

The Acts of the Apostles

LESSON 11

The Contrast of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11)

But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. 2 And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? 4 While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. 6 And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him. 7 Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." 9 Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. 11 So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

It is important to understand what the story of Ananias and Sapphira is not. It is not an example of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit or the "unpardonable" sin. The actual sin involved here was withholding a certain amount of money over against that which had been promised which was represented as the entire amount. Remember that they most likely gave a significant offering toward the needs of the poor. In other words, they made a vow to the Lord and did not pay it (Eccl. 5:1-6).

Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. 2 Do not be rash with your mouth and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore, let your words be few. 3 For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool's voice is known by his many words. 4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed--5 Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.

It is not meant to be a pattern for discipline in the Church Age. Fortunately, this is the only time in the New Testament where God took such drastic judgment into His hands. The pattern for New Testament discipline was given by Christ Himself (Mt. 18:15-20). The authority for discipline in the local church has been given to human authority.

It is important to understand what the story of Ananias and Sapphira is. It is a study in contrasts in the Early Church. This story follows hard on the heels of the example of Barnabas in the previous chapter (Acts 4:36-37).

And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet.

It is an indication of the purity of the Early Church. God is very jealous over this new church that is being formed. He does not want it spoiled by wrong motives (hypocrisy). If the church was being judged in this manner today, we would all be in trouble.

It tells us of the first recorded sin in the Early Church. It is very interesting that the first recorded sin against the Children of Israel when they entered the Promised Land was in regard to covetousness or the love of money (Josh. 7:1). Now the first recorded sin in this New Testament Church is over the issue of money. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (I Tim. 6:9-10).

It represents the first case of discipline in the Early Church. This was a sin of premeditation and mutual consent. Ananias and Sapphira were under no compulsion to dedicate the proceeds of their land sale to the Lord. However, they were caught up in the spirit of the church and made some kind of pledge to that effect. After they had the money in their hand, their heart changed, and they conspired to keep a small portion of the money back for themselves (Compare James 1:13-15).

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

It affirms the place of human authority in the local church. It is clear that God stands behind the authority that He has established in the church. To lie to Peter and to lie to the Holy Spirit are seen to be one and the same (Acts 5:3-4, 9). It highlights the fact that while the church cannot be destroyed from forces outside of the church (i.e. Satanic opposition and persecution), it can be destroyed from forces within the church (disunity, ambition and greed).

It is important to learn the lessons from Ananias and Sapphira. If we do not learn the lessons from them, their death would have been in vain.

- God searches the heart of man and knows his thoughts and intents.
- God is more concerned about the motive of a man more than his external acts.
- God will often expose secret sins that man will not be able to detect.
- God hates hypocrisy.

The Church Rises in Miraculous Power (Acts 5:12-16)

And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. 13 Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. 14 And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. 15 so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. 16 Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

When sin had been dealt with, the power of God was manifest. The fruit of godly disciple was positive in every way.

Great fear came on the disciples (Acts 5:11, Compare Is. 33:14-16). There was a fresh release of the miraculous (Acts 5:12). There was a fresh unity among the believers (Acts 5:12). You discipline one child, and you get them all. Hypocrites were afraid to join their ranks (Acts 5:13). There was a renewed respect for authority in the local church (Acts 5:13). There was a new wave of evangelism (Acts 5:14).

There is a big difference between joining and being added. Hypocrites were fearful of joining, but the Lord added to the church by the multitudes.

The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness has seized the hypocrites: "Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?" He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly, he who despises the gain of oppressions, who gestures with his hands, refusing bribes, who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed, and shuts his eyes from seeing evil: He will dwell on high; his place of defense will be the fortress of rocks; bread will be given him, his water will be sure. Isaiah 33:14-16

The apostles were beginning to move in the "greater works than these" of which Jesus spoke (John 14:12). Here we see even the shadow of Peter had power to heal. The woman had touched Jesus' hem, but here the crowds touched the shadow of Peter (Mt. 9:21-22).

The Apostles were Imprisoned and Released by an Angel (Acts 5:17-25)

Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, 18 and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. 19 But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.” 21 And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. 22 But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, 23 saying, “Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!” 24 Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. 25 So one came and told them, saying, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!”

This newfound success sparked the envy of the religious leaders (Acts 5:17). They couldn't sit by any longer; they had to try to stamp this movement out. In addition, the apostles had defied their order not to preach or teach in the name of Jesus.

The apostles were arrested and put into prison. This arrest seems to have included more than just Peter and John as before, but included all or most of the Twelve. Peter was getting his chance to fulfill his statement of commitment (Luke 22:33).

But he said to Him, “Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death.”

Jesus had predicted that this would happen (Luke 21:12-13).

But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony.

The Lord sent an angel to bring them out of prison. It is interesting that in the face of a Sanhedrin filled with Sadducees that God would use an angel to set them free (the Sadducees did not believe that angels exist). It is interesting that the guards stayed in place all night and they did not discover the absence of the disciples until they came to bring them out the next morning.

The apostles followed the instructions of the angel and continued their ministry of teaching and preaching in the temple area. Their unusual escape from prison left the religious leaders in a state of wonderment (Acts 5:24b).

Other translations:

...they doubted of them whereunto this would grow. –KJV

...they were perplexed, wondering where it would all end. –NLT

...the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this. –NIV

The word that is used here denotes a state of anxiety which arises when someone has lost their way or when someone does not know what to do to escape from a difficulty. Herod had experienced these same feelings when he heard about Jesus (Luke 9:7).

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed, because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead...

They were in this state for several reasons.

- The apostles had disregarded their authority.
- God seems to have overruled them with a miracle.
- The doctrines of the apostles were gaining ground.
- Their efforts to oppose them up to this point had been in vain.

The Apostles were Rearrested and Charged (Acts 5:26-33)

The apostles were rearrested without violence (Acts 5:26).

Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned.

This can be seen from two sides.

1. The apostles were in violation of the commands of the Sanhedrin and did not resist the arrest from the officials. All they would have had to do was create a little stir and the multitudes would have rioted and stoned the soldiers.
2. The soldiers were going to be careful with these men who had demonstrated unusual powers and the support of angelic beings. They had not been so careful with Jesus.

The apostles were charged with fulfilling the first part of Jesus' commission (Acts 5:27-28).

And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!"

The apostles were charged with three things including...

- Ignoring the command not to teach.
- Filling Jerusalem with their doctrine.
- Trying to blame the death of an innocent man on them.

If these were the charges, the apostles were "guilty as charged." Peter made a full confession (Acts 5:29-32).

But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."

Peter's profession infuriated the religious leaders (Acts 5:33).

When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them.

Gamaliel Gave Valuable Advice (Acts 5:34-39)

When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. 34 Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while. 35 And he said to them: “Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. 36 For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. 37 After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. 38 And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing, 39 but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it--lest you even be found to fight against God.”

Gamaliel's words saved the day. There are a couple of different opinions about his words.

- They were words of wisdom that turned away the wrath of the counsel.
- They were a demonstration of poor leadership from a man who did not want to take a personal stand. In other words, his wisdom was really a copout.

In either case, it tempered the punishment that would be meted out by the Council.

The Apostles were Beaten and Released (Acts 5:40-42)

And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. 41 So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. 42 And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

They didn't totally follow Gamaliel's advice to let them alone. They beat them with the hope that they would accomplish two things. They wanted to discourage future acts of disobedience on their parts. They wanted to humiliate them in front of the people hoping that they would lose some of their influence and following.

It didn't work in either case!