



A COSTLY MISTAKE

Acts 5:1-11

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I don't know if you can even do this with newer cars, but it used to be easy to reach under the hood and disconnect the speedometer cable. You could then drive without racking up mileage on the odometer, thereby artificially preserving the resale value of your car. Several of my "friends and relations" in Florida used to do this back in the day. I remember as a kid sitting in the back seat of a big sedan, flying down some back road at lightning speed while the speedometer was pegged at zero and the odometer frozen in time, and I remember wondering what poor sucker would someday buy that same used sedan, marveling at its miraculously low mileage. So if you're shopping used cars on the Central Florida Craigslist, consider yourself fairly warned.

Isn't it amazing the lengths we go to in order to make a few extra bucks, regardless of the consequences? And to a great degree our resignation to fraud as a culture—perhaps even our celebration of it on occasions when it's particularly clever, as with my "friends and relations" back home. It's just a fact of life, isn't it? In the marketplace, especially Craigslist, we fully expect that people are trying to rip us off.

That's why so many of us would rather shop retail and pay more for a new item than have to deal with the stress and aggravation of buying used. But sadly, it feels like we're just as likely to be ripped off by big retail as we are buying second-hand. Just this week Volkswagen reached a \$14.7 billion settlement with US authorities and car owners, after selling cars with software designed to cheat on emissions tests. Surely a big corporation like Volkswagen wouldn't try to deceive us, would they? Yes they would. And there are now 11 million cars out there to prove it.

Is there any safe haven in our world of deception? Any retreat from phonies and frauds? Of course, it must be the church. Despite high profile deception that runs the gamut from huckster televangelists to sticky-fingered treasurers, the church remains a community in which deception isn't expected and regarded as commonplace. And that's why church scandals are still big news, even to this day. We expect the church to be different, and God demands that it be different.

As we continue our summer series in the book of Acts, we're considering story of Ananias & Sapphira, the first scandal in church history, when God acted decisively to root out corruption in the early church. What we're going to hear is God's calling for our congregation to be a community of repentance instead of pride, integrity rather than deception, of generosity instead of greed.

The book of Acts is Luke's second volume, following the Gospel of Luke, and continuing the story of Jesus after his resurrection, as he began to establish the church through the power and presence of his Holy Spirit. And by the time we get to Acts 5, the early church was a couple of months old and experiencing explosive numerical growth. Peter and John had miraculously healed a lame man who had begged outside the temple for decades, as long as anyone could remember. When the Apostles healed him in Jesus' name, and the man started walking and leaping and praising God, it was a tipping point in public opinion regarding the early church. People began to realize that what they saw among Jesus' followers was the very power and authority they had always hope to find in the old Jerusalem temple. The Temple was supposed to be the quintessential "thin place" in our world, a portal between heaven and earth, where anyone and everyone could be taught by God, and healed by God, and forgiven by God, and redeemed by God. Instead, it was corrupt, as corrupt as Volkswagen's emissions software, as corrupt as Kenya's police department. It was so corrupt that Jesus had condemned it, promising that he would raise up a new temple when he rose from the dead.

In only a few short weeks, the early church had grown from the handful of Jesus' disciples to 5,000 households, quite possibly the majority of people living in and around Jerusalem at the time. And the tipping point in public opinion seems to be that all the things that one was supposed to find but didn't in the corrupt old temple were to be found among Jesus' followers in the early church, where anyone and everyone could be taught by God, and healed by God, and forgiven by God, and redeemed by God. The old temple was corrupt, but the new church was holy and pure.

In Acts 5 we come to the first of a series of Satanic counter-attacks against the early church. Just as Satan inserted himself into the Garden of Eden in order to thwart God's plans in creation, he also got straight to work trying to undermine God's New Creation by attacking the church in its infancy. And it should come as no surprise that his first counter-attack was an attempt to corrupt the early church in the same ways that he had corrupted the old Jerusalem temple. Satan may be wily, but he's not very imaginative. If it worked before, he'll try it again. So the same old corruption was Satan's aim in the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

On June 26, Shawn Honey did a terrific job of highlighting the amazing generosity of the early church, and calling us to the same high standard, in the prelude to the Ananias and Sapphira story in Acts 4:32-37. In that passage, Luke said (4:34) that there wasn't a single needy person within the 5,000 households of the early church, because property owners sold their possessions and laid the proceeds "at the apostles' feet," who used it to take care of church members in need. It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? No compulsive giving, no fundraising campaigns with big thermometer posters everywhere, no tote bags as thank-you gifts, no guilt trips from the pastor, just authentic Christian generosity welling up from thankful hearts.

