

Authenticity & Duplicity

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[0 : 0 0] We're reading from Acts chapter 4 and verse 32. Last week, David spoke about a great threat, but that we've got an even greater God.

Peter and John were being threatened not to speak in the name of Jesus, but they said, how can we not? How can we not speak in that name?

And they returned to their friends, and they prayed for boldness, and they're all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they continue to speak the word of God.

So now we're going to carry on from verse 32 and through to chapter 5, verse 11. 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 their 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.

[1 : 3 2] Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

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.

But Peter said, Ananias, 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 is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?

You have not lied to man, but to God. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last, and great fear came upon all who heard of it.

[2 : 3 9] The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. 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.

Wouldn't it be great to be back in the early days of the New Testament church? If I had \$10 for every time I've heard that over my ministry years, I would be well away.

[3 : 44] It's a reasonably common expression for Christians. And almost always, it's a response by Christians to the many exciting things happening in the early church.

Often times, Christians are actually reading the Acts of the Apostles. when they have these sort of thoughts, as Matt suggested in his introduction. And why wouldn't they have? There's the spectacular arrival of the Holy Spirit, the secret weapon that Jesus promised to enable them to be good witnesses.

There's the Spirit's enabling of Peter and John, men who only weeks earlier had been cowering in the darkness. Now we're taking on a hostile crowd, speaking the gospel of Jesus with new understanding, new clarity, and new confidence.

And then there's the radical renewal of, we're told here, more than 5,000 people have been converted in what we presume is just a short number of weeks. Converted through hearing the name of Jesus.

And not only converted, but a radical new community has emerged. The community itself is a witness to the unstoppable Jesus, both as it clearly shaped, as it was clearly shaped and defined by Jesus' word, an example, and also a witness as individuals within it spoke the gospel of Jesus to those around them.

[5 : 09] So much excitement, so much positivity, that not even opposition and threat of violence could stop the excitement.

As we saw last week, with fresh enabling, fresh confidence from the Holy Spirit, chapter 4, verse 31, they continued. In the face of threat, in the face of personal threat of violence, they continued to speak the name of Jesus.

Now all of that is exciting, excitement plus, all of it combines as indisputable evidence of the unstoppable Jesus building his spiritual empire as he gathers his died-for people from the four corners of the earth.

All of that clarifies what we can expect when we speak the name of Jesus, speak the gospel of Jesus. We can expect people to be radically renewed from the inside out.

We can expect to see Christ's radical new community, the church, grow and be an important confirmation of the changing power of the gospel. And we can expect opposition and attack.

[6 : 30] This morning, I want to just take us into what Luke presents us here as a different perspective on attack. So let's jump into the story as Luke describes the demonstrated reality of the early Christian community.

And if you're a visitor, that outline of what I'm speaking to is on the back of the bulletin thing you got when you came in the door this morning. The demonstrated reality of the early Christian community.

authenticity and what the church could and ought to be. Now, the description we have in verse 32 onwards reinforces the description we have already been through in chapter 2, verses 42 through to 47.

And what we saw there and see here is that the gospel changes whole communities radically. and the point here is that I think that this new gospel community is the most attractive in the very points where our culture is most ugly.

Verse 32. A community that's now in excess of 5,000, in spite of that, they were noted for their single-minded all-in commitment.

[7 : 57] United in heart and soul. It sounds so attractive to us in our fractured, disconnected world, doesn't it? All-in commitment to Jesus.

All-in commitment to one another. All-in commitment to expressing the mind of Christ in everyday living. All-in commitment to speaking the gospel of Jesus to those around them in their community as they had opportunity.

And there's demonstrated reality as they're demonstrably moved from the attitude of self-protection and possessiveness, which sort of marks out our culture, doesn't it?

When they're moved from that to the kingdom attitude of self-sacrificing generosity. And it's most clearly seen and exemplified here in terms of how they think about their material possessions.

They're converting their assets into cash and bringing them for the work of the gospel. Why? Well, I think it's very simple.

[9 : 14] Since their immediate happiness, since their future security is no longer tied to their own efforts to accumulate things, wealth and possession, since it's no longer that, but God's grace, then suddenly they've experienced a new freedom in respect to those things they had accumulated.

a new desire to cash in their assets and use the money to be as Christ to others. Now we need to just pause on note here.

There's absolutely no suggestion in these verses of some sort of mandate, some sort of requirement. If you're going to be a Christian, then you have to sell private property. Nothing like that at all.

What's on display here, I think, is the changing power of the gospel. As Christians increasingly express the mind of Christ, then they're no longer expressing that basic human attitude of possessiveness, self-interest, my, me, mine.

And verse 33, look at the consequence, look at the immediate result of that. And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all.

