

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Judgment Begins with The Church

Acts 4:33 - 5:11

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SermonAudio Blurb: The winds of change are now upon the early Church. It was just a short time ago where these young believers in Jesus the Messiah were enjoying favor with all the people. Now the first indications of coming suffering is at the doorway. The Church is numbering in the thousands and God uses a specific event centered around money and generosity to bring sobriety into the hearts of the believers. Judgment does not begin with the unbelieving world but Christ's Church. But even in the shock of killing Ananias and Sapphira there is grace as God prepares the Church to suffer. And He does it by getting their priorities right.

I. Introduction.

- A. Last week we saw the effects of grasping the heights and depths of God's grace in the life of a Christian.
 1. The grace of God is evident in our lives whether we walk in an awareness of it or not. It is ever present.
 2. The grace of God is described as abundant and even super-abundant (Romans 5).
 3. Every Christian is given a grace according to Romans 12. This grace is what we often call a spiritual gift.
 4. This grace begins in God's gracious choice and saving work in the lives of every Christian. From before we knew Him, God has granted grace freely and without any outside influence.
 5. We are saved by grace and we live in that grace.
 6. And this, when rightly apprehended by us, motivates us to be a generous people. A people who give and share freely and without regret. Our approach to money and possessions is simply a clear indicator of how well we understand God's grace in our own lives.
 7. We saw this in Acts 4. None needy in the church. All needs met. Those with the means to help simply helped. They sold assets and laid the money at the feet of the Apostles to be distributed as needed.
 8. Everything seems wonderful.

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- B. But things are going to change and they will change rather rapidly. Sin is still in the hearts of the people.
 - 1. Even though they are saved from the wrath of God. Even though their sins are forgiven.
 - 2. Nonetheless sin is in each of their hearts and sin is still dominating this entire creation in which they live and walk.
 - 3. So we will see that favoritism and partiality is also taking place in the church. We will see that greed and deception still runs deep in the hearts of people. In other words, they are like every other church that ever existed.

- C. We come to a passage now that is strange and even a bit shocking because it shows the seriousness God has about the holiness of His people.
 - 1. The writer of Hebrews tells us that God disciplines His children for our good, so that we may share His holiness (12:10).
 - 2. Peter writes this, *“but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”* (1 Peter 1:15-16)
 - 3. Paul writes, *“God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.”* (1 Thessalonians 4:7)
 - 4. John writes, *“everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”* (1 John 3:3)
 - 5. Jude, in his benediction, writes, *“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”* (Jude 1:24-25)
 - 6. Holiness is not an option. Paul writes to the Corinthian church, *“let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”* (2 Corinthians 7:1)

- D. But holiness in the church is not the primary point of this section. Rather, holiness in the church is to prepare the church for something else. It is to have a healthy, proper fear of God above all other things.
 - 1. When you fear God above all other things then you are now “on mission” to your calling as a Christian.

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2. So often I hear from people, “I will do anything to fix my marriage.” This is very revealing as it shows an improper goal and plan.
- E. Today we will see this very idea of fearing God above all other things through the vehicle of a story. In this story we see several people involved—faithful people, unfaithful people, people in leadership and people in service. But in all of it we have it all moving to how God brings fear of Himself into the hearts of the people.
- F. Read Acts 5:1-11.
1. The winds of change are now upon the early Church. It was just a short time ago where these young believers in Jesus the Messiah were enjoying favor with all the people. Now the first indications of coming suffering is at the doorway. The Church is numbering in the thousands and God uses a specific event centered around money and covetousness to bring sobriety into the hearts of the believers.
 2. Judgment does not begin with the unbelieving world but Christ’s Church. But even in the shock of killing Ananias and Sapphira there is grace as God prepares the Church to suffer. And He does it by getting their priorities right.
- G. *“For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God” (1 Peter 4:17).*
1. This passage is what came to mind when I began to study our passage in Acts 5.
 2. Everyone loves to talk about the good times and the pleasant times filled with peace and good things. We see a pay raise, a promotion or a pregnancy or a relaxing vacation. We see a healing from a sickness, escaping a bad accident, a move to a better neighborhood or a great price on a new house as God’s blessing.
 3. But what about persecution? Real persecution?
 4. For a person who believes the gospel in a Muslim or Hindu nation there is the understanding by them that they shall suffer. Their first day following Christ involves risk.
 5. But what about a people who do not suffer in the same way? Where peace, safety and comfort is the norm? Where generations have come and gone and there is no individual or group memory of true suffering as a Christian?

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- a. Example in our culture: D-Day, Normandy invasion. A massive number of young, 18-20 year olds watched as the ramps of the landing craft were lowered and the rounds from German machine-guns lay waste to those in the front. Yet they entered the waters and fought forward.
 - b. Example: Eastern Illinois University just gave their students 2 days off for mental health. Stress relief opportunities abounded with therapy dogs, meditation spaces, lavender for aiding in good sleep, affirmation cards, and tricycle races. All this for the great stresses of the day.
 - c. One generation came out of great turmoil and hardship and the other generation has been raised in a comfortable, peaceful environment to the point that true threats must be invented, such as micro-aggressions.
6. The same with the church. So how does God prepare the young, vibrant church of Acts to suffer? He does it by causing them to fear Him more than man. He does it through judgment.

