

## EXPOSITION OF ACTS

### Message #13

Acts 4:32-5:10

There are many theological institutions and many ministries that have learned the tactic of sending out very professionally designed mailings to play on your sympathies to get your money. They talk about their various needs and show heart-touching pictures. Some try to manipulate your giving by promoting the idea that if you don't give, their operation will completely shut down. One commentator rightly observed that if the apostles were here, they would be shocked at the way the Christian church solicits money. **The early church, which was a church dynamically empowered by the Holy Spirit, was completely funded by voluntary giving.**

When the early church was making great progress because it was in tune with the Holy Spirit, giving was generous and voluntary. There was no coercion. There was no compulsion. There was no manipulation. There were no rules, there were no regulations, and there were no pledges. What people don't realize about faith pledges, as Dr. S. Lewis Johnson once said, is that they "fail to realize that God has promised to meet the needs of his believers and of the bodies of believers" (*Acts 4:32-5:16*, p. 4).

When a church starts trying to humanly create means to generate funding for the work of God, it has just turned away from trusting God and depending on God to supply its needs. Churches that truly trust God do not have faith pledges or faith promises. They pray and ask God to supply the needs and they depend on the Lord and they get the work done.

What happens here in Acts must be understood in that very context. In **verses 31-37**, the Holy Spirit was powerfully and uniquely at work among the believers in Jerusalem in six ways:

**(Holy Spirit Unique Work #1)** - There was a unity of heart and soul among all believers. **4:32a**

This church was united at the deepest possible core level, which is a uniting of heart and soul. These were true "soul brothers" and "soul sisters."

**(Holy Spirit Unique Work #2)** - There was an unselfishness with their possessions. **4:32b**

Apart from Christ transforming a heart and mind, most are not unselfish with what they have; they are selfish with what they have. Most look out for themselves, not others. This was unique.

**(Holy Spirit Unique Work #3)** - There was great authority in apostolic teaching specifically about the resurrection. **4:33a**

Literally the Greek reads there was mega-power (*μεγαλη δυναμει*), which means as the apostles were preaching people sensed a great level of dynamic power and authority in what they were hearing. Their preaching had the power of God in it. People realized the resurrection of Jesus Christ set Him apart as the only God/Savior.

**(Holy Spirit Unique Work #4)** - There was abundant grace upon them all. **4:33b**

Keep in mind that this group had been dominated by O.T. law in Jerusalem. Now “mega grace” was upon them all. The Holy Spirit was setting them free from man’s tradition, man’s rules and rigid legalism. There was a realization of grace at a mega level.

**(Holy Spirit Unique Work #5)** - There was a unique benevolence with the apostles. **4:34-35**

There is no hint that the apostles asked people to do this, but God’s Spirit was moving with great power, and because of it some owners of land and houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles so they could distribute it to those who had need. Giving to the church was an important part of church life.

**(Holy Spirit Unique Work #6)** - There was a leading Jew who contributed to the apostolic ministry. **4:36-37**

Now one man is singled out and named because there is a clear connection between him and what takes place in chapter 5. A Levite, named Joseph of Cyprus, a Mediterranean island, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles, owned a track of land and sold it and brought all the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. This was not solicited by the apostles. God did not command people to do this, he just did it. The name Barnabas means Son of Encouragement, which does appear to have been his spiritual gift. He was a great, generous, honest, cheerful giver.

Barnabas will become a powerful man of God and will be closely linked to the Apostle Paul. In fact, Luke will later say of him that he is “a good man and full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (Acts 11:23-24). It all starts here; he used what he had to invest in eternity. He was more focused on the spiritual than the material. This is a critical factor to what takes place.

This was a very generous thing for this leading Jew to do. What must have happened is that because of this act, Barnabas was greatly admired and respected and praised for this action. He was given a new name by the apostles and all esteemed him.

