

Acts 5:1-11 | But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² 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. ³ 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? ⁴ 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." ⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Acts 5:1-11 | Ananias & Sapphira

Last summer I preached through Ecclesiastes, ending right where the book of proverbs begins, with the fear of the Lord. In the beginning of proverbs we read "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Pr 1:7). And Ecclesiastes ends saying,

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 | The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.
¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning and the end.

It is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom (Pr 1:7, 9:10). The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil and turning from evil (Pr. 8:13, 16:6). That seems good. Life and Satisfaction: *The fear of the Lord leads to life, and whoever has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm* (PR 19:23). Confidence & Refuge, *In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge.* (Pr 14:26) It finds God's compassion, *As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.* (Ps 103:13) Steadfast love of God and Forgiveness of Sins, *For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;* (Psalm 103:11).

If you're in one of the 1 John studies, you may be thinking, "doesn't he say there is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear." And you're right, he does say that. So we must understand

that this fear which we are called to before the Lord is no cowering or hiding from God. How could hiding from God be the way to experience his compassion, or to gain confidence? It is not the type of fear that we have towards a strong enemy, but the fear we have towards a true father. I know he is very strong I am on the right side of that strength.

Our text today comes right on the heels of the glorious boldness and unity of the church, a description which culminates in the little detail about a man named Joseph who received the name Barnabas from the apostles, which means son of encouragement. He sold a field that belonged to him and gave the money to the apostles. It is a beautiful picture of the generosity within the early church. But if there is an authentic thing happening, counterfeits are not far behind. Especially if the authentic people get high status nicknames from miracle workers. This week the counterfeits creep into the church.

1. Hypocrisy, Fear of Man

Acts 5:1-2 | But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² 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.

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was pretending to give in the same way that others were giving around them while saving some for themselves. It is ordinary run of the mill hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is fearing man rather than fearing the Lord, and thinking God can be tricked in the same way a man can be tricked.

That is why sin loves the dark. Ananias and Sapphira are each other's darkness. It wants to remain hidden. The fear of man is what causes us to hide Sin, the fear of the Lord is what causes us to bring sin into the light because he promises forgiveness of sins. A great fear of the Lord does not cause us to hide sin, but causes us to repent. A great fear of man causes us to hide even when we don't have to hide. Because they do not fear the Lord they believe that the Lord can be tricked like a man could be tricked. But the apostles are not tricked.

Acts 5:3 | 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?"

The truth is exposed to Peter and he understands that he must maintain the purity of the church. This is the opposite of hypocrisy. If he were a hypocritical leader he would be glad for any momentum the church was gaining, and glad for any money received be it honorably given or dishonorably given. But Peter fears God, therefore he desires to protect the integrity of the church. The money does not cover the lie for Peter any more than it does for Ananias.

Acts 5:4 | 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.”

The description of the early church has been weaponized to convince people that they had no private property. But the law of God is the foundation for private property. We take it for granted but the 8th commandment, You shall not steal. Is the establishment of private property. Private property means there is the capacity for theft of something which does not belong to you. Private property means you have the capacity for true generosity because you are giving of something that is yours. And this is the very point that Peter presses in on with Ananias. The field was yours, and you did not have to sell it. And then once it was sold the money was at your disposal, you did not have to give any of it to us.

This is why Paul is concerned with the heart of the giver. In his exhortation to the Churches in Corinth on giving he brings it to a final point.

2 Corinthians 9:6-8 | The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.
⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

The point is not that they didn't give all of the proceeds from the sale. The point is that they contrived this deed in their hearts in order to lie to God. They thought they could pull a confidence game on God. The giving must be as one has decided in their heart. If they had decided to give part of the proceeds of the field, and told the apostles such, this is cause for rejoicing. But they did not fear God, and in not fearing God they did not believe that God would reward them for their generosity or punish them for their lies. The fear of God requires both. We fear God as he has revealed himself to us. Therefore we believe he will punish disobedience and bless obedience.

This is the nature of all hidden sin. That we think we can con God. What is beneath the idea that we can con God is simply no fear of God. A church with no fear of God at the top is a church which runs by the fear of man. The fear of man is the default setting of all humanity trapped in our sin. This setting is broken by repentance, receiving forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ alone and being restored to the fear of God whose love casts out all fear. Because fear has to do with punishment, and we are not punished by God because Jesus Christ has borne all of our punishment. But we are disciplined by the Lord and seek to obey him because we desire to please him because we fear him.

1. Death of Ananias & Sapphira

Acts 5:5-6 | When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

Ananias is killed by the power of God in the presence of the apostle. The punishment for trying to deceive the author of life is death. Sapphira arrives three hours later with no knowledge of the death of her husband. Peter, with Solomonic wisdom asks here how much they sold the land for. She agrees to the number given by her husband.

Acts 5:9 | 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.” ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last.

But you may be thinking, they just lied about how much they still gave. Should they really be dead? The answer is, first of all God can freely take whatever life he has freely given. We exist at his pleasure. Secondly, the whole mission of the church and the salvation of the world is at stake when the purity of the church is compromised.

In the book of Joshua, the old covenant prototype for the book of Acts, the people of God face a similar situation that threatens the mission given to them by God. It takes place right after their initial victory over the great city that stood in their way. In Joshua that was Jericho, in Acts that first city is Jerusalem. Both are brought down by the word of God’s people. After Jericho’s fall the people of God were prohibited from keeping for themselves any of the things devoted for destruction.

After this victory Joshua sends a group of men to defeat the small city of Ai. But the men Joshua sends are handily defeated. Joshua tore his clothes and mourned at the defeat and sought God’s counsel. The Lord replied,

Joshua 7:11-12 | Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings.
¹² Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies. They turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become devoted for destruction. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you. (Joshua 7:11–12, ESV)

If we are not living in the fear of the Lord the church will not be able to stand before her enemies. Instead she will bring the devoted things of the cultures gods and hide them so we can try to have both.

Acts 5:11 | And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

The Lord is jealous for his church. He will see them to victory. He will establish the fear of the Lord. In the fear of the Lord is life and salvation, wisdom, and steadfast love.