

ACTS 5:1-16

THE ENEMY INSIDE THE CHURCH

This lesson was tough. I have been a Christian for many years and have never heard a Sunday School lesson or sermon on this passage. I poured over many commentaries because this was not an easy lesson to prepare. I really prayed about how to present it.

We are in Acts Chapter 5. This is my introduction... Everything in the Jerusalem church started out so well. That's what we have been reading. Jesus rose from the dead. He spent six weeks with His disciples. He talked to them about the kingdom of heaven and gave the Great Commission. Then Jesus ascended back to the Father. The apostles, as they were now known, went back into Jerusalem and waited for the Holy Spirit to come. And He did! On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit arrived. He rested on all 120 believers who were gathered there – "as flaming tongues of fire" the scripture says. And they went out and began proclaiming the mighty works of God in many different languages. The people of Jerusalem were amazed when they saw this. Signs and wonders began to be performed through the power of the Holy Spirit. There were marvelous evidences that God was at work through the apostles – like the healing of the lame man at the Temple gate. Remarkable things were happening in the church. Peter preached the Gospel at Pentecost and 3,000 people were converted. A week or so later Peter preached inside the Temple and another 5,000 men got saved. Things were going so well! The church was growing and flourishing. It was all joyful. Through the Holy Spirit the church experienced unity.

In Chapter 4 we're told that they were all "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." Nobody was holding on to property that they possessed. They were selling their earthly possessions in order to provide money for the needy among them, not just those in the church but also in the community. It says that they "brought the proceeds of what

was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

At the very end of Chapter 4 we're given the example of the type of giving that was taking place in the early church. A man named Barnabas (he will later be Paul's traveling companion), he owned a tract of land and he sold it. He then brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. And that's how the chapter ends.

Chapter 5 begins with the word, "but." In English we call this a coordinating conjunction that connects ideas which contrast. So, what we read in Chapter 5 is going to be a contrast. It's different somehow from what Barnabas did in Chapter 4.

READ Acts 5:1

So far it sounds like what Ananias and Sapphira are doing here is exactly what Barnabas did. Or so it seems.

READ Acts 5:2

From this verse we notice something is different. What Ananias and Sapphira do is they bring only a part of the proceeds to the apostles. OK, so what's wrong with that? There's no requirement to bring all the money. What they contribute is a gift, right? So, my question is "What's wrong with what Ananias and Sapphira are doing here in Acts Chapter 5?" Here's the answer – they made false pretenses. They acted as though they were giving everything they had to the Lord when, in fact, they were not. They lied. They misrepresented themselves. We know all this based on the next few verses where Peter exposes it.

READ Acts 5:3-4

We know from what we read in Acts Chapter 4 that Peter, confronting Ananias here in this passage, is filled with the Holy Spirit. He is speaking the truth with boldness. And what is that truth? Based on the verses I just read...

All the commentaries I read say that Ananias was a believer who had apparently made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and been baptized into the church. But Peter says that he is filled with Satan. That is quite a charge, isn't it? This does NOT mean that Ananias is possessed by the devil, but rather, that he is under Satan's influence. Ananias in his heart contrives in his heart a lie. And his wife is complicit in that lie. In their hearts they are basically saying, in essence: "This is what we will do. We'll sell our property, keep some of the money for ourselves, then we'll take the rest of the money and give it to the church. We'll make them all think that we're giving everything and we will look good, super-spiritual. They will think that we are generous, godly people even though we're not. They will never know the difference."

Peter knows all this because the Holy Spirit reveals it to him. And he calls Ananias out on it.

I want you to think about something. You and I may be able to fool people. There are all kinds of hypocrites in the church. They wear nice clothes. They smile and sing and even bring their Bibles. But inside they are not who they pretend to be. At home, behind closed doors, they are someone completely different. I'm not pointing any fingers. I'm just saying that there are people like this in the church, yes, even in our own church. So, we can fool people, but we can NOT fool God. He knows our hearts. He knows our true motives. He knows us better than we know ourselves (because we can fool our own selves).

So, Peter, under the power, influence and inspiration of God, the Holy Spirit exposes Ananias' sin. Do you think that Ananias was shocked by what he heard Peter say to him? Well, maybe he was, but not for long...

READ Acts 5:5-6

God's judgment in this case is swift and severe.

Dr. Thomas Constable, former Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) Professor and founder of Plano Bible Church, says this in his commentary on this passage: "Lying to the Holy Spirit is a sin that Christians commit

frequently today. When Christians act hypocritically, by pretending a devotion that is not theirs, or a surrender of life they have not really made, they lie to the Holy Spirit. If God acted today as He did in the early Jerusalem church, undertakers would have much more work than they do." That is a sobering statement. It makes you think.

Before we get to Sapphira. She'll be coming along later. Right now, she's down at the beauty salon getting her hair and nails done. Before we get to her, let's talk about what just happened to Ananias. Frankly, it is a troubling story. The obvious question that gets raised every time you read this passage is this: "There are all kinds of hypocrites in the church. We know this. So, why did God deal so severely with Ananias?" That's an excellent question and one that we dare not avoid. In order to properly answer it you need to appreciate the setting. The church is in its infancy. It's growing and flourishing and God is at work doing mighty things through His church.