I do believe that the best investments that will pay us the greatest dividends are investments we make for the Lord’s work. In the long run, our best investments will not be what we deposited in a bank, but what we deposited in heaven. By the way, please observe the investment here concerned that local church, not foreign missions. God viewed the money given to help the believers in Jerusalem as giving that would lay up treasures in heaven. At this point, the apostles are running the local church in Jerusalem.

**What happens in Acts 5:1-10 is that Ananias and Sapphira saw what Barnabas did and apparently wanted the same kind of praise.** They already had wonderful names. Ananias means one who has been graced by God, and Sapphira means one who is beautiful. William Arnot said Barnabas and Ananias are contrasted to show the difference between genuine and counterfeit spirituality and generosity (*Studies in Acts*, p. 102). J. A. Bengel said these two had

good names but they had bad morals. We must assume that Ananias and Sapphira discussed what Barnabas had done, and they decided to sell some of their land holdings and give some of the money to the church. Land in Jerusalem is at a premium and would sell quickly, and apparently when it did sell they got a good price for it. **At some point in the process, they decided that the amount they got for their land was so large they determined not to give it all, but to pretend to give all.**

**The sin they commit is not one of refusing to contribute; the sin was pretending before this church that they had given all of the money, when in fact they had not. They want a reputation like Barnabas without having the reality of heart like Barnabas.**

**Verses 1-2** set the stage for this. They sold a piece of property, kept some of the money for themselves, and brought some to the apostles and laid it at their feet pretending they were just like Barnabas. No one asked them to sell this land and give the money to the church. No one solicited this. No one begged them for one dime. They decided on their own to give a portion to the church and pretend it was all of it. Kent Hughes said he probably waited until the organ was playing “I Surrender All” and went forward and put the money at the feet of the apostles (*Acts*, p. 76). **The actual sin here is pretending that part was all.** That was the lie. This is not some casual deception; this is intentional deception. They intentionally planned this and did this. **They wanted the church to admire them so they pretended something that wasn’t real.**

It is a terrible thing to try to deceive the Holy Spirit by pretending that part of something is all of something. It is serious and satanic. There are some who pretend they really have given all of themselves to God, when in fact only part is actually committed to God. When it comes to a relationship with God, hypocrisy is not tolerated, honesty is promoted. God cannot stand and will not tolerate pretended devotion to Him.

**BELIEVERS WHO PRETEND TO BE SOMETHING THEY ARE NOT, ESPECIALLY IN GIVING, ARE ACTUALLY LYING TO GOD AND THEY WILL RECEIVE HIS JUDGMENT .**

Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be noticed by the church. They will get noticed alright, but not for the reason they wanted. They wanted a little praise, a little acclaim, and a little recognition. They wanted a little limelight. As Kenneth Gangel said, “This couple wanted acclaim without sacrifice, and comfort without commitment” (*Acts*, p. 74). This is critical. God does not judge humble, broken-down sinners who admit truth about themselves. God does not judge one who is honest about things before Him. However, when you get someone who wants to publicly be noticed in the church that is living a lie, it is dangerous business.

They decided that the way to get it was to pretend to give equally as impressive to what Barnabas had given. But God does not play games with people in His church. God knows every person. He knows who is real and who is pretending. He knows who tells the truth and who lives a lie. He knows who gives sacrificially and who doesn’t. There is nothing wrong with giving a portion and not giving everything. What is wrong is pretending to give more than what one actually gives. Obviously God knows how much we give and how much we don’t give. He keeps the

record of who gives what to His church. These two wanted to pretend in front of everyone that they gave more than they did. There are three simple straight forward parts to this critical story from the early church:

**PART #1 - Peter confronts Ananias. 5:3-4**

At this point the apostles could see straight through phonies. The Holy Spirit enabled them to do that. They could look someone in the eyes and tell whether or not they were real in their dedication to Jesus Christ and the church. Sometimes we are able to do something similar, especially if an individual has an established track record.

Now in **verse 3** Peter said why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit by pretending you have given everything, when in fact you have only given a partial amount? You will notice in **verse 4** that Peter says you have lied to God, which proves the Holy Spirit is in fact Deity.

