

Introduction:

The late Brennan Manning is probably best known for his bestselling book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. Manning, very courageously admitted to a serious drinking problem when he was a priest in the Catholic church. He voluntarily entered a 28-day treatment program. He recounts in his book [Ragamuffin Gospel](#), that early in the treatment program they had to sit in a circle with a leader and tell the truth to themselves and to the other people in the group, about the extent of their drinking.

So, they went around the circle, and they all told the truth, except for one business guy named Max. When it came time for him to reveal the extent of his drinking, he said, "I never really drank that much."

They said, "Max, you're in an alcoholic treatment center for a month. You weren't sipping cokes. Tell the truth to yourself. Admit it."

He said, "I'm being honest with you. I've never really had all that much to drink."

Manning explains, they had signed affidavits to be able to get information. Max had signed one, too. They could glean information in any way they so desired. So, they had a speaker phone in the center of the circle, and the leader of the group said, "I'm going to call the bartender close to your office and we'll just find out."

So, they called the bartender, and the leader says to the person on the phone, "Do you know Max So-and-So?" The guy says, "Oh, like a brother! He stops in every day after work and has a minimum of six martinis. Man, this guy drinks like a fish! He's the best customer we have—a prolific consumer of alcohol."

The rest of the people in the group all looked at Max. And now here's a moment of truth. Max tells the truth to himself. He says, "Yes, I've had a lot to drink."

A little later in the group, they asked everyone, "Have you ever hurt anybody, a friend or family member, while you were drunk?" Some people said, yes, and they described it. Other people said, no. They tried to get at the truth, and if that was the truth, that was the truth. They get all the way around to Max, who says, "I would never, ever hurt anybody. Not when I'm sober, not when I'm drunk. I have four lovely children. I'd never hurt my wife, I'd never hurt my kids."

The leader says, "You know, Max, we don't believe you. We're going to call your wife." As soon as Max's wife starts talking on the speaker phone, Max starts breathing heavily. He knows something's coming that he has been unwilling to face.

The leader says, "Mrs. So-and-So, has Max ever mistreated you or anyone in the family when he was drunk?" And she said, "Well, yes he has. It happened just this last Christmas Eve. He took our 9-year-old daughter shopping on Christmas Eve, bought her a new pair of shoes; he's a generous man. On the way home, our little girl was sitting in the front seat enjoying her new shoes, and Max passed the bar and saw the cars of some of his buddies.

"He pulled in. It was a cold, wintry day, 12 degrees, with a high wind chill. He made sure all the windows were rolled up snugly. He left the car running so that the heater was blowing, and he said to our 9-year-old daughter, 'I'll be right back. You just play with your shoes; I'll be right back.'

"He went in the bar and started drinking with his buddies. He didn't come out of the bar until midnight. In that time, the vehicle had shut off and the windows had become all frosted over and locked up tight so she couldn't get herself out of the car. When the authorities opened up the car and

rushed her to the hospital, she was so badly frostbitten that her thumb and forefinger had to be amputated. And her ears were so damaged by the cold that she'll be deaf for the rest of her life."

The wife describes this to the group, and Max falls off his chair and starts convulsing on the ground. He just couldn't bear telling himself the truth about what he had done. He couldn't face it. He was going to live the rest of his life in some fantasy world of denial about what he had done.¹

[Transition] - I tell you this story to highlight the poisonous power of deceitfulness and the deadly game of pretending in our relationships with God, in our relationships with others and ourselves. Today in our story in Acts, God makes a dramatic point about how much the truth matters to him and to the health of all our relationships. Let's set up the situation by starting with Acts 4:32-35

God intends for us to enjoy the blessing of Christian community.

Luke sets the backdrop for our story by reminding us that the believers were experiencing unprecedented unity...a profound unity that was being expressed by unhindered generosity in all things. Remember what we have been seeing with these believers...they were captured by the Holy Spirit, and they were reveling in all sorts of amazing expressions of the power and favor of God.

The Spirit of God was transforming the way they lived life. They were extending to one another in the same gracious and generous way God had extended to them and shared his Spirit with them.

[Quote] - A.W. Tozer said, *"If your faith doesn't make any difference in your life, it doesn't make any difference to God!"* Their faith was making a huge difference in how they lived.

