

Holiness and Community

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 01] Well, we come to Acts chapter 5 this morning and if you would open your Bibles and you'd like to follow along, it's on page 116. I was very glad to hear that everyone said thanks be to the Lord after the reading of this passage and I wonder if you meant it.

You know, there's a movement in the church in North America today, it's called the seeker sensitive movement. And the basic idea is that our goal in church is to make everyone feel very comfortable. So we don't do anything that will embarrass one another, put anyone off or make people feel unhappy. And there are some good things about this. Of course, you don't want to make people feel unnecessarily miserable and there's no excuse for gloomy, joyless Christian worship or for preachers who have the remarkable ability to make the great Christian message boring.

But when we come to this passage this morning and the events around Ananias and Sapphira, I think you'll agree there's nothing seeker sensitive about it.

It is not a comfortable passage. In fact, it is decidedly disturbing. And it's a warning to us that coming to church and being engaged with God's people can be very bad for your health.

[1 : 25] And rather than giving pride of place to feeling good, the Christian church seems to deal with issues of life and death as though God himself was dwelling in our midst.

And I think we can be very grateful for Luke's honesty. I mean, it must have been a big temptation to gloss over this story, do you not think? I mean, everything he has told us so far about the fresh, new church has been remarkably positive.

Keep your finger in chapter 5. Just remind ourselves back in chapter 2, in verse 42. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship and the breaking of bread and the prayers.

And fear came on every soul and many signs and wonders were done through the apostles. All who believed were together, had all things in common. They sold possessions and goods and distributed as any had need.

Day by day, attending the temple, together, breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God, having favour with all the people.

[2 : 27] And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. And the picture deepens at the end of chapter 4 over on 116 in verse 32. You remember the company of those who believed were one heart and soul.

No one said that any of the things he possessed was his own. And many people went out and sold their possessions and brought it to the feet of the apostles so that no one would have any need. And chapter 4 finishes with this lovely story of Barnabas, who embodies this sacrificial love and generosity that's the hallmark of the Christian fellowship and sells the property and gives it to the Christian community.

And chapter 5 begins with the word, But. And it's good for us because the New Testament does not take a romantic view of the life of the church.

I sometimes read Christian biographies and Christian books that make you think that people were sinless. But Luke and the New Testament lays out this whole sordid story for a very important reason.

[3 : 31] Luke's not telling us this so that we might feel good about ourselves or better about ourselves. Nor is he writing it to warn you to watch out for those people around you. He is telling us this to show us the nature of God and the nature of God's church.

You'll be glad to know this is not a sermon about how important it is to fulfil your financial pledge. The fellow who preached at the 7.30 service called this donate or die.

LAUGHTER And I think he was kidding. I hope he was kidding. Now there are two halves that reflect each other, verses 1 to 6 and then 7 to 11.

And Ananias and his wife Sapphira have been first-hand witnesses to the genuine heartfelt...

They've been part of the community there in Jerusalem.

They've seen the wealthy Christians sell property, take care of the needs of the poor. And they've seen the joy this generosity has brought, not just those who've given but those who've received as well.

[4 : 42] They want to get their hands on it. So they carefully calculate this charade. They sell one of the properties that they own and hold back the money, some of the money, and take a part of it.

And in verses 1 to 6 we follow Ananias on his own as he goes to the apostles with a big song and dance and brings this little bit of what they made on the property and puts it down in front of the feet of the apostles pretending it's everything.

Because Ananias thinks that this is a purely human transaction. He doesn't imagine that God is involved with this. And he thinks that by doing this he's going to win himself a place of great affection and admiration and respect in the Christian community.

He's got more concern for the apostles' feet than for the eyes of the living God. But in verse 3 God has revealed the truth to Peter somehow.

And we read that Peter says, Ananias, Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?

Keep back part of the proceeds of the land. While it remained unsold, didn't remain your own.

[5 : 51] And after it was sold, was it not still at your disposal? How is it you've contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God. And then no sooner are the words out of Peter's mouth than Ananias literally expires.

The word is a very rare medical word. It means breathing out your last breath. He falls down dead. And the young men gather round, pick him up and take him out for burial.

And great fear falls on all who heard of it. Wonder. And I think we are meant to see that this is the judgment of God.

Some of the commentaries I read this week thought that Ananias died because of Peter's forceful personality. Which is utterly ridiculous. Peter does not, he doesn't utter a curse.

He doesn't threaten Ananias. He confronts him with the truth. But it is God who judges. And just in case we missed the point of the story, the story is told almost in the same way concerning Sapphira from verses 7 to 11.

[7 : 00] And we learn that she's not an innocent bystander or victim of an overbearing husband.

She's a very willing participant. One of the commentators has spent a bit of time suggesting she actually was the initiator of this.

