

GOOD GOD!!?

ACTS 4:36—5:11

4:32-5:11 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.

Last week we looked in depth at this passage that describes life in the early Christian community. One of those descriptions is that "great grace was upon them all" (4:33). In other words, God was pouring out His pleasure and funneling His favor upon these Christ followers in ways that everyone could feel and observe and experience. They knew God was in their midst, they knew that He was pleased with them, and they were basking in the warmth of His pleasure.

We also learned about individuals, compelled by the Spirit and in response to God's grace, voluntarily selling lands and houses and putting the proceeds at the apostles' feet to be distributed to anyone who was in need. Barnabas is given as an example of someone who exercised this extreme generosity with a selfless and sincere heart.

In our study this morning, we are going to encounter a startling disruption to this selflessness and sincerity in the Jerusalem church, and how the same Spirit who lavished great grace also administered severe judgment.

Look at **verse 1-11**. *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.

After last week's message, you may have been motivated to sit in God's lap, as it were, and rest in His goodness, bask in His grace, and relax in His lovingkindness. After reading this passage, you may be having second thoughts. Let's face it, this story is disturbing. It creates dissonance and raises questions, one of which is how in the world do you reconcile God's grace, goodness, and lovingkindness with what happened to Ananias and Sapphira?

It is ironic that "Ananias" means, "God is gracious." When he and his wife, Sapphira,

sold a piece of property he brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles' feet, but kept back some of the money for themselves, Peter knew, presumably by divine revelation, that they wanted everyone to believe that they were giving *all* of the proceeds. Peter tells Ananias that they did not *have* to give it all—they did not have to give any of it—but when they gave some of it and tried to make the apostles (and perhaps the whole church) think that they had given it all, they were lying, not just to them, but to God. Later in the story we find out that Peter knew Ananias and his wife had conspired together in advance to try and deceive them. This was deliberate, premeditated deception on their part.

Peter also knew there was some diabolical influence behind this scheme. He asks Ananias in verse 3 how *Satan* could fill his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit in this way. Peter saw Satan's fingerprints all over this incident, and he could recognize it as such because he had had previous experience with Satan's schemes. On one occasion he himself had unwittingly been under the influence of the devil, prompting Jesus to say to him, "*Get behind me Satan*" (*Matt. 16:23*).

Which raises another puzzling question. Why didn't Peter just say to Ananias, "Get behind me Satan?" Why not just *rebuke* Satan or *deliver* Ananias from his influence, and then instruct him about how he could learn to keep in step with the Spirit and not cooperate with the devil? Why did Ananias and Sapphira have to die?

And the answer to that question is, I don't know.

By the way, there are plenty of Bible teachers and scholars who think they *do* know and have confidently expressed their opinions. But I am hesitant to do that because the fact is, we don't know the whole story of Ananias and Sapphira. We don't know anything about them other than what is written here. We don't know how long they had been believers in Jesus, or even *if* they were believers in Jesus.

Furthermore, some of the commentaries I read place a lot of emphasis on the particular sin they committed, as though the sin of deception were more destructive than other sins, and therefore warranted a stiffer penalty. But I don't buy that argument. Lying *is* a serious offense, to be sure, and lying in order to create the impression that you are more generous or more spiritual than you really are, is more insidious yet. We know that when Jesus was living on the earth, religious showmanship seemed particularly loathsome to Him, and He frequently condemned it. But I don't think we can draw any conclusions that Ananias and Sapphira's sin is any more deserving of death than dozens of other sins.

How many of you know the hymn, "At Calvary"? How many of you have ever sung the third stanza: "*Now I've given to Jesus everything; now I gladly own Him as my King*"?

If you have sung that third stanza but you have *not* actually given to Jesus everything, then aren't you guilty of the same sin as Ananias and Sapphira? You've publicly declared that you have given to Jesus everything and yet you haven't. But God hasn't stricken you dead.

Incidentally, Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, the late pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, on the basis of this text, wouldn't let his congregation sing the third stanza of "At Calvary". He 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 pastoral staff."

