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Acts / Sin; Hypocrisy; Unity; Fear; Holiness / Acts 4:32–5:11

The risen King preserves his church by producing genuine unity and generosity, exposing hypocrisy, and judging his people.

The King Preserves His Church

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Introduction

Awakening Church, welcome back to the book of Acts.

Over the past few Sundays, we have watched the risen Christ build his church and advance his kingdom through the witness of his apostles. In Acts chapter 3, Peter and John healed the lame man at the temple, and Peter used that miracle to proclaim the risen Christ. Then in Acts chapter 4, the opposition began. The religious leaders arrested Peter and John, brought them before the council, and commanded them to speak no more in the name of Jesus... but they could not silence them, Peter and John answered, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”

And last Sunday, Pastor Mike brought us to the church’s response in Acts 4:23–31. When Peter and John returned to the church and told them what happened, the church didn’t pray for an easier road. They prayed for boldness to keep speaking the word of God... and the Lord answered.

The place where they were gathered was shaken, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they continued to speak the word of God with boldness. So, everything we have seen so far tells us that the enemies outside the church cannot stop what the risen King is doing.

- They threatened the apostles.
- They arrested the apostles.
- They commanded them to be silent.
- And the word of God kept advancing.

But this morning, the battlefield shifts.

If the church can’t be stopped by threats from the outside, what happens when sin rises up on the inside?

And before Luke shows us that threat, he starts by showing us something beautiful.

He shows us what the grace of the risen Christ is producing among his people. The church is one in heart and soul, the saints are caring for one another, and the apostles are testifying to the resurrection with great power. And great grace is upon them all. We're about to read all that, it's amazing.

There's harmony in the church... but then sin enters.

And what follows is one of the most serious, attention grabbing moments in the book of Acts.

So this morning we are going to see three things.

First, the harmony that the grace of God produces among his people.

Second, the hypocrisy that attempts to counterfeit that grace.

And finally, the holiness of the King who sees what's hidden, exposes what men (even Apostles) can't see, and preserves his church.

So, the threat has moved from outside the church to inside the church.

But the King hasn't changed.

And you should be asking, Okay, how is Christ going to preserve his church when the danger is inside?

That's what Luke is going to show us this morning.

So open your Bibles with me to Acts chapter 4, verse 32. Let us stand together as we hear the word of the Lord.

Sermon Text: Acts 4:32-5:11

Call: “*The grass withers and the flower fades,*”

Response: “*But the word of the Lord endures forever.*”

1. The Harmony (v32-37)

1.1 The Unity and the Generosity (v32)

Now after they prayed for boldness, God gave them more than boldness. Luke shows us the Spirit produced unity and love that marked the church.

Look at **verse 32** because this is the first great reality Luke wants us to see this morning. He wants us to see the beautiful harmony that the Holy Spirit produced in the church. This is not just organizational unity or surface agreement. This is deep, supernatural, gospel produced fellowship. Human nature pulls us toward self interest and division. Only the Holy Spirit could bind these people together into one heart and one soul.

The more experience we have of seeking unity, the more we realize how supernatural this gift truly was. Only the Holy Spirit could take a multitude of sinners and make them one in heart and soul around the risen Christ. One of the things I want us to pay careful attention to is that Luke shows that this unity didn't come by softening doctrine or by avoiding hard truths. In the verses just before this, they were speaking the word of God with boldness. The apostles' teaching and witness to the risen Christ remained at the center of their shared life. True Christian unity always gathers around the truth of God, not around the lowest common denominator.

And this unity produced radical generosity. No one said that anything he possessed was his own. Luke isn't abolishing private property or teaching communism. These believers still owned possessions, but they understood that everything they had was a stewardship from God. They held their goods loosely because they held Christ tightly.

The risen King creates a united people, and that unity becomes visible through generous love in the way they cared for one another.

John 13:34–35 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

1 John 3:16–18 “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

This harmony was not the product of human effort, and Luke is going to show us its true source.