[10 : 47] Now there's various ways you can interpret that verse. I think it's a very practical thing just. I think it's this, that as the watching world, their local community looked into this new emerging radical community, they saw such a matchup between their words and their actions that this community became an even more compelling witness to the new freedom, the new security that we find in Christ.

It was powerful and compelling. As a unit, as a church group, they demonstrated the power of Jesus, the power of God's grace to renew and free and equip in life.

I think it's hard to imagine a more radical community, isn't it? It's hard to imagine a more compelling witness to the changing power of the gospel, isn't it?

So, here we need to prop and go back to my opening sentence. And our time-to-time expression of longing to be part of the early church in its unity and its excitement and its compelling testimony to the watching world.

So, here's what I'm going to suggest to you, that sometimes I think that idea is more romantic than real force.

[12 : 35] are you really longing to be part of a community where there's such single-minded, all-in-commitment, demonstrated reality of the changing power of the gospel?

If that's something you say you really are longing for, then the question becomes for us here today, why are we so far removed from that picture?

Why are we so far away from the attitudes that shaped the early church? And then again, the question becomes, well, if we're really craving that, why aren't we free to do it today?

What's stopping us from striving through all-in commitment for an identical community here in GECN? Friends, I think we get found out here, at least I get found out here anyway.

You might be different from me. I think the truth for most of us is that we crave a community shaped by self-sacrificing generosity. We crave a community shaped by care of one another, deep care.

[14 : 14] We crave that so much but personally, we want to continue and do insist on continuing to be self-protective, possessive.

We crave this but we find ourselves unable to find sufficient security and delight and happiness and hope in Jesus that actually allows us to be set free from our possessions.

That sort of overflows in an attitude of generosity and all-in commitment that quite literally would transform us individually and as a church community.

Okay. Okay. See, corporate change as we look around this church and wish it was different and we all do that.

I hear it all the time and I express the same thoughts myself. We wish it was different at so many points. We need to be saying to ourselves that corporate change starts individually.

[15 : 36] As I have those attitudes, as you have those attitudes, then we will have those attitudes. Well, let's move ahead in the story.

We confront Satan's clever ambush and he effectively destroys their unity and credibility. And this part of the story shows that duplicity now undermines authenticity and eventually trumps authenticity in this radical new community.

Now, they've already experienced external attack through the threats of the Jewish religious leaders. That of itself only made them more bold to speak about Jesus.

Now the story changes and for the first time in the Acts of the Apostles, Satan is identified by name. I think that tells us that for Luke, this is a very significant moment in the story of the early church in the way he brings this out.

Satan's strategy, and we can look back through the Gospels and see Jesus teaching this, Satan's strategy very simply is to hurt the cause of Jesus.

[16 : 53] It can't actually hurt Jesus, so his fallback position is then to hurt the cause of Jesus by silencing any credible witness to his name by his followers.

Silencing any credible witness from the church in the local community. And so I think what Luke is telling us here in this story is at two levels.

There's the immediate cause, the human cause. We've got Ananias and Sapphira and the way this plays out in front of the apostles. But there's a cause behind the cause. And that is Satan working to discredit and undermine the witness of this radical community in a way that external threats have not been able to achieve thus far.

He works, Satan works from inside the church. church. And here we have it. Satan uses a nice, well-to-do husband and wife team in this local community to do what external threats fail to do.

Ultimately, to destroy their unity and to threaten their credibility in the local community. Now, again, these are difficult verses to understand and some people have gone into really black places with this.

[18 : 23] But I need to just pull us back and say this story is not about people who are not truly converted being part of the church. There's a reality to that.

But that's not what this story is about, I believe. Nor is it about Christians losing their salvation because they have failed in their practical discipleship.

and because they've committed a particular sin. I don't think it's about either of these things. And one of the reasons why I think that is because Peter actually addresses Ananias and Sapphira as Christians, as people who have the spirit.

So I think the point of the story is this. The point of the story is to show the struggle it is to maintain demonstrated reality in the church against Satan's strategy to compromise and discredit their testimony.

So let's see how the story falls out in that context. Peter, I think, is really saying to Ananias when he confronts him here, Ananias, why have you given a foothold to Satan in your life?

[19 : 41] That is, why have you allowed yourself to be manipulated into given expression to the mind of Satan? That is, the mind of lies, deceit, and greed, rather than expressing the mind of the spirit, the mind of Christ.

The mind of Christ through the Holy Spirit, which is truth, authenticity, and generosity. There's the divide.

At face value, the seriousness of their action was in going for appearance without reality.

And so the story falls out. Barnabas is mentioned in the end of chapter 4 as just an example, a worked example of this incredible generosity. He sells a property, brings all the money, and lays it down at the feet of the apostles.