In Acts 4:32-37, Barnabas in particular was one of those who sold his property and generously gave the proceeds to the church. Barnabas will become a much more important figure later on in Acts after St. Paul's conversion. But Barnabas is also relevant to the Ananias & Sapphira story, so let's take note of what Luke said about him in 4:36-37: *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.*

Through his self-sacrificial generosity, Barnabas developed a reputation for being an encourager, and his nickname became the “Son of Encouragement.” We need more Sons of Encouragement in the church today.

In Acts 5 we learn that Ananias and Sapphira wanted to do what Barnabas had done, or at least wanted to gain a reputation for doing what Barnabas did. The wording Luke used to begin Acts 5 is identical to that of Barnabas in Acts 4:36-37. In 5:1 Ananias and Sapphira also “*sold a piece of property*” and in 5:2 they also “*laid it at the apostles’ feet*”—but not before they kept back for themselves part of the proceeds. They “brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet” while evidently claiming that they were giving all the proceeds to the church. So Peter then confronted them individually and called them to account for their sin.

What exactly was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira? Some people have suggested that they were still clinging to the old Jewish laws of private property ownership in the new age of Christian communalism? But there’s no evidence in the New Testament of any bias against private property ownership, and Peter’s questioning of Ananias in v4 makes clear that generous giving wasn’t mandatory, nor was property ownership somehow sinful or unspiritual. Peter asked (v4), “*While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?*” In other words, he didn’t have to sell his property. “*And,*” Peter went on to ask (v4), “*after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?*” In other words, he didn’t have to give all or even any of it to the church. He could have done with it as he pleased. It was entirely up to him.

What then was Ananias' and Sapphira's sin? Was it greed? They may have been motivated by greed, but that isn’t what Peter spotlighted when he confronted them. It was deception. Look carefully at v3: “*Peter said, Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?*”

It’s clear from the context that Peter was choosing his words very carefully. On nine different occasions in Luke-Acts, Luke wrote of believers being “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Thus far in the narrative of Acts, all the believers were filled with the Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2:4), and then Peter was filled with the Spirit when he addressed the Jerusalem Council (Acts 4:8), and then again all the believers were filled with the Spirit following their prayer meeting (Acts 4:31). Every time Luke used this language, he was showing that the power and authority of the old Temple had gone out into the church. It was the old Temple that was supposed to be “filled with the Spirit,” but God had moved house, and now the early church was God's mobile home. As people gave their lives to Jesus, they became holy containers, filled with God's Holy Spirit. So as Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira, he was distinguishing between this wonderful experience all the believers were sharing as holy vessels filled with the Spirit of the Lord, in contrast with Ananias' and Sapphira’s experience, as those whose hearts had been filled not with the Spirit but with deception.

It wasn't hyperbole for Peter to declare that it was Satan who had filled their hearts with this lie, since the Scriptures consistently attribute deception to Satan. He lied in the Garden, when he tempted Eve. He lied in the wilderness, when he tempted our Lord. And that’s why, before Jesus was crucified, he called Satan “the father of lies” (John 8:44). Meanwhile, God is always true, God never lies. Jesus said in John 17, “God’s word is truth.” That’s why Jesus used God’s word faithfully in the wilderness to combat Satan’s lies.

Thus Ananias' and Sapphira's sin was deception, Satanic deception, since all deception is Satanic deception. Satan was determined to counter-attack the church, and Ananias and Sapphira were his willing accomplices. Instead of being temples of God, filled with the Holy Spirit, they had become Satanic ambassadors, hypocrites, filled with deception on the inside, while appearing to be generous benefactors on the outside. What mattered to them was not God's opinion of them, but keeping up appearances. In order to make themselves look good, they lied to the early church.

But they unwittingly lying to God too. That's why Peter identified God, rather than the church, as the plaintiff in the case, saying in v4, *"You have not lied to man but to God."* God, of course, wasn't fooled by any of it. God isn't impressed with our outward displays of religious knowledge, or commitment, or practices. If you itemize your deductions on your tax return, God doesn't read it and say, "Gosh, you're a lot more generous than I thought." God isn't swayed in the least by all that we do to keep up appearances. Why? Because God knows our hearts. He knew the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira, as they held back some, but claimed that they had given all. He knew the heart of the old widow Jesus mentioned (Luke 21:1-3), who put only two small copper coins in the temple treasury, yet it was all she had to live on. God knows our hearts as we give, or don't give, "regularly and sacrificially to this church" as those of us who are members promise each year in our membership covenant. God knows our hearts, and he cannot be fooled.

