

Acts 4:32-5:11

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses, sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

This is one of those text that does not get preached very often. I searched all over to see what pastors and preachers were saying about this passage and honestly could not find much at all. This is an intense story of the seriousness of sin, God's ability and power to do what will bring Him the most glory, A LOT of grace and 2 differing examples of human response to the gospel. In Acts 20: 26-27 Paul addresses the elders at Ephesus "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." Paul talks about preaching the whole counsel of God. You probably hear that at Bridgeway often. What does it mean to preach the whole counsel of God. Paul is saying that it is his responsibility before God and man to preach the entirety of God to man...the parts that make us feel good, the parts that might rub us the wrong way, the parts that are sad, the parts that are filled with joy, the parts we fully understand and the parts we can barely grasp. As I preach through the book of Acts we now hit Acts 5 which is one of those passages that would be easier to skip. But with the power and grace of Jesus lets ask Him to come and speak to our hearts in intimate ways.

The more I read and studied this passage the more I realized it's importance. There are a few questions I want to raise and attempt to answer as we move into this rather difficult text. First, what exactly was it that Ananias and Sapphira did? Second, why did they choose to act in this way (motive)? Third, why did God respond the way He did and what does it say about Him? Fourth, how was Barnabas different and how we can we apply these truths to our lives?

A. What exactly did Ananias and Sapphira do that was wrong?

We are told in verse 1 and 2 that he “sold a piece of property and with his wife’s knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds” then “brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles feet.” The word translated “kept back” - means to keep back in a secret way or embezzle. In the OT we see the same word used in the story of Achan (Joshua 7) when he kept back for himself some of the spoils of war in disobedience to God. The only other time this word was used in the NT was in Titus and is translated “to steal.” So the next thought I had was, can you steal something or embezzle something that is your own? Well, if you look at verse 3 Peter says again that they kept back for themselves some of the proceeds which means at some point they must have made an agreement that they would give all of the proceeds of the land sale to the church. And in the same verse Peter emphasizes that they lied to the Holy Spirit. Peter even says that it was their house to do with what they please and after the sale it was their money and they had no obligation to give any or all of the money. So again we must infer that they said they were giving it all and so therefore when they did not give it all Luke uses the words steal, embezzle, and lying to describe their actions. If we look in verse 8 “And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” We see Sapphira said the same price as her husband because they were working together to keep back money for themselves and deceive the people by pretending to do something they never did.

As we look a little deeper stealing or embezzling is not the sin that Peter focuses on. The major emphasis in this text is that Ananias and Sapphira were outright liars. Let’s look in verse 4 Peter says “While it (referring to the land) remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it (referring to the land) was sold was it (referring to the money from the sale) not at your disposal (to do with what you wanted)? Why is it that you have contrived this deed (saying you gave everything when you didn’t) in your heart (place where all sin comes from)? You have not lied to men but to God.” **They made a calculated public attempt to create the idea that they were spiritual.** They said they were giving all the proceeds but secretly did not. Do you ever try to create the idea that you are more spiritual than you are??

They misrepresented who they were and what they were about. They took credit for doing something they did not do. They acted like they were righteous and generous but were not. Some will say how is giving the majority of the money not generous...Peter’s answer is “they said they were giving it all”...they did not have to give it all but for some reason they wanted to appear better or more spiritual or more righteous or more generous in the eyes of the people. They wanted to fool the people and ultimately

thought they could fool God. They pretended or put on a show, they were hypocrites. Remember the verse in James 4:6 "God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble"...those who recognize their utter need for God get God and all His grace. Those who pretend to be something they are not or think they can make it on their own merit do not get God or His grace. So the sin of Ananias & Sapphira was deceit and hypocrisy. That is what they did. So now...

B. Why did they choose to do this? Or what was their motive?

Some people say that Satan made them do it. The text says in verse 3 that Satan filled Ananias' heart. What this really means is that Satan put massive temptation in his path and he chose sin over righteousness. We have to see that they chose to give in to the temptation and are responsible for their choice. All through His word God says man is responsible for his actions and in this text we see humans make a choice to deceive God and people. So yes they chose their sin, but what comes before the act of sin?

We always have to look further than the action itself and look to the root. Remember, in verse 4 Peter says that they contrived the deeds in their heart. So it started in the depths of the heart. Motives are deeply hidden in our hearts. All sin begins inside and works its way out. I do not have time to get into this subject fully but read James 1:13-15 for some more clarity on how sin progresses. What was the motive behind their hypocrisy? What is the motive behind **our** sin. All of us struggle with heart idols. What are they?? Think about these for a second...Power, Approval, Security, and Comfort.