1.2 The Resurrection and the Grace (v33-35)

Look at **verse 33**, the resurrection remained at the center. The apostles were still bearing personal eyewitness testimony that Jesus is alive. Their shared life didn’t replace the gospel, it flowed from the gospel. The church was not simply a group of people “doing life together”. Their unity and care for one another were the fruit of believing and proclaiming that Christ had been raised from the dead.

Then Luke tells us that great grace was upon them all. Great grace wasn't just something Luke tells us they had, you could see it. They kept preaching Christ, and they started opening their hands to one another. Programs, budgets, and buildings may serve the church, but they can’t create the life Luke describes. Only the risen Christ, by his Spirit and through the means of the gospel, produces this kind of people.

Now look at **verses 34 and 35**. Notice how the generosity worked. This was voluntary. It wasn’t a command that every believer must sell everything, private property continued. Luke doesn’t say that every believer sold everything, in fact, he calls them “owners” of lands and houses. The concern here was never equal wealth, it was sufficient care so that no saint remained in genuine need. The believers trusted the apostles’ unique authority to oversee the care of the church, and the apostles served as faithful stewards of what was entrusted to them.

So what we end up with is the testimony of the resurrection and the grace of God producing

a church that held the gospel tightly and held their possessions loosely.

1.3 The Example of Barnabas (v36-37)

Now in **verse 36** Luke gives us one clear example of the grace he has been describing. Joseph, who the apostles called Barnabas, meaning son of encouragement.

We're going to see much more of Barnabas in Acts. He'll stand beside Saul when others are afraid of him, encourage believers to remain faithful, and later invest in John Mark after his failure. Barnabas really will prove to be a son of encouragement.

But in **verse 37**, this is where we see his first encouraging act. He sees the needs, sells a field, and lays the money at the apostles' feet... and then the story moves on.

Barnabas isn't the hero. He's simply a genuine example of what the grace of God is producing in the church.

And that matters because another man is about to walk in and do something that looks almost exactly the same.

2. The Hypocrisy (v1-4)

2.1 The Sale and the Secret (v1-2)

Now we look at **verse 1** of chapter 5. The word "but" here is a deliberate and sudden contrast. Luke wants us to feel the shift. The beauty of the church's harmony is about to be threatened by ugly deceit. On the surface, Ananias appears to be doing exactly what Barnabas did. Both men sold property. Both men brought money. Both men laid it at the apostles' feet. Except that Luke is about to show us that what looks similar before men can be completely different before God.

Look at what's said in **verse 2**. Sapphira is not a passive bystander. She knows, and she later confirms the lie. They agreed together to keep back part of the money while presenting the rest as if it were the whole. This was a coordinated deception between a husband and a wife.

The sin was not that they kept part of the proceeds. Peter will make clear in verse 4 that the property belonged to Ananias and the money was still at his disposal. The sale was voluntary, and the gift was voluntary. They were under no command to give it all. But Ananias and Sapphira wanted the church to believe they had given everything when they had not. They wanted the reputation of sacrifice without the cost of honest sacrifice.

I really want us to know what's going on here. I don't want to confuse hypocrisy with the ordinary Christian struggle against sin. Hypocrisy is not just having sin in your life. If that were true, every Christian would be a hypocrite.

Instead of thinking about it as a sin, think about it like a wound. The difference isn't that one person has a wound and the other doesn't. They both do. The difference is what they do with it.

The struggling Christian brings the wound into the light because he wants it treated. He confesses his sin, fights it, and runs back to Christ for mercy.

But hypocrisy covers the wound and works to convince everyone that nothing is wrong.

That's what Ananias and Sapphira are doing. They're deliberately creating an appearance of godliness that they know isn't true. They want the church to see one thing while they knowingly conceal another. And that's very different from a Christian who is fighting against sin.

So if you're worried because you're still fighting sin, don't mistake the fight for hypocrisy.

The question isn't whether you have a wound. You do.

The question is what you're doing with it.

Are you hiding it to protect your appearance? Or are you bringing it into the light?