¹ Brennen Manning, *Ragamuffin Gospel*. Sisters Oregon: Multnomah Publishers. 122-129

I want you to notice what was happening. The text says all the believers were “one in heart and mind.” This phrase doesn’t mean they all shared the same thoughts and feelings. Instead, it means they were all aligned and unanimous about a cause greater than themselves. In other words, they were setting their personal feelings aside for the greater cause, the greater good.

They recognized God was the real owner of everything. He had graciously given them everything they had. God’s work in their life had inspired a willingness in them to share. God’s grace and generosity to them inspired their grace and generosity to others.

So, the text says from time to time when they sold assets, they would give the money to the Apostles so they could distribute it to anyone as they had need. NOTICE...this was not a required action. This was not a required vow of poverty—requiring everyone to sell all they have and give it to the Apostles.² This was not some sort of spiritual tax. This was not forced generosity. This was not the beginning of wealth distribution. And it wasn’t some sort of Robin Hood-like taking from the rich to give to the poor.

This generosity was voluntary. They didn’t have to do it. Their willingness was the fruit of their walks with Jesus. It came from the inside out, not pressure from the leadership. And a result of this Spirit inspired generosity was the needs of the folks in their church community were met.

Now, Barnabas is cited as a positive example of the unity and generosity God intended. He recognized that God had been generous with him and so he committed to be generous with others. Look at verses 4:36-37

[Transition] - As great as things were and as influential as the Spirit was in many of their lives, things were not perfect. Remember, there are no

² Barrett, C. K. *ICC Acts 1-14*. Emerton, J.A.; Cranfield, C.E.B.; Stanton G. N.; editors. New York: T&T Clark. 252.

perfect churches. Not everyone was fully surrendering to the Spirit's influence in their lives. Look at 5:1-10

In contrast to the authentic generosity that many like Barnabas were demonstrating, Ananias and Sapphira only wanted to virtue signal. They only wanted to pretend to be generous. They connived together to deceive the others by selfishly misrepresenting their generosity.

The problem was not that they didn't give the whole amount to the church. Peter makes that clear in his questioning...The money was at their disposal. The problem was they gave part of the amount claiming it was the whole amount. That was deceitful. And later when questioned, they lied about it.

Who knows what their motivations were? Perhaps he hoped to gain a reputation for being super generous. Maybe he saw how those who were bringing their donations to the cause were praised and his craving for praise and affirmation poisoned his actions. He wanted the accolades Barnabas got.

Perhaps he allowed himself to fall into the temptation that all of us have wrestled with...the temptation to believe that while God has taken care of us in the past, he might not do so in the future. Fundamental trust issues like that can motivate many of us to withhold from God. He's blessed us and maybe we believe in our heads that he'll take care of us but in our hearts, we gripped by doubt and so when it gets right down to it, we withhold.

Friends...one thing is for sure: **Deceit disrupts your relationship with God.**

Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive the leaders and people in their church. But Peter tells them that the One they were really deceiving was

in fact, the Holy Spirit; the One whose life-giving power had created the community and was residing in it...filling it...and empowering it.³

And Peter makes an important point for all of us when he points out that deception of others, is really deception of God. When you and I deceive one another, we fundamentally sin against God. This was the first recorded sin in the life of the church. And the people learned this day, you can't lie to the Holy Spirit.

Paul explains it this way in Galatians 6, *"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. ⁸ Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."* -Galatians 6:7-8

You can't lie to God and try to deceive God. When you do it leads to destruction! You reap what you sow.

[Biblical Illustration] - The story of Ananais and Sapphira is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. Perhaps you are familiar with the story back in Joshua 7. At God's leading, Joshua had sent a small battle company of about 2-3 thousand men up to take the city of Ai because there were only a few men in that city.

But those few men of Ai defeated the Israelites so badly that when the people heard about it, they freaked out...their hearts melted and became like water.

And Joshua, the leader, went to prayer to ask God why they got their tails kicked. God said, *"Israel has sinned; ...They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions."*

God goes on to tell him that their sin has made them liable to destruction because it keeps his hand of blessing off them (Joshua 6:11). When Joshua got to the bottom of it, one man named Achan had kept a

³ Bruce, *The NICNT Acts*, p. 105.

beautiful robe, some silver and a wedge of gold and hid it under his tent. And that sin of selfish deceit impacted the ability of all the people to enjoy the full blessing of God in their lives. Sin threatens to put the brakes on the blessing of God!

