

Title: Acts 4:32-5:11

Theme: Series-Jesus Christ and His Church (Acts of the Apostles): Good Stewardship Does Not Cheat

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Morning Prayer Service on 22/05/2016 at 10.30am

It is a shame that our Bibles are broken down into chapters and verses. Because if they weren't we would realize that our Scripture passage actually starts at Acts 4:32 with the phrase, "All the believers." So, we are talking about believers. We are talking about those who profess Christ as Saviour from sin and as Lord of life. We are talking about those who are filled with the Spirit of Christ. We are talking about those who are in the church and part of the church.

Acts 4:32 mentions two results of their Spirit-filled faith. First, you are drawn closer to your brothers and sisters in the faith. Second, you are cut loose from your attachment to the things of this earth so that you are able to use those things as a means of loving people.

The early believers cared about people. So, what did they do? **(Acts 4:34-35)** ... from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales (v. 35) and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. The result? "There were no needy persons among them" (Acts 4:34). What a beautiful picture.

Barnabas is an example of a Spirit-filled believer who loved people and used his things to show that love. Listen to the last two verses of Acts 4: **(Acts 4:36-37)** Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), (37) sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. Barnabas did not do this to get praise. He was not like the Pharisees who announced their giving with trumpets in order to be honoured by men (cf **Mt 6:1-2**). Barnabas did this because of the generosity of his heart which flows from appreciation of the love of Jesus.

And, many were impressed. Included in this number of impressed people were Ananias and Sapphira. **In many ways things seemed wonderful, even idyllic. But in fact not all was perfect, heaven had not yet come to earth. No sooner had the church of Jesus begun than problems arose.**

What was wrong here? Was it wrong for Ananias to give only some of the money to the church? The first answer: No. No, it wasn't wrong to give only some of the money to the church. Notice what Peter said: **(Acts 5:4)** "Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?"

The property was theirs both before and after the sale. They were under no obligation to sell their piece of land. And, once it was sold, they were under no obligation to donate the entire selling price to the apostles. No, it wasn't wrong to give only some of the money to the church.

So, what went wrong here? Notice the word used in both verses 2 and 3. We are told **Ananias "kept"** part of the money for himself **(Acts 5:2)**. The Greek word means "to misappropriate or embezzle." The other time the word is used in the New Testament it means "to steal" **(Tit 2:10)**. And, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament the same word is used to describe Achan's theft of gold, silver, and cloth from Jericho that belonged to God.

If, as Peter put it, the property and money was theirs, how could Ananias and Sapphira be guilty of embezzlement? Let us use our imagination. Go back to the night Ananias dumped all the money on the kitchen table. The next morning Ananias ran into James on the way to work. "Hey, James, we sold our property in Bethlehem and we are giving all the proceeds to the

church." And, at coffee with her friends that day, Sapphira made sure she let "slip" what they were going to do on Sunday.

Ananias and Sapphira somehow, in some way, let it be known that they were selling a piece of property and giving all the proceeds to the church. We can go so far as to say it was some kind of contract. It had to be, or else it wouldn't be embezzlement and misappropriation of funds.

We shall examine the text further under three main headings:

1. **God is Holy and will not tolerate sin**
2. **Hypocrisy is serious**
3. **Why did Ananias and Sapphira fall?**

1. God is holy and will not tolerate sin

Why did God perform this unusual action – husband and wife falling down dead in the space of three hours!

It is a reminder that sin is a serious offence against God, an offence that deserves his judgement. This is a truth seen throughout the Bible: Old Testament & New Testament. Indeed, it is foundational to the way the Bible explains the death of Jesus.

As the same Apostle Peter puts it in his 1st letter some years later (1 Peter 2:24) "Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross that we might die to sins & live for righteousness". **Jesus took within himself, in our place, instead of us, God's judgement on our sins, so that forgiven; we might live God's right way instead of living our own rebellious way.**

Sin is serious, so serious it cost the death of God's son. The judgement of Ananias & Sapphira is a reminder at the outset of the church's life that as believers we are to seek to avoid sin. We are forgiven wonderfully in Jesus, but we are not forgiven to be free to sin, but to be free to "die to sin & live for righteousness".

So why not more of this kind of judgement?

Given that sin is serious & God is just, it would actually not be unreasonable for God to bring this kind of judgement more often. But there isn't anything else quite like this in the New Testament, we're not told to expect it regularly & Church history suggests that in experience God hasn't often acted like this.

There is, I believe an important lesson about the period of history we live in. We are, as was the early church, in the "times between the times": the time between the birth of Jesus & his return. In Jesus' 1st coming he inaugurated God's Kingdom. There was in his life remarkable evidences of God's loving, saving rule breaking into his world. But that rule is not yet complete until Jesus returns to earth. When he does, he will return as judge. All that is wrong will be judged as wrong & all that is good will be seen as good. He will restore all things & all that is against God will be eliminated.

In the life of Jesus and in the early days of the church in the ministry of the Apostles, we see something of the in-breaking of God's kingdom in ways that are more usually to be fulfilled when Jesus returns and his rule is complete.

That's why we see the unusual number of healings. They point to the healing of all at the end of time as we know it. Similarly, with judgment God will fully judge the whole world through his Son when Jesus returns, but unusually we see something of his judgment in advance, with Ananias & Sapphira.

