

**“Satanic Hypocrisy”**  
**Acts 5:1-11**  
**May 18, 2008**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 is one of those passages in the Bible that tests our willingness to receive all the Bible as the word of God. It contains not one but three themes that are very offensive to modern people: sin, judgment and the fear of God. So as we approach this passage, we would do well to make sure we are not like the people of Israel during the days of Jeremiah. Chapter 42 of Jeremiah’s prophecy describes a time right after the Babylonians conquered and destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple, and took many of its citizens into exile back to Babylon. Jeremiah was in the group left in Jerusalem, and one day the leaders of this group came to him and asked him to seek a word from the Lord about what they should do. They promised him, **“May the Lord be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act according to all the word with which the Lord your God sends you to us. Whether it is good or bad, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God”** (Jer. 42:5-6). What they really wanted to do was to flee to Egypt for refuge, and they were hoping that he would come back with a word from the Lord that authorized them to go to Egypt. Jeremiah sought a word from God, and God said to the people, “If you remain in this land, I will bless you abundantly. If you go to Egypt, you will die by sword, famine or disease.” They didn’t like that word from God, so they said to Jeremiah, **“You are telling a lie. The Lord our God did not send you”** (43:2). They proceeded to leave for Egypt, doing exactly what they wanted to do all along.

We could easily do the same thing in our approach to this passage. If we claim to submit ourselves to God’s word, but then reject what we don’t like, we are not submitting at all. What we are doing is holding our word above God’s word. God promises blessing to us as we submit ourselves to him fully, especially in those areas where his word challenges us, such as these areas of sin, judgment and the fear of God. So let’s look at the story of Ananias and Sapphira this morning, trusting that God will show up to bless us as we receive all of his word for us today.

**I. Their Sin**

Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of the sin of hypocrisy, and the dishonesty that inevitably accompanies that sin. Peter makes it clear that their sin was not that of failing to give all the money from the sale of their property. There was no Christian obligation to sell the property or, once sold, to give all the proceeds to the church. **“While it remained unsold, did it not remain**

**your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?”** (v. 4). They could have kept the property for themselves without sinning, and they could also have given a portion of the proceeds from its sale without sinning. There was nothing amiss in their financial dealings. But what they could not do without committing a sin was to deceive others in an attempt to look good. That was the very thing they did. Others had been selling their property in order to help the poor among them, and Ananias and Sapphira wanted to look as spiritual as those others. But the reality was different than what they were attempting to portray. In reality, they could not bring themselves to part with their money. A hypocrite is one who wants to look good to others, and portrays something on the outside that is not present on the inside. It inevitably leads one into dishonesty before others and before God.

I have read that on the French Riviera it is very fashionable to have a balcony overlooking the water. Some people who don't have balconies or the money to build one will paint a picture of a balcony on the side of their apartment, to make it appear they have a balcony. Some will even go so far as to paint clothes hung on the railing to dry. Hypocrisy is when we do this same thing with our lives, attempting to look good to others while ignoring the reality of our spiritual condition.

Why is this sin dealt with so severely? You may be thinking to yourself, “I've certainly been guilty of hypocrisy in my own life, but so has everyone else. Why does this common sin receive such swift judgment in this passage? If all hypocrites were judged like this, our churches would soon be empty.” What's so bad about this sin in this instance, and why is there such severe and immediate judgment upon it? There are at least three reasons why this is such a serious sin.

First, its presence is the opposite of believing the gospel. This passage shows that Christian morality is about what happens in our hearts, not just our behavior. Ananias and Sapphira could not be faulted for their external behavior. They were giving money to the church. But they were at fault for what was happening in their hearts, hypocrisy that led them into dishonesty. A hypocrite says, “It is so important to me that I look good to others that I am willing to deceive in order to achieve that.” But why would a person have such a strong desire to look good? Because they are not living in the reality of gospel truth. The gospel says that we have a new identity in Christ, having received his righteousness as a gift from God. So when we are willing to deceive in order to look good, we reveal that we really don't believe that. We are like a time when I was about to walk out to do a wedding and began to panic. I was panicking because I couldn't find my glasses, which I knew I would need in order to fulfill my obligations as Officiating Minister at the wedding. For thirty seconds, my panic level was growing as I tried to think where I had put my glasses. And then I remembered that I had put them on top of my head. They had been there the whole time I was frantically searching for them. All my fears

turned out to be needless. Our desire to look good on the outside is just as needless. Jesus has come to die the death we should have died, and to live the life we should have lived. God has punished him in our place, and he has given us credit for Jesus' righteousness. Believing that will give us an honesty that delivers from hypocrisy.

Are Ananias and Sapphira in heaven today? It's possible, but I don't think we have been given enough information to answer that question. True Christians can fall into the sin of hypocrisy by forgetting the gospel. But a true Christian won't stay there. The more we believe the good news of the gospel, the more we are freed up to be honest and to put away the sin of hypocrisy.

A second reason why this sin is treated so seriously is that sin does not remain dormant in a church. If left unchecked, it spreads like fire through dry grass. Or to use the metaphor the apostle Paul uses, **"Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"** (1 Cor. 5:6). He's talking about the way yeast spreads a lump of dough, saying that sin spreads through a church in just the same way. I know of a PCA congregation where the founding pastor committed adultery and ran away with the church secretary, whom he eventually married. The third pastor of that church committed adultery, ending a thirty-year marriage in the process. Other church officers and their children also fell into adultery, and an unusually large number of marriages in that church ended in divorce. The nature of sin to spread is what makes its presence in this young church such a serious matter.