But I won't go there. The difference is that Sapphira, Peter gives Sapphira the opportunity to repent in verse 8.

He says, tell me whether this is true. She says, absolutely. That's how much we sold it for. And Peter says, verse 9, how is it you've agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?

Hark! The feet of those who buried your husband are at the door and they will carry you out immediately. She fell down at his feet, where they put the money, and expired.

Same word. And the young men came in and found her dead. They carried her out, buried her beside her husband, and great fear came upon the whole church. And all who heard these things.

[8 : 00] So is that all clear? Now, what does this passage have to say to us this morning? I mean, how can God act in this way?

Doesn't it seem random? I mean, why does God judge Ananias so decisively when we can look around today and see dozens, hundreds of people who mock God with impunity?

I mean, why does God take their lives when thousands and thousands of hypocrites die happily and peacefully of an old age? And I need to say that the problem, of course, is not with God.

The problem is with us and with our attitudes. And the reason, somehow we have almost unquestioningly taken on the spiritual attitudes of our culture.

There are two principles that form some of the foundation of the spiritual worldview in Canada that make us question God. Let me just give them names. The first is what I'll call the principle of spiritual privacy.

[9 : 10] We have had cause this week to be reminded of Pierre Trudeau's statement in 1967, there is no place for the state in the bedroom of the nations. Sorry, the bedrooms of the nation.

What was intended as a statement of legal principle has now become an unquestioned statement of spiritual principle and applied to God.

There is no place for God in the bedrooms of the nation. God has no place to dictate how I behave or how I believe in the privacy of my own bedroom, particularly if I am doing it with someone I consent with and particularly if I'm not hurting anyone else.

And what's happened is that the bedroom walls have started to move outwards and been expanded, so now God has no place in how I run my household or how I run my organisation or how I run my community.

One of the ways you can see this is in poll after poll, Canadians say that they like God but dislike organised religion.

[10:15] One level you can understand that and some people have been genuinely hurt by the organised church. But more often I think it's a way of saying, I want God but I want God on my terms.

God is there to affirm my preferences. The principle of spiritual privacy. The second principle is deeper and I think it applies to everyone who lives outside the Garden of Eden.

This is not just a Canadian issue. That is the principle of spiritual suspicion. Where I say, let me put it very boldly, I am good but God is suspect.

I am gracious, God is sometimes unkind. I have good motives, God has mixed motives. My sense of justice and compassion is well formed and mature, God's is primitive and often irrational.

Now we never quite say it that way but one way to test yourself as to whether you're suffering from this spiritual suspicion is to ask whether you are offended by what happens in this passage.

[11:25] See the spiritual suspicion states, God may have given me life but he owes me a good life and he has no right to judge me unless I agree to it and whenever he does something that I don't understand he answers to me.

And the lovely thing about the word of God is that despite the fact God owes us absolutely nothing let alone an explanation, the lovely thing is that in his tenderness and his kindness he repeatedly reveals and explains and appeals and invites and woos us all in this passage here.

Let me show you. If you look at verse 2 and 3, twice we read this little phrase that Ananias and Sapphira kept back some of the proceeds.

Very strong word. It means embezzled. It means to steal something secretly. Luke is very clever. That word is used once in the Greek Old Testament in the story of Achan in Joshua.

When the people of God were fresh and new, had just been formed and they're moving into the land, the promised land of Palestine, they suffer a serious setback.

[12:54] Their progress is stopped because Achan steals something that belongs to God. Same way. You're at the beginning of the New Testament people of God. I mean, Jesus has only risen from the dead just a few weeks ago.

Thank you. I'm going to have a drink of water. There's a glass here, but I'm often suspicious of what's been put in it.

Terrible thing to tell you. Where were we?

My simple point is this. Luke is trying to say that the new people of God who are fresh and new, their progress is going to be arrested unless this is somehow dealt with.

What Ananias and Sapphira are doing is they are contaminating the people of God. And that is why this remarkable statement in verse 3, Peter sees right to the heart of what's going on.

[14:05] He sees the activity of Satan. You see in verse 3 he says, Satan has filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. It's not the way we speak to each other, is it? This is exactly the phrase that was used of Judas.

And Peter is saying, this is not a private offence. He says, this is not between you and me. He says, there is no such thing as spiritual privacy when it comes to Satan and to God.

Satan is engaged in this just as God is. And if you were here three weeks ago, you will remember in chapter 4 of the book of Acts that Satan's first strategy against the church is violence, threats, force, coercion, and it didn't work.

It must be infuriating to Satan. With all his skill in threats and bullying, far from silencing and destroying the church, it only made them more bold and more holy and more prayerful.

And you know that historically, persecution and force against the church usually ends up purifying the church. It refines us. People who are not believers don't stay.

