

Acts 5:1–16

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[0 : 00] Again, the scripture text is Acts 5, verses 1 through 16 on page 1011 of the white Bibles next to you.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge, he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

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?

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. When Ananias heard those words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

[1 : 11] After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, Tell me whether you sold the land for so much. And she said, Yes, for so much.

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.

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. And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together at Solomon's portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.

And now more than ever, believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they were even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them.

[2 : 23] The people also gathered from towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits. And they were all here, healed. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning.

I also want to add my welcome to you, and especially those of you who might be in town visiting.

Family, which lives in our midst. We are so grateful to have you here today.

And I would be remiss to not express my gratitude to God for the birth of another child, even on our pastoral staff, being in Christy Knee.

Christy gave birth to Josiah David earlier this week. We praise God for that. And let Christy know we look forward to the day when he enters into the house of the Lord.

[3 : 22] God bless you this week, dear friend. One of the challenges facing anyone who wants to be a writer of history is to combat the notion which is present in every one of their readers.

Namely, that the outcome of the things about which they're writing was somehow inevitable. But we know the outcome in retrospect.

And therefore, we can think of nothing else but that that was inevitably going to occur. And so the great writers of history know how to combat that notion and to set scenes before you as they unfolded at the time, which indicate that really everything hung in the balance.

This is one of the reasons I think people like to read Gordon Wood on the American Revolution or David McCullough in his book 1776.

The writers of history know how to combat your sense that all that we are today was somehow inevitable.

[4 : 50] And they take you back to scenes where everything hung in the balance. Luke, as a writer of history, making clear to Theophilus the reasons for which the Christian faith flourished all throughout the known world must also put before the reader a real sense that it was not at all secure along the way.

And that at any given point obstacles came to the church which threatened the very work of God which had begun at Pentecost.

We have already seen one such obstacle come from the outside, haven't we? The last few weeks in chapters 3 and 4.

An external pressure placed upon the community which threatened their ongoing proclamation. And now, in the scene before us today we have a second obstacle that threatens the very welfare of the church.

In chapter 4 it was the suppression of preaching in Jesus' name which could have undone it all. But today it's the sin of a single man and woman who profess Jesus' name.

[6 : 29] The things that could have derailed the early church then are internal as well as external. They come from the community itself.

There are hints aren't there at the very opening of chapter 5 and I hope you have it before you hints that there was a great compromise a moral compromise already in play within the church.

Let me give you a few of the literary markers the opening word but this is in contrast to this wonderful moment where we have seen Barnabas Joseph actually sell land and at the very end of verse 37 place the money at the feet of the apostles in ways that it was a beautiful expression of what we heard last week was great grace.

You see it right there in verse 33. great grace of chapter 4 to be able to share. But that wasn't the only thing we saw in the previous context.

There was not only great grace to share there was also in verse 33 great power to continue speaking. In other words they had successfully navigated the external pressures that would have pushed the gospel into a very quick end in the first century.

[7 : 57] but but great power and great grace give way through Ananias and Sapphira to a great moral compromise.

Not only does the opening word give it to you but look at the first few sentences. With his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property and with his wife's knowledge here it is he kept back for himself. The reader is already aware that something different is happening in contrast to what we have seen. And then as if that's not enough he's already moving you to this phrase and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles feet.

What a contrast between Joseph or Barnabas and what we see in Ananias and Sapphira. And the full extent of their self-congratulatory deception actually isn't known by way of literary clues until you arrive at verse 8.

And Peter said to her tell me whether you sold the land for so much and she said yes for so much. In other words it wasn't even that they just didn't give all the money to the church.

[9 : 19] That wasn't a sin. The sin was that they claimed to be giving all the money when they actually held back some for themselves.

That was the problem. It wasn't that they didn't give all it's that they deceived all into thinking they did. Which then reveals what the great moral compromise was in the early church that made the outcome of its growth anything but inevitable.

If I was to encapsulate their compromise it would be simply with the words spiritual pride. C.S. Lewis has a well-known book titled Screwtape or Screwtape Letters and it's an imaginary telling of a demon writing to another demon who's trying to disrupt the growth of a Christian and you read of all the strategies that they hope to unwind the work of the gospel in this individual's life and one of the strategies in there listed is spiritual pride which Screwtape calls the strongest and most beautiful of all vices.

He enjoins his advocate to derail the gospel with these words. Quote What you want is to keep a sly self-congratulation mixing with all his thoughts.