Because the Christian life isn't pretending that the wound isn't there. It's confessing our sin,

fighting it, and continually running to Christ for mercy.

2.2 The Satan and the Sin (v3)

In **verse 3**, Peter confronts Ananias directly. Two truths stand side by side in Peter's question, and we need to hold both of them tightly.

First, Satan is real and active. He isn't a symbol or a myth. He's a personal deceiver who opposes Christ and seeks to corrupt the church through lies, pride, greed, and false appearances. Satan filled Ananias's heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. Even among those who gather with the people of God, the enemy works to plant lies and protect appearances. Proximity to the church is no guarantee that a person is walking honestly before the Lord.

But second, Ananias remains fully responsible. Peter does not say that Satan made him do this, instead he asks why Satan has filled his heart. Satan tempted Ananias, but Ananias embraced the temptation. Satan influenced him, but Ananias chose the lie. Satan never removes human accountability before God.

And then, notice what Peter says Ananias has done... he has lied to the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force, and he's not a vague energy. You can't lie to an impersonal power, you can only lie to a person. Ananias thought he was managing his reputation before men, but he was lying before the personal Spirit of God.

Awakening Church, this is another serious warning. Satan still today tempts people to manage appearances, hide sin, and present a version of themselves that isn't true. But we can't blame Satan for the lies we choose to tell or the truth we choose to conceal.

And Peter is about to press the point even further.

2.3 The Property and the Lie (v4)

In **verse 4**, Peter is closing the loop for us on the question of property. He makes it plain that Ananias was never under compulsion to sell his land, and he was never forced to give the money after the sale. The land belonged to him, and even after the sale, the money remained at his disposal.

So the issue was never the amount of the gift. The issue was the lie about the gift.

Peter then asks a very personal and pointed question. “Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?” Ananias had thought about this. He had planned it, and he had agreed with his wife. That’s how sin works when it is entertained rather than killed. This wasn't spontaneous, he walked into the church and carried it out with purpose. This wasn’t a careless word or an accidental misunderstanding.

We can see in the text that Satan was at work, but Ananias contrived the deed in his own heart. Satan’s influence was real, and Ananias’s responsibility was real. He owned this sin.

So there is no “the devil made me do it” in biblical Christianity. Satan may tempt, Satan may deceive, but when we embrace the temptation and choose the sin, the sin is ours.

Then Peter brings the full weight of the matter down upon him. “You have not lied to man but to God.” In verse 3, Peter said that Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit. Now he says that Ananias has lied to God. Don't miss what Peter just did... Verse 3: you lied to the Holy Spirit... Verse 4: you lied to God. Luke isn't leaving us to guess who the Holy Spirit is. The Holy Spirit is God. He is fully and eternally God, the third person of the Trinity.

Ananias thought he was managing an appearance before the apostles and the church. In reality, he was lying to the living God who sees every heart.

Awakening Church, this verse leaves us with two clear truths.

First, while our possessions may truly belong to us, everything we have is still entrusted to us by God. We remain accountable to him for the way we use what he has placed in our hands.

Second, we may be able to deceive other people, but every lie and every carefully managed appearance is laid bare before the God who cannot be deceived.

So far, Luke has shown us the harmony that the grace of God produced. Then we saw the

hypocrisy that wanted to counterfeit it. And now, Luke brings us to the holiness of the King who won't leave deceit hidden in his church.

3. The Holiness (v5-11)

3.1 The Judgment of Ananias (v5-6)

What happens next in **verse 5** is terrifying. Just like that, Ananias is dead.

The holy King who sees every heart has acted. Ananias hears Peter's words, falls down, and breathes his last. Peter didn't kill him. The church didn't sentence him. God did this. The God who dwells among his people is holy, and Ananias has just learned that he can't be deceived.