[15:17] People who are genuine believers grow deeper in boldness and godliness and faith. So Satan has to shift his strategy. Somehow, he has to move from being outside to getting inside.

He has to get at this core thing in the Christian community, this koinonia that we've looked at over the last weeks, this communion, this holiness of the Spirit, this life.

And his chief strategy and his chief weapon in how to get inside the church is hypocrisy. Never about human greed and deception.

The strategy of Satan is to invade the community of the Holy Spirit by hypocrisy. That is very searching for us, isn't it? In a wealthy, attractive congregation such as yourselves, well, wealthy, maybe.

Constant temptation is to compare ourselves to one another. We make calculation after calculation on a horizontal level. We miss God entirely.

[16:30] And I often feel that I am the leading hypocrite. That if you saw into my heart now, you wouldn't listen to anything that I'm saying. The great thing about this, of course, is that this episode is not about being sinless.

I've often said this, if you find the perfect church, don't join it because you'll ruin it. The New Testament picture is that the church is not a group of perfect, sinless individuals.

It's a group of people who are constantly sinning and constantly repenting and constantly growing and asking God for forgiveness and constantly believing. That is why the confession of sins has such a prominent part in every service and every gathering that we have here because it is the only thing, brothers and sisters, that separates us from Ananias and Sapphira that we turn from our sin. They thought that they were acting just with the church and that what they did with their lives and what they did with their money had nothing to do with God and they were dead wrong.

That's why the passage tells us three times that God is involved. They lie to the Holy Spirit. They lie to God. They test the Holy Spirit. They are challenging God himself.

[17:52] That's why verse 11 is so important. For the first time in Acts, we hear this word church. Great fear came upon the whole church. This is a very important word.

In the Old Testament, when God the Lord gathered his people at Sinai, it's called the church, the congregation of the Lord gathered.

And now the spirit has fallen, we have a new congregation. And what Ananias and Sapphira are doing is they are violating the identity of this congregation.

Let me put it a completely different way. Church is the dwelling place of God the Holy Spirit. The risen Lord Jesus continues to live in the congregation. In deceiving the community, you deceive God.

In lying to the Christian community, you lie to the Holy Spirit. What is at stake here is the koinonia, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the fundamental character of this new community of God.

[19:01] And just as the lovely healing miracles in verses 12 to 18 are a sign of the salvation of God, the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira are a sign of the judgment of God and the fact that God is God.

We have heard already in our service, haven't we, that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. And yet it is true that God alone is judge.

It is his prerogative to give life. It is his prerogative to take life. And if we demanded strict justice from God, who amongst us would be alive? The fact that we are here this morning is because of his constant, patient, tender, loving kindness to each one of us.

He is deeply committed to us, deeply committed to our holiness. Let me take you to one cross-reference. If you would turn right to 1 Corinthians chapter 3 on page 158.

1 Corinthians 3. 1 Corinthians 3 verse 16.

[20:26] Do you not know, which is the Apostles' way of saying, you do know this, do you not know that you are God's temple, you plural, and that God's spirit dwells in you plural?

If anyone destroys, and that word can also mean contaminate God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple, you are.

See, it's not the building that's holy. It's not the building where God lives. You don't drive down the highway and see these houses where God lives. God lives in the people.

He lives in the congregation. It is the people of the congregation, you, who are holy. God continues to act to purify and protect his church, and he stands against anyone who would derail and destroy and disrupt the progress of the church.

And Satan's strategy has not changed. Stunning lack of originality in Satan's strategy. He continues to try and destroy the church with persecution, and when that doesn't work, he tries to attack from inside.

[21 : 37] And this episode today tells us how heavily invested in the church God is. You would expect that, wouldn't you? I mean, today we begin the church year, the season of Advent, where we celebrate the fact that in fulfillment of his promise, God sends to us his son who comes into the world, who lives and dies and rises again to create this new humanity, this new community.

We are meant to see from this passage that this new community, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, is different from anything the world has to offer.

It's a community that is built on God's forgiveness and God's grace, where we come to love what he loves and hate what he hates. Where holiness is something that is attractive, where we constantly, week by week, come together and cast ourselves and throw ourselves on the mercy of God to hear those words of forgiveness and grace again and again.

Where we pray that God would help us turn away from and repent from our constant hypocrisies.

Where we depend on the grace of God but we do not presume on that grace.

The church is not a conspiracy of cordiality, not a harmless alternative for those who are spiritually interested. This is the temple of the living God and here Christ is alive and Christ is Lord.

[23 : 08] And I think we are meant to stand back from this passage and take a deep breath and say to each other, there but for the grace of God go I. Lord, open my eyes that I may see my own sin.

Give me the grace to turn to you, strengthen me to receive your forgiveness. Teach me to walk in your paths. For your name's sake.

Amen.