

At the end of chapter four, Luke paints a picture of the church at peace. Everyone was of one heart, and mind. The Holy Spirit was powerful among them. The Apostles were reaching more and more people with the gospel message. Everyone shared what he or she had with those who were in need. Many people sold property, and brought the proceeds to the disciples, so that the money could be applied wherever there might be a need.

This is a model of a church with perfect peace, and harmony. The love of Christ permeated their hearts, and they extended that love to one another. They lived in God's grace, and all was right with the church. Then something happened that, on a spiritual level, threatened everything God was doing in the church.

When people first read the account of Ananias and Sapphira, they sometimes question why God would deal so harshly against, what they perceive as, some small thing. After all, this couple did make an offering, and so what if they didn't give all the money to the church. Why would a loving God, take their lives when all they did was to keep a little back for themselves?

A close examination of the text gives us the answer. Let's read it together and discover some principles that will help to guide us in our dealings with one another within the church. Read Acts 5:1-11.

To understand the passage we must first recognize that the situation set up in verse one is in direct contrast to the example of Barnabas in 4:36-37. Of his own free will, Barnabas sold a field he owned and gave all the money to the church. Barnabas gave out of a pure heart with no ulterior motives. The Lord received the offering and blessed it, and by extension, blessed Barnabas.

The difference between Barnabas' gift and Ananias and Sapphira's gift has to do with the condition of their hearts when giving, and the motivation behind the gift. The text does not tell us the amount of the gift, because that is not important. The problem was that the couple sinned against God in the way that they gave. Their sin is explained in verses 3 and 4.

Peter asked Ananias, "How is it that Satan has so filled your heart, that you have lied to the Holy Spirit, and kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before you sold it? And didn't you have the freedom to use that money any way you wanted to? You have not lied to men, but to God." See the contrast? They were filled with Satan, rather than being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Notice that the gifts that came to the church were free will offerings. No one was forced to give. They were not socialist, where the common people were forced to give up their earnings so that everyone would be at the same economic level. The offerings were given from the heart. People realized how God had blessed them, and out of the excess of His provision, they gave to others who were less fortunate, or who had special needs. When Christians give with the right heart, God blesses both the gift, and the giver.

Barnabas' gift is the model for the proper way to bring our tithes and offerings today. Ananias' gift was deceitful, and the action brought about God's judgment. I cannot say for certain what motivates individuals in the church today when they give. Ideally, we bring our tithes as an act of worship, in obedience to the Lord's command. We express our thankfulness to God and return the full tithe, even if it seems like we must sacrifice to do so at the time. We tithe with a prayer in our hearts that God will be blessed in our giving, and that He will take our money, bless it, and use it according to His will, and purpose, to advance His kingdom, and be a blessing to others.

In the same way, we bring our offerings, which are above and beyond our tithes, to focus on specific identifiable needs. Last Wednesday, Brenda Bowman gave us a report on her mission's trip to Ghana. She mentioned that they did not have enough bibles to give away this time, so when I made out my tithe check, I was moved by the Holy Spirit to add a little extra to go towards paying for those bibles on the next trip. I also added a little extra to my giving to go towards the Lottie Moon Christmas offering that we take up every year to support Southern Baptist Missionaries across the globe.

I am not telling you this in order to draw attention to myself, but to give you an example of the kinds of offerings the Lord blesses. My offerings were not large sums of money, but if we all chip in a little, and if we give consistently, with the right heart, God blesses. But not everyone gives, and not everyone gives with the right heart.

About twenty-five years ago, or so, before I became a pastor, there was a man in our church who appeared, to me at least, to pretty much run the finances of the church. He asked questions at every business meeting in such a way that it sometimes seemed he was calling into question the integrity of the church leadership. He served on financial committees, and was vocal in expressing his opinion as to how, and where, the church should spend its money. He spoke with authority, which made it difficult for most people to question him. He appeared to be someone who had insights into church finances, and someone you could trust. In time he set upon a campaign to undermine the leadership, and split the church with godless accusations.

Imagine my surprise some years later, when I learned that this man, and his family, didn't even tithe. While it could never be proven, he was also suspected of reaching his hand into the offering plate, and stealing from the church. We have so many checks and balances today, that it would be hard for anyone to take advantage of the church in that way, but you can see that sometimes people are not what they seem. We cannot control what is in someone else's heart, but we are responsible before God for what is in our hearts, and He sees our hearts clearly.

The bible says that the Lord loves a cheerful giver, and we see many examples of the way God blesses the giver, and the church, when we bring our tithes, and offerings, with the right heart. Ananias wanted to appear to be someone that he was not. He wanted the church to think of him as this great and generous benefactor. But Peter, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit called him out, and accused him of lying to the Holy Spirit in verse 3, and he says in verse 4, that he had not lied to men, but to God.