As I was preparing this lesson, I read several different commentaries. One of them drew a parallel between what happens here in Acts Chapter 5 to what happened with Adam and Eve in the garden back in Genesis Chapter 3. If you recall, everything was perfect in the garden. Adam and Eve were representing God in His new and perfect creation the way God wanted them to. Life was great. They didn't want for anything. Enter the serpent. We know now that this serpent was the devil in disguise. Several biblical passages point that out. What did he do? He approached Eve and lied about God. That is really no surprise to us because Jesus said that the devil "is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). In that story Eve chose to believe the serpent's lie rather than God. Big mistake! You know what happened. She and Adam both ate of the forbidden fruit and they were subsequently kicked out of their garden paradise. Satan temporarily disrupted God's plan for mankind.

The same thing is happening all over again here in the life of the early church. Everything is going well in God's newly formed church. Do you see the parallels? Satan comes along and he approaches a couple and lies.

And, just like Adam and Eve, this couple believes his lie. However, his plan to disrupt the church is temporarily derailed because Peter exposes it.

As you read through the book of Acts and the New Testament letters you see that Satan is persistent in his attacks and he tries everything he can to disrupt God's plan for His church. What happens here in Acts Chapter 5 is only the beginning. This first fall from the ideal of the church must have staggered the apostles and the multitude.

Well, the story continues. Here comes Sapphira...

READ Acts 5:7-9a

Sapphira is given ample opportunity to tell the truth. But just like her husband, her heart is not right and she lies. Peter, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, exposes the motivation behind her sin, "to test the Spirit." This is something we are clearly told NOT to do. Deuteronomy 6:16 says, "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test..." and Jesus actually quoted this verse to Satan when he was tempted in the wilderness (Matthew 4:7). "Don't test God!" It's a command. Instead, believe Him, take Him at His word, trust Him and do what He says. Unfortunately, that's not what Sapphira did.

READ Acts 5:9b-10

This is a bit scary, isn't it? The quarterly points out something that we as God's children need to keep in mind, which is, that God's discipline of us as believers CAN include physical death. Paul reminds the Corinthian believers who had abused the Lord's Supper: "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). So, God could, as judgment for sin in your life, kill you. But don't worry. I have some positive news. Before you get too upset, there is something we can do to prevent this from happening to us. Here are three passages you need to know that will help you out...

“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Ephesians 4:26-27).

“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith...” (1 Peter 5:8-9).

“Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

We have an enemy and the enemy is Satan. He’s on the prowl. When positive things are happening in the life of a church or the life of an individual believer, the devil wants to put a stop to it. He doesn’t like it one bit and he will do whatever he can to derail it and see it fail. So, what happens here in Acts Chapter 5 seems extreme, but God is sending a message.

Well, let’s go back to our story in Acts Chapter 5. How do the people in the Jerusalem church react when they see and hear about what happened to Ananias and Sapphira?

READ Acts 5:11

They were afraid. We can certainly understand why. Two of their own have just been struck down – dead! No doubt they were jolted and stunned by it.

READ Acts 5:12

Despite what had happened did, it not change their regular habit, their commitment to meet together. For now, the unity of believers has been preserved. The LORD continues to do amazing things through the apostles. So really, not much changed. To their credit, they stayed the course.

READ Acts 5:13

There is a real lesson here for us. Even if people outside our church walls don’t believe our Gospel and they don’t join our church, it is important that we continue to be held in high esteem by those outside the

church. We need to conduct ourselves properly as Christians. We need to remain faithful, show kindness and Christian love, be honest, be good neighbors, be good citizens, do what's right. Even if they don't believe our message, they will still respect us.

READ Acts 5:14

Great things are still happening in the church!

READ Acts 5:15-16

This sounds a lot like what happened during Jesus's ministry. Do you remember how the people would flock to where Jesus was and bring their sick for healing? And that is really the point. Jesus had told His disciples, "You will do greater things than these." The church's ministry is merely a continuation of Jesus's ministry. Or it should be. We are going to stop right here at verse 16.

Here is my application for this rather difficult lesson:

- There is an enemy actively working inside the church and that is Satan. He lies to us about God (because Satan is a liar and the father of lies). He misconstrues and misrepresents what God has said. He can be very convincing if we're not prepared. So, we need to be prepared and resist him.
- "Those that boast of good works they never did, or promise good works they never do, or make the good works they do more or better than really they are, come under the guilt of Ananias's lie" (Matthew Henry). So, then, don't do that!
- Don't lie. Be honest with God and others.
- Trust God and take Him at His word. This is the opposite of testing Him.
- Just a reminder – each one of us will one day give an account of himself or herself to God (see Romans 14:12).

A church sign I showed in my PowerPoint at the beginning of class asked, "What would you do today if you knew Christ was coming tomorrow?" That is a really good question. But I have a better question for you based on today's lesson...

"What will you do today knowing that you will one day stand before your LORD and give an account of yourself?"