



CHOICES HAVE CONSEQUENCES
Acts 5:1-11

Today, we come to one of the most challenging passages in all of sacred scripture. It would have been very easy to skip over these eleven verses. However, it also is part of God's word which we claim to be holy – unfailing – and infallible in all generations. It is part of the full counsel of God's word.

In all my 56 years of church life – I have never heard one sermon on this particular passage. It was difficult to even find a pastor who was brave enough to preach on this text. Thankfully Dr. Boice did not skip over it in his preaching through the book of Acts. The lectionary never includes this story. Devotional guides won't touch it. So what is it about this story that embarrasses us – or causes us to shake in our boots? This story was not used to extort money or to fleece the flock for a building campaign – but to show how deeply God is concerned about his church and our life together.

Two weeks ago – we preached and studied about the unsung hero of the early Christian church – Barnabas. This story is really a continuation of that biblical narrative. We separate chapters 4 and 5 – but St. Luke did not write it that way. Barnabas' witness is one of delight. Ananias' witness is one of deception – and it is deadly. This story clearly teaches us that there are consequences to our choices – thus our sermon title today.

From what I was able to read and study about this challenging passage – three descriptive words emerged – hypocrisy, satanic deception – and spiritual dishonesty. The reason this story is so challenging to us – is that this story is about believers in the church – not pagans or unbelievers outside the church walls.

We have already studied how Satan attempted to defeat and injure the church by persecution and intimidation from outside the church walls. It failed.

However, Satan's great strategy to wreck the church always comes from the inside. He seeks to ruin our life together by satanic attack on the inside or the interior. The story of Ananias and Sapphira takes place in the church. Eugene Peterson is correct when he shares "To us – the sin of Ananias and Sapphira doesn't seem so terribly bad. So why is it viewed with such seriousness here? Simply because it was a fundamental defiance of the ways of God in the church – they lied to God. Yes, it is the lie of Ananias of which we need warning – appearing to have an external righteousness that we don't possess - internally which is none other than hypocrisy."¹

To fully understand this text let us go back to **Acts 4:32-33** where we read “The whole congregation of believers was united as one – one heart and one mind. They didn’t even claim ownership of their own possessions. No one said, ‘That’s mine. You can’t have it.’ They shared everything. The apostles gave powerful witness to the resurrection of the Master Jesus – and grace was on all of them.² What a beautiful description of the body of Christ. Imagine if every church in America was described in such a manner. In other words – they were on a roll.

In **Acts 4:36-37** Barnabas was moved in his heart to sell a parcel of land that he owned – and gave the entire purse or profit for the ministry and mission of the church. There were great needs in the church – as there are today. This gift was simply beautiful. No one forced him to do it – it came from the deepest place – the heart. It brought much encouragement to the leaders and the entire fellowship.

It is believed that this married couple were gathered in the fellowship the day that Barnabas gave this wonderful gift. The gift probably brought a certain recognition and prestige to Barnabas. While Barnabas did not seek it – it was graciously bestowed upon him. Ananias and Sapphira most likely wanted to be accorded such recognition and honor as well. So they decide to sell a parcel of land as well. We don’t know how long it took to sell the land and receive the profit from it. On the surface Barnabas and Ananias seemed to be moved to do the same thing. However, somewhere between the time they were moved to sell the land – and the time they gathered together as a fellowship – they schemed to hold back a portion of the proceeds. As Dr. John Stott shares “They wanted the credit and the prestige for sacrificial generosity – without the inconvenience of it. So in order to gain a reputation to which they had no right – they told a brazen lie. Their motive in giving was not to relieve the poor – but to fatten their own ego.”³ In the NIV Bible in verse two it shares “With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself” – which means in the Greek ‘misappropriated’ or ‘stole.’

So in the latter part of verse two “They bring their offering to the worship service.” As Paul Harvey would say “**Now for the rest of the story.**” I can picture them coming forward as the group sings verse 4 of “Take My Life and Let It Be,” “consecrated Lord, to Thee, Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.” Peter, as one of the apostles, has been given the gift of spiritual discernment. Peter recognizes this is a satanic attack on the unity and wholeness of the church. While Satan tempts us – we are still held accountable for our choices and actions. Ananias – as with all of us – could have called upon the Lord to give him victory over this.

James 4:7-8 clearly teaches us “Submit yourselves, then to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.” (NIV)

Peter asks Ananias point blank, “How is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?” Now you and I live in a culture that does not take God or sin

very seriously. We justify our actions by saying ‘Everybody does it.’ Just because ‘everybody does it’ – does not make it right.

Yes, Satan hated the spirit of generosity and unity among the believers then – and still does sow discord among believers. Satan wishes to make everyone as selfish as he is. The sin in our lesson is not that Ananias and Sapphira only gave a portion of the proceeds – it was that they **pretended** to give it all. If they had said, ‘We gave 50% of the proceeds – everyone would have welcomed their gift and spirit. It was not the amount – but the hypocrisy behind the amount.’⁴ This couple’s sin wasn’t greed. They voluntarily sold their property. They were not forced to give the profit to the ministry and mission of the church. They did it voluntarily.