The idea of belonging to an inner ring of being in on a secret is very sweet to him play on that nerve.

[11 : 26] Well evidently that's what had happened with Ananias and Sapphira. They had seen this incredible display of Joseph otherwise named Barnabas giving voluntarily for the welfare of others.

They had seen great power to speak. They had been a part of great grace to share and they wanted in on the inner ring. But they wanted in on it in a way that wasn't really credible.

As John Stott writes, they wanted the credit and prestige for sacrificial generosity without the inconvenience of it. And so what happened was they said, you know, we got some land.

This is a really cool thing going on in Jerusalem right now. I mean, there are four, five, six thousand people gathering in the temple every day and it is just astounding. No one has ever seen anything like this. We want to get behind this.

We want to be not your silent financial backer. We want to be the backer who is known by all. And so they too sell a field, but rather than just giving the proceeds, they actually decide they are going to take some for themselves.

[12 : 37] They wanted the credit of sacrificial giving without the inconvenience of actually fully being vested. Think about it.

How the apostles knew this, because Peter moves in verses 3 and 4 to a straight statement, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?

While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why have you contrived this deed in your heart? It's almost as if Peter has some spiritual knowledge or awareness of what they have done.

And indeed, that is one possible explanation for how the apostles knew. Perhaps the apostle Peter just knew because he had been prompted by the ministry of the Spirit that the man standing before him was a fraud.

The text doesn't say. But you need to remember that there were other ways for him to know. It might have been the prompting of the Holy Spirit, but perhaps and even more likely, it's good to remember that transactions of this kind, that is the selling of property, then as now, were matters of public record.

[14 : 05] So we go back into the Hebrew scriptures in the book of Ruth, in chapter 4, 9, and 10, and we find Boaz purchasing a field that belonged to Elimelech, the previous husband of Naomi, and on two occasions in chapter 4, it mentions that in that transaction it required witnesses, and it goes on to mention ten elders of the city.

Now there's another indication in Jeremiah which I find quite extraordinary. Jeremiah, in chapter 32, is buying a field from Anathoth, his cousin.

Listen to what was required in the selling of property. He says he weighed out the money to him, 17 shekels of silver, there's the price, and then he writes, I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales.

Then, Jeremiah says, I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions and the open copy, I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch, the son of Neriah, the son of Mashiach, in the presence of Hanamel, my cousin, in the presence of the witnesses who likewise signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. In other words, the transaction was just like it happens today. It's public. You want to know what I bought my condo for? You can find it.

[15 : 47] You'll be able to find it online by lunchtime if you wanted. You can find it by the end of the sermon as you desire. And in that day it was the same. So it's very possible that they sell this field, witnesses are there, the property is exchanged, the money is given, the deed is signed, and Peter hears.

Did you hear that Ananias getting ready to make a gift to the church? From what I understand, it could be a pretty substantial one too. Looks like a year-end gift.

Oh really? What did he do with it? Well I hear he got this much for it. In fact, so-and-so was there, he's on the deed, he signed it. And then in comes Ananias, lays it at the feet of the apostles, and with his own voice, makes his life a fraud.

Now while we don't know exactly how the apostles were told, we do know what they make of it, having been told.

Look at what they make of that moral compromise. Verse three, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?

[17 : 10] Or, to his wife in verse nine, how is it that you have agreed together to test the spirit of the Lord?

So the presenting issue was deception, but the underlying gravity of spiritual pride in the assembly, where people present themselves in church in ways that are not consistent with their true heart, is they are not only fraudulent in our presence, they are fraudulent in the sense that they are testing the very spirit of the living God.

It is nothing short of a lie against the Holy Spirit, which remember, according to the words of Jesus in his own ministry, you can get away with a lot of things, even if you want to defame his name, and people do it every day, taking the name of our Lord Jesus in vain, with no consequence.

But you begin to lie intentionally of the work of the Holy Spirit to deceive a world into presenting yourself as someone that you are not, to be claiming to be aligned with the Holy Spirit when your life is really duplicitally given.

Well, the consequences are great. The wording of this lying against the Holy Spirit is almost identical to the words that Achan gives to Joshua in the Old Testament when he stole things that were to have been devoted to the Lord in destruction, and he hid them in his own tent.

[19 : 01] It was his own greed. And what he actually says then when he's all found out is, I have lied against God.

I have tried to pull a fast one on the one who sees all things. I have tried to present myself in the midst of this assembly as one who is all in when in actual fact I'm all in for me.

