

Ananias and Sapphira

Acts 5:1-11

Introduction

Luke gives us a remarkable picture of the beginning and growth of the early church. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the numbers of people won, the way they devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer, the miracles worked among them, their courage and boldness, their grasp of the truth about God in prayer. For a time there was sweetness and light, but it did not last.

Acts 5 casts a sudden shadow over the church. The work of God was going well, and then there was a Satanic attack. Physical force was used on the church from outside. And now there was corruption and falsehood inside. The Bible is remarkably honest in the way it does not try to whitewash everyone, even the greatest heroes, exposing the duplicity of Abraham, the adultery of David, the wavering and weakness of Peter. And here we read of the lying and deceit of Ananias and Sapphira. It reminds us of Oliver Cromwell, disfigured by warts on his face, but who insisted, when he sat for a portrait, that he be painted “warts and all”! It must have pained Luke to write about this episode, but in his honesty he did it.

Initially there was unity in the church, they were one in heart and soul and they shared their possessions. They had everything in common. When they sold their land or houses, they gave the proceeds to the apostles who gave the money to those in need. One of those who did this was Barnabas, the Levite from Cyprus, “the son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36,37). Then there was Ananias (whose name means “favour of the Lord”) and Sapphira (“fair and beautiful”). They sold some of their property, gave part of the money from the sale to the apostles – but pretended they had given the entire proceeds from the sale. Their gift was marred by their lying, deceit and hypocrisy.

This tragic story is reminiscent of Achan in Joshua 7:1, who was guilty of theft and lying. Thus we have these two similar stories in the beginning of the account of God’s people in the Old Testament and the New Testament. In both cases, the sin affected them, and they met with severe divine punishment.

We are going to look at this picture of sin – its nature, effect and remedy. This is so relevant to us all.

Nature of sin

We need to be clear about the precise nature of the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. They sold their land and kept back some of the money. So they only gave part to the Apostles. And they were entitled to do so. It was a voluntary arrangement. They were entitled to keep all of the money if they wished. The problem was that they lied and pretended that they had given all when they had only given part. They did not mention to the Apostles that they had kept some for themselves. So the problem was lying, deceit and hypocrisy.

We do not know why they kept back some of the money. Could they not trust God to supply their own needs? Did they fear they would be left with nothing? Did they think He might let them down? Or was it sheer covetousness? But at the same time, they wanted to give something. Why? Did they want the reputation of being generous givers? Were people praising Barnabas for his generosity, and did they want the same nice things said about them? Did they want credit for being sacrificial givers without any of the inconvenience and self-denial attached to it? (Why, in some churches where an offering is taken up, does the amount people put in depend on whether the money is received on a plate or a bag?)

The fact that a man gives well proves nothing about his spiritual state. If his heart is right, he will give generously. But not all generous giving is because the heart is right. People want reputation. Their generosity is just serving their own ends.

Note also that this was not a sudden lapse. The deceit was deliberately planned. Sapphira had full knowledge of Ananias's plan. A cool calculated plan in which they both participated and knew what they were doing. They got their stories straight beforehand. Marriage is such a potential for good, but is also capable of being the cause of untold evil.

Does this story challenge us in any way? We are not likely to get names in the paper for great sins which even the world condemns – murder, stealing, perjury, perversion. But that does not mean all is well with us. Have we never done anything deceitfully or covered something up with a lie? Do we make a profession which has little reality? Do we commend prayer, but know little of it ourselves? Do we encourage others to read the Bible, but rarely take the time ourselves? Think of the promises made to God that have not been kept, and as we keep on drifting, they are not likely to be kept. We claim His blessings, but it is all empty hollow untruthful talk. We may be aping others, using the right language, but not meaning a thing. Living a lie, concerned only for good standing. Is your conscience stirred?

