who came home drunk and tried to conceal his sin from his wife. He snuck up the stairs quietly, looked in the bathroom mirror, and bandaged the bumps and bruises he’d received in a fight earlier that night. He then proceeded to climb into bed, smiling at the thought that he’d pulled one over on his wife. When morning came, he opened his eyes and there stood his wife.

“You were drunk last night weren't you!”

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

“No, honey. No way.”

“Well then, if you weren't, who put all the band-aids on the bathroom mirror?”

Be sure your sins will find you out. There's perhaps no more vivid illustration of this truth in the Old Testament than the account of Achan, which we just read. There's perhaps no more vivid New Testament illustration of this truth than the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11.

In both accounts, great fear seized the people of God. There are three scenes.

I. The crime (1-2)

“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.”

In the book of Acts we read the story of a growing church. It started with 120 people in Acts 1, and then exploded to 3,000 in Acts 2, and then 5,000 in Acts 4.

Jesus said, “I will build My church,” in Matthew 16:18. That's a promise. Is God interested in seeing His church grow? Yes, He is.

But never at the expense of purity. He who died for sin never wants His church to tolerate sin.

Through the first four chapters of Acts, things were going well for the young church. Real well, in fact. Then, with the first word of chapter five, comes the caution flag.

The NIV begins the account with the word, “Now.” Actually, the Greek term is better translated, “But,” as reflected in the ESV and KJV. All of a sudden, there are some band-aids on the bathroom mirror, if you know what I mean.

One of the great things about the Bible is that it doesn't try to hide the flaws of biblical characters. All people are sinners. Some people have received God's forgiveness for their sins through faith in His Son. But even forgiven sinners at times get off track. And when they do, the Bible records their blemishes. God wants us to learn from them.

Luke makes a contrast between Barnabas, a character he introduces us to at the end of chapter 4, and the couple we meet in chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira. Barnabas was quite a man, so much so the church called him “son of encouragement.” What about this couple? What do we know about Ananias and Sapphira?

A. This couple did some things right. Like what? First of all...

1. *They gave to the church.* Verse 1 says they sold a piece of property, and gave some money to the church. Is that a good thing to do? Indeed it is. Everything we have in reality belongs to God. We are stewards, and giving to the church is both commanded and commendable.

2. *They submitted to the church leaders.* Luke says the couple brought the money and put it where? At the “apostles' feet.” That, too, is a good thing. This husband and wife demonstrated submission in their giving. They didn't use their wealth as a means to promote their own agenda in the church. They simply gave it, as loyal church members, and trusted their leaders to use it as they deemed best.

Those are some pretty good traits, aren't they? Most churches would love to have on their roll two people who are givers and who submit to the church's leadership. But wait. We're not seeing the whole picture. Based on what God will do with them in a moment, a church most certainly should not want a couple like this in their assembly.

Yes, on the surface this couple did some things right. BUT...

B. This couple did something very wrong. According to verse 2, “With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself.”

I went to the Hardware store once and discovered a powerful reminder that a bunch of “rights” don’t cancel out a “wrong.” I checked out the label on D-Con’s rat poison. It read, “Inert ingredients—99.995%. Active Ingredients—.005%.” It’s amazing to me that very little of the product we call rat poison is actually harmful. 99.995% is no problem at all for the rat. It’s actually edible. It’s the .005% that gets him.

You say, “What did Ananias and Sapphira do that was so bad? I mean, they sold a property and gave a bunch of money to the church, didn’t they?”

Yes...but.

1. *The problem wasn’t what they gave.*
2. *The problem was what they said they gave.* No one forced them to sell their property. And no one forced them to give all of the proceeds from the sale of their property. That’s not the issue here, as Peter will make clear in a moment. The problem was that this couple misrepresented the truth.

Again, the unfortunate chapter division in our English Bibles keeps us from seeing the contrast between Ananias & Sapphira and Barnabas. Chapter four concludes by saying, “Barnabas sold a field and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.” Chapter five begins, “But a man named Ananias...sold a piece of property...and kept back part of the money for himself.”

Do you see the contrast? Acts 4:32 says, “All the believers were one in heart and mind.” All, that is, except for two. Ananias and Sapphira.

Somewhere along the line these two believers—and I see no reason to question that they were genuine Christians—got out of true *koinonia*. Instead of thinking about the fellowship, they began to think about themselves and how to use the fellowship for personal gain.

