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Acts 5:1-16 (read vv.1-11) “Hypocrites in the Church!”

Intro. So far in our study of the book of Acts, we have read about a church in victory. Beginning with only 120, thousands of people in Jerusalem came to believe in Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. God worked wonderfully in the lives of His people. Lives had been transformed for the better. Love and unity prevailed in this early church. They had come to experience the forgiveness of sins and wanted to share with everyone how they too could know the same One Who died for all. It seemed nothing could stop this army of Christian soldiers. How can you stop Truth? The rulers tried in Chapter 4, but God’s people took the problem to the Lord in prayer, were then filled with the Spirit and boldness, and kept on preaching with great success.

Well, Satan was ready to try a new approach. In fact, Peter recognized the hand of Satan in what happened as we can see from v.3. So in chapter 5 we are introduced to a new kind of problem. If Satan could not stop the church from without, he would try to corrupt the church from within. This problem that we are to examine today is much more serious and still plagues us today. So I call upon you to open your heart and let God speak to you through His Word.

Let us see first of all from our text:

I. THE PROBLEM OF THE CHURCH

Yes, the early church was a great church. But even the vibrant church of Acts had its share of problems. So a change of atmosphere is heralded by the opening word, “But” (*de*). Beginning with that word in chapter 5, we are told of a serious problem in the church. We should not expect to find a perfect church. Spurgeon is reputed to have counseled a man seeking his help in finding a perfect group of God’s people that if he found one, he should not join it, for if he did, it would no longer be perfect. [Harrison, p.94]. You are not going to find a perfect church. So don’t let the sins of the church keep you from God or His church.

Now let consider first the underlying cause of this problem in the church. Notice:

A. The Design of Satan – We see from v.3 that this problem in the church was instigated by Satan. He always wants to stop the work of God. He wants to drag everyone to hell with him. It is often when things are going so well with God’s people that the enemy comes in and seeks to subvert the work and destroy the fellowship. It must have been a source of grief to Peter that so early in the life of the Church, Satan had been successful in making damaging inroads. But this should not have surprised Peter. Jesus told the parable in which Satan places tares among the wheat. Furthermore, Satan corrupted Israel and defeated them from within before he could defeat them from without.

So we need to understand the design of Satan. Paul said in 2 Cor. 2:11, “...we are not ignorant of his devices.” Satan wants to destroy this church, and every church that is proclaiming the gospel and teaching God’s Word.

Well, we see that the design of Satan led to:

B. The Deception of Ananias and Sapphira – Let me start by giving you some background. Look back in chapter 4, vv. 34-35, “Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.” A wave of generosity swept the church. In vv.35-36 we read of a specific example of such generosity. Barnabas sold a field and brought the money to the apostles. In such an atmosphere of generosity, we read in vv.1-2, “But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. 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.” Ananias did not want to appear to be stingy, so he followed the example of others by selling property, and placing the money down at the apostles’ feet. He stood there smiling, congratulating himself on his generosity, and others were probably congratulating him as well. But for some reason, Peter was not smiling. He knew there was sin in his heart. Peter says in v.3, “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?” He kept back part of the sale of the land though he was giving the impression that he was giving at all. Then we see from v.7 that about 3 hours later his wife came to the assembly. Why did she arrive 3 hours later? Was she was preparing dinner? Perhaps she was out spending some of the money! Well, in v.8 we see that Peter asked if she and her husband had sold the land for such and such a price. They must have conspired together, and so she said yes. She lied also!

The sin was not necessarily keeping part of the sale of the property. There was no compulsion put on Ananias to force him to sell their property or to give it all. Look at what Peter asked in v.4, “Wasn’t it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn’t it at your disposal?” If they had been honest and straight-forward and come to the apostles and said, “We have kept some but here is the balance to be used,” it would have been all right. But instead, they lied in saying that the money they brought was the total price of the land.

So the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was hypocrisy, a form of lying. The word “hypocrite” (*hupokrites*) comes from the Greek word for a play actor who wore a mask and acted like someone else. Ananias, in the effort to gain a reputation for greater generosity than he actually deserved, tried to deceive the Church into believing that he was also a very generous person, like Barnabas.

