

Sunday 3rd March 2024 - Sunday Service

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Date: 03 March 2024

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[0 : 00] Well, what do we make of that? Guys, I have to tell you, I'm the one who drills up the preaching rota, and I still end up with that passage. I don't know how that happens.

There's so much here, isn't there? There's a very natural story, a human nature story like the football fraudster, and yet there's a supernatural story too.

Did you notice that as we were going through? It's not just about Ananias and Sapphira and Peter. It's about the devil and the Holy Spirit as well. As we walk through these events, which obviously rock a young church at its very beginnings, I think what the Lord wants us to hear is this.

So again, this is the if you're going to fall asleep moment, and remember this. God will not be mocked, and God will protect his flock.

So don't hold back from God. God will not be mocked. God will protect his flock. So hold nothing back.

[1 : 10] Don't hold back from God. We're going to look at it in three sections. First section, chapter 4, verses 32 to 37, so the end of chapter 4. If you're reading these verses, you might have been put in mind of what we were talking about in chapter 2, because it's a bit of a reminder of that.

Remember back in chapter 2 when we thought about what the early church was like? There were people believing. There were people who cared more about belonging to each other than about the belongings that they have.

There were people who are growing, and there were people who are sharing the story of Jesus so that other people can have hope as well. It says here, all the believers were one in heart and mind. And what did they do? They sold possessions to make sure that nobody went hungry. They shared all they had, verse 32. And the good news that Jesus is alive, and the forgiveness and life that that brings is shared by the apostles.

Can you see that? Verse 33, with great power, the apostles continue to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And that is quite a vision, isn't it?

[2 : 21] People who are one in heart and mind, who share all they have, and who offer hope to people outside. That is the world we want, isn't it? It's the opposite, the complete opposite to the football fraudster approach, where you're only out for yourself and you don't care who you hurt to get it.

How does Luke say that you can tell that God's grace is at work? Have a look at those verses. Because it is at work, isn't it? Despite the opposition that Rich was telling us about last week, from the authorities saying, No, be quiet, don't say that stuff.

God's grace is still at work. How can we tell? Verse 33, And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all, that there was no needy person among them.

So God's undeserved kindness to us in the Lord Jesus is seen in these people because there were no poor. It's quite concrete, isn't it?

They'd really ditched pursuing money for the sake of the kingdom of good news. How do they do that? Well, it's supernatural. God's grace is changing them from the inside out, setting them free from the need to have money, to buy security, to be okay.

[3 : 40] That is not what these people are about any longer. And I think some of us don't even want that freedom. Which shows just how enslaved we are.

But this is clear, isn't it? There is a direct connection between how powerfully God's grace is at work and our generosity. And this world, this kingdom of good news, produces new heroes, doesn't it?

Verse 36, Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

So the heroes of God's kingdom are sacrificial encouragers. Not the kind of people who just affirm you in all your dreams and desires, good or bad. But people who will actually give up stuff that is theirs for your good.

And that's the kingdom that Jesus is building. And it was real. And it happened in a pluralistic, multi-ethnic society, just like ours.

[4 : 49] With ordinary people, just like us. Except these people are deeply secure in Jesus. Aren't they? Deeply secure. And therefore they are deeply generous to one another. Doesn't that sound good and right?

And if you're thinking, yes, that's more like the world we should have. And that we should be living in. Then, friend, you need to be a part of the church, don't you? Because that's where Jesus builds that kingdom.

Some of you might be thinking, well, it sounds great. Sounds great, but it's too good to be true, really. It's in here as a kind of mythical, inspirational example.

People don't really work like that. Religion doesn't change them. It just kind of puts a nice layer over the top. You'll see. Just read the next few verses, in fact.

Just read the first bits of chapter 5. You'll see. And do you know what? Luke says, you're right. This isn't a fairy story. And there are problems.

[5 : 53] Let's look at verses 1 and 2 of chapter 5. Now, a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. And 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.

And at first glance, it seems like the doubters are right, doesn't it? People don't really change. Ananias and Sapphira prove it.

They're still buying their security and their status with money, and then trying to keep the cash as well. How do we deal with it as human beings when things like this happen?

Well, it's not difficult to look around and think of some examples, is it? What happens when the police are racist? Especially the Met.

They've covered it up. What happens when there's anti-Semitism in the Labour Party? The first instinct is to cover it up. What happens when church leaders have been abusing people in their care?

[7 : 01] The first instinct is to cover it up. Until they get found out, of course. And how do I deal with something, let's make it personal, that I have done that could ruin my reputation?

Or that could ruin my career? Or my reputation at school? Or my family? Or my church? What's my first instinct? Sweep it under the carpet. Nobody can see it.

It can't hurt me. And what does Luke absolutely not do with this first scandal to hit the church?

He doesn't cover it up. In fact, what does he do? Inspired by the Holy Spirit? He puts it in the Bible. He says, this, what you are always to come back to, that is where this is going to find its place.