William LaSor offers a plausible reconstruction of the plot: “Everyone was talking about the generous act of Barnabas. Sapphira said to Ananias (or the reverse; it makes no difference): ‘That was nice, what Barnabas did, wasn’t it? Didn’t the church make a fuss over him? Why don’t we do something like that?’ Ananias replied, ‘We can’t afford it; not if we’re going to enlarge the living room.’ Sapphira said, ‘But couldn’t we sell a field, and keep some of the money to enlarge the house?’ Ananias answered, ‘Yes; but the church would think we were selfish, keeping some of the money when so many poor people don’t have enough to eat.’ And Sapphira said, ‘But who would know how much we got for the field?’ So they worked out their satanic plan (5:3), in order that no one would ever know. But some One did know.”²

So ends scene #1. The crime. A premeditated crime.

II. The confrontation (3-10)

Actually, the confrontation took place twice. For reasons not given in the text, Ananias delivered the money to the church all by himself, with his wife arriving three hours later. With the crime committed, the confrontation begins in verse 3.

² William LaSor, *Church Alive*, pp. 74-5.

A. Peter exposed Ananias (3-6). “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 to men but to God.”

You’ll notice that Peter called Ananias by name. And that he was not fooled at all. “How did Peter know?” you ask. Apparently, God revealed the hidden sin to him. Peter was an apostle, and as such possessed special abilities (Heb 2:4).

Peter probed Ananias with four rhetorical questions.

How has Satan filled your heart?

Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold?

Wasn’t the money at your disposal?

What made you think of doing such a thing?

What’s the purpose of the questions? They’re intended to expose the truth.

According to Peter, Ananias had a twofold problem.

1. *There was a heart problem.* “How is it that Satan has so filled your heart?” Ananias had a heart problem. He pretended to be something he was not. That’s called hypocrisy.

In fact, in the Greek language the term “hypocrisy” means play-acting. In the Greek theater, an actor wore a mask. What he was under the mask was very different from the way he appeared to the audience. He was just playing a part.

That’s exactly what Ananias and Sapphira did, right? They pretended to be something they weren’t. And they went down in infamy with the distinction of being the first (though certainly not the last) hypocrites in the church.

Be clear on this. What Ananias did was no small thing. He portrayed himself to be more spiritual than he was. He tried to create a false impression that would result in praise from men.

Do we ever do that? Do we ever pretend to be something we are not? A little boy once said to his mother, “Mother, why is it that whenever I do something wrong, it’s because I am a bad boy; but whenever you do something wrong, it’s your nerves?”³

Friends, Kent Hughes is right, “We share Ananias’ sin not when others think we are more spiritual than we are, but when we try to make others think we are more spiritual than we are.”⁴

It happens when we tell people who ask us to pray for them, yes, sure, and then not do it. Or when we give the impression at church that we’ve got the perfect family when the fact is all we’ve been doing lately is fighting at home. We do it when we sing or share a testimony about how much we love Jesus, knowing we haven’t spent much quality time in His Word for weeks.

If we’re honest with ourselves we may be a lot more like Ananias than we care to admit. I read that Pastor Donald Barnhouse, on this basis of this text, wouldn’t allow his congregation to sing the third stanza of “At Calvary:” *Now I have giv’n to Jesus everything; now I gladly own him as my King.* “You see,” he said, “if God acted the

³ Boice, *Acts*, p. 101.

⁴ Kent Hughes, *Acts*, p. 77.

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 pastoral staff."⁵

For Ananias, as with us, the problem started in his *heart*. It didn't stop there.

2. *There was a tongue problem.* Putting it bluntly, Peter said, "You have not lied to men but to God (4)."

Ananias lied. He claimed the money he gave was the money he made from the sale. That was not true. He was lying. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "Sin has many tools, but a lie is the handle which fits them all."

A store manager heard his clerk tell a customer, "No, ma'am, we haven't had any for a while, and it doesn't look as if we'll be getting any soon."

Horrified, the manager came running over to the customer and said, "Of course we'll have some soon. We placed an order last week."

Then the manager drew the clerk aside. "Never," he snarled, "Never, never, never say we're out of anything--say we've got it on order and it's coming. Now, what was it she wanted?"

