

## Truth or Consequences

- Acts 5:1-16
- Some of you know who Johnny Football is. I am not talking about Johnny Unitas, which is the name that every man over 50 in here might have thought of. The younger men know I am talking about Johnny Manziel, the first freshman football player ever to win the Heisman Trophy, which he did last season. He is quarterback for the Texas A&M Aggies and he came under considerable scrutiny when sources came out who said Manziel had agreed to sign hundreds of photographs and items of sports memorabilia in exchange for a five-figure flat fee during his trip to Miami for the Discover BCS National Championship last January. Both sources said they witnessed the signing, though neither saw the actual exchange of money. This story escalated into a huge deal, partly because the coach of the Texas A&M football team would not sit down with his star quarterback and ask him a simple question: did you do it? And most of the sports world was saying, "Hey, if he did and got away with it, he better not admit it. He will be ruled ineligible and we won't be able to see Johnny Football anymore, at least not in college." I was amazed at that. But I was thankful for at least one ESPN analyst, former coach Herm Edwards say this: "If I were his coach, I'd sit him down and ask, 'did you do it?' Because what is most important in this whole matter is the truth. If my players won't tell me the truth, they won't be playing for me any more." I think God had the same game plan when it came to the brand new church. That's what we see in today's story: if you won't tell the truth, your playing career will get a lot shorter. Let's look at this account in the book of Acts and seek to understand the story itself, which is fairly self-explanatory, and then look at the lessons we learn from the story. Then we will see the way this event brought about great blessing to the church. Story, lessons, blessing.
- The Story
- Remember last week we were introduced to Barnabas, the man whose real name was Joseph but was so encouraging he got a nickname from the apostles: Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement." He sold a field that he owned, and brought the proceeds from that sale and laid the money at the apostles' feet. That must have created quite a stir, and others were doing similar things in the church, which everybody was talking about. So Ananias and Sapphira decide to get in on this action. They hatch a plot to sell some property themselves, and then put back part of the money, and the plan was that Ananias would bring the rest to the church and lay it at the apostles' feet. Or maybe they sold the property and once they had the cash in hand, they started talking about all that they could do with that money, and instead of giving it all they decided to give a portion as IF it were all. One of those two scenarios, and we don't know which, because they both had the same root and would produce the same rotten fruit. If you look at Barnabas' and Ananias' actions, on the surface, they were exactly the same. Both sold a piece of property. Both brought money and laid it at the apostles' feet. That's the picture on the outside. So, Ananias' blood must have run cold when Peter looked him in the eye and said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" Peter sees right past the pile of money and into Ananias' heart and recognizes two things: ONE: Satan is at work here to destroy the church if he is able, and TWO: Ananias is a willing partner with the enemy. Peter says, "You have not lied to man but to God." In other words, Ananias, you made yourself believe that God does not see everything that goes on in the church. You thought you could get away with pretending to be something that you're not. It has nothing to do with your property or even the sale of it: it was your land, and you had the right to sell it or keep it. The money from the sale was your money, and you had the right to keep it or give it away. You chose to lie to God instead. Notice that Ananias didn't utter a word. All he could do at that moment was drop dead at Peter's feet, **possibly falling right on top of his money**

**that he loved so much.** Then the young men came in and carried him out. We have young men on the ready here at Antioch to come in every Sunday and carry out...the offering.