Peter acknowledges in **verse 4** that the land belonged to them and they could do what they want with it. But he conceived a plan to pretend to give everything, when in fact he had not done it. What a sham. **Here was a man at church pretending to be in tune with the Spirit when in fact he was more in tune with Satan.**

Peter said you have lied to the Holy Spirit and you have lied to God. We must carefully see this and understand this - **Whatever we profess before men at church we profess before God in heaven. Whatever we profess to be before people at church, we had better be before God in heaven.**

Now I want us to carefully see something critical here about the work of Satan. **Satan can tempt you to do something (verse 3), but notice carefully Ananias conceived this in his own heart (verse 4).** You can as a believer be filled with the Spirit or filled with satanic things.

**The aorist tense of the verb “filled” (verse 3) means that at one point of time Satan presented a full, complete idea to the heart and mind of Ananias.** The idea he presented was to give a portion of the money to the church and pretend it was all of the money. **However, Ananias looked at the idea in his own mind and heart and contemplated it and he decided to do it (verse 3). Satan didn’t make him do this and couldn’t make him do this. He did this on his own.**

Satan cannot possess a believer, but he can present ideas to your mind and heart. At that time we decide to yield to him or God’s Spirit. When people pretend at church to be something they aren’t or pretend to give more than what they actually give, you may be certain that they are not led of God and that they truly anger God.

**PART #2 - Ananias drops dead and is carried out and buried. 5:5-6**

Can you imagine if Peter would have been a modern day counselor speaking to Ananias? He probably would have said, “Well let’s just overlook your pretending because you obviously have some personality weakness or some psychological problems. We understand you and Sapphira are under a lot of pressure. Probably you were insecure as a child and playacting or pretending is just a defense mechanism you use from time to time to cope with life. It is a sickness, and let’s get you some medication and counseling to help you.” Peter did not say that - he said **Ananias you are a liar (verse 4). It isn’t that you lied to men, you have lied to God.**

**When Ananias heard these words he dropped dead.** Some have said they think he died because of the shock of getting caught. But that is not what happened. **God killed Ananias right in this church.** He dropped dead at church because of his playacting. **By the way, Peter did not do this to Ananias; God did.** His death was due to his Pharisaical sin. There is a sin unto death and this was one of them. **This is the second miracle of the Church Age. The first was to heal a cripple, and the second was to kill a liar.**

Now typically punishment for hypocritical sin does not happen instantly. But we may be certain that one who is playing games will be tracked down by God eventually.

Now some have questioned whether or not Ananias and Sapphira were actually saved. Some suggest they weren’t real believers. However a great majority of scholars assume they were. These were born again Christians who were pretending that they were doing more than what they were actually doing. They were not real. There is a warning here specifically to Grace Age believers that there is a sin unto death (I John 5:16-17; I Cor. 11:27-30). In both the O.T. and the N.T. there were times when God physically executed His own people because of their sin, and this is one of those times.

If God were to kill all people today who go to church pretending to be something they are not, we would have to have our own morgue. Dr. S. Lewis Johnson said we would have to have three offices in the church - “elders, deacons and pall bearers” (*Ibid*, p. 7). Immediately young men covered him up and carried him out and buried him. This would certainly make a statement to the young people in church.

Notice carefully from **verse 5** that “great fear came upon all who heard of it.” That same phrase will occur again in **verse 11**. **When God sends some judgment upon someone in the church, it is for the purpose of getting His church to fear and reverence Him and not pretend to be something we aren’t.**

**Also notice that when God sends this kind of judgment against someone in the church, they all know why it happened.** This would certainly make a statement to all people of the church that you don’t pretend to be something you aren’t. **A powerful church is not a pretending one.**

The famed Presbyterian preacher Donald Grey Barnhouse would not let his congregation sing the third verse of “At Calvary” which says, “Now I’ve given to Jesus everything, now I gladly own Him as my King” because of this text. Kent Hughes said that if God acted the same way today as He did in the early church, everyone singing the song, including the pastoral staff, would drop dead.