Satan apparently knows what we often forget about the nature of sin to spread to others, and Peter reveals that his influence is behind this sin. **"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?"** Chapters 5 and 6 of Acts reveal three Satanic plans to bring harm to the church, and this is the first one. He wants to destroy the church from within, through the corruption that comes by sin. The end of this chapter reveals his second strategy—persecution. His third strategy appears in chapter 6, as the apostles are distracted from their work of teaching. It is the strategy of false doctrine, to which a church becomes susceptible when there is not good Bible teaching. Satan is very clever, but he's not very creative. He has always employed these three strategies, and continues to use them today. Satan succeeds in this when the church looks just like the world. If he can get the church obsessed with power and money, just like the world, he will have achieved a major victory. When the divorce rate in the church equals that of the world, Satan smiles.

## **II. God's Judgment Upon Their Sin**

God will not let Satan win. His answer is to step in with immediate judgment upon this couple. There are a couple of common marks of God's

judgment that we can see in this passage. The first is that God's judgment is always marked by fairness. They were attempting to look good by deceit, and what they received instead was exposure of their true hearts, leading to shame. They sought to lay their money at the feet of the apostles, and instead fell down dead at the feet of the apostles. They attempted to use God in order to bring honor to themselves, and instead only succeeded in bringing dishonor. Note that verse 6 reports that they were buried immediately. In this culture, funerals and burials were a time to honor the deceased with a lengthy process of grief. These two who sought to receive honor through their deceit received only dishonor and shame.

A second mark of God's judgment is exposure of our deepest and most secret sins. Imagine the surprise felt by Ananias when Peter looked him in the eye and exposed the sin of his heart. He was probably expecting the same response he had seen Barnabas receive when he had made his gift to the church. But instead of a big bear hug and tears of gratitude, Peter said the words recorded for us in verse 3. Ananias was exposed, and later his wife in the same manner. You'll be glad to know that this gift of seeing into the hearts of church members is no longer given to pastors. But that doesn't mean that we no longer need to fear exposure. Jesus said it like this: **"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops"** (Luke 12:1-3).

This kind of immediate judgment from God's hand is rare today. It took place on this occasion because God was undertaking to protect this young church from the damage done by the proliferation of hypocrisy in its midst. Many commentators have noted that he is doing the same thing here that he did with Israel in the days of Joshua when Israel was just forming as a nation. Do you remember the story of Achan, where he steals some gold that had been put under the ban of God's judgment? He too was judged immediately by God. F. F. Bruce says, "The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God."

How does this judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira apply to us? It is applicable to us in the area of church discipline. Satan still attempts to bring harm to the church through the proliferation of sin among God's people. The biblical remedy to it is church discipline. Unfortunately, though, church discipline today is commonly regarded with almost universal disdain, even within the church. Those churches where it is practiced are thought to be judgmental and legalistic. Many think that it is inconsistent with an emphasis on grace and the love of God. I like what Dietrich Bonhoeffer says about this. "Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his

sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin. It is a ministry of mercy.” One application of this is to affirm again the membership vow in which you agreed to submit to the discipline of the church. In doing so, we are renouncing the spirit of autonomous freedom that is such a strong part of our culture. We are saying that we really do believe that hymn we sing that says, “Blest Be the Tie that Binds.” I was convicted this week that if I really believed that, I would be more faithful in leading this church in the area of church discipline. We have and will continue to practice church discipline here, but your pastors and elders need your prayers in this area. It is hard work.

### **III. The Result of God’s Judgment Upon Their Sin**

We read twice in this passage that the result of the judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira for their sin was that **“great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things”** (v. 5, 11). It’s not hard to see why that would be the case. They were undoubtedly thinking the same thing that has occurred to you as we have been studying this passage. “I too have been guilty of hypocrisy and the dishonesty that accompanies it.” We sometimes have the mistaken idea that if a sin is common, it can’t be that bad. Since hypocrisy and dishonesty is so common, therefore it must not be too serious. This judgment from God should change all such ideas. God is not like us. He is a holy God, and we see here what he thinks about our hypocrisy.

The fear that Luke reports as coming upon all who heard of these things is a good thing. It is the kind of fear that deepens our faith and our joy. It is the kind of fear that says this. “I can see that my sin is far deeper than I thought. It extends past my outward behavior to my heart. I see also that my sin is a bigger problem than I thought, putting me at odds with the holiness of God. But I also see more fully what the cleansing of my sins by the blood of Jesus has brought to me.” That’s what it means to fear God, and that brings us to a closing application.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Ananias and Sapphira had their sin of hypocrisy exposed here and judged. Since God is consistent, he must always judge hypocrisy in this same way. It’s not a question of *whether* our sins will be exposed but *when* they will be exposed. It will either be now or on the day of judgment. For those who expose them now through confession and repentance, there is forgiveness in Christ. So I invite you to expose what you know of your sin now and receive the forgiveness of God for all your sins.