And so that is the great sin. So when you really look at the way the text is moving in the book of Acts, the great power to speak, which overcame external opposition, and the great grace to share, which was the fruit of overcoming outside opposition, gives way to a great compromise within, which is a great sin against God.

And the consequences are there. everything hangs in the balance at this point. And just as the sin was great, so too were the consequences.

I want you to see three consequences of sin in the church. On that day, it meant immediate death for both Ananias and Sapphira.

[20 : 30] In other words, they fell dead on the spot. when Ananias heard these words, verse 5, he fell down and breathed his last.

And notice where he fell down. Back to verse 2, he had laid his offering at the apostles' feet. Just as in chapter 4, 37, Joseph had sold a field and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. And so then, three hours later, when Sapphira comes in, verse 10, immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last.

That is irony of all ironies. The early church lived and died at the feet of the apostles. apostles. What an irony. We have just seen the power of the gospel in chapter 3 to heal a poor, beggardly, lame man who jumps to his feet.

[21 : 48] And now we are reading of those who are in the assembly who are dying at the feet of those who are overseeing the welfare of the gospel.

The irony goes even further because this is both a man and a woman. And Luke is famous for pairing a man and a woman in his gospel narrative and the book of Acts.

I counted up this week on my own, no fewer than 15 occasions where Luke utilizes a man and a woman in the telling of the story.

Whether it's Simeon and Anna at the birth of Jesus or the centurion and his servant who was healed and the widow at Nain and her son who was healed.

I mean, there are so many occasions where Luke is pairing a man and a woman and the wonderful things of the gospel and this is the only time where both individuals that are paired are negatively construed.

[23 : 07] I mean, we've seen nothing like this in the entire ministry of Jesus. Every time a man and a woman come before Jesus, good things happen to them in regard to the growth of the gospel.

people. But now that Jesus is off the scene and his apostles are here and he is judged in heaven and the time of repentance has come, here we have an instance where a man and a woman are dead at the feet of the apostles.

That is the consequence for sin. Now you might say that's a pretty harsh penalty. but the wages of sin is death.

And the timing of when God decides to bring that to us is up to him. But believe me, one day you will read of my death. Most of you are young enough, I trust that probably will be true.

And while I hold my forgiveness in the hands of Christ, there is no doubt in my mind that he could willingly, knowingly, immediately take me to be his own and have full right to do so.

[24 : 26] Such is the state of my own soul and the consequences of my own sin. And so it is for us all. The only thing, the only thing keeping you vertical today is the grace and mercy of the Lord that you might live in some measure until you see him face to face with authenticity, integrity, simplicity, humility, and to live truthfully.

The consequences for Ananias and Sapphira were death. Notice what the consequences were for everybody else. I love this phrase because it links where we were last week.

Verse 5, And great fear came upon all who heard it. And notice that's paired with the language that follows Sapphira's as well, but only it's expanded in verse 11.

And great fear came upon the whole church, but notice, and upon all who heard these things. So the consequence of the moral compromise that is met by God's justice to protect the growth of his own work is great fear.

Great fear to refrain from sinning. sinning. Great power to speak.

[26 : 06] Great grace to share. Great fear to refrain from sinning. These two individuals are laid out before you in full dress in the text.

I mean, they're on the ground. they are laid out before your eyes, just as they were before the apostles feet. And they are there in order to keep you from stumbling over their same sin.

Oh, how easy it is to verbally claim more of ourselves than we know to be true concerning our love and devotion to the Lord.

Oh, how easy it is to succumb to the desire to be part of it all while our heart is actually closed off for ourselves.

And so the consequence then is great fear. It's not just fear and like, whoa, wow, mind-blowing. Or as we talked about this once in our community group, somebody actually said something to the effect of, this is, you go to a, I'm not sure I want to be part of a small group like that.

[27 : 42] But the narrative is not there to keep you from the community of faith. The narrative is there to keep you from the sin which would penetrate your own heart.

And know this, while so many people in the church today decry the culture and look to the outside and say our greatest threats are from the unbelieving world, don't ever believe it.

The greatest threats to the welfare of the growth of the gospel are in our own hearts. We carry all that is needed to derail the progress of the gospel within us.

We carry it individually, we carry it collectively. And therefore the response ought to be a soul-searching realism that doubles down on true heart, authentic integrity.

The most persuasive thing you can do for the gospel is not merely the words you say. And it's not ultimately the passion you have.