So lets take a second to see what might have been the root idols in their hearts. They might have wanted to be part of the inside group (striving for Approval / Security). Maybe they wanted to belong (hungry for security / comfort), I mean look at what Barnabas and others did...they sold their land and gave ALL the proceeds and everyone loves them. Maybe they thought this was the way they could be in good standing and appear valuable and noble to this community (Pining for Approval / Power). Maybe they wanted to be accepted and looked up to and known and maybe even wanted to be famous for their enormous GENEROSITY (Approval / Power). Maybe they wanted to be recognized or liked or loved or applauded. Look at us! Aren't we awesome and valuable and spiritual. Maybe they envisioned being put on a pedestal and thought they would be given power to lead out in this new community (Power).

These are all speculations on my part but aren't these desires or idols what all of our hearts crave. We all want to belong, to be applauded, to be recognized, to receive praise. Stop for second and think...do you want approval, security, comfort, and power? Our hearts are searching to find these idols and when temptation comes we dive in! Our hearts are deceitful, wicked, and bent towards sin. And sin waits crouching at the door ready to jump on any opportunity to lead us down the path of destruction. We are just like Ananias and Sapphira. If you think you are better or if you think your heart would never sin like that, you are deceived in this very moment.

So why did they choose to sin?

Instead of trusting Christ and remembering what He did, they gave in to hypocrisy and sought after glory, approval, money and power for their own good. They chose dishonesty and deceit rather than honesty before the God of the universe. They did not believe in that moment that Christ could fulfill the needs of their hearts. They were more interested in their appearance. They looked elsewhere which led them to disastrous hypocrisy. So we know what they did and most likely why they did it...Which leads to the third question...

C. Why did God respond the way He did and what does this say about Him?

If you look at the church in this moment, the people in the church were alive and free and generous and loved people more than money or possessions because they understood the Gospel and were SO satisfied in Him that their actions overflowed with love and mercy. They were depending on the Holy Spirit for everything. God's love was real and pouring out of them.

Look back at Acts 4:32 "Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

What a great picture of freedom...freedom from the love of money. Freedom from people pleasing. Freedom from having to fake it. Freedom from the slavery of sin. The people were trusting Christ to be their all in all. The church was young and flourishing in the grace and mercy of Jesus and was spreading like a wild fire!

Remember, there had already been an attack of the enemy from the outside. Peter and John had been thrown in jail and repeatedly told to stop the Jesus talk. Now the Satan intended to up his game by working on the inner walls of the church and alluring Ananias and Sapphira with temptation of fame, power, approval, security, comfort and self seeking glory. So when they took the bait and their hearts contrived evil, God has to respond and He responds in quick and concise discipline! Remember, the wrath of God was already poured out on Jesus on the cross for those who believe. So this was not an act of punishment because Jesus took our punishment on the cross. This was a strong act of discipline for the good of His church (His bride). God did whatever it took to insure the spread and proclamation of his love and glory.

There are some people that say this story does not align with the character of God. Some reject this passage of scripture because they say it does not show the long-suffering of God. So they say this small part of the Bible is not relevant, correct, or even to be used as part of the inspired scriptures. We cannot go down that road or we end up with nothing! You all know if we go down the road of picking and choosing what

scripture is inspired or not so inspired we have no standard for truth and then truth itself becomes subjective. We have to read the word given to us by God and stake our very lives around its truth.

So there are some who say this story does not show the long-suffering or love of God, but I would disagree, because if we look to the entirety of the redemption story in the bible, all we will see is long-suffering and mercy.

Stop for second and breath!

Do you realize every breath you and I have right now is only because of His grace and long-suffering. Sam Storms says “the amazing thing isn’t that Ananias and Sapphira died so soon, but that they lived so long.”

Our hearts are so sinful and our perspective so skewed that we think we are owed time and breath and life from God. Once we sin, which we all have done, the only thing we deserve is death. He owes us nothing.

Some people say what He did in this story is unfair. Well, do we really want God to be fair. Let me remind you of another story...the sinless, loving, perfect son of God, Jesus Christ, died a brutal death that should have been ours. He absorbed our sin and death and punishment and shame on the cross. In turn He gave us his perfection, grace, mercy, and eternal life. All we must do is turn to him and ask for mercy! Now that is unfair and that is the GRACE of God. The creator of the world who owes us absolutely nothing freely gives us undeserved favor and blessing because he loves us.

Luke had purpose in recording this story. He was bold enough to record it because it actually happened and needed to be told. We cannot pick and choose what we like and what we think we dislike about God.

So, why does this discipline seem so harsh? It was a pivotal time in the formation of the NT church. We have no idea how terrible hypocrisy can be and how it could have infected and diseased the church.

Listen to this quote by D.A.Carson:

In times of genuine revival, judgment may be more immediate than in times of decay. When God walks away from the church and lets the multiplying sin take its course, that is the worst judgment of all; it will inevitably end in irretrievable disaster. But when God responds to sin with prompt severity, lessons are learned, and the church is spared a worse drift. In this case, great fear fell not only on the church but also on all who heard of these events ([Acts 5:5, 11](#)).