[Transition] - In Joshua and here in Acts, an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God. In both instances individuals 'kept back' for themselves what was intended to be used for God and lied about it (Bruce, NICNT, p. 102). And in each case God judges deceitfulness harshly because it is so damaging to the health of our relationships with God and with one another.

Deceit disrupts your relationships with others.

Here's what I want us to notice. Peter says their deceitfulness tested the Spirit of the Lord. In other words, they tested God's patience and forbearance by deceiving and lying and thinking that it would be no big deal.

But Peter sets them straight. When you deceive God or his people you test the grace and mercy of God's Spirit, and you threaten to choke off the free working of God's Spirit in your life. Sin always threatens to put the brakes on God's blessing in your life!

What's more...you jeopardize the free working of the Spirit in the church corporately as well. God's harsh judgment in this story makes it clear that honesty with God, honesty with yourself and honesty with one another matters a ton to God.

[Illustration] - Someone once calculated that each of us tells several lies each day! Yet we believe ourselves to be honest, truthful people. We have sort of numbed ourselves to it and so we don't notice it. When people are brutally honest:

- It's easier to "call in sick than to go to work when friends or family we like are visiting.

- Few people think twice before insisting to the arresting officer that they were not driving as fast as he claims they were.
- Most errors on tax returns occur in favor of the taxpayer, attesting to our habit of nudging reality in our own direction.
- The marriage counselor who interviews each partner separately can hardly believe he is hearing about the same relationship—the two versions vary so sharply.⁴

Left unchecked, untruths and deceit will poison your life...devastate your relationships...corrupt your character, shred your spirit, and likely put the brakes on the free operation of God's power in your life.

We must commit to being honest and forthright in all areas of our lives. We must commit to being honest with ourselves, honest with God and honest with one another. We have to be willing to seek the help of others in our lives to help us get objective input like Max in our opening story.

[Illustration] - As we can see in our story today, money is certainly an area where some of the greatest temptation for deception can reside. One family I know (Not a family in this church) started out as one of the closest extended family groups I have ever been associated with. Whenever there was a birthday or wedding or graduation...as many as could gathered from all over the west. Several years ago two of the members of this family went into business together and after about 8-10 years the spouse of one of the couples embezzled about 80K dollars from the business over a period of about 4 years...she hid it, covered it...when it was discovered, she denied that she did it and called it an honest mistake until it was obvious that you don't make honest mistakes repeatedly over a 4 year period all in your favor. And to this day she has not fully and convincingly owned her deceit. Her choices have divided and decimated this once close family. And I haven't even mentioned the trauma it has brought to the relationships within their church where they both attended.

⁴ Backus and Chapian, *Truth Talk*, Inspirational Press: New York, 1980, p. 189.

I have been stunned by the damage her seemingly private choices have caused in this family. It's tragic to see first-hand how the sin of deceitfulness and lying can put the brakes on God's blessing in your life and poison the blessings he has given.

God judges Ananais and Sapphira harshly because he wants us to understand that deceitfulness and lying are horribly destructive to the health of our relationships with others, but most importantly with God. When we lie and deceive a fellow believer...we lie to and deceive the Holy Spirit.

Truth and integrity are so fundamental because unless you are willing to tell yourself the truth and others the truth and God the truth, you are stuck. Lying and deceit keep you in bondage, and it inhibits the free working of the Spirit of God in your life and that is a very dangerous path.

Conclusion:

The sequel to the story of Max that I started with this morning is encouraging. His deceitfulness threatened to undo everything God had given him...and it even threatened to get him kicked out of the rehab program.

But, Max pleaded for and obtained permission to continue in the program. He then proceeded to undergo the most striking personality transformation the group had ever witnessed. He became more honest and more sincere, more open, more affectionate, and more vulnerable than he had been before. The tough love of God and the tough love of those around him made him stop playing the deadly game of pretending, and the truth set him free just like Jesus said it would.⁵

Friends...if you're playing the deadly game of deception. It's time to come to grips with the power and blessing of honesty.

⁵ Brennen Manning, *The Importance of Being Foolish*. Harper: San Francisco, p.11.