II. Judgment Begins with The Church.

A. God knows.

1. Two men with different agendas.
 - a. We already discussed Barnabas back in chapter 4.
 - b. Now we are introduced to another man and his wife—Ananias and Sapphira. They have a very different agenda.
2. But for both situations God knows.
 - a. He knows the mind set.
 - b. He knows the intentions of the heart. Nothing is hidden from His sight.
 - (1) The omniscience of God is a glorious truth.
 - (a) In our time of discouragement and fears. In our wanderings and wondering, God knows.
 - (b) For David, this becomes a point of solace for even if he can't put into words his desires and fears, God still knows.

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- (c) *Lord, all my desire is before You; And my sighing is not hidden from You. (Psalm 38:9)*
- (2) The omniscience of God is also disconcerting and frightening.
 - (a) It means that though we like to think we can hide ourselves from the eyes of our Creator, nothing is hidden from Him.
 - (b) *O God, it is You who knows my folly, And my wrongs are not hidden from You. (Psalm 69:5)*
 - (c) In Psalm 44:21 he writes of God, “. . . for He knows the secrets of the hearts.”
 - (d) Psalm 139 is a whole Psalm devoted to this quality of God. He says of God, *“Before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O YHWH, You know it all.”*
 - (e) The point is that we cannot fool God, we cannot hide from God. He knows us from before we existed and He knows our rising and sleeping.
- 3. And here is a man and woman who are seeking to hide things. Things both physical and things that are only in their heart.
 - a. They had every right to not sell the property. Or to devote only a portion of the money to the church. But that is not what they did. They declared one thing and then did something else. All the money from the sale shall go to the church.
 - b. Behind this whole mess is something more that is not obvious in the English. That phrase in vs 2 “kept back” is a single word in the Greek.
 - (1) A unique word. Used four times in the bible, two right here.
 - (2) In Titus 2:10 it is about “pilfering,” and refers to Christian slaves not stealing from their masters.
 - (3) But the big one is in Joshua 7:1. The Greek translation uses this word to refer to the sin of Achan. The battle of Jericho, take nothing, all belongs to God, Achan took some valuables as loot and hid them. The end result was judgment on the nation and upon his entire household. They were stoned to death.

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4. Ananias and Sapphira were like Achan.
 - a. They coveted what was not their's. This couple had devoted this money to the church and then tried to reduce the amount.
 - b. It wasn't the money though, it was the fact they thought they could claim one thing and really pursue another. They wanted to appear generous but were covetous.
 5. But God not only knows, God judges.
- B. God judges (vss 3-10).
1. We see the spiritual side to this whole mess in vs 3.
 - a. Ananias sins but it is Satan who is working to tempt him toward this.
 - b. But who is responsible? It is not Satan here, though that will come in the final judgment. It is Ananias.
 - c. Note this well. In vs 3 it is Satan filling his heart to lie. But then in vs 4 it is Ananias who conceived this deed. Where? In his heart.
 2. And it is an issue of worship. He is not lying to the church. He is not lying to the Apostles. He is lying to the Holy Spirit. Why?
 - a. Because he had committed this money to the Lord. Essentially he said to God, "I will sell this land and give this money to the church."
 - b. Likely he had made this commitment at some time in the near past. Something like, "When the need arises I have some land I can sell. Let me know when the funds are low and I will do that."
 - c. Now why he withheld some is not told. Maybe an unexpected bill came due. Maybe there were some unusual expenses. Perhaps the land sold for more than he expected.
 - d. We don't know and the reason is that it is not important.
 - (1) That is key for you to remember. We love to argue and rationalize in our sin. We lift one sin up over another and seek to soothe our conscience in that manner.
 - (2) But, in the end it is still just sin.
 3. The words of Peter were not words of warning. They were words of final judgment (vs 5).

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- a. Ananias died right there in the midst of the people. And a great fear came upon those who heard of it.
 - b. The task of dealing with the body fell to the young men of the church. The shamefulness of this man is seen in the haste in which they buried him. In under 3 hours he is buried.
 - c. Notice that there is no opportunity to repent. To turn or to confess. He hears these words of judgment and as they are uttered he falls dead.
4. For Sapphira there is the opportunity that is given—but only once(vs 8-9).
- a. It is fascinating how this unfolds. In our current time frame how Peter handles this would be seen as wrong, unloving, un-Christlike.
 - b. Why not tell her what has happened? The whole church who witnessed this remains silent.
 - c. She stands by the story that she and her husband agreed to. And her life is taken as well.
 - d. Note how we see a bit more of what is happening in her and Ananias' heart in vs 9. The issue is putting the Holy Spirit to the test.
 - (1) This has more Old Testament connections much like the sin of Achan.
 - (2) With the exception of one passage, the idea of Israel putting God to the test always occurs in the wilderness wanderings. Behind this idea of testing God is the belief, or fear, that God will not provide.
 - (3) That is always the real issue for us in our possessions and money. Hedging the bets. Protecting the assets. Don't touch the principle, just the interest. It's called good money management.
 - (4) We do not pray that God would give us our daily bread because we have months of food stored up. Many do not know what it looks like to simply trust that God will handle the unknown as they open their hands and heart in generosity.
 - (5) Do you test the Spirit? Do we as a church test the Spirit?