In that moment God acted in grace for His bride. If this was not severely dealt with the early church would have had phony people leading it in its formative years. God knew he must deal severely as an example and he disciplines out of love for His bride. Had

he left them to themselves disaster was inevitable. He loved the church. He loved them. And he loves us!!

Remember, Romans 11:33-36, **Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!**³⁴ **“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”** **For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.**

He is God. He is more wise, more knowledgeable, and more loving. He is greater, stronger, and holier than we can even understand. He is good! He can do what he desires because he is concerned most about His glory and the good of His children! He chose the path of severe discipline in this story and we can learn a lot from it. God does not share His glory with anyone.

Let's look at Psalm 86: 5-7 For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you. Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my plea for grace. In the day of my trouble I call upon you, for you answer me.

Same God in Psalm 86, Isaiah 6, Romans 11:33-36 and Acts 5. We cannot break him up into parts and talk about him as if he was different in the OT from the NT or different when Jesus fed the 5000 from when he rebuked the pharisees. He is the same God yesterday, today and forever.

So what does this all mean?

Fourth, why was Barnabas different and how can we apply this to our lives today?

Let me do a quick recap. Ananias and Sapphira stole from God and His people. Then they lied about it and misrepresented themselves as generous and spiritual. They did this because they did not see the seriousness of their sin, the holiness of God, and did not understand the grace of God through Jesus.

So, instead of ending on this note let's look quickly at Barnabas. Let me start off by saying that Barnabas was human and that he was a sinner like the rest of mankind. I want to say this because in a second some of you are going to think wow that Barnabas really had his stuff together. But that is not the truth...he recognized he did not have his stuff together and ran to someone who did, namely Jesus...that is where change happens.

4:33-37 “And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses, sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles

Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.”

Barnabas did not lie and steal like Ananias and Sapphira, but gave generously to the church with no strings attached. Why? Because he could not get over what Jesus had done for him on the cross. He was living in a community that constantly reminded each other of what Jesus did...”they were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ” He could not get away from the fact that God was unfair to him by saving his life even though he deserved death and hell!

In this moment when the temptation to lie or steal or pretend to be something he was not came upon him...when he felt his heart wanting approval or power or security or comfort he remembered all of this was found at the cross. Through the power of the Holy Spirit he ran to Jesus.

According to Tullian, “Since Jesus was someone, Barnabas and all of us are free to be no one.” He did not have to pretend to be spiritual or good or generous because he knew he was none of these things apart from the cross. Neither do we!

He did not need approval of man because he had approval of God through Jesus on the cross and so do we!

He did not need to look elsewhere for emotional or material comfort because at the cross Jesus provided eternal comfort for him and for us. He did not have to look elsewhere for security and hold tightly to his material possessions because He found out that through the cross their are pleasures forever more at the right hand of God.

He did not need to search the world for power and prestige because he realized at the cross he can be weak and needy and find strength for the day. So Barnabas lived and breathed and constantly remembered the cross and because of that he was free to love God and people and not have to pretend. I said earlier this sound like Barnabas has his stuff together but in actuality he just continues to realize he does not and he remembers the grace and love of Jesus on the cross and lives from that place.

A quick side note - God is not calling everyone to sell their house and land and give it to the church. The point is being free from the love of these things because you are satisfied in God through Jesus.

As we close, what does this mean for us?

How can we apply this to our lives?

First, we all need to take an honest look at ourselves and our hearts and ask, do I generally live a life promoting the idea that I am more spiritual than I am? Do I deceive people with big or small lies about who I am? Do I regularly misrepresent who I really am? We share the sin of A & S when we **create** the idea that we are more spiritual, more committed, more holy, closer to Jesus, than we truly are.

For example, this happens to me, I enter into a conversation where someone is telling a story about something God did in and through him / her. My first reaction is to find a story in my own life that might be better than theirs and if it is not better I can maybe make it better with a false tweak here and there. That is sin wanting to destroy and deceive. I am learning to see that as the desire for approval or power arises in me, to ask the Holy Spirit to come and help me remember the cross and I gospel myself by asking the Lord to forgive me for wanting to be seen as spiritual or good or better than someone else or having it all together. I repent before my flesh makes up a story about how great I am.

So, if this is you, then remember God gives grace to the humble. You don't have to fake it anymore. Let's lay the truth before the Lord and repent and ask for mercy and a changed heart. Remember, this stuff starts in the heart. None of us have our stuff together...all of us struggle with understanding the sin that so easily entangles us. God is not asking for you to get it together, He is asking for you to come before him broken and empty and he will transform your heart day by day.

What are the hidden deeds of your heart that need to be confessed?

Confess your sins / idols to God. Maybe it's not hypocrisy but some other sin that seems to continually drag you down. Turn from it and ask for mercy. He is good and kind and abounding in steadfast love.

Confess your sins to one another. This is big. Take time to get with people who you can share the heart stuff with.

Let me end with one sentence...

GREAT HONESTY in the church brings a healthy powerful church.