

Acts 4:32-5:16 Ananias and Sapphira

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[0 : 0 0] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah. It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me, actually, to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

Bow our heads in prayer as we stand. Father, sometimes your Word to us is very hard, and we ask, Father, that your Holy Spirit would do a gentle but deep work in our hearts. Father, help us to see this text for what it is. Help us, Father, to see it as both a mirror by which we can see and understand ourselves, and at the same time a window by which we might see your great beauty and grace, your justice and your mercy, your kindness and patience towards us.

And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. Please be seated. So if you were to make a list of the top 10 Bible passages that people in Ottawa would have problems with, I think every one of those lists would include the text that we're going to look at today.

Those of you who are maybe watching this sermon down line, you didn't see the earlier part of the service. Earlier we read the story of Ananias and Sapphira, and for what appears to be a trivial sin, God strikes Ananias dead and then strikes Sapphira dead. And it's a very shocking text.

[2 : 3 8] And we find it, many Canadians would find it objectionable. And in fact, the matter is, is that most Christians find it very problematic, at least most Christians in Canada today. And it's very interesting, because I'm going to look at the text, like we're preaching through the book of Acts, so we're going to look at the text just before this, and then the text just immediately after it.

And if it wasn't for the Ananias and Sapphira text, the other text which leads into it would be seen as very controversial. But because of the Ananias and Sapphira text, it would be as if there's a big grizzly in the room, and I want to talk about everything other than the huge hungry grizzly in the room, and you'd all be upset. So we need to look at the grizzly. I'll just say a couple of tiny comments upon this other text, which is also actually quite challenging. So if you have your Bibles, I invite you to open up, and we'll begin with Acts chapter 4, verse 32. Acts chapter 4, verse 32.

And the flow of the story, right, we're reading this ancient biography, eyewitness, not biography, ancient eyewitness history, eyewitness-based history of the early, basically the first 30 years of the Jesus movement. And what's just sort of happened is a couple of weeks or a month or so after Pentecost, Peter and John heal a man who was born lame, and he was in his 40s. He's a very well-known beggar. Peter and John pray, and Jesus heals the beggar. It attracts a very large crowd. Peter preaches a sermon. The result of the sermon is that Peter and John are arrested. They spend a night in jail.

The next day, they're grilled by the religious and political authorities and warned not to do anything like this again, and they're let go. They go and meet the other Christians, some of the other Christians, and they end up having a prayer meeting, and that's what we talked about last week.

And now the story continues like this. And the way the story ended last week was that they prayed that they would have boldness and clarity to declare about Jesus, and God showed that he was going to give that to them by shaking the room. And now the story continues. Verse 32. Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power, the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Now just sort of pause there for a second. You can see how this would be a bit of a controversial text, and if it wasn't for the fact that it's going to lead into the Ananias and Sapphira text, we'd spend a bit of talking about it. It's been used throughout the years to say that the Bible requires some type of communist political system, or that Christians should practice that themselves. We'll see in a moment that that's not accurate. And so, you know, I could do a whole sermon on limits and all that stuff, but here's the main point that you get from it. It's even more clear in the original language.

[6 : 13] The question is that it wasn't that Peter and John and the apostles were teaching stewardship sermons. They weren't teaching tithing sermons. They weren't casting vision for the need and then going around and getting people to fill out pledge cards. They weren't doing anything like that. All they did was preach the gospel. They just preached about Jesus being resurrected from the dead and what his death and resurrection meant for people. And the response was sacrificial generosity, like quite amazing generosity. The fact of the matter is that the gospel generates generosity. That as the gospel becomes more real to your heart, being generous is one of the things which flows out of the gospel coming and becoming very real to your heart. It's like a natural consequence. And not only are you generous in general, but the gospel forms you to be generous especially to the church and its mission and to the poor. And that's what you see going on here in the text. And we can talk about it a little bit after church if you want, but the Ananias and Sapphira text has to be talked about. We need to look into it.

Now this very next bit, if this was a, if they were to film all of the Book of Acts as a, like a Netflix special or, you know, some other, something like that, and then there came time for the, you know, award shows later, the next incident introduces somebody who would be nominated as best supporting actor.