Notice that when we consider both of these verses together, we have a Trinitarian statement that the Holy Spirit is God. When Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, he lied to God. In verse 5 we learn that when Peter said this to Ananias, he fell down and died.

There are those who might say that this was harsh treatment of Ananias. After all, he brought an offering. So what if he didn't give the full proceeds to the church? Ananias was never required to bring the whole amount. He wasn't required to bring anything, but in his giving he lied to God.

Was God harsh in his judgment? Have we become so comfortable in compromise that we see nothing wrong in lying to God? In first Peter we read that God's judgment begins with the family of God, His church. God expects more from His people than what He sees in the lost world. In Old Testament Achin's sin led to his destruction. In order to prevent his spiritual influence from infecting God's people, he was removed from Israel. In the early days of the church, Ananias also had to be removed to protect the integrity of God's people, and to not let the devil get a foothold among God's people. Ananias' death was a sign and a warning to the people. The church must operate in light of God's holiness, not in the darkness of the world.

The second half of verse 5 says that great fear seized all who heard what happened. Luke repeats this in verse 11, for emphasis. The bible says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Jesus is my Lord and Savior, and I tend to focus upon the love and grace He extends to me, and to all who trust Him. In the back of my mind however, there is always awareness that I must be careful not to abandon His Lordship over my life, in order to pursue the desires of my flesh. I have committed my life to Jesus, and I don't want to do anything that might have a negative impact upon my relationship with Him. I don't want to do anything to cause God's judgment to fall upon me, or upon the church. I prefer His grace to His judgment.

The bible says they carried out Ananias' dead body and, about three hours later, his wife came in. She had not heard what had happened. Peter asks her if they gave the full price they received for the land. She could have said, no, we kept a portion back for ourselves. Instead, she followed the deceit of her husband and said, yes, that was the full amount we received. Like her husband, Sapphira wanted to appear to give more than she was willing to give. She tried to deceive the church, lied to the Holy Spirit, and by extension, she lied to God. At which point, she met the same fate as her husband.

Just before she fell dead, Peter asked her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?" The idea behind testing the Spirit of the Lord is an attitude of seeing how much I can get away with before God judges me? It is the rational that says if God's grace covers all of my sins, then he will forgive me if I willfully choose to sin against Him. I know that I should not do this thing, but I am going to go ahead and do it, and then I will fall back on God's grace.

This is a very dangerous attitude that professing Christians take all the time. Instead of living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, they try to straddle the fence, with one foot in the church, and one foot in the world. It is a lifestyle of compromise, characterized by an unwillingness to take a godly stand, or to exercise self-discipline and to live in righteousness. People live this way without regard to the judgment of God, or the consequences of sin.

This heart attitude is the primary reason why some professing Christians fail to live in victory. They choose sin over repentance, because they are unwilling to say no to temptation. They yield to the desires of the flesh, instead of standing upon the word of God. Of their own free will, they fall into sin, but want to, somehow, avoid the consequences.

But know this: be sure your sins will find you out. God will always hold out His grace to the repentant sinner, whether that person is coming to Jesus in faith for the first time, or if it is a professing Christian who has fallen away, but now repenting, so that they may return to the Lord. But God's forgiveness does not automatically remove the consequences of sin. Sin is always destructive. It can destroy your life, and the lives of the people around you. Each of us has to choose whether we are going to live miserably in our sin, or to live in the joy of God's grace. Salvation must not be thought of as giving us permission to sin, rather salvation is meant to give us freedom from sin. We are to no longer live in the world, where we succumb to the desires of the flesh; rather we live in Christ, and allow His perfection, His holiness, and His righteousness to become the characteristics of our lives.

If the spiritual forces behind Ananias and Sapphira's actions had gone unchecked, it could have destroyed the church in its infancy. Unfortunately, that same spiritual dynamic is in play in much of the modern church today. It is why the church lacks the power of the Holy Spirit. It is why we have been ineffective in stopping the flow of godlessness that has infected our nation and the world. But it doesn't have to remain that way, not if God's people will repent and choose to pattern their lives under the authority of God's word, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

It must begin with a sincere commitment of our lives to God, through faith in Jesus Christ. In fulfillment of prophecy, God took on flesh, and assumed the cost of the penalty for our sins. Jesus lived a sinless life, sacrificed Himself, and rose from the grave, in order that people who place their trust in Him might be forgiven of their sins, and inherit eternal life. If there is anyone here tonight who wants to know how you can be saved, please come, and speak with one of the pastors at the conclusion of the service.