One of the immediate questions that comes to mind is, does the severity of this judgment surprise you? Does this seem to be too heavy handed for such a small misstep? One of the things that this text is meant to do for the early church, and for us today, is to reveal the severity of our sin. Something we might dismiss as just a little lie is, in the sight of God, deliberate rebellion against the one who sees the heart. In the text, Ananias didn't just misspeak. He had planned this deception. He wanted the appearance of sacrifice without the truth of it, and to get it, he lied directly to God.

This moment stands in the same line as other decisive judgments in redemptive history.

When Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized fire at the beginning of the priesthood, God struck them down.

When Achan hid what had been devoted to the Lord at the beginning of Israel's life in the land, God exposed and judged him.

And now, at the beginning of the New Covenant church, God again acts with judgment to reveal his holiness and guard the purity of his people.

This text doesn't teach that every sudden death is a direct judgment for a specific sin. Far more often than not what we experience is God being patient, and longsuffering. But... at

certain foundational moments throughout redemptive history, he chooses to make his holiness unmistakably clear.

Then **verse 6** tells us that the young men rose, wrapped Ananias's body, carried him out, and buried him. This quick and unassuming verse is the first recorded funeral in the church. And it's the burial of a man who God judged for hypocrisy.

And at the end of verse 5 Luke says that great fear came upon all who heard of it. This isn't just shock, and it isn't a worldly kind of terror. It's a holy reverence for the God who judges sin in his own house, and he isn't done.

3.2 The Judgment of Sapphira (v7-10)

In **verses 7 and 8** Luke continues... Three hours have passed. Sapphira enters the gathering, and she has no idea that her husband is already dead and buried. Peter does not accuse her immediately. He extends mercy, and he asks her a direct question that requires only a simple, honest answer.

I don't think Peter needed more information about the circumstances here. The Spirit has already exposed the deception. But Sapphira is now given the opportunity to come into the light, she could tell the truth. She could confess what she and Ananias had done. Instead, she confirms the lie. Verse 2 told us that she knew about the plan, and now verse 8 shows us that she willingly embraces the lie for herself. She had agreed with Ananias to deceive the church, and when Peter confronted her, she chose to continue the deception before God.

Sapphira is not being judged just because she was Ananias's wife. She isn't a passive bystander caught up in her husband's sin, she's fully responsible for her own choices.

Then in **verse 9** Peter asks a similar question and we see a similar result. Peter says they agreed together, which confirms her full partnership in the sin. Then he names the sin for what it truly is, they conspired to test the Spirit of the Lord.

They both were acting presumptuously. They were behaving as though God didn't see, as though he didn't care, or as though he wouldn't judge their hypocrisy. They had both joined together in an attempt to deceive not only the church but the Spirit of the Lord.

In **verse 10** we see her involvement confirmed through divine judgment. She falls down at his feet and breathes her last. The judgment of Sapphira confirms her personal guilt. In all of these circumstances Ananias could not blame Satan and Sapphira could not blame Ananias. Both had sinned deliberately before the holy God and they were both exposed, and judged.

The holy King will not allow the new temple of his church to be defiled by deceit. And after this display of the holiness of God, Luke brings us to the result of all these events.

3.3 The Fear of the Church (v11)

Look with me at **verse 11**. For the first time in the book of Acts, Luke calls the gathered people the church. The word is ekklesia, and it carries the Old Testament background of the assembly or congregation of God's people. What began at Pentecost is now clearly identified as the church of the living God, and what that church has just witnessed is the holiness of her King.

And what is the lesson, what is the result of all these events? It's that great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Luke has used the word great several times in this section. There was great power in the apostles' witness, there was great grace upon the church, and now there is great fear upon the church.

When you hear that, your initial thought might not be to praise God for his mercy and grace. You might be thinking that after all that what we are left with is a scared church? So I want to add a few guard rails for our understanding this in context...

This fear is not just shock or sadness at two sudden deaths. It's not a kind of hopeless dread that someone might have before a tyrant. It's a sober, holy dread before the God who sees every heart and judges hypocrisy in his own house. It's the reverent humility of a creature before the Creator.