"Rain," said the clerk.⁶

Lying seems to be a way of life these days. People lie at the drop of a hat. The book *The Day American Told the Truth* says that 91 percent of those surveyed lie routinely about matters they consider trivial, and 36 percent lie about important matters; 86 percent lie regularly to parents, 75 percent to friends, 73 percent to siblings, and 69 percent to spouses.⁷

Is lying a big deal? If you think not, take a look at what happened to Ananias in verse 5, "When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him."

You ask, "Why was God so severe with Ananias?" I don't know for sure. But I wonder if, perhaps, the real issue is just the opposite. Why is a holy God who hates sin so patient *with us* when we sin?

The fact is, every once in awhile, God does take action. Indeed, as you examine the Scriptures, at the beginning of key phases in redemptive history the Lord did judge sin severely. After the tabernacle was built, He killed Nadab and Abihu for offering unacceptable fire to Him (Lev 10). Right after the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Achan was stoned to death because of his deceitful disobedience (Josh 7).

It may not be a coincidence that the word Luke used in Acts 5:2, translated "kept back," is the same word used in the Greek version of Joshua 7:1 to refer to Achan's sinful action. F. F. Bruce remarks, "The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua."

Then there was a second phase to the confrontation beginning in verse 7.

B. Peter exposed Sapphira (7-10). Here's how it happened, "About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened."

Stop there. Can you imagine the looks the people gave her as she entered the room? Peter broke the ice in verse 8, "Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

⁵ Taken from Kent Hughes, *Acts*, p. 76.

⁶ James Dent, in Charleston, W.Va. *Gazette*.

⁷ *Daily Bread*, August 28, 1992.

Talk about getting to the point. Here's where I want to scream, "Come on, Sapphira! Tell the truth! This is serious!" But to no avail.

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

Another blatant lie. Again, the question is, "Were Ananias and Sapphira believers?" I see no reason to assume otherwise. Do Christians ever sin? Do they ever blow it? The fact is, there is no such thing as a sin-free Christian. Thankfully, we have a loving Heavenly Father who loves His children too much to allow them to hide in their sin.

You say, "Why didn't Sapphira show up until three hours later?" LaSor suggests the possibility that this three-hour interval was pre-arranged. That maybe Sapphira was staying out of sight until just the right time to make a dramatic entry to the oo's and ah's of the adoring church crowd.

"There she is! Oh, Sapphira, you shouldn't have! What a spiritual woman you are!" Maybe that's why she arrived later. Maybe not. Yet of this we can be sure.

1. *She tried to fool people.* But...
2. *She could not fool God.*

In verses 9-10, "Peter said to her, 'How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.'"¹⁰ At 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."

The next time you find yourself thinking, "It's nobody else's business what I do. What I do affects me and only me," think again. What Ananias and Sapphira did affected other people. Our sins usually do. How would you like to have been one of the young men whose task it was to bury them on the spot? No doubt, this was a day they never forgot.

Which brings us to scene #3. We've seen the crime and the confrontation. Finally...

III. The consequences (11)

"Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events (11)." Sin has consequences. Always. In this case, two Christians lost their lives. But others were affected, too. Two groups...

A. It shook up the church. By the way, in verse 11 you see the first appearance of the word "church" in the book of Acts. "*Mega* [that's the literal Greek term] fear seized the whole *church*." The church was stunned, as we would be. Their membership roll just dropped by two people. Is God interested in church growth? Yes, but never at the expense of church *health*.

That's why we practice church discipline as a church. Matthew 18 says that when a church member refuses to repent of sin, he is to be confronted and urged to repent, then confronted again with witnesses, and then confronted again by the church family. If he repents he is to be restored, and the church celebrates. But if he still refuses to repent, he is to be put out of the church.

Some would say, "If a church does that kind of thing, people will shy away from it." Some might. My hunch is that some thought twice about joining the Jerusalem church after what happened to Ananias and Sapphira, particularly those who were just playing games with God.

But the opposite is also true. Many people are attracted to a church that takes sin seriously. I was standing in the church parking lot one time after we had just practiced

church discipline. A man walked up to me and said, “Wow, this church really does believe in the Bible, doesn’t it?”

When God removed Ananias and Sapphira from the Jerusalem Church (and from the planet), it shook up the church. Secondly...

B. It shook up the community. “Great fear seized the whole church *and all who heard about these events* (11).” People who had scoffed at the church as “irrelevant” now began to pay attention. Great fear seized them. It was a day no one in the community would soon forget.