So use it however you want. Ananias and Sapphira looking on from the side thinking, hey, we could do that. We like the way Barnabas has been considered in the church.

[20 : 46] And so, like others in the church, they decided to sell a piece of property. And they go public saying, well, look, okay, we're selling a piece of property, we want everybody to know that. And leading the brethren to believe that they too would bring all the proceeds of that property and make it available for gospel work.

But unlike others, Ananias and Sapphira made an agreement between themselves that they would go public inferring one thing but secretly keep some of the money for themselves.

And I think it was a scheme that was designed to make them appear generous, to make them appear concerned for the care of others and the needs of others without actually being so in reality.

Appearing one thing while still being self-protective, self-possessive. They wanted a reputation for being ministry-minded while being, in fact, self-interested.

In verse 3, Peter is really, really strong words for them. When it talks there about keeping back, the word really is embezzle. Why have you embezzled God's money?

[22 : 10] Why have you misappropriated? Why have you stolen? Strong language. How does that work? Well, I think it works like this. Secretly keeping money, they had publicly pledged or led people to believe they were giving to the Lord.

It was already given to the Lord. Secretly keeping it then was tantamount to stealing it from God. Embezzlement. Now, I think the problem here is not simply selfishness or greed.

In fact, it's not that really at all. Peter is very clear to them. They were entitled to keep whatever portion of the proceeds of the sale they wished.

They could have sold their property and said, well, look, actually, we're actually committing to give 50% of it to the work of the gospel. And we're keeping 50%. Peter would have said, well, that would be fine. Of course you can do that.

The sin was much more subtle. And it was in the issue of trying to create an impression about themselves that had little or no substance in reality.

[23 : 18] In other words, the problem here was not about money. the problem was about their relationship with God and their view of and treatment of God's church of which they were part.

And in turn, this initial scheme becomes a slippery slope of compounding sin. Verse 8. We just see it. It just falls out.

It gets a momentum. In an attempt to cover their tracks, Sapphira resorts to brazen public lies that were just spoken without regard for the impact of that on the testimony of the church.

Now, the first part I opened up was just how exciting. This story, how sad. How sad. How sad that here in Christ's church, image and reputation is put above truth and integrity.

How sad is it that a Christian couple could come to justify and deception and lies for the sake of reputation.

[24 : 49] an image. It's a very powerful, poignant moment in the life of the early church. Now, do you see Satan's strategy and where it was aimed?

He couldn't care less about Ananias and Sapphira. What he could care about was destroying the credibility of this outstanding Christian community before the community.

Destroying their oneness of mind and heart. You can imagine how that would have made others feel. Well, hey, we really were generous.

We really did put our money down there, but now they're enjoying that new car, that big holiday. And we could have had that had we kept some money back. And so it actually erodes your initial generosity.

Unless you're very careful about it. But that's human nature, isn't it? And it undermined their teaching about new security, new hope in Jesus, and new freedom from worldly possessions.

[26 : 08] And it had the effect of potentially, at least, making the Christians just look like others in their community saying one thing, but actually deep down really being committed to the power of money and what money can buy you.

And they become, they lose their outstanding, powerful, winsome credibility, and they just become like unbelievers in their secret, grasping, self-centeredness.

But there's more to come because we've got to consider God's severe response. There's no way to sugarcoat this.

Each of these two drop dead. And I would suggest that the seriousness of their sin before the Lord is shown in the consequences.

Now again, we've got to get this right in terms of what the story is pushing us to, otherwise there might be some here this morning who will spiral into terrible, terrible blackness. I think the story is telling us this, that the Lord removed these two from his church not because they were not Christians, but because their actions seriously threatened and tarnished his church.

[27 : 38] Over the years, Christians have found these verses very hard to handle. Some have suggested that it was Peter who, with this new spirit power at his disposal, just lost his temper and zapped these two unfairly and angrily.

sin. But I think the story at face value is very clear that Peter had nothing to do with it, apart from exposing the sin, and that God's spirit was the one who acted in this situation.

Which means then that we're left saying, some people would say, well, God was very severe, too severe. But again, I think the point of this incident is to say through the incident that God is screaming, I hate sin and duplicity in my church.

Don't mess with me in my church. And again, verse 3 and verse 9 sort of reinforce that.

Peter's very clear that lying to the apostles and lying to the brethren, because of the close connection between what the church is and God, is tantamount to lying to God. Scheming before God himself.

[29 : 02] It's Christ's church with Christ's standards. And Jesus once demonstrated reality in our church family, not just image and appearance. And he will deal severely with any who settle for appearance only.