[29 : 08] the most powerful apologetic you have for the gospel is not your logos or your pathos.

It's your ethos. It's your integrity. It's your truthfulness. It's living here as though we live in the face of God.

It's living before God and living before one another in a way that's authentic. This is true community.

So notice the consequences are the sin is that these two fall dead at the feet of the apostles.

The other consequence is that this fear begins to develop within the community and a commitment to holy living. A commitment to truth telling. A commitment to humility.

A commitment to saying you know what? I can't make more of myself in this place than I have a right to really make.

[30 : 19] Notice what happens then. And I love this. We're moving now to the close. That last paragraph that was read today verses 12 to 16 at a surface level feel as though it's unconnected to this story.

But as I've looked at it this week it is almost like well in literature it could be point and counterpoint and I'm not a musician you know that and I'm not a musical theorist but as a person who doesn't read music at all I have heard or I have likened counterpoint to melodies that are running alongside a melody that in some sense they're playing off of something and to whatever degree my articulation of that is correct as I'm looking at a musical theorist that's what 12 and 16 are doing we have just seen this horrific act and now notice what happens many signs and wonders were

regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles and they were all together in Solomon's portico none of the rest dared to join them there's picking up on the fear that was coming upon some but now the rest which I take to mean the people in the temple that are in distinction from the people who are attending the temple in other words it's probably the religious leaders they were not going to get in on this nobody was going to try to join like Ananias did but the people held them in high esteem and the language there is exactly the language we've been talking about great they held them in great they were greatly esteemed great power to speak great grace to share great fear upon all holy living and the apostles themselves were greatly esteemed what a way to play off of that and then it says verse 14 and more than ever believers were added to the Lord and notice this look at this phrase it's meaningful multitudes of both men and women that's counterpoint he opens the chapter but let me tell you there was a certain man and a certain woman but by the end both men and women and multitudes of them are coming to faith learning how to live in the fear of the

Lord and notice what irony with the clothes so that even as they carried out the sick into the streets and they laid them on cots that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them and the people gathered around Jerusalem notice that's a wonderful word it's the first hint that the gospel unexpectedly is now beginning to move beyond Jerusalem bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits and they were all healed they had lied against the Holy Spirit and now the unclean spirits are actually being delivered by those who are afflicted they had fallen at the apostles feet and now if Peter's feet just would get close enough to them where the sun would fall all of a sudden the work of God was in play again in other words this paragraph is explosively stating surprise even internal sin was incapable of thwarting the growth of the gospel because God was so committed to his son that when sin emerged it would be known and cleaned out lest the progress of the gospel be stopped so when we read acts we're reading the story of the unstoppable gospel you're reading the story of the triumph of something but never forget it didn't unfold with such inevitable force it hung moment by moment day by day week by week on a razor's edge and could have been derailed at any point along the way not merely by things which came from outside but things which come from our very soul so what are you going to walk out with today what about our work let me just say this to meditate on beware of the great compromise and know where it comes from begin to be attentive to the state of your soul to your own mind to your own heart to your own loves know why these things are your loves and learn to supplant them with the love of Christ you and I we are individually responsible to refrain from great moral compromise know this secondly your personal conduct has consequences for the collective welfare of the gospel think of it so much of our sinning in our lives goes on in the confines of our own mind or in our own world and we don't actually think and we're right to think that not everyone is actually aware and they don't have a knowledge but God knows all God sees all God knows the heart and can lay it bare and we need to remember that what you do what I do what we do on our own has the power to derail or accelerate the growth of the gospel in our own day you are we are moral agents of change so that means then that we're giving ourselves to holiness to integrity to honesty and then the third thing [37 : 39] I would give us because I think the text is there the people held them in high esteem not only do you need to be aware of the great compromise not only do you need to live in great fear but you need to hold the apostolic message as given to you in the new testament with great esteem I've been in pastoral ministry 30 plus years now and I guarantee you when the apostolic authority of the new testament scriptures as given to us by historians and others who have recorded it is denigrated in your own heart and your own mind you are moving away from the actual solid base upon which christianity stands that's a good question worth asking yourself what do I really think of the apostles and their message here it says they were greatly esteemed so give yourself to moral living give yourself to holy pursuits give yourself to regular consideration of the apostolic message and to the best of your ability live under their word our heavenly father we now prepare to go out this week and I just ask that our hearts would be open to you that you would be drawing us all to a greater devotion which will be manifested in simple humble truthful living we offer ourselves to you today in that light in Jesus name amen