When you date someone, you see them in their best behavior. They always try to look nice when they are with you. They want to treat you well. But after you get married, you get a better picture of what they are really like! So let me ask you, are you just dating Jesus? Do we just see you one way at church, but you are actually different when you are with other people? Make sure you Christian life is more than an act.

People continue to come into the Church acting hypocritically. They pretend to be devoted; they act committed; they look holy and sanctified. But they have ulterior motives behind their actions. Hypocrisy is a serious sin, for it makes you most like the devil. Jesus said of the devil in John 8:44, “he is a liar and the father of it.” Our Lord Jesus had strong words for hypocrites. In Mt. 23:27, 28 He said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

We must not only guard against hypocrisy, but we also need to be careful lest we let Satan “fill” us as he did with Ananias and Sapphira. This is how people we least expect end up stealing from a church or having extramarital affairs. Though v.3 shows that what happened was inspired by Satan, v.4 shows that it was the responsibility of Ananias to resist the solicitation of the evil one. 1

Pet. 5:8 says, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” Therefore, he says in v.9, “Resist him, steadfast in the faith...” (cf. James 4:7). Otherwise, a drug addict who is wonderfully converted may, in a time of discouragement and spiritual weakness, give in to his old habit “just once.” But that one opening triggers a process that sends him spiraling down to his old life.

Now if we are going to be vigilant, and avoid the terrible sin of hypocrisy, we need to understand why Ananias and Sapphira committed this terrible sin of hypocrisy. One sin tends to lead to another. Well first of all, they committed this deception:

1. Because of the Love of Human Praise - We read in 4:37 that Barnabas had sold land and laid the proceeds down at the apostles’ feet. His gift was not secret, and evidently, he must have received quite a bit of praise for his generosity. It is obvious that Ananias and Sapphira were imitating Barnabas and others. I believe that they wanted the same praise and recognition for themselves. They lied to win the same sort of esteem that Barnabas had won in the church.

In Phil. 2:3 Paul warned against “vain glory.” Too often social media becomes a platform for seeking praise, recognition and fame, which can then lead to pride. Yet pride is a barrier to the work of God in our lives. Later, Peter wrote in 1 Peter 5:5, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (cf. Jas. 4:6).

The temptation to seek a higher reputation than is our due is too common today as well. So let us take warning from the example of Ananias. If you serve God in this church to receive praise and applause, then you are guilty of one of the sins of Ananias and Sapphira, and you are more likely to manifest hypocrisy.

Another reason they committed this act of deception was:

2. Because of the Love of Money - 1 Tim. 6:10 warns that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. He may have initially intended to give all of the money from the sale. That’s because the word translated “kept back” (*nosphizomai*) in v.2 means “to separate for oneself,” (middle voice). It can even mean “to pilfer, embezzle,” as in Titus 2:10. The LXX uses this word for Achan, who kept some of the booty from the spoils of war that had been devoted to God (Josh. 7:1). This suggests that Luke deliberately drew on the language of the Old Testament. I can imagine that when they sold the land and had the money in hand, they decided that it was just too much to give. They started thinking about what they could do with all that money! So they kept back part of it to retain for their own use. The love of money got the best of them.

Have you ever intended to give God a certain amount, but instead keep back part of it for yourself? In Mal. 3:8 God rebuked the people for robbing Him of His tithes and offerings. Don’t let the love of money cause you to hold back from God what you have committed to Him.

So having seen the problem in the church, now let us see from our text:

II. THE PURGING OF THE CHURCH

The devil had made his way into the church. Could this go on unchallenged? No! Paul said, “And do not give the devil a foothold” (Eph. 4:27). Peter knew that truth and he had to take action quickly. Notice what needs to be done in such cases:

A. Such Sin Must Be Exposed – Hypocrisy is hiding the truth from view. So in v.3 we see Peter exposing their sin to full view. Evidently his sin was exposed publicly before the whole church. Peter did according to what Paul later taught in Eph. 5:11, “And have no fellowship with

the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.” Peter did not waste any time exposing the sin of Ananias and Sapphira.

