

April 25, 2021
Serious Business
Acts 5:1-11: Ananias and Sapphira
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When was the last time we saw anyone in the church confronted over financial sin? You know, the categories that we don't like to talk about in church – withholding the tithe, tax evasion, failing to pay a living wage – the things that God spends a lot of time in scripture talking about, but we are hesitant to take very seriously.

Or come to think of it, when was the last time you were part of a church that exercised any sort of community discipline for any sin issue in its midst? One friend that I was talking with jokingly said that Ananias and Sapphira was the last instance of such discipline.

We know that that isn't true. There have been instances throughout church history – I recall one time that I was a guest in a church here in Lethbridge when a member of the church was confronted over sin that had been dealt with according to Matthew 18 – first confronted one on one, then by two or three, and finally, they were called on in the congregation, and publicly stripped of their membership. It was the first time I had ever witnessed such a thing, and the rarity of it left me feeling uncomfortable, shaken, and vulnerable.

That is how I feel when I read the story of Ananias and Sapphira. It brings to the surface all of the stories of judgement that make us squirmy in scripture. It is part of these stories that sometimes get used to justify a theology of being afraid of God. Stories like Achan hiding some treasure that was supposed to be devoted to God in Joshua 7. Or when Uzza put out his hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant, which represented God's presence with his people, and was struck dead because he dared to touch it in 2 Samuel 6.

Even in this story, it ends in fear. "And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things." (Acts 5:11).

This leaves me with many questions. Why did God strike Ananias and Sapphira dead? Was it because they withheld some money? Or was it something else? Why didn't God give them any warnings? Should they have known better? And wasn't this just a tad bit of an over-reaction? Surely the punishment was far more severe than the crime demanded. And finally, what in the world do I need to do to avoid the same fate?

One could be forgiven for reading this passage as purely financial sin. When others in the church are giving the full price of their sold property to the church, then precedence was established, and it looks like Ananias and Sapphira are hedging their bets. They want to security of the kingdom community, without being fully dependent on it.

This is not out of line with other stories in scripture. The story of the rich man in Mark 10:17-27 tells us about the dangers of hanging on to wealth. Jesus' judgement in that story has haunted me for years:

²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

It doesn't seem, however, that this is the reason that God takes the lives of Ananias and Sapphira. Verse 4 tells us that Ananias and Sapphira were free to dispose of both the property and the income from it according to their wishes. The issue was that they lied about it. Wanting the social standing of honor and generosity without taking the full cost of earning it honestly, they contrived a scheme by which they could earn the praises of the church, but still keep their money. In short, they lied.

Yet Peter makes it clear that they didn't just lie to him. They had, in fact, treated the church of God, the bride of Christ, with contempt. They had failed to respect the holiness of God, and his people.

This is why God reacts so strongly. Further, they were warned.

The stories of the Achan and Uzza are the warnings that Ananias and Sapphira needed to heed. Joshua 6:17-19 lays the scene, as Israel prepares to go into the promised land and take the first city, Jericho. These were their instructions:

¹⁷ The city and all that is in it are to be devoted^[a] to the Lord. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. ¹⁸ But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. ¹⁹ All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury."

It wasn't the keeping of the spoils that angered God against Achan, but that he was so contemptuous of God that he stole what had been given to God.

Uzzah is similar. The ark of the covenant represented God's seat in the temple, the symbol of God's very presence among his people. It was among the most sacred of the temple furnishings. So sacred, in fact, that it was placed in the Holy of Holies, a room that others had been destroyed for merely entering. The ark was to be carried only by Levites, and then only suspended between two poles so that the ark was never touched by humans.

So the whole enterprise in 2 Samuel dishonours God. Carried like baggage in the back of an ox cart, the ark is then in danger of falling over. Despite his good intentions, Uzzah touches it, and God destroys him.

At the end of the day, the story of Ananias and Sapphira, like those of Achan and Uzzah, are about treating God with contempt, trying to have the benefits of God and his community, all while refusing to fully enter into what God asks of us.