Beloved, there is no such thing as a *small* sin.

Imagine what it would take to walk from New York City to San Francisco. Just think of all the obstacles you’d have to overcome. One man who accomplished this rare achievement mentioned a rather surprising difficulty when asked to tell of his biggest hurdle. He said that the toughest part of the trip wasn’t climbing the steep slopes of the mountains, or crossing hot, dry, barren stretches of desert. Instead, he said, “The thing that came the closest to defeating me was the sand in my shoes.”

Again, there is no such thing as a *small* sin.

Take Inventory: Three things to consider...

1. *God takes sin seriously, and so must we.* Until we grasp how big a deal sin is to God, we’ll never fully appreciate Jesus Christ. You see, God *hates* sin. And I mean He really hates sin. Nothing makes that clearer than a look at the cross.

At the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ took upon Himself the sins of every person that would ever believe on Him—every white lie, every lustful thought, every spiteful look—and then endured the horrid consequence of those sins. Jesus died in the place of the sinner. And God exhausted His righteous wrath against His own Son. In the words of 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.”

God doesn’t overlook sin. Because He is holy, He must judge it fully. And that’s what He did at the cross, dear friend. The Son of God chose to pay the penalty of sin so sinners like you and me don’t have to. He died as a substitute, a sin-bearer, an atoning sacrifice. Then three days later He defeated death, which is the consequence of our sin (“For the wages of sin is death,” Romans 6:23), thereby proving that His substitutionary death is sufficient to save any hell-bound sinner.

Let me put it this way. According to God’s Word, there are only two options. Either you will pay the penalty for your sin, which is what you and I deserve. Or...you will put your total trust in Jesus Christ and receive what He offers you, forgiveness and eternal life.

Sin is a serious matter with God. Do you see? Just look at the cross. See what His Son endured that we might escape the just penalty every one of our sins deserves.

You may object, “But wait. I can see that God hates sin, as you say. But why don’t people fall over dead in church today?”

To which I would respond, who says that don’t? Every once in a while God gives a vivid reminder of His holy standard. In 1 Corinthians 11 we are told that some church members were sick because of unconfessed sin, and some had even died a premature death.

But I grant you that typically God doesn't deal with His people as He did with Ananias and Sapphira. Yet why not? It's not because the sin doesn't matter. The answer is...*His mercy and grace in Christ Jesus.*

Mercy, by definition, means that God doesn't give us what we deserve. Judgment. Condemnation. Hell.

Grace means He gives us what we don't deserve. Pardon. Forbearance. Another day of life. The assurance of eternal life.

My non-Christian friend, even you today are experiencing the incredible mercy of God. Though you have sinned, your heart is still beating. Your ears are still working and you are now hearing of His offer to pardon you.

God sends His rain on the just and the unjust, Jesus said in Matthew 5:45. Is that because the injustice of the wicked doesn't offend Him? No. It's because He is gracious and merciful.

Yet He indeed remains holy. Which brings us to a second application.

2. *The time to take care of sin is now.* "Today is the day of salvation," says the apostle Paul. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts," says the writer of Hebrews.

Today. We have no guarantee of tomorrow.

So I must extend two warnings. Warning #1 is this. If you don't know Christ as your Savior, then according to the Bible you are still in your sin. And if you are still in your sin, then you are but one heartbeat away from experiencing the eternal consequences of your sin in a place called hell. Is hell a real place? Jesus said it is, in Mark 9:47-48, "And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"

O sinner, come to Christ today. Do not delay. *One heartbeat*, dear friend, just *one*. Don't presume upon God's mercy.

There's a second warning, and it too is serious. It's for you, my fellow believer. If you are a Christian and yet you have known sin in your life, take note. God may continue to exhibit patience and mercy with you. But then again, He may call you to account, and He may do so *today*.

Is there anything in your life that you know is displeasing the Lord? Oh, dear friend, "If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)."

I can say it no better than Charles Spurgeon, "Let your tears fall because of sin; but, at the same time, let the eye of faith steadily behold the Son of man lifted up, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, that those who are bitten by the old serpent may look unto Jesus and live. Our sinnership is that emptiness into which the Lord pours his mercy."⁸

One final lesson.

3. *Never presume upon God's mercy.*

⁸ http://christian-quotes.ochristian.com/christian-quotes_ochristian.cgi?find=Christian-quotes-by-Charles+Spurgeon-on-Mercy