He ends up playing a significant supporting role in the rest of the Book of Acts and in the early church. And he's introduced in a particular way. Look, look how he's introduced. Verse 36. That's Joseph. So that this, the context is that people are selling some stuff and giving the money to the apostles so that people who are in great financial need can have their needs met and other needs of the community can be met. And verse 36, that's Joseph, who was also called by the apostle Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus. He sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. And for those of you who are a bit familiar with the Bible, you'll know that Barnabas shows up several times in the rest of the Book of Acts, and he's mentioned sometimes in the epistles, and he plays a very important but minor role in that early part of the Jesus movement.

And you'll see that they had some type of, I guess, of a ritual or a liturgy of coming and bringing the offering and laying it at the apostles' feet. It might just be that they brought it to the church.

We don't know exactly if it's meant literally or if it's just a sense of the apostles in the sense of God. And they're laying it at the feet of God, acknowledging that ultimately all that they have and all that they own ultimately belong to him. And it's in that context now that we see the story of Ananias and Sapphira. And it goes like this. 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 a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

[9 : 45] Now, just sort of pause here for a second. Kept back is a very, very good translation of the original language, but it's also translated another way. And it's the same meaning. It just has a bit of a different nuance. In other places, it would be translated as misappropriated the money. So those of you who have a bit of a business background, you know that's not good. But it's the same type of idea. It would be as if I had a business or I was employed by a business as a sales guy and I make some sales and I should really be giving the company the million dollars, but I keep back for myself \$100,000. And then eventually I would be arrested for the misappropriation of funds. So that's actually, so I kept back some. It's the same idea, but it makes it starker if we understand that it's a misappropriation. Well, why is it a misappropriation? Well, we'll talk about that in a moment. But every time you see kept back, that's the idea. So they kept back for themselves some of the proceeds, verse 2, and only brought a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet, verse 3.

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? Just a pause here. This is one of the texts that helps to show that the Holy Spirit is God. To lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God, if we were doing a sermon on the Trinity. Verse 4, while it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?

And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? See, the text doesn't teach communism. And by the way, communism is the opposite of this text. Communism is where the state owns everything, not Christians. That's the complete opposite of this text. Communism is a massive theft and should always be rejected by people of good sense and especially by Christians. So just sort of read verse 4 again. 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 or woman, but to God. Now here's the shocking part. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last, and great fear came upon all who heard of it.

And the young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. Now some Christians and others throughout the years have tried to say that God didn't actually kill Ananias. I'm using very stark language, but that the shock of public exposure caused some type of aneurysm or some type of stroke or heart attack, and he died of that. Well, the next part of the story shows that that's not the right, you can't possibly understand that as what's going on here. Because in other words, what I'm trying to say to you is I'm making the problem worse, not better.

[13 : 01] You know, because sometimes when you look at the original language, you'll see that some problems that you think are there aren't actually there, but sometimes actually that's not the case. It's quite clear. And so it is, from an Ottawa point of view, in 2023, a very problematic text.

And the next part makes it even more clear, verse 7. After an interval, oh, and by the way, one of the other complaints that are often made is wondering why Peter, and hence God, didn't give Ananias a chance to repent. Well, I'm going to talk about that in a moment. But we'll see that in a sense, that offer of to repent is given to Sapphira. Verse 7. 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? And in other words, literally, they were, how did you, how have, how is it that you have come to be of one heart and mind with Ananias, 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. In other words, the knowledge of this particular event caused great fear within the church and in the wider community outside of the church. And part of the reason that this text is such a shock, which I'll talk about in a moment, we just find it offensive and problematic, but it's also a shock because of the context. Like, the beginning context is very, very beautiful.

beautiful. That people are so struck with what Jesus has done for them that they would willingly give away significant amounts of their income to help others. That's very beautiful. It's very beautiful.

And it says something about the power of the gospel and the goodness that comes from the gospel. You know, you can, and it's good. Some of you have had roles in politics, and some of you still have, and some of you might have in the future, and some of you have roles in the civil service. And it's a very good thing to help the state, to help the government, to come up with just ways of taxation and just ways of spending the money. That's a very, very good endeavor. But we can never be completely and utterly dependent upon the state to do those things. That, in fact, most of the time, what makes life most living is the generosity of your neighbors and the kindness of those who are around you. And so there's something very beautiful about it, and it's accentuated in what happens immediately after the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Look what happens in verse 12.