Thoughts, motives, covetousness, petty jealousies, all sorts of things go on in the heart. They totally belie our professions and claims. But the heart is where the trouble began for Ananias and Sapphira. Sin, dallying with it, playing with it, excusing it, condoning it, rationalizing it, makes our profession a mockery. **Woe to you hypocrites** (Matthew 23:13, 14, 23, 25, 27, 29). These words come to us with a peculiar and special force. "The first rule in holy living is Don't lie to God" (Jeremy Taylor, 18th century saint). "One of the greatest needs of evangelical Christians is to be honest and stop lying to the Holy Spirit with the professions we make to God which are dishonest" (G.B.Duncan).

Effect of the sin

God's judgment was swift and severe. They fell down dead. A direct punishment from God. Some people are offended by this severity and hope the story is legendary. Or they exonerate God by attributing their deaths to Peter putting a curse on them, or putting them under unbearable psychological pressure. But Luke is clear that this is divine judgment. This is God's reaction to a sin committed against Himself.

This form of punishment continued in the early church (1 Corinthians 11:22,30), for those despising the church of God through their misconduct at the Table. Normally in the New Testament church, sin was dealt with by the church discipline via excommunication (1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20). **Be sure your sin will find you out** (Numbers 32:23).

But sin not only affects the sinner and leads to God's chastisement. Sin has other effects. It affects the church. The people knew all about what was going on. **Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events** (Acts 5:11). Sin always affects others in various ways with great disappointment and grief. They feel disillusioned and let down – especially when the sinner is looked up to by young Christians. The witness of the church is marred, and the world is delighted to be able to label the church members as hypocrites. In some cases, fellowship is destroyed. Warmth and unity evaporates quickly. The reputation of the church is in our hands before the world.

Then there is the divine reaction. Normally the punishment of God is reflected in the church discipline – something we too often run away from nowadays. Also God withdraws blessing, especially when tolerating in secret what we know is contrary to His will. There is spiritual decline, an end of a love for the Word, reduced effectiveness in service, loss of reality in prayer, less like Jesus, loss of joy in the Lord. **Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked** (Galatians 6:7). **The Lord detests lying lips** (Proverbs 12:22).

Hypocrisy and untruth grieves and quenches the Holy Spirit. Sin does matter. We cannot lie to the Holy Spirit with impunity. "There are churches in which something new and vital would begin if absolute honesty came."

Remedy for sin

Suppose we are aware that we are in the grip of sin. We have compared ourselves with the Word of God, and know we fall short in a particular area. Or suppose we are aware that we are liable to such a sin. Could my life stand searching inward investigation? How can I guard against it?

First of all, recognise God's ideal. **We have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God** (2 Corinthians 1:12). The Latin word for "sincere" literally means "without wax". Shoddy sculptors filled in the cracks in faulty marble with wax, and painted over it. These false fillings soon melted in the hot sun, and the blemishes became exposed. Christians are to be "without wax" – without falseness that can easily be exposed.

Surely you desire truth in the inner parts (Psalm 51:6). The only one safe path in life is true heart sincerity. "When God wants a vessel, He doesn't want a golden vessel or a silver vessel. All He wants is a clean vessel." (D.L.Moody). Our aim should be 100 %, and nothing less. Not 95% for God, and 5% for that skeleton in the cupboard. Once we start talking in those terms, we are already backslidden. We may falter at times, but the Christian who is making progress must make 100% for God his standard.

Then awareness of failure? **God be merciful to me a sinner** (Luke 18:13). Ask that Christ now takes rightful and undisputed place in your life. **So that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith** (Ephesians 3:17). He must be perfectly at home in the heart, and taking full control. He must settle down and live there, right in the centre and not on the circumference. **Henceforth walk in the light as He is in the light** (1 John 1:7). “A transparent life before God with no guile”.

Strive to keep conscience clear and blameless before God and man (Acts 24:16). Be sensitive to sin overtaking us. **Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness** (2 Timothy 2:19). **I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others I shall not be disqualified for the prize** (1 Corinthians 9:27).

The heart, and who possesses it, is the key to the situation. Before things go wrong outwardly, things go wrong in the heart. **Guard you heart for it is the wellspring of life** (Proverbs 4:23). **My son, give me your heart** (Proverbs 23:26). **Jesus put His hands on her and immediately she was made straight** (Luke 13:13) – the same needs to happen spiritually.