Lying to the Holy Spirit is a sin that Christians do often today. People intentionally lie and pretend all kinds of things. I know of a case in which a woman claimed she had led something in a church and come to find out she just helped a little bit. She wanted everyone to think she was the kingpin which was an outright lie. I knew of a minister who said he studied hard to feed his flock, when in fact, he didn’t study at all. He was giving them canned messages.

I know of a man who stood before a congregation professing he was really right with God and he was pursuing an immoral lifestyle that eventually put him in jail. People will pretend to read through the Scriptures and pretend to be prayer warriors and pretend to be really concerned about building the church, when nothing is actually farther from truth.

God wants us coming to church and worshipping Him and He certainly knows we are all sinners. However, He does not want us coming pretending to be something we aren’t. When you come, come just as you are, admitting truth. You come to church humbly and honestly.

In Luke’s Gospel there is an interesting account of two men who come to worship God. One was a very religious Pharisee and another was a sinful tax collector. The Pharisee did all kinds of external religious stuff. He fasted and gave tithes and publicly prayed and strutted around for all people to see. The tax collector wouldn’t even look up toward heaven, but simply said God, be merciful to me, a sinner (Luke 18:9-14). It was the tax collector who was right with God, not the Pharisee. You come to worship God as you are. Don’t pretend to be more than you are and you’ll be fine. But walk around church pretending to be some spiritual giant, when deep down you know it isn’t true and you are heading to serious judgment.

### **PART #3 – Peter confronts Sapphira. 5:7-10**

According to **verse 7**, about three hours had passed since Ananias dropped dead and his wife Sapphira came in, not knowing what had happened. This church must have been a tight lipped operation because no one had said one word to her about this.

In **verse 8**, Peter gives Sapphira her own opportunity to not lie and make this right. He gives her her own opportunity to tell the truth and come clean. He asks her whether the amount they gave to the church was the full amount of the land sale and she said, “Yes.” Here we go again, *deja vu*. She wanted people to look at her and think she was really special when in fact, she was a liar. James Montgomery Boice tells the story of a little boy who asked his mother a question: “Why, mom, when I do something wrong I am a bad boy, but when you do something wrong it is your nerves?” Fact is we can begin to justify anything, except before God.

In **verse 9** Peter told her what happened to her husband was about to happen to her and it did. She too dropped dead and was carried out and buried next to her husband. God killed her just like He killed Ananias. Observe that all Peter did was to confront sin and tell the truth and God took care of the results.

I believe one day we will learn that there were many believers who are weak, sick, and have died because they pretended to be something at church that wasn't real. They came and worshipped and took the Lord's Supper but did not honestly examine themselves before God. This is why Paul said, examine yourself. Again, notice **verse 11**, great fear came upon the "whole church."

**Why was God so hard on these two? Because at the beginning of the Church Age, He wanted to send a strong signal that the church can be poisoned through hypocrisy.** Often times "hypocrite" is a noun used as a cliché for those who go to church, and often it is true. God wants us honest and real. We live in a world of lies and deception. The Church of God must be a place of honesty and integrity. The more we are becoming this; the more power we will manifest.

#### **Parting Thoughts:**

- 1) God does keep track of how much people give to His church, and those who are sacrificial and generous and cheerful about their giving will be praised.
- 2) God knows all those who are deceitful and arrogant.
- 3) The reputation we want with God is that we are honest and real before Him.
- 4) God's judgment is an individual judgment in that we give our own account to God.

Let me ask a probing question to all of us here. What is God seeing right now as He looks deep into our heart? We sing, "My Jesus, I love Thee; I know Thou art mine; For Thee all the follies of sin I resign." Is that true? God can and will do great things with people who are honest and humble; but He will not do anything with Pharisaical play actors except to judge them. Be real when you come to church.