Now, 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 them, none of the rest, that's the wider community, dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. In other words, basically, the community was of two minds. They don't want to join them, but they basically thought they were doing a good job. And at the same time, there's also another thing is that there's conversions happening. Look at verse 14. And more than ever, believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, that's just the wider community, and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them.

[17:07] The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed. So we see here part of the shock that, and it's all just very beautiful, it's all very good, that God does miracles through these people, and the miracles are miracles of healing, people being restored to health. They're miracles of deliverance in terms of all of a sudden human beings who are oppressed by demonic forces, which lie and cause slander to be set against yourself, and to diminish you, and to make you hate yourself and hate others, that you're delivered from that, so that you can begin to know the truth, you can begin to be of a sound mind, you can begin to have the type of freedom and autonomy that God desired for you to have. And so there's this financial generosity, there's this healing, there's a type of inner healing as well, and it's all beautiful, it's all very good, and it all happens surrounding this particular text of Ananias and Sapphira being struck dead by God, and it makes it even more shocking. So what's going on? Well, I think first of all, it's a natural human response to not like this text. It's a natural human response to have this text be a bit problematic, and I'll explain why that is in a moment. One of the ways that Christians try to deal with this text,

I think, is well-meaning, well-intended, but wrong. So they'll try to make it look like this was actually a really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really bad sin. And then, of course, if you do a really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really bad sin, that it's not that bad that God would actually strike you down. But the fact of the matter is, is that this is a garden variety sin.

If I was to ask for a show of hands of who has ever tried to pretend that they prayed more than they actually did, or gave more than they actually did, or forgave more than they actually did, if any of you have been guilty of that, could you raise your hands? I'm not going to ask it. Most of us would raise our hands. And for those who didn't raise your hands, none of the rest of us would believe you. Not one of us would believe you. We'd say, those liars. Of course they do all of those things.

They pray less than they say they do, give less than they say they do, read the Bible less, not as kind, not as loving. That type of self-serving hypocrisy is a garden variety sin. And that's what they're guilty of. The text makes very clear that if Ananias and Sapphira, let's just, you know, put it in Canadian terms, if they said, listen, we have a cottage, and we really see the great financial need of, you know, Church of the Messiah, and we have a cottage, it's valued at about, you know, \$800,000. You know, we got it a long time ago when cottages, you could buy them for, you know, for pennies almost, and, but we'd sell that, and, you know, we'll sell that, and the money will go to meet the needs of the Church. And they don't tell you that it's worth \$800,000. They sell it for \$800,000, and then they only give you \$400,000 or \$500,000 keeping the rest. Well, if they had begun by saying, you know, listen, I need to keep a couple hundred thousand dollars for my retirement fund, but the rest will all go to the Church. See, Ananias and Sapphira would have been fine if they'd said something like that. The problem is they implied that they were giving the whole proceeds of the cottage, but then kept back a big chunk, and they sort of, they were pretending that they were far more generous than they actually were, and God strikes them dead. So it's a very, very garden variety, garden variety sin. I'll also say one other thing before we get a little bit more into it, because some of you might be wondering, George, where on earth are you going? Like, this is just getting worse and worse. It's more depressing every moment you speak. It does show, by the way, the profound historical integrity of Luke that he would include this text. Like, you could well imagine if he'd written a text about the early Jesus movement, the first 30 years of the Jesus movement, and people who were familiar with that time period read it and said, oh, yeah, just look at those Christians trying to dodge the Ananias and Sapphira story. No, he put it in. He put it in, even though it would have been a very shocking and problematic text. So what's going on? I'm going to make it even worse before I, well, actually, you know what? The whole thing is very sobering.

To the Bible, all human death is God's judgment on your sin. My death is God's judgment on my sin, and on you, and on you, and on you, and on you, and on you, and on you.

[22 : 30] All death, every human death, not all death, all human death is God's judgment on your sin. That's a significant part of what death is. If you go back and you read Genesis 2 and Genesis 3, Genesis 1, 2, and 3, but especially Genesis 3, you'll see how sin entered God's good creation. And part of that, if you, those of you who remember the story, the Satan, in the form of the serpent, asks, you know, Eve about what God actually said about eating this particular, a fruit of this particular tree.