Now, I don't recall in all my ministry years somebody dropping dead in front of me, and I haven't dropped dead, so you might well have expected that as well. So God won't necessarily do it like that, but there's a myriad ways in which God will find us out, and God will discipline his church.

And I do believe as a church family over years, we've experienced some of that hand of God disciplining us. Jesus once demonstrated reality in our church family, but you see, few of us would think that their sin deserves such punishment.

And friends, that's our problem. We don't see sin in the church as God sees it. We don't see factions and divisions within our community, this community of died for people, as Christ who died for us sees it.

chapter 3, verse 26 says, the whole point of God sending Jesus was to bless us by delivering us from our wickedness. And when God sees a form of wickedness continuing within our church family, it's just so contrary to what Jesus died for.

[30 : 41] God gave a very clear demonstration of his view of sin in a warning to the whole church. And in verse 5 and verse 11, we're told that that warning sure worked.

A sense of fear fell on the whole church. In what sense do we talk about fear gripping the church? Well, I think it's this fear of offending a holy God, fear of messing with the idea of church, and somehow or other it's just something for us to be part of rather than a primary demonstration of this changing power of the gospel before the watching world.

Fear of lagging authenticity and truth and unity. So what do we need to learn from this passage as I wrap up? Two things I want to suggest.

First, as we speak the gospel of Jesus, we can expect ferocious spiritual warfare. Now, I'm not talking about external threat. I'm talking about internal spiritual warfare now. Being part of the unstoppable mission of the unstoppable Jesus to gather his died for people will always be exciting because the outcome is always guaranteed, already guaranteed.

defeated. But my friends, it will never be easy. Though ultimately already defeated, Satan is determined to do as much damage to Christ's church as possibly he can do.

[32 : 22] kingdom building. So, as witnesses engaged in Christ's mention of kingdom building, we need to be on our guard against satanic counterattacks.

And again, here's where we get ourselves into trouble because we so often think of our church community more like a social outing. A place where we come, we relax, we chill out, we chat with friends, we expect to be happy, we expect it to be nice, expect to learn a few things along the way, we expect to enjoy being there.

That's what we think of church as rather than a place of spiritual warfare where we might expect attack. And therefore, we don't strategically plan to defend ourselves by ensuring that we help one another continue, when those attacks come, continue to express the mind of Christ to one another.

So common that when churches fall into a fight, they so quickly default back to just non-Christian ways of doing it.

And the credibility just evaporates. Second point then, remaining, we need to remain authentic, or remaining authentic and credible will be, therefore, our greatest challenge as individuals and as a church community.

[34 : 09] we must always seek to live in a way which enhances and demonstrates the reality of the changing power of the gospel.

Now, two things I want to note very carefully here. I am so thankful that that is so much to the forefront of what we are about as our church, as a church family.

I am really, really appreciative of that, and I thank the Lord for it daily. The second thing I want to say is here, I am not talking about perfection.

I am not talking about us having to get everything right. I am talking about us being in the struggle on a daily basis to make our living practically as close as we can humanly to what we are in Christ.

Struggling to match what is happening on the inside with what we are doing on the outside. Friends, we need to be aware of how Satan will try to get at us as a church family.

[35 : 16] It is unlikely, at least I am speaking for myself here, it is unlikely that I will easily give way to external threats. Maybe I will be found out about that in due course, I don't know.

But where I am sitting in the minute, it is unlikely he will be able to force us as a church family to bow to external threats. But while we are priding ourselves on that, he might well neutralize us in terms of our testimony to the local community by internal attack.

Perhaps it will be an outbreak of disunity. And it can easily happen. Suddenly there is an upsurge and well, my preference for my songs, my desire to have a particular role in the church, my needs are not being met by others in this church.

Look, I am already being as generous as is possible to be and the elders are asking us to give more money for a new mission venture. Really? Seriously? How could they dare to do that? Perhaps it will be before our children or our spouse in the home through actions and attitudes practically that don't line up with what we say to our children and our spouse when we're reading the Bible or whatever.

Perhaps the attack will happen on the sports field or in your workplace or when you're chatting with neighbors in your street. And any attempt at speaking the gospel of Jesus is neutralized because your actions when you're playing your sport or at work just don't light up and people will roll their eyes and think, oh, here he goes again or here she goes again.

[37 : 05] Friends, I'll finish on this. It's real easy to talk about being authentic. All the things that we see in the early church are so appealing.

I think we genuinely crave them. But that's not really the issue. The issue is do people around us see the sort of all-in commitment to make this talk of authenticity demonstrated reality?

And at a very practical level, that means using our assets, time, money, energy, skill sets, and having those things as an overflow. The way we use those things as an overflow of joy as Christ loved, died for, and secure people.