What a sad commentary on both Ananias and Sapphira. The name "Ananias" literally means "God is gracious." The name "Sapphira" means "beautiful." Ananias certainly did not act as though God was gracious to him. As for Sapphira, her beauty was only skin-deep because inside she had an ugly, ugly heart.

A study of Psalm 139 reveals that it is no use trying to hide from God. He sees our thoughts from afar. He knows our words before they are on our tongue.

2. Hypocrisy is serious

(Lk 12:2-3) There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.

In the case of Ananias and Sapphira, this means that the Spirit of God sees through all the lies and deception. So, the Spirit somehow reveals to Peter the truth about Ananias and Sapphira.

The Spirit struck down Ananias and Sapphira. Within three hours both of them were dead. The Spirit brought "great fear" upon the church (Acts 5:5,11). A holy fear. A reverent fear for God and the things of God. This is the fear experienced by Isaiah when he saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted. Remember what Isaiah cried out?

(Is 6:5) "Woe to me!" ... "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

It is never a bad thing to have a holy fear of God.

God hates any hypocrisy or pretence in our worship. When we look through the Gospels we see that Jesus was very compassionate, patient, and tender with those who fell into the sins of the flesh. But He was very harsh with those who were religious hypocrites. With some people, He was the meek and gentle Lamb; with others, He was the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

Remember what Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery? He said, "I do not condemn you. Go and sin no more" (Jn 8:11). The woman at the well had five husbands and was with a sixth man. To her Jesus said, "I give you living water" (Jn 4:10). Zacchaeus, the little man, was a liar and a thief. Yet Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham" (Lk 19:9). Jesus could talk the way He did to each of these because they all repented and believed. They knew they needed the Saviour.

Hear what Jesus said about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees?

(Mt 23:27-28,33) Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. (28) In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness ... (33) You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?

Why did Jesus talk this way? Because hypocrites, like the scribes and Pharisees, did not repent. They did not think they needed to repent. They thought they had no need for the Saviour or forgiveness.

Hypocrisy is a stench in God's nostrils. So, brothers and sisters, don't ever pretend to be a better Christian than you really are. Don't ever try to fool God with your acts of piety and faith because God is more than able to see right through them. Don't ever pretend you don't need the Saviour and His blood.

It's very easy for us to make out we're better than we really are; to seek to gain a reputation for godliness falsely; even to attempt to gain credit for greater acts of service or devotion than

we are really responsible for. There's a real challenge here about what we say in public compared to what do in private. "Who you are when no one's looking?". Certainly, speaking as a preacher, this is near the knuckle. We all need to be careful how we talk of our money, family, our time & what we do with them. Do we really mean everything we pray about in public? Do we claim more for our personal prayer lives & Bible reading than is true? **God wants us to be real with Him. If you lie to yourself, you cannot lie to God.**

Perhaps hypocrisy is so serious for another reason that's not explicit in this passage. Hypocrisy is something that is opposite to the gospel of grace. The gospel is all about the generous love of God for sinners. And its benefits are enjoyed by those who honestly know & admit they are sinners.

Hypocrisy is about pretending we're better than we are. Hypocrisy is so serious because it denies grace. It implies we need to pretend to others & to God to gain acceptance. **Grace says we don't need to pretend to God (he knows the worst about us already and he accepts us on the basis of Jesus) our acceptance is not dependant on our reputation or performance but on Christ & his death on our behalf.**

Hypocrisy brings the community of the gospel into disrepute because it says God's grace in Jesus is not enough.

3. Why did Ananias and Sapphira fall?

They allowed Satan to distort their thinking. Did you hear how Peter put it? "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart ..." (**Acts 5:3**). The Greek term for "filled" means to make full. It carries the idea of totality. Their inner being, their spirit or soul, has been filled with a lie. It has been filled with the lies of Satan.

This does not mean Ananias and Sapphira can blame Satan. There is no place in the Bible that lays the blame for a Christian's sin on Satan. Satan may tempt us. He may lure us. But it is our decision, our act, our sin. No one can ever say, "The Devil made me do it." Our first parents who blamed Satan did not get any commendation from God.

Ananias and Sapphira gave the Devil a foothold in their heart. Satan used their greed as usual, their desire for fame and recognition, their pride and arrogance, in order to get his way. So, we need to be careful, to never give Satan the foothold that he wants. Through worship and prayer and Bible reading and meditation, we must allow our inner being to be filled with the Holy Spirit rather than with Satan and his snares.

Christians can fall. Christians can fall big. Think of David. A man after God's own heart. The king of Israel. Yet, he committed adultery and murder and tried to cover it all up. Think of Peter. The leader of the apostles - he denied knowing Jesus three times.

There are those who try to say that Ananias and Sapphira were not Christians. But, apart from the chapter and verse division, remember how the portion of Scripture in front of us starts? It starts with the phrase, "All the believers" (Acts 4:32). In Barnabas, we are given a positive example of a Spirit-filled believer. And, in Ananias and Sapphira we are given a negative example.

Ananias and Sapphira were part of the church. **They heard the Word. They participated in worship. They took communion. They gave to the poor. They prayed. Yet they fell because they denied the work of grace – that God accepts us the way we are and His grace through His Holy Spirit makes us what we should be.** This is what glorifies God. Spirit-filled people live for the glory of God and not for their own glory.