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5. Peter now functions again like a prophet from the Old Testament. It is a word of doom, of judgment on behalf of God. This is now not redemptive. The decision from God is rendered and Peter faithfully declares it.
 - a. Like her husband, now she lies dead. Notice where in vs 10—at his feet. There is some irony there.
 - b. And think of the poor young men. They just go back from one dead guy and now it starts all over.
6. The question in this story should never be, “Why did God act so swiftly and sternly in this situation?” Rather, we ought to ask why God does not do it more often in such a manner?
7. This couple wanted a place in both realms. They wanted the joy of life in Christ in the future Kingdom. But they also want the security of earthly possessions. But as Jesus said it, “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

III. Conclusion.

- A. So what do we do with this passage? Why is it here? We find an indication in vs 11. *“And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things”* (Acts 5:11).
- B. My point in this whole message is this: God often prepares the church to suffer by making them fear Him more than man.
 1. And the first step in this is making everyone aware of the serious nature of following Him. The call to the gospel is not a light one where you are invited to fix your problems and find happiness. It is a call to deny yourself and take up the shame of the Cross and follow your Lord. But this does not happen until you fear God more than man.
 2. Note that it was not only the Church that began to fear God in a greater manner; but all who heard of these events.
 3. There is always a group of people in a church who sees the non-Christian as facing the judgment of God. They may not verbalize it but it is on their minds. But this is not a proper way to approach it. It is short-sighted and it can result in a lot of pain and shock of mind.
 - a. We forget that the way of the Cross is suffering when we don’t suffer much at all.
 - b. We begin to think that we will be exempt and we relax. Or things are going so well that we think it will stay this way.

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- c. This is the situation in Acts but suffering is coming. Death for some. Many will be scattered throughout the land. All because they believed in Jesus as the promised One of old.
- C. 1 Peter 4:12-17 gives to us this idea in a more doctrinal manner.
 - a. (12) Peter is writing to a group of surprised Christians and there is a bit of irony in his wording. Why are they so shocked? But, of course, we all find ourselves shocked when it comes our way.
 - b. (13-16) Instead he tells them to examine the nature of their suffering.
 - (1) If it is on behalf of Jesus Christ—then rejoice.
 - (2) Listen beloved, “Joy is **not** connected to our experiences.” It is to be connected to Jesus Christ.
 - (3) If, however, it is due to your own foolishness and sin then there is nothing to rejoice about. The only thing you can do is bear up under the suffering with repentance endurance. And at its end, rise up and go do what is good and right.
 - (4) To suffer for the name of Christ (14) is a blessed, happy thing.
 - (a) Peter is faithfully teaching these believers what he was taught himself. In Matthew 5:11-12 Jesus taught him, “Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. 12 "Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” This was confirmed in his own suffering later in the early church.
 - (b) One man pointed out that faith realizes that the ground for rejoicing does not lie in the sufferings themselves, but in the fellowship with Christ that they bring. The Spirit is present in these times of suffering, bearer and carrying you through them.
 - c. Now notice vs 17. The “for” tells us why we are to be happy in suffering for Christ.

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- (1) Peter is assuring the people that God has not forgotten them, rather, He was at work in the midst of their sufferings.
 - d. God is at work cleansing and maturing His people. He is removing that which is inconsistent with His character
 - (1) *“In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glo necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious ry and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6-7).*
 - (a) *“. . . that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27).*
 - (2) And as that is accomplished, He then moves on to the unbeliever and that is a much more severe judgment. For they suffer His wrath.
 - (a) What are they defined as being? Those who do not obey the gospel.
 - (b) This is their character, they reject and react against the gospel.
2. Beloved, God cleansed this early church of sin.
- a. But do not think these two were the only ones sinning. These were the ones God chose to deal with to make an example.
 - b. The two who died are of less importance than the many who were left alive. You can imagine how many put away their pet sin on that day.
 - c. People became very afraid that day. They served a good God, but not a safe God.
 - d. Judgment begins with God’s people. It prepares them to suffer because they now fear God more than what any man can do.

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Benediction

May we stand firm against the spiritual powers that press upon us in the strength of the Lord and in His might. May we take up the full armor of God so that we might resist and stand fast in these evil days. May we walk in the peace that comes through the gospel of Jesus Christ and we live in the power of the Spirit to the glory of the Father. Amen.