You may say, “That won’t happen to me. My pastor doesn’t know what I’ve done.” But you know all sin will eventually be exposed. Why? It is because of what Peter says in v.4, “You have not lied to men but to God.” Peter knew only because the Holy Spirit revealed it to him. And my friend, God knows what you are doing. Sin may be hidden from men, but not from God. He sees right through the hypocrisy. Jesus said in Lk. 12:1b-3, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops.” Num. 32:23b says, “Be sure your sin will find you out.” Revelation 20 teaches that every sin you commit is written down in the books of works, and shall be revealed on Judgment Day, unless those sins are blotted out by the blood of Christ (Acts 3:19). You can’t hide anything from God, for He is omniscient. He knows all things.

Peter Popoff, a televangelist faith healer and self-proclaimed Christian prophet, was exposed as a fraud when it was uncovered that his wife was communicating information to him about candidates for healing through a hidden earpiece.

Peter did not ignore such a serious sin, and neither should we. But I must ask myself, Would I do the same as Peter did if I knew that a big donation coming our way was tainted by sin? We are often tempted to ignore such problems and hope that they will clear up or at least not come to the surface. But when we do that, we let a deadly cancer into our community life that will eat into its spiritual vitality. We must deal with our sins the moment we face them.

B. Unconfessed Sin Will Be Judged – In the case of Ananias judgment fell upon him immediately. His death was probably inflicted directly by God. God gives life, and He has the right to take life. His wife Sapphira was judged as well. 1 Cor. 11:30 indicates that some in the Corinthian church had died because of their continued involvement in a serious sin. 1 John 5:16 warns of sin unto death. If those who lied to God in our churches were to drop dead, we would have a lot of funerals!

Speaking of funerals, as soon as he died, the young men came in to bury him. The time for burial was short in Jerusalem for sanitary reasons and to avoid ceremonial defilement. In this case, burial was so quick his wife missed the funeral! (Note that young people¹ were involved in the church from the earliest days). The young men were better suited for carrying heavy objects. I’m thankful for the young men that help us move the pulpit when we need to do so!

Why was their judgment so swift and severe?

1. To Reveal the Holiness of God - The first notable sin in the Church needed to be dealt with in an emphatic way. The Church’s infancy needed profound revelation of the holiness of God and the nature of sin. Likewise, in the early days of Israel, there were similar cases of quick and severe judgment to emphasize the holiness of God, and the need to keep Israel pure. This was especially true during key revelatory periods. Think of the many in Ex. 32 that were judged following the sin of the golden calf (vv.19-28). In Lev. 10:1-3 we read of Aaron’s two sons who sinned even while serving as priests, and they were devoured by a fire from God. In Num. 16 we read of Korah’s rebellion and consequent judgment. The earth opened up and swallowed them alive! In Joshua 7 Achan sinned in a similar fashion to Ananias. He was filled with greed. He interrupted the victorious progress of the people of God. And so Joshua ordered a severe judgment

¹ The Greek word is *neoteros*, comparative of *neos*, literally “the younger (people).”

against him, and even his entire household. We typically will not see such swift judgment today, but God has revealed once and for all what he thinks of such sin.

Our society takes sin lightly. They either deny sin, or say it is no big deal with only a few exceptions. Yet if you want to see another example of God's holy attitude toward sin, look also to the cross. How else do you explain the intense suffering of Jesus, who died for our sins, if sin is no big deal?

God also judged them severely:

2. Because Sin Corrupts Others – Paul addressed the problem in Corinth of a church member who was committing immorality with his father's wife. And so Paul said in 1 Cor. 5:6, "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" Sin has a way of spreading to others like a cancer, especially when the church just looks the other way and does nothing. Sin especially spreads when a *prominent* church member commits a major sin.

3. Because Sin Hinders Our Witness - The early church was seeking to proclaim the Truth, but two of the members were speaking and living a lie! How inconsistent. There was an imperative need for integrity if the work was to gain acceptance by the populace. So often when we witness to someone, they will bring up about what preacher so and so did, or what deacon so and so did. Our witness becomes ineffective.

Once when John MacArthur was visiting a jail, he met a prisoner who was quite vocal about his being a Christian. When asked if he had been converted while in prison, he answered no. When he told him that he was jailed for ignoring 30 or so parking tickets, Dr. MacArthur strongly suggested that he not advertise the fact he was a Christian. His life was a testimony against Christ.²

So what are you to do if you realize that you have sinned?