Because if he did cover it up, and if we do that as Christians, then it would prove that the church, the people of the Lord Jesus, really are no different from anybody else, wouldn't it? Then we're just all Ananias and Sapphira.

[8 : 16] Covering up the truth for the sake of our reputations. No, God puts it in the Bible. Because he wants us to learn from what has gone wrong here. So what has gone wrong? What have Ananias and Sapphira done that is so terrible?

Because it wasn't that they had to give the money, was it? We talked about that back in chapter 2, and it's obvious from these verses as well. There's no obligation. It's not that they've given up rights to their property.

It wasn't even, actually, that they only gave a part. But that was the problem. What does it say that they did? Verse 2.

They kept back part of the money for themselves. And then they lied to the church about it. And so they lied to God.

And what's so bad about that? Well, if you go back to the Greek, and I don't tend to do this very often when I'm speaking, but if you go back to the Greek, let's do it this time, and you look at that word, kept back, what you see is that it translates misappropriate.

[9 : 30] Misappropriate. A bit like embezzle. Or steal. You see, if we call ourselves Christians, and we hold out on God, like Ananias and Sapphira did, then what we are doing is misappropriating what belongs to God.

Not because it's not ours, but because we ought to give it to him. And in fact, as God owns all this world, and we all owe him our lives, in another way, if any of us hold back things from him, we misappropriate what belongs to him.

And then Ananias and Sapphira lie about it to the apostles. And did you notice what Peter says? He doesn't say, why did you lie to me? He says, verse 3, how is it that you have lied to the Holy Spirit? Remember that feeling at the beginning that we were talking about? God doesn't really see. God doesn't really know what goes on in these places. That was the thought in Ananias and Sapphira's heart, wasn't it?

So he doesn't really know. So he won't really know if we just keep some of the money for ourselves. But we'll still get all the kudos of appearing generous among God's people.

[10:54] So we'll keep some of it back. In other words, they're mocking God. They are short-changing God. And here's an example of how that looks.

I had a conversation, which I shared with a couple of you this week, with Annika, who's here today. And I think I said something like, it's really annoying that the dog's not listening.

Or I think maybe you said, it's really annoying that the dog's not listening. And I said something like, yeah, it's like some children I know. And Annika, quite rightly, called me out on it.

She said, do you mean me? And I fudged. Because I didn't really want the fight. I just wanted to make a backhanded remark and get my frustration out.

So I gave a lame explanation instead of facing up to it. Because I wasn't willing to let God make me honest about that part of my life and heart. I was holding out on him.

[12:03] Sound familiar? I'd go so far as to say I'm probably not completely alone in having done something like that at some point. And there's an ugly word that describes it, isn't there?

It's hypocrisy. And the truth is, we are all hypocrites. Because if you live with us for long enough, we will all do something different to what we say.

And we will all try and sweep it under the carpet for the sake of our own convenience. We all know it. And only God can fix it. That's why we need his grace.

Don't we? Hold on to that thought. We need his grace to fix this problem. Behind that hypocrisy is a real deep need for security, isn't there?

The security that Ananias and Sapphira were trying to buy. So, the early church have their own football fraudsters. Ananias and Sapphira.

[13:08] What will happen? Will that be the end? Public scandal. The church implodes, undermined by humanity, just like so many other institutions before and after.

No. Because King Jesus is going to do something about it. And here's our third section, verses 3 to 11. The king acts.

He's not shocked. He's not surprised. He's not taken in. He knows humanity. He enables Peter to recognize that what is going on here is not just a problem between human beings, but a supernatural attack on the new church.

And there is immediate judgment on Ananias, and therefore on Satan. And later on Sapphira, when she confirms her own guilt as well.

And the result of that, did you notice, mentioned twice, fear. A renewal of the awe that Keith was talking about, that we were talking about in Acts chapter 2, that was part of the early church.

[14:20] The good fear of God. Do you remember the one that went hand in hand with glad and sincere hearts? Suddenly, we remember that God is awesome. Still, it's pretty shocking, isn't it?

They fall down dead. Why? Why does there need to be such an awful, shocking, immediate judgment? There are two reasons.

And the first is that God will not be mocked. What does that mean? Well, the lesson is obvious, isn't it? Be good, or bad stuff will happen.

Right? Be good, and, sorry, be bad, or bad stuff, be good, or bad stuff will happen. Be good, and you'll be surrounded by nice people. Like this first church in Acts, that's the lesson, isn't it?

Very simple. Because, that's what God owes you when you pay your dues, right? If you're good, then God will be nice to you.

[15:25] If you're bad, then God will punish you. In fact, isn't that how every belief system works, really? Yeah? You do the right things, and you access good life.

And you do bad stuff, and karma will probably get you in the end. It's just different ways to go about it. Secular humanists have one way to do it, and the Buddhists have another way to do it, and the

Hindus have yet another way to do it.

That's the simple lesson, isn't it? No. That's wrong. Ananias and Sapphira's mistake is not breaking a moral code, and therefore, they get punished.