We know from our Lord’s encounters with the Pharisees that hypocrisy is a serious spiritual matter. John the Baptist spoke clearly about the dangers of this attitude and action. Most people do not start out to be hypocrites. It takes honest spiritual discipline to overcome it and defeat it. Our culture teaches us to seek to sit high on the pedestal. The Bible teaches us to beat our breast and give thanks that God has saved a sinner like us.

This is why week after week you and I gather to worship to put ourselves under the authority of God’s word. We seek to love and honor God first.

It is easy to read the Bible as truth – it is another thing to walk in that truth. It is one thing to look righteous – it is another thing to be righteous.

The well-known Dr. Tony Campolo tells of being a guest speaker at a banquet of a well-known mission organization. He was delighted to accept the invitation to speak. Right before he was to speak – the president of the organization read an appeal letter from a missionary that the organization sponsored. There was a pressing need for \$4,000.00. After reading the heart-rending letter the president said, “Before Dr. Campolo speaks – I want him to pray for this dear missionary – and that God will meet her need.”

Dr. Campolo got up – walked to the podium – and said, “**NO!**”

Everybody was **stunned!**

Dr. Campolo continued, “No I won’t pray for God to meet the need of this missionary. However, this is what I will do. I am going to give you every dime I have in my pockets and wallet – and place it right now on the table.”

He then said, “Every one of you will now empty your pockets and pocketbooks – and put it on the table. **Right now,**” he said.

The president said, “You have a point Dr. Campolo. We should give generously.”

Dr. Campolo said, 'I am not trying to make a point! Just empty your pockets.'

Reluctantly, 300 ladies emptied their pocketbooks. Dr. Campolo got the servers to pick up all the money – and bring it forward just like an offering. They counted it – and well over \$4,000.00 was given.

Dr. Campolo smiled and said, "We didn't need to pray that God would provide the resources.

What I was praying silently was that you would let go of the money that was already there. When the spiritual discipline of generosity is practiced in word and deed – the church is one in heart and soul. Jesus said it well, "Where your treasure is there you heart will be also."

I have shared with you that one of our outstanding United Methodist bishops, Robert Schnase, has identified '**extravagant generosity**' as one of the five practices of a vital and spirit-filled church. He shares that the practice of generosity describes the Christian's unselfish willingness to give in order to make a positive difference for the purposes of Christ.⁵ Extravagant generosity means graciously and responsibly placing ourselves and our resources in service to God.⁶

This Barnabas did – and Ananias and Sapphira could have done. There are consequences to our choices – and our choices have consequences. Be sure your choices are honest and honoring of the Lord.

In the late 1980s Southern Mississippi University shared the following story of a legacy given to them by a single African-American woman that brought great encouragement to them. She gave a gift of \$150,000. She worked her whole life as a laundress (washing other people's clothes). She started with a rock near a river – graduated to a laundry board – and finally a washing machine near retirement age. The gift was over and above the tithe she gave to her church. By being frugal and thrifty she managed to save \$150,000 in a savings account to establish a scholarship for financially strapped families. For many years – Southern Mississippi would not even admit Afro-Americans – but she pressed on.

When interviewed by one of the major network shows she was asked, "Why didn't you spend it on yourself?" To which she answered, "Oh, but I did, you see. I really did." I think her name really was Barnabas.

I was trying to think of a way to end this sermon and frankly I was stumped until Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie, the past chaplain of the United States Senate shared this thought in his fine commentary on this passage. Dr. Ogilvie shares that we cannot read this passage without asking, "Lord, is it I?" Of course, we know the answer is yes. There are places we have not only withheld our money – but ourselves from people who need us. He instructs us to take out a clean sheet of paper and write out the names of the people and the situations in which we have been 'pretending' to show love and concern. Then consider our relationship to the church – and how we 'pretend' to love and serve

as well. 'What kind of church would Christ have if everyone acted as I do?' We do this so the Ananias in all of us can be exposed – so we can become like Barnabas in attitude and action.⁷

May God give us the grace and the courage so to do – and so to be.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with It's Translator**, NavPress Publishing Group, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1689.

² Peterson, **THE MESSAGE BIBLE**, Acts 4:32-33.

³ John Stott, **THE MESSAGE OF ACTS: The Spirit – the Church – and the World**, InterVarsity Press, Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1990, pages 109-110.

⁴ This paragraph is indebted to Dr. James Boice, **ACTS: An Expository Commentary**, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997, pages 98-99.

⁵ Robert Schnase, **FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS**, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 2007, page 112.

⁶ Schnase, *ibid*, page 112.

⁷ Lloyd John Ogilvie, **DRUMBEAT OF LOVE**, Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1976, pages 71-72.