

THE BOOK OF ACTS: GRACE AND JUDGMENT

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Acts 4: 32-37
Acts 5: 1-11

I seriously considered skipping over that creepy story about Ananias and Sapphira. I also thought about keeping it in the Acts line-up, but assigning it to Lee. But I'm trying not to be one of those preachers who focuses only on happy, feel-good messages. If I we did that regularly at LCPC, you'd hear only a one-sided gospel.

After reading through the story three times, I grudgingly said: "Okay, Lord, I won't ditch Ananias and Sapphira. But I'm struggling to understand why they suddenly dropped dead. I'm struggling to find the good news, and the practical application, in what looks like a story about hellfire and damnation."

Then I started to actually think and pray about the story. It slowly dawned on me that the story is actually hugely important to Luke's history of the Church, and deeply relevant to our walk with Christ. And I realized that I've been misreading the story all my life. I used to think it was about greed. I now see that's it's really about hypocrisy. I used to think the story undermined the Bible's teachings about God's grace. I now see that the story actually *enlarges* our understanding of God's grace.

I'm sure you picked up on the stark contrast between our first and second readings. At the end of Acts, chapter four, Luke describes the other-worldly unity of the very first Church. As they grew in unity and love for one another, Luke explains, they received power from the Holy Spirit. Poverty was eradicated, at least for a season, and that made the Church, and the Church's message, more attractive to outsiders.

I'm reading from Acts 4, starting at verse 33:

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

- Acts 4:33-35

Notice that Luke is basically repeating what he told us at the end of chapter two, which we looked at last week. Lee talked about how the believers who were financially secure shared what they had with those who poor. Lee compared the life of the church in its infancy to the life that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden at the dawn of creation.

If chapter four describes the Church's contentment in Eden, the beginning of chapter five describes her fall from grace. Ananias and Sapphira, we could say, are the Adam and Eve of this new Eden. Satan beguiles them, and the body of Christ becomes infected with sin.

Ananias and Sapphira feel the powerful expectation, as Church members and property owners, to be generous with the poor. They announce to the church their intention to sell a piece of property and give all the proceeds to the apostles. They want to be included on the honor roll of those who are making a difference – they want to be recognized as platinum circle givers. But they also want to be financially secure. So they secretly conspire to keep a portion of the money they make from the land sale.

Peter sees through the deception, and he confronts Ananias with his sin. He tells Ananias that Satan has beguiled him. “Didn’t [the property] belong to you before it was sold?” he asks. “And after it was sold,” Peter continues, “wasn’t the money at your disposal?” (Acts 5:4).

Peter’s point is that no one forced Ananias to sell his land – he did so of his own volition. So he – Ananias – can’t rely on the excuse that the Church manipulated him or put undue pressure on him.

Peter asks: “What made you think of doing such a thing?” But the question is rhetorical. Peter has already exposed the motives behind Ananias’s actions. Ananias and his wife want to be celebrated in the Church for their unbounded generosity. But they also want to have their own personal rainy-day fund.

Peter then offers his withering indictment: “You have not lied just to human beings but to God” (Acts 5:4). Never mind that most big donors enjoy being recognized for their gifts. Never mind that most of us try to set aside money so we can be financially secure. It’s clear that Peter is speaking under the power and authority of the Holy Spirit. And Ananias drops dead.

Those who witness the event begin to freak out. They want to know, as we do: Did Peter call down God’s judgment on Ananias? Did the Holy Spirit terminate him because of his sin? Or did Ananias maybe die from the shock of having violated a sacred taboo? Luke doesn’t tell us.

The story becomes even more chilling. A few young men wrap Ananias’s body in a blanket, carry him out the door, and bury him without a ceremony. They aren’t interested in providing Ananias with a decent funeral. Nor do they see the need to wait for his wife to return so she can see her husband’s corpse. They all seem to understand that God has pronounced his judgment on Ananias because of his sin.

Three hours after Ananias’s death, Sapphira returns. It doesn’t matter where she was – maybe she was off doing a few errands? Peter says to her, straightaway: “Is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” (Acts 5:8).

This is the point in the story where I really start to squirm. I understand that Sapphira is as guilty as her husband. But good grief, she’s just sustained a terrible loss! You’d think Peter might exercise a bit of mercy. At the very least, you’d think he would tell Sapphira what has happened to her husband, and give her the chance to confess her sin and make a new start with God.

Instead, Peter lays a trap for Sapphira and she steps right in it. “Yes,” she says, “that’s the price” (Acts 5:8). Peter accused Ananias, remember, of lying to God. He now accuses Sapphira and her husband of

testing God's Spirit. Because of these sins, Peter declares, God's judgment will now fall on Sapphira. "Listen!" he says, "The feet of those who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also" (Acts 5:9).

With those words, Sapphira drops to the ground, stone cold dead. The young men who just buried Ananias turn around and bury Sapphira right next to him. And the Church that so recently had been filled with joy suddenly becomes gripped with fear.

As I told you, this is a hard story. It's still not so clear what it's telling us about God or about our walk with the Lord. Several disturbing questions remain unanswered. But we already know enough about the story to crack it open and dig out the core message.