They get their just desserts. That is not the problem. Their mistake is to hold out on God and pretend that they had given him their all. That's what their actions show about their hearts.

They were not devoted, deeply committed, in the words of Acts 2, to their God. Their mistake is to think that he had paid for less than their all when he died for them.

[16 : 35] That is their mistake. And so, when we hold out on God, what do we do? We make Jesus' death cheap. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit did not plan to allow the Holy Blood of Jesus to be spilled so that God could improve our behaviour or our reputations.

Did he? He did not die on the cross to buy us a new community, although that may be a good thing. He died on the cross to win your soul and your love back. And giving him anything less and calling yourself a Christian is making a mockery of that sacrifice.

And God will not be mocked. Why? Because if he allows himself to be mocked in this way, then it cheapens grace.

Doesn't it? And true grace is the only thing that can wipe out our guilt and restore us and make us one with one another and with God one more time.

[17 : 58] True grace is the only thing that will make us part of his family forever. So when Jesus dies for us on the cross, we don't give him our good deeds.

We don't give him our charity, our donations. We give him our messy all because he has paid for nothing less.

And if we obscure that message, we may as well all go home and so judgment falls. God will not be mocked. Secondly, God will protect his flock.

Here's a headline I came across this week. Gen Z ushering in the post-truth media age. The comment underneath, this generation prioritizes content over truth.

And I don't think Gen Z is alone. Can't lay the blame at their feet. As a society, we've never cared less about the truth, have we? More about our feelings.

[19 : 09] More about how things look. But God cares about truth. Because as the Bible says, it is the truth about Jesus that sets us free.

And God is 100% committed to our freedom. And Jesus warns us about the danger to the truth, doesn't he? From inside the church, from people who say things which aren't true, like Ananias and Sapphira.

They won't look like enemies. Jesus says, they will be wolves in sheep's clothing. And Paul says exactly the same thing just later on in Acts.

chapter 20, verse 29. Here's what John Calvin says about that verse. It is the perpetual fate of churches to be infested by wolves.

And Jesus, because he is the good shepherd, will do anything necessary to protect his flock and his kingdom from attack.

[20 : 14] And so judgment falls because God will protect his flock. Why is untruth or lies, why is that so serious?

It's because it's an attack on our hope and that the one thing that we hope in, it is misinformation about Jesus or what he has done or how he wants us to follow him. And if we don't believe in the Jesus as he reveals himself to be in the Bible, then we can't be one with him.

And we can't have that wonderful grace that works so powerfully in people to change them. So we can't belong. So we can't grow. So we must care about the truth too.

Just like Jesus does. And that is one of the reasons why we have a leadership team, isn't it? To do the job that Peter and the apostles did then. as the spirit gives us insight and understanding to oppose lies and to protect the flock.

What do we take away from this? Well, there are some obvious things that we could take away. We could ask if how powerfully God's grace is at work in us can be measured by our generosity, then how powerfully is God's grace at work in us?

[21 : 46] Think of the church building work in Nepal. We could ask him every day to help us not to live by lies, can't we? That seems fairly clear from this.

And instead to love the truth. Of course, the lies aren't out there in this passage. It's not that we should be out there saying all the bad stuff that everybody else says on the street corners.

This is inviting us to look in. But there are some less obvious things to think about as well. Do we need to go back and remember as a church that God is holy?

To be filled with awe again the way that this church needed to to experience that good fear that goes with a glad and sincere heart one more time?

Or maybe you're here and you've been stuck in the good deeds trap. And you thought, yeah, Ananias and Sapphira got their just desserts. And thank goodness that I'm not like that.

[22 : 52] I've got my faults, but it's the good deeds trap. You're trying to climb up to God. And perhaps you've realized or realized again that that doesn't work.

And that what you need is this grace that works so powerfully in people's hearts. That you need to accept how much Jesus gave up for you.

Perhaps you need, as you've been doing for so many years, to stop holding out on God and give him your all. people. Or maybe you've seen the kind of hypocrisy and dishonesty in the church that is on show here.

And maybe you've been hurt by that. Well, perhaps you need to remember that your confidence is not in people, but it is in a God who will not be locked and who will protect his flock and who will not allow the grace that saved you to be cheapened.

And perhaps you need to come back to him and even to his family because of that. And remember that you too are a human being and I too am a human being that is in need of that grace.

[24 : 16] God will not be mocked and God will protect his flock. So hold nothing back from God. Let's just pray to finish.

I'm going to use the words of an old hymn, slightly modified to help us pray. Take my silver and my gold, not a penny would I withhold.

Take my intellect and use every power as you may choose. Take my will and make it yours. It shall be no longer mine.

take my heart, it is your own. It shall be your royal throne. Take my love, my Lord, I pour at your feet its treasure store.

Take myself and I will be ever only all for you. Lord, may that prayer be our prayer and may it be true of us.

[25 : 21] we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.