And she misquotes God, et cetera, et cetera, saying that somehow or another she'll die if she eats it. And what is Satan's famous line? Ah, you will not die. You will not die. Satan lies. They do eat of the fruit, sin, and sin, and rebellion enters into our, into the God's good creation. And part of God's merciful judgment is death. Like all of God's judgment, it is both a judgment, but it's also mercy.

I'm going to bury, burrow in a little bit more about why it is that we have troubles with this text. But I, I, first of all, I want to, you know, like it's very helpful. I, I don't know if I did a good job last week when I was talking about, or a couple of weeks ago when I was talking about predestination and people have problems with the idea, but they don't actually stop for a moment and think, well, okay, well, if I reject the Christian faith, what am I stepping into? Like, is what I'm stepping into wiser and more insightful and, and cover the facts better? And, and so we have a problem with this idea that God created all things to be good. We human beings rebelled against God, desired to be God's ourselves, separate ourselves from God, and God, part of God's judgment on us, which was also a merciful judgment, was to bring in death. But doesn't this fit?

If you step out of this text and just ask yourself for a second about death, doesn't this fit a little bit with how we intuitively understand death? When you watch movies like, oh, I should have written it down in my notes, Mad Max, and there seems to be a death cult at the very center of the movie, of people loving death and willingly dying. We all say there is something profoundly sick and wrong about that. I am going to be political. There is something profoundly sick about the death cult of Hamas.

And unless prejudice or other things have educated that out of you, we recognize intuitively there is something sick and evil about making a cult around the glorification of death.

[25 : 44] And what else do we think about death? We think, no matter what evolutionists tell us, it isn't natural. It doesn't seem to fit. It seems to go against the beauty of human beings, the glory of human beings, the potential of human beings, the good that human beings can do. We see it when we see somebody that we love die far too young. We're at the height of their powers. And we think of it as being some type of a tragedy. And we have a natural type of fear of death. And if you press it, it almost does feel as if it is somehow a judgment on us. And what other thing comes if we actually say that it seems to go against the goodness of creation and it seems to be a bit of a judgment on us? The very next thing in our thought is, how dare God? How dare God? How dare God judge? How dare he judge?

Why is death a mercy? It's a judgment and a mercy. It's a judgment, it's a mercy because it provides us time to realize that there is something wrong and that there is a judgment that we will die and to call out to God to have mercy upon us. It is a proximate or closer judgment before that final judgment that makes us aware of that final judgment and our need to repent.

This story is both a mirror for us to see ourselves and a window to see and understand the grace of God. Why is it a mirror? Well, think of our reactions to the text.

God should have given Ananias a chance to realize what was about to happen so he should repent. Why is it that God chooses that sin? It's just a garden variety sin.

Well, what's implicit in all of these comments is this. God has to meet my exalted moral standards. God has to measure up to my standards.

[28 : 12] He has to measure up to our standards as enlightened Canadians. I'm going to be political again.

It's quite astounding that in our culture, we think of our exalted moral standards when our culture has not only rushed headlong into medically assisted death, but continues to want to lower the bars so that even if you are but poor or have mental distress, that we would urge people that the wise course of action is to allow a doctor to kill them.

And then we want to stand in judgment on God without any type of embarrassment or shame.

I resent that God would do this. I demand that he give a sufficient time for every human being to realize and to repent. And I get to set the sins of...

What are really sins? By the way, God, listen here. I'm going to set before you the sins. And, you know, by the way, you know, well, maybe hypocrisy if you're right wing, that's a good thing or something that, you know, we can see that that's a, you know, a great problematic type of thing.

[29 : 32] But, you know, you need to have these... These are the lists of sins, and these are the ones... This is our hierarchy. And by the way, if we were to give that list of a hierarchy, I mean, this is what's going on in our culture right now.

Our people in Canada 100 years ago had a different hierarchy, and now we want to dethrone them. We want to take away their statues. We want to rename our streets, because we now think that those earlier human beings before us in Canada, that they didn't have our exalted standards, and if Canada continues to exist in 50 years, they'll be dethroning us.

Because our moral standards shift, and they aren't exalted. I mean, obviously, some of our moral standards are good. It's not that all of our moral standards are wrong.

But we resent God. It's also a window. And it's a window into the grace and the goodness of God. I can do unbelievable good for the rest of my life.