The first question –or set of questions – has to do with God's apparent hardness of heart. Why is God so angry with Ananias and Sapphira? Why doesn't he give them the chance to confess their sin and reform their ways? Why does he seem to punish them so severely for sins that we commit regularly?

Let's begin with the fact that Ananias and Sapphira weren't doing anything that we would regard as despicable or horrific. They weren't making money off of child slavery. They weren't running a Jewish heroin ring. They were trying to help the poor. They sold what was probably the only piece of land they owned so they could participate in the Church's anti-poverty campaign.

Many of us, myself included, have serious reservations about egalitarian schemes that involve trying to eradicate poverty by taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Such arrangements typically end in frustration and failure, as the earliest Christians quickly discovered. The lesson they teach, for to those who have eyes to see, is that the best way to pull people out of poverty is to provide them with good jobs.

But our views about capitalism, socialism or communism really aren't relevant here. What we want to know is: What was the nature of Ananias and Sapphira's sin? And why did God's respond to their sin as he did?

What I'm suggesting is that greed wasn't the ground-level problem. It was a contributing problem, to be sure. But it was a problem the Lord could address through the agency of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Ananias and Sapphira weren't black-listed by Luke because of their love of money – they weren't struck dead by God simply because they held back a portion of their gift for the poor.

So then, was the main problem their dishonesty with the church?

Once again, we have to put Ananias and Sapphira's actions in the proper perspective. Of course they displayed poor judgment, and a lack of character, when they lied to the Church. We sometimes behave even more shamefully when we think our reputation is at stake. We exaggerate our accomplishments. We give money to charities under the pretext of wanting to help, but mainly so we'll be honored for our

generosity. We agree to sit on boards or committees not because we want to advance the cause, but because we want to pad our resume.

That kind of dishonesty – the kind that’s rooted in pure vanity – is reprehensible. But thankfully, it, too, is the kind of thing the Lord can help us with through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

So no: Ananias and Sapphira weren’t black-balled by Luke, and struck down by God, simply because they were dishonest with the Apostles.

If we want to understand what went wrong with Ananias and Sapphira, we have to zero in on Peter’s words. Remember: Peter tells the couple very plainly why they’ve incurred God’s wrath. *He says that they lied to God and tested the Holy Spirit.* What he means is that they’re living as counterfeit Christians. They tell the Lord they’ve surrendered their lives to him, but they follow him only when it’s convenient. They speak of Jesus as their Lord and Master, but they treasure the things of the world. They honor the God with their lips, but their true god is money.

There’s a word for this kind of sin. We call it hypocrisy. It’s the sin of pretending to be someone you’re not.

Jesus boldly confronted the spiritual hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders of his day. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees,” he declared. “You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence... You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23: 25, 33).

Jesus never got very far with the Pharisees. Their problem was that they didn’t think they had a problem. They didn’t see the need for a Savior. They thought they were doing pretty well without Jesus.

Ananias and Sapphira likewise don’t think they have a problem. Repentance isn’t part of their vocabulary. They think they can serve two masters. They think they can test the Spirit with impunity. But they’re wrong.

The greatest fools on earth are the ones who are trying to fool God. Amazing grace – a boundless ocean of grace – is available even to the worst of sinners. But God’s door is closed to religious phonies. He can do nothing for hypocrites who say they love God, but follow him only when it serves their purposes.

This is scary stuff – or at least it was for the very first Christians. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira caused them to ask questions about themselves, questions that we, too, should be asking. Are we sometimes guilty of lying to God or testing God’s Spirit? If so, are we in danger of being cut off from God forever?

Paul tells us in Romans that nothing can separate us from God’s love. He says that God always “works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). We

rather unthinkingly take that to mean that everyone who professes faith in Christ is secure in their salvation. It would be more accurate to say that everyone who truly loves God is secure in their salvation. Those who profess Jesus with their lips, but continue to live in the world are in for a surprise when they die. As Jesus declares in his Sermon on the Mount, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father...” (Matthew 7:21).

The world is full of people who say they believe, but who actually don’t know God at all. What distinguishes them isn’t that they’re bigger sinners than the average Joe. It’s that deep down inside, they don’t feel the need for a Savior. They don’t hunger for the goodness that can only come from God.

Have you been lying to God, and testing his Spirit? You’re probably the only person on earth who can answer that question. The Spirit enabled Peter to look into the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira, but he had a particular purpose in mind in that special circumstance. Our constant prayer should be that the God would reveal to us the lies we’ve telling him. Our daily bread should be to do the Lord’s work for his glory, and only for his glory. The Spirit can help us, but only if we’re truly open to his leading.

Finally let’s ask a question about the Church. What’s the Spirit revealing to us through this story about our life together?

Of course the story of Ananias and Sapphira serves as a warning. The Church is Christ’s bride, but she’s also weighed down by sin. In her ranks, the weeds and the wheat always grow together. So we need to be careful of our actions, careful of what we say to each other, careful in the way we plan our mission and exercise our discipline. The Spirit wants to bless us, but he can do so only if we’re honest before God and each other about our sin, and our daily need for grace.