C. Exercise Self-Judgment - God does discipline His children (Heb. 12)! But how can we avoid it? The best solution is self-judgment. Paul says in 1 Cor. 11:31, "For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged." And the way we judge ourselves is by self-examination (1 Cor. 11:28), and confessing our sins to God (1 Jn. 1:9). In v.8 Peter was giving Sapphira the opportunity to confess the truth. He said, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" Instead of speaking the truth, she said, "Yes, for so much." She covered up her sin with a lie! We should do what 1 John 1:7 says, "if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." Instead of hiding our sin in the darkness, we should shine the light of God upon our sin. Then we can avoid the chastening hand of God.

Now if you don't exercise self-judgment, then other believers in the church should confront you, and encourage repentance. If that doesn't happen, then God may chastise you Himself. His chastisement can be pretty rough. So be wise. Confess you sins. Repent of your sins.

Now because the church was purged of sin, notice last of all:

III. THE POWER OF THE CHURCH

In these verses we see what God will do through a purified church. Purged of sin within its ranks, the church once more enjoyed the blessing of God. Notice what we see in our text:

² John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), Illus.#C-984.

A. New Fear and Reverence of God – In v.11 Luke says, “So great fear came upon all the church³ and upon all who heard these things.” That’s not surprising in light of what just happened! This was a fear of displeasing God that comes from a knowledge of His holiness and the consequences of our sin.

Do you know why some people live the way they do? It is because they do not fear God. With too many, “there is no fear of God before their eyes,” as Paul said in Rom. 3:18. So we need a Great Awakening to the reality that God knows your sin and holds you accountable for it if you do not repent. Hebrews 12:28-29 says, “let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire.”

When we fear the holiness of God and the consequences of sin, we avoid sin. When I was just a boy we would go around looking for deposit bottles to get a little money for candy. We could get about 2¢ per bottle when we turned them in. As we were out and about, we came up to the back of a church and found case after case of drink bottles. I was tempted to take some, but the fear of God kept me from doing so, especially since I would be stealing from a church!

Yet the same God that we fear is the also the God who loves us and forgives us when we sin. He is the God who gives us peace and joy as we turn from sin.

This purging of sin also resulted in a:

B. New Commitment – We read beginning in the last of v.12, “And they were all with one accord in Solomon’s Porch.⁴ Yet none of the rest dared join them....” With Peter pronouncing almost instant death upon Ananias and Sapphira for what to many appeared to be a relatively minor infraction, the church’s fellowship was not for everybody. Only committed believers would continue to attend their worship services. Others would think twice before professing faith in Christ in order to share in the common fund of the church. It was already a dangerous thing to be a follower of Christ unless one was willing to walk straight. So for a little while, there may have been few converts. Yet, before long, another result of what happened was:

C. New Converts – In v.14 we read, “And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” This may seem like a contradiction, but it is not. Though initially unbelievers tended to avoid joining the assembly of believers, there was such a power in the church that people were getting saved outside the assembly, in homes and elsewhere.

Finally, this purging resulted in a:

D. New Influence – The news spread throughout Jerusalem and the surrounding area of the power of the apostles, and of the church. So we read in v.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.” After the reports of this incident got out, the esteem of Peter grew in the eyes of the people. They would be content if even the shadow of Peter touched the sick that were brought to him. Then we read in v.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

³ This is the first of twenty-three times that the word *ekklesia* appears in Acts, though the word is found in Acts 2:47 in the Textus Receptus.

⁴ This was the portico built by Solomon in the eastern part of the temple (which in the temple’s destruction by the Babylonians was left uninjured), and remained down to the time of King Agrippa, to whom the care of the temple was entrusted by the emperor Claudius, and who on account of its antiquity dare not demolish it and build anew.

healed.” For the first time we read of people from outside the city, bringing their loved ones for healing. What a great influence! Because the church was pure, the church was powerful.

What about our influence? Are we so walking with God that people like to come in contact with us? Or is there so little of Christ about us, and are we so self-centered and worldly that no one would think of bringing people within our influence to be blessed and helped?

Conclusion: As we observe the Lord’s Supper this morning, do some honest self-examination, and confess your sins to God. Then receive God’s forgiveness that is promised.

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).