- Meanwhile, back at home, Sapphira is excitedly awaiting either Ananias or someone else to appear at the door. She may have had a vision of one of the wives of a prominent man in the church, having heard what Ananias has done and his great sacrifice for the church, coming over to see her and saying something like, "You and Ananias are such mighty pillars in the church. You are examples to all of us. Oh, I am humbled by what you have done and I feel so selfish when I think about my husband and I and how little we can give." And Sapphira would blush and say, "Oh, well, you know, it is all for God. To God be the glory! Ananias and I are nothing." She is thinking about all of this, and waiting for SOMEONE to come, even if it is Ananias. Where IS he? Finally after three hours, she couldn't wait any more. There's no way they are going to be having a big party down there, celebrating her husband and his sacrifice for the church, and SHE not be a part of it! It was her property, too! She walks in to see Peter and some of the other apostles standing there, looking fairly grim. No party going on. And no Ananias. Where IS he? Then Peter asked her, "Did you and Ananias sell the land for this price?" Sapphira thinks, "Now, I am going to get what's coming to me! That's why Ananias didn't come home; he wanted me to come here and receive the same reward that he received. She says, "Yes," knowing that it is a lie, and then Peter says, "How is it that you and your husband would agree together to test the Spirit of the Lord? The young men are just back from the graveyard. They just finished burying your husband. Now they will carry you to the same place."
- Two Lessons
- First, God is jealous for the purity of His bride. He will not tolerate hypocrisy. We may tolerate it in ourselves or in one another. God will not. He hates it. We like to quote Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." But we don't often quote the next verse, "And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." (13) Hypocrisy will not be tolerated by God because it destroys our relationship with Him. And each other. John Stott says "Falsehood ruins fellowship." Ananias and Sapphira didn't ruin their fellowship with the church by owning land. Or by selling land and having money. That wasn't the issue. It was their deceit that did it. Even if you commit a sin-- you steal something from someone or you say something to offend someone--those can be easily dealt with. Give back what you stole, and pay restitution if needed. Ask for forgiveness for your unkind words. But if you LIE about stealing or about your words, the cover-up becomes worse than the crime. That is why we used to give "eleven licks for lying" when our children were little. How does the little poem go by Walter Scott? "Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." It is one thing to tell a lie because you are trying to escape consequences for a sin. But if you get away with it, the deadly truth is that you may learn then how to *practice* to deceive! Hypocrisy will not be tolerated by God. It was the besetting sin of the Pharisees. It was mentioned twice in the list of the seven things God hates in Proverbs 6: "a lying tongue" was the second on the list, and "a false witness who breathes out lies" was sixth. It was number nine on God's top ten list, "You shall not bear false witness." Hypocrisy, deception, lying: triplets, genetically identical, equally destructive. God loves His church and will be jealous for her purity.
- Second, God established church discipline as a necessary practice. You may have noticed the severity of this discipline, which God brought upon Ananias and Sapphira, not Peter. Peter was just the man who read the verdict; God was the judge and executioner. And there have been many parallels drawn between this account in the New Testament, at the very beginning days of the church, and the account of Achan in the very beginning days of the occupation of the Promised Land by the children of Israel. Same thing there. Achan took clothes and money

after the destruction of Jericho, even though that had been strictly forbidden. Then he hid them in his tent. FF Bruce wrote, "The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God." God made an example of these men in both time periods. But He also established a practice of church discipline. The sad truth is that the church today often goes to one extreme or the other when it comes to church discipline. Either becoming controlling and abusive in its authority over the people in the church, which is not biblical church discipline and leads to a legalistic, self-righteous, pharisaical congregation. Or becoming so "tolerant" and permissive that no sin is dealt with, which leads to a self-indulgent, fleshly, carnal congregation that is virtually indistinguishable from the world. That's the church, Vance Havner used to say, if you go there, you have to backslide to be in fellowship. It's the church that starts at 11:00 sharp and ends at 12:00 dull. As we have said many times, the purpose of church discipline is to restore. In most cases, to restore the fallen brother to righteous living. In this case, God used it not to restore Ananias and Sapphira, but to restore the church to a healthy fear of the Lord BEFORE Satan could wreak havoc. That leads us to the third point.

- The blessing
- Luke says it twice. Once after Ananias is struck dead by the Lord. Again after Sapphira falls to the same fate. It's our memory verse: "And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things." That's the point. The blessing of the Lord is that church discipline, done in the right way in the midst of God's people, will produce the fear of the Lord. And you will notice that immediately after this event in the life of the first church, "many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles." I believe that the reasons there were so many signs and wonders in the first church were two. First, because it was the beginning, and God used the signs and wonders to confirm His Word. But second, because of this very truth: there was a great fear of the Lord. An awesome wonder at His holiness. A powerful and humble surrender to His authority. A trembling at His Word. Isaiah quoted God as saying, "But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." (Is. 66:2b) When you have a congregation full of people like that, who fear the Lord, here's what happens: people who just want to play church or people who are learning to practice deceit, or people who love to find fault with their brothers and sisters...just stay away. The stakes are too high. That's what verse 13 means: "None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem."
- Vance Havner said, referring to the church in Jerusalem: "People didn't join this church carelessly. They were afraid to. There was a holy awe that kept Tom, Dick, and Harry at a distance. People didn't rush into this fellowship just because it was the nice thing to do. It meant something to unite with this crowd. There was a holy repulsion, and I know of nothing that the church needs more today. It is the last thing we think we need. We are always trying to attract. Our programs, prizes, picnics, and pulpit pyrotechnics are aimed at drawing the people in. Here was a church that made people stand back! We have catered to the world, we have let the world slap the church on the back in coarse familiarity. Here was a church that prospered by repelling!"
- We have to look at verse 14 as we close... "And more than ever, believers were added to the Lord." Luke has lost count now. That's the power of the Holy Spirit at work in a church. May God let us see that in this place.