But, as I said, I don't think it was the particular sin of deception or hypocrisy that prompted God to take this action against Ananias and Sapphira, and I don't say that to minimize in any way the seriousness of their sin. The fact is, countless people throughout the history of the church have committed this same sin, and very few have suffered the same consequences. Furthermore, countless people have sinned in seemingly far *more*

destructive ways with *no* apparent or immediate consequences.

A few years ago, it came to light that a pastor of a very large church in the South had fathered several children through several women in his church. Some of those women said that he told them they could not go to heaven unless they had relations with him. He engaged in that sinful behavior for thirty years before it was made public, and in those years his church grew steadily, and he was the most respected, influential pastor in his denomination.

We've all heard stories like that. And we all know a day is coming when people who commit such atrocities will give an account for their actions and will be judged for them. We know the verse, "*God will not be mocked; whatever a man sows that shall he also reap*" (Gal. 6:7).

But it still leaves us to wonder what God was doing in Acts 5. I think all of us would agree that God does not generally act in this way. If He did, we'd be in trouble. Thank goodness for all of us that this was a rare occurrence. But it did happen, and it happened for a reason—maybe more than one reason.

I'd like to suggest two reasons why I think God judged Ananias and Sapphira so severely. However, these are my interpretations, so feel free to critique them and see if you think they make sense in the context and fit with other Scripture.

First, I believe God took this drastic measure in order to preserve and protect the purity of the early church. Christianity was in its infancy—it was in its developmental stages—and the chief characteristic of the early church was the Holy Spirit's dynamic leadership. He was expressing that leadership through the apostles by performing miraculous signs and wonders and through powerful proclamations of the gospel, which He used to bring salvation to thousands of people. The Holy Spirit expressed His leadership by influencing Christ followers to exercise a selfless, sacrificial love toward one another, and by creating an environment of trust and transparency that was void of religiosity and all its trappings.

By trappings I mean performance-based spirituality, spiritual showmanship, spiritual one-upmanship, and, perhaps most especially, hypocrisy. These things were rampant in Judaism at this time, and they were utterly offensive to God. Why? Because religiosity is inherently self-focused, self-generated, and egocentric, which is the very antithesis of life in the Holy Spirit. Religiosity is a sham; it is pretentious and presumptuous.

And I believe God took drastic, decisive action with Ananias and Sapphira because their pretense was a direct assault on the Spirit of God and what He was doing in the church. Peter said to Ananias, "How could you lie to the Holy Spirit?" (v.3). And He said to Sapphira, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?" (v.9). Willful sin sabotages the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community. It is as intrusive to the body of Christ as cancer is to a physical body.

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul compares willful, unconfessed sin in the body of Christ to a little yeast that works its way through the whole batch of dough (5:6b-7a). The point is yeast cannot be isolated. It cannot be confined to a portion of the dough. It affects every part of the dough. In the same way, a little sin can work its way into the community of God's people, spreading and growing until the whole community is infected by it.

You cannot quietly sweep sin under the rug. Sin is like a hot ember. It will eventually catch that rug on fire and burn the whole house down.

One of the reasons God takes sin so seriously is because sin is incredibly destructive. So sometimes He will deal severely with sinners so that sin doesn't diminish or destroy His good work.

That's the first reason why I think Ananias and Sapphira might have died for their sin. And there is a warning for us. God may or may not deal as swiftly or severely with us when

we sin, but He feels every bit as strongly about our sin and takes our sin every bit as seriously as theirs. Don't test the Spirit of the Lord. Don't let your sinful actions intrude upon and infect what He is doing or what He wants to do in His church. Willful sin, whether it's pretense or pride or pornography or jealousy or bitterness or gossip or slander or whatever, is extremely consequential to the health of His body.

The second reason why I think God dealt with Ananias and Sapphira so severely has to do with what God wants us to know about Him. And that is precisely the question we ought to ask when we come to a passage like this that is difficult to understand or reconcile with other things we know about God. What does God want us to know about Him?

Let's be clear about something: It was God who took Ananias' and Sapphira's lives. It wasn't Peter, even though Peter was the agent through whom justice was administered. Peter was simply acting under the influence of the Holy Spirit as he presided over this situation, just as he was acting under the influence of the Holy Spirit as he proclaimed the gospel and performed signs and wonders.

This judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira was an act of God. So, what is God revealing about Himself in this passage that He wants us to know or that can give us a more complete picture of who He is?

Is it that God is impatient, or that He has a bad temper, or that He is easily offended? No! The clear teaching of Scripture is that God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love. He is not impetuous or impulsive, He is not malicious or malevolent, and He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. He is full of mercy, and He is good, all the time.

But we must also remember that God is *holy* all the time. He is described by the writer of Hebrews as "a consuming fire" (12:29). A consuming fire is dangerous, it can be unpredictable, and it can devour everything in its path.

In his book, *The Trivialization of God*, Donald McCullough opens with these words: "Visit a church on Sunday morning—almost any will do—and you will likely find a congregation comfortably relating to a deity who fits nicely within precise doctrinal positions, or who lends almighty support to social crusades, or who conforms to individual spiritual experiences. But you will not likely find much awe or sense of mystery. The only sweaty palms will be those of the preacher unsure whether the sermon will go over; the only shaking knees will be those of the soloist about to sing the offertory" (p.13).

Annie Dillard is even more pointed in her provocative book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. "Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?" she asks.

"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return" (pp.40-41)

I know, some of us don't like to think of this part of God's nature. We prefer to think of His love and grace and compassion. We want to think of Him as our Daddy who invites us to sit in His lap. But while this is completely true, it's not the *complete* truth about God. We must also recognize that this gracious, loving, personal God is absolutely holy and righteous and just. He's the God who said to Moses when asked if he could see His face, "No, Moses, I'm afraid that's not possible. For no one can see my face and live."

He's the God whose presence has compelled every single person who have had their spiritual eyes opened and seen some visible manifestation of that presence to fall down as though dead, and tremble with fear. We're not talking about spiritual wimps who were living in sin and were ashamed of what they had done. We're talking about godly, righteous people who were friends of God—who had found favor with God. Yet, when they saw Him for who He really was, they could not stand in His presence.

Did you notice in Acts 5 that when Ananias and Sapphira died *great fear seized all who heard what had happened*" (vv.5, 11)?

You cannot truly know God without being afraid of Him. Even though we have been reconciled to Him by the blood of Jesus, clothed with the righteousness of Jesus, and made His son or daughter. To truly know God is to fear Him. Not a fear of dread or of terror. Not a flinching fear that comes from thinking that He's going to slap or squash you because you've done something to offend Him. But a fear that comes from His awesome nature—a nature that is so utterly different and infinitely greater than yours.

In C.S. Lewis' first chronicle of Narnia, Lucy asked Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan, the Lion whom she had never met. "Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just plain silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good, He's the king, I tell you."

Indeed, God *is* good...all the time. But he's also holy...all the time. Which means that he cannot overlook sin. He cannot dismiss it or minimize it. He cannot shrug his shoulders at our disobedience and pretend it's no big deal, or pat us on the head and say, "Try not to do that anymore." Sin, all sin, is an affront to God's holiness and is offensive to Him, and sin is incredibly destructive to those He loves, including ourselves. That's why he takes sin so seriously. So seriously that sometimes He will deal severely with sinners so that sin does not diminish or destroy His good work.

Good God!? **Acts 4:36-5:11**

Main Idea: *Sometimes God chooses to deal severely with sinners so that sin will not destroy or diminish his good work.*

An honorable Offering (4:36-37)

A dishonorable Offering (5:1-11)

Premeditated Deception (5:1-2)

A direct Challenge (5:3-4)

Cooperation with Satan

Lying to God

A severe Consequence (5:5-11)

Ananias' Death

Sapphira's Death

Reasons for Punishment

Preserving the purity of the Church

“God will not be mocked” (Gal. 6:7)

Application Questions **Acts 4:36-5:11**

What does the story of Ananias and Saphira reveal about the character of God? How do you reconcile the events of this story with the concepts of God's goodness and grace?

Does God still punish sin severely? Give Scriptural support for your answer.

Though the details are sketchy, Peter does not seem shocked or dismayed by the consequences of Ananias' sin (if he was, he may not have been so bold and direct with Saphira later that day). Since Peter was a pastor (shepherd) of the Jerusalem flock, what does his response tell you about a shepherd's role in the church?