When Peter said in v4, *"You have not lied to man but to God,"* it must have been a heart-stopping shock to Ananias. So much so that Luke tells us in v5, *"When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it."* And then a few verses later, the same thing happened when Peter caught Sapphira in the same lie, v10, *"Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last."* (v11) *"And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things."*

Great fear fell upon them all. If you're feeling at all disturbed and unsettled by this story, you're in good company, because it's been disturbing and unsettling people for 2,000 years, ever since the early church responded with 'great fear' to what had happened. In the time that remains, I want to think together about why this story disturbs us, and then what we can do about it.

Why does this story disturb us? Maybe because it raises questions about God's character. Many of us have been led to believe that just as people have been evolving through the centuries, inventing new tools and technology, getting smarter, and so on, so also has God been evolving, from the more wrathful God of the Old Testament, raining down plagues upon his enemies, to the jolly old Santa Claus of the New Testament, encouraging us to love one another and comforting us with forgiveness whenever we make mistakes. But this evolutionary view of God is itself a modern invention, the fruit of our imagining God in our own image. The Bible teaches that God is the same, yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8). He doesn't change. He is always both just and loving. His character remains the same. From the beginning of time, God in his justice established that the penalty for any and all sin is death. And because all of us have sinned against the Lord, all of us deserve to die. But God in his mercy sent Jesus into our world to pay the penalty for our sin, by dying in our place, so that we ourselves might escape God's wrath against sin and have eternal life through him. People often forget that it's in the New Testament,

not the Old, where God pours out all his wrath upon his only son. But it was ultimately an act of God's love, and because of it we can be saved from sin and death by giving our allegiance to the risen Lord Jesus.

Nevertheless, it still may feel like God acted out of character when he took such quick and decisive action against Ananias and Sapphira. After all, we do read of other instances of sin in the early church, whether it be sexual sin in the church in Corinth, or favoritism for the rich in James, or racism in Galatians, or dissension in Philippi. And from what we can tell, God did not act immediately in any of those situations like he did against Ananias and Sapphira. So it's reasonable to ask whether in their case God simply lost his temper. But something else was going on in this case. It was a pivotal moment during the infancy of the early church, while the church was still gathered in Jerusalem and before it was sent out to the ends of the earth. If the DNA of the early church became corrupt, literally, then the infection would spread, and the church around the world would reflect this corruption. So God intervened, in ways that are reminiscent of similar moments in the Old Testament when God acted decisively among his people to keep them true to their mission, like when the Israelites took possession of the promised land, and a man named Achan secretly pilfered some Canaanite artifacts that God had warned them explicitly not to keep but to destroy because of Canaanite idolatry—that man's sin resulted in the failure of their mission (Joshua 7). God intervened, Achan was destroyed with the artifacts he pilfered, and the Israelites successfully rebooted their mission. Likewise, here in Acts 5, Luke uses the same word—*pilfered*—to describe the money Ananias and Sapphira held back from the church. And I believe that we are to read God's decisive action here as both an essential corrective, to keep the early church on the right path, and also an important lesson for the future Christians who may be tempted with corruption and dishonesty. God is merciful and slow to anger. But he is also, as CS Lewis said, “not a tame lion.” We mustn't be surprised when he responds quickly to preserve the mission and holiness of the church.

Now let's talk about our own response to this story. And given how unsettling it is, we could simply ignore it. We could write it off as just another old wives' tale, just as superstitious as walking underneath a ladder. But hopefully we know better. Ananias and Sapphira are kindred spirits. We too like to keep up appearances. If they needed to examine their own hearts, then we need to examine our hearts as well. If their story shocks us, perhaps it's because we're so much like them, and we don't want to get caught.

How should we respond? God is calling us to be a community of repentance instead of pride, integrity rather than deception, of generosity instead of greed. Let's look briefly at each of these three responses.

First, God is calling us to be a community of **repentance instead of pride**. Hypocrisy is a form of pride, covering over one's internal state in order to keep up appearances. Because of their pride, Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church and to God, and it cost them their lives. Instead of pride, we ought to respond by examining our hearts and repenting of our sins. God doesn't want for us to remain afraid of him. He wants us to come to him and be reconciled. But understand that there's a reason why he hasn't acted decisively against our sin. Either it's because we are covered by the blood of Jesus, upon whom God poured out his wrath, or it's because God is giving us time to repent and come to Jesus. In any case, Jesus is the remedy against sin. By the

power of his Holy Spirit, we can have a greater freedom than anything we celebrate this weekend—we can be free from Satan’s tyranny, free from sin, and saved from the wrath of God. Our first response, then, ought to be repentance from sin and giving all of ourselves to Jesus.