New Testament Scholar NT Wright says this:

“We don’t like those stories, of course, any more than we like Acts 5, but we can’t have it both ways. If we watch with excited fascination as the early church does wonderful healings, stands up to the bullying authorities, makes converts to right and left, and lives a life of astonishing property-sharing, we may have to face the fact that if you want to be a community which seems to be taking the place of the Temple of the living God you mustn’t be surprised if the living God takes you seriously, seriously enough to make it clear that there is no such thing as cheap grace. If you invoke the power of the holy one, the one who will eventually right all wrongs and sort out all cheating and lying, he may just decide to do some of that work already in advance. God is not mocked. . . We either choose to live in the presence of the God who made the world, and who longs passionately for it to be set right, or we lapse back into some variety of easy-going paganism, even if it has a Christian veneer to it. Holiness, in other words, is not an optional extra.” (NT For Everyone Commentary, Acts 5:1-11).

I fear that we, the modern Church of God in his creation, may have fallen into a trap that fails to recognize the awesome, all encompassing, and deadly serious nature of our God. This is the God on whom no one can look without dying. This is the God of whom the great poem of Job speaks in Job 38:4-15:

*“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?
On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone—
while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels ^a shouted for joy?
“Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,
when I made the clouds its garment
and wrapped it in thick darkness,
when I fixed limits for it
and set its doors and bars in place,
when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther;
here is where your proud waves halt’?
“Have you ever given orders to the morning,
or shown the dawn its place,
that it might take the earth by the edges
and shake the wicked out of it?*

*The earth takes shape like clay under a seal;
its features stand out like those of a garment.
The wicked are denied their light,
and their upraised arm is broken.*

And it goes on.

If we truly grasped who God is, would we dare to enter his presence? Would we dare to claim his name at all, in our lives? Would we come to church half-heartedly? Or with only part of ourselves, letting our minds wander freely to other worries or desires in a time devoted to God?

Ananias and Sapphira made the same mistake of God that is so often made by us: They assumed that God is not powerful enough, not involved enough, or too distracted to notice that we are trying to have it both ways. God must be willing to accept whatever we have to give, and whatever we choose to hold back, as though it were us who set the terms of our relationship. Even more, we want all of the benefits of the kingdom of God. We want the healing, the prestige, the help from God when we need it. But otherwise, we don't want God messing around too much in our lives. We don't want him to tell us what to do sexually, or financially, or socially. We want the kingdom of God walled off, into the safe category of religion, to be brought out either once a week for an hour, or for when our own efforts fail us.

Nothing could be further from the truth. NT Wright correctly calls this an easy-going paganism with a veneer of Christianity.

Because when God comes in to heal us, to forgive us, and to save us, he does it completely. There is no holding back one or two favourite habits or sins that will continue to destroy his creation. We read in Hebrews 4:12-13:

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

And so, when we realize exactly how deadly serious God is about his holiness, his temple, his creation, his church, are we to be left in the same place as those who heard this story? Trembling in fear of an awful and wrathful God?

Not at all.

Because this is a huge part of why Jesus dies on the cross, and rises from the dead. Because as passionate as God is about removing every bit of the stain of sin on his creation, he is just as passionate that we should be rescued, not destroyed with it. This is what Jesus was on about. We read further in Hebrews 4:16 says:

“Let us approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

So, how about it? We know that we need help, and that God is the one who offers life to us through Jesus. But if we come to him, if we say that we want to follow Jesus, if we claim that Jesus is Lord, then God takes that very seriously, and he will begin a process of transformation in us, a pruning and purging away of habits, activities, and addictions that hurt us or others. We will find ourselves convicted of sin when we hold back anything from God that he wants. We will find ourselves giving away our treasures, our time, and our very selves. We will be defined by God, sexually, financially, politically, and socially. We will be unable to cheat, or steal, or use others, or lie, freely.

Even as I speak, I know that there are some of us who are hoping against hope that God doesn’t ask you for that one thing. It’s in the back of your mind. You know what it is. I know this, because as I wrote this message, that was my experience. Is today the day? Today, do you approach God with confidence, in repentance, to find the grace you need to be completely his?

Knowing the price, can you pray today, and submit yourself to God almighty? Will you let him remake you completely, holding nothing back?

Benediction:

The Lord’s Prayer