I could take all the best therapy in the world and all of the best spiritual practices and all of the best spiritual directors, and I could live a life of unfailing selflessness and goodness, and it would not stop me dying.

[30 : 46] And because all human death is God's judgment on sin, unless the Savior died, we could not believe that he was one who met the just demands of our sin.

And that's the message of the Gospel. That when I put my faith and my trust in my hands in Jesus, the death that he died, he died for me. The resurrection that he experienced is my resurrection.

It shows that God has accepted his death in my place. You see, we have a correct intuition that if there is a God who does exist, that he really is really real, he should be beautiful, he should be good, he should be true, he should be just, he should be merciful.

And if he's really good and really true and really just, it means he cannot allow lies and injustice and selfishness and hatred and envy and pride and self-centeredness and looking down our nose at others and all of those things, that obviously we cannot stand in his presence and we cannot rid ourselves of these things.

Even if we were able to rid ourselves of these things from now on, every human being is a little bit like a tree where you can tell by the rings in the circle of the depth of the tree that those earlier lives of the tree are all still in there.

[32 : 18] And even if we could fix the outer spot, all of those things are all started what it means to be a human being. And only in the Gospel do we see this beautiful sacrifice of God himself in the person of his Son.

that the judgment that all death is laid upon him, and it's laid upon him, the second Adam, that I might be made right with God purely as a gift.

God in his goodness and truth and justice and beauty offers us Jesus.

Now why is it that as the Gospel becomes more real to our heart that we would be more generous? Well, it's the same in all of these things. As God's mercy becomes in Christ on his cross, becomes more real to our heart, we begin to be shaped to be merciful.

When we understand that Christ's death on the cross for us was a profound act of forgiveness by God, then for us forgiving others, we are shaped for that. It becomes more reasonable.

[33 : 34] When we see that Jesus' death upon the cross is an act of profound generosity, beautiful generosity on the part of God towards us, then our being generous starts to be a natural type of thing that flows from it.

When we see that God takes the truth of our human condition and still does something true in history by having his Son die upon the cross, then truth becomes something that matters to us.

And we could go on and on and on. It all flows in a sense as the Gospel becomes more real to us. These things, we are shaped as we accept the Gospel, as it becomes more real to our heart, we are shaped by these things to live a particular way of life.

And it's not just that the story shapes us, but because the God of the Bible is real and Jesus really did rise from the dead, we have a Father. We are in the presence of our Father in heaven this morning, folks.

We are before his throne and his desire is to give you and me grace. And Jesus is present. He is with us.

[34 : 41] He is for us. He puts his arms around you and me even as we gather. And the Holy Spirit is here, brothers and sisters.

And he knows the worries and the cares of your heart and the Holy Spirit is here to minister to you in the very depth of who you are. It's not just a story.

God is real. And he looks upon each one of us in Christ and he loves you.

He is for you. Please stand. Bow our heads in prayer.

Father, you know that we can't follow you perfectly and still you love us. But you do know that we can follow you. And when you see us following you, even if it's very imperfect, you see the goodness in our attempt to follow you.

[35 : 54] You see the goodness of our attempts at generosity and being generous and speaking the truth and speaking out against injustice and standing for life and praying for healing. And Father, we know that we're not perfect and we give you thanks and praise that we have a Savior who made the perfect sacrifice for us.

And we know, Father, that you have not called us to live a life that's impossible to lead. You have called us to live a life where real goodness can grow in us and real generosity can grow in us and real truth-telling can grow in us.

And Father, we know that your Scripture shows that there's higher up and deeper in and farther in that we can go, but that our acts of obedience, even today, are things that make you smile.

And we ask, Father, that the Holy Spirit would bring the reality of Jesus and what he has done for us on the cross, that that would come deep into our hearts, that that would be ever more precious to us and that, Father, we might know we are in your presence so we are not just praying to nothing that you hear us, that Jesus is present, that the Holy Spirit is here.

And Father, help us to be open, to know, to live out of your grace and goodness that comes to us through the cross and your ongoing grace and goodness towards us as you delight in even our tiniest acts of obedience.

[37 : 11] So, Father, help us to live as free men and women saved by Jesus, learning to be generous, learning to speak the truth, learning to be just, learning to speak the gospel and share the gospel with others.

And we ask all these things in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.