Second, in addition to repentance, God is calling us to be women and men of **integrity rather than deception**. We must become the same on the inside as the way we look on the outside. Satan is the father of lies. But God who is the truth is our Father, and he invites us as his children to become like him. That means making a serious, lifelong commitment to speaking the truth in love, practicing what we preach, and cultivating a community of honesty and sincerity. As a church, we need your financial contributions, and I’m going to come to this in a moment. But what we need even more is your integrity. The degree to which we practice honesty with one another is perhaps the clearest sign that our church has become God’s temple, filled with the Holy Spirit. One of the essential building blocks for this kind of integrity is deep Christian friendships within the church. We all need close friends, in whom we can confide, to whom we can reveal our true selves and find encouragement to become more like Jesus. There are plenty of people here tonight with whom you could have a friendship like this. If you don’t yet know any friends to whom you could confess your sins, Shawn and I serve as your pastors, and we are more than willing to meet and talk with you, so long as you are willing to become such a friend to others. So again, God is calling us to be women and men of integrity rather than deception.

Finally, in addition to repentance & integrity, God is calling us to **generosity instead of greed**. Although God condemned Ananias and Sapphira for their deception, there’s no doubt that this story is also meant to encourage us toward generosity. Lest we be too hard on Ananias and Sapphira, we should remember that they did give something to the church. If you don’t give generously to the church, yet you also don’t lie about your generosity, it’s no time for feeling smug. The church depends upon our generous giving. We are to give not as a way of somehow buying stature within the congregation, but rather out of love for Jesus, who gave all he had for us.

From the days of the early church until now, individual members have given generously to their local church, and the leaders of the local church have used that money to underwrite the ministries of the church. In our congregation, thankfully, we have lay leaders rather than the clergy who oversee our budget and treasury, and we have a great system of checks and balances that protects us from greed and graft. There’s a firewall between the clergy and the treasury; Shawn and I don’t know who gives, or how much anyone gives. Each year, the lay members of the church choose from among themselves representatives to serve on the seven member Parish Council. The Parish Council gives care and attention to our resources, so that your contributions are best used to advance our mission of loving God and serving our city as a growing community of Jesus’ disciples. And each year the Parish Council puts forward a budget for the rest of the members to scrutinize, tweak, and eventually approve. If you don’t like the way they manage the church’s resources, talk with them, or vote in new PC members, but don’t give less than you should. If you pull back on giving, then the whole system struggles.

Historically, Christians have given at least a tithe (10%) of their earnings to the church. We begin with the Old Testament principle of the tithe, and then as the Spirit leads us to be more generous, we can go beyond the tithe, sometimes giving more to the church, or giving to other ministries or causes. In our congregation, I don’t know who gives or how much, but I know that

our annual budget is not based on all our adults giving in this way. In fact, our budget comes out to be roughly half of the adults giving about 5% (half of a tithe) to the church each year. As the Parish Council works on the next budget, they face a catch-22. There are many things they feel that we ought to do as a church but we simply cannot afford because we don't have the money. But if they aim low, then people give less because they sense that the church doesn't need it.

My point in sharing all of this is not to somehow bump up giving this week, but rather to put a skunk on the table that we seldom talk about. If our biggest areas of temptation are money, sex and power, we've talked a lot about sex and politics in recent years, but have said very little about money. The reason I mention it today is out of my own sense of conviction that we ought to address this topic more forcefully whenever the Sunday lessons raise it.

In closing, our giving ought to come from a sense of gratitude to God, for what he has done for us in Jesus, rather than out of compulsion. During the English Reformation, some among the Anabaptists argued that the church was to forbid private property ownership. The Anglican church fathers responded in the Articles of Religion (1563) in this way:

Article 38. Of Christian Men's Goods, which are not common. *The Riches and Goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same; as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast. Notwithstanding, every man ought, of such things as he possesseth, liberally to give alms to the poor, according to his ability.*

In other words, Christians do have the right to private property. But we also ought to give liberally according to our ability. Many churches in our city are known for their liberalism, but few are known for liberality. Wouldn't it be great if our church had this kind of reputation, as a place where people give, not out of compulsion, but generously out of love for Christ?