Awakening, biblical fear does not cancel trust or love, and it's a necessary part of a loving trust in God. Luke will later describe the church as walking in the fear of the Lord and in the

comfort of the Holy Spirit. I want us to see these are not opposites. The fear of the Lord humbles us before his holiness, and the comfort of the Spirit assures us of his grace.

We can notice that Luke says the fear fell on the whole church and on all who heard. God used this judgment not only to remove and expose deceit but to teach his people to take sin seriously. The same grace that produced unity and generosity has now produced a fear of the Lord.

And I think one of the reasons we sometimes have a hard time understanding biblical fear is because we have created a category of Christian maturity that the Bible doesn't actually give us.

Imagine the Christian life for a moment like walking along a narrow path across the face of a mountain. On one side is the mountain itself, solid and secure. On the other side is a terrible cliff. One wrong step toward the edge and there is a deadly fall below.

Now imagine three men walking that path.

The first man sees the cliff, but he doesn't fear it.

He doesn't believe the danger.

Maybe he thinks the warnings are exaggerated. Maybe he has convinced himself that the people warning him are just trying to scare him. So he walks carelessly. He wanders toward the edge. He plays where he should never play because he doesn't actually believe that he's in danger.

Scripture knows that man.

Romans 3:18 says of the unbelieving world, "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

The first man denies the danger.

But **the second man** is different.

He sees the cliff, and he knows it's dangerous. He's even watched others fall.

But he's an experienced climber. He knows his Bible, and he knows his theology. And he thinks, "I know the danger, but I can handle it."

Scripture knows this man too.

1Corinthians 10:12 says, "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

The second man doesn't deny the danger. He overestimates himself.

So, the first man says, there is no danger, and the second man says, there is danger, but I can handle it.

But then there is **a third man**.

He sees the cliff, he believes the warning, but unlike the first man, he fears the Lord. And unlike the second man, he doesn't trust himself.

He's seen what happens when men wander toward that edge. He knows that sin is deadly and he knows that he's weak, and because he fears the Lord, he turns away from the danger and clings to what is secure.

Scripture knows this man too.

Proverbs 16:6 says, "by the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil."

Do you see what the fear of the Lord is doing?

It's pressing him against the mountain.

It's keeping him near the Rock.

The first man dismisses the warning.

The second man believes the warning but trusts himself.

But the third man believes the warning, fears the Lord, and clings to the Rock.

Awakening Church, we don't mature beyond the fear of the Lord. We mature in it.

Christian maturity is not becoming increasingly confident in our ability to stand. It's becoming increasingly aware of how desperately we need Christ in order to stand.

We don't ask, how close can we get to the edge without falling?

We look at the cliff.

We look at ourselves.

We look at the Rock.

And we say, Why would we ever leave the Rock?

That's what the fear of the Lord does. It teaches us to take God seriously, to take sin seriously, and not to trust ourselves. It turns us away from evil and presses us closer to Christ.

And Awakening Church, that's exactly what we see happening in Acts 5.

Ananias and Sapphira presumed upon the holiness of God, and Christ showed his church the cliff.

And what happened?

Great fear came upon the whole church. Awakening we need to know that the fear of the Lord is not the cliff. The fear of the Lord is one of the means God uses to keep us from the cliff. We need to understand that God's warnings are not the enemies of his grace, they are instruments of his grace.

The fear of the Lord doesn't frighten the sheep away from him. Jesus is frightening his sheep away from the cliff.

He shows us the danger of sin.

He shows us the danger of hypocrisy.

He shows us the holiness of the God who dwells among us.

The title of this sermon is "The King Preserves His Church," but Luke doesn't use the word preserve anywhere in the text, so I want us to see why I'm using it. What does Christ do when hypocrisy enters his church?

He exposes it, he judges it, and then what happens?

In verse 5 and verse 11, Great fear came...the sin of two becomes a warning to everyone.

And that fear presses his people closer to the Rock.

So the truth in this text is not that we started with great grace and then, sadly, we moved to great fear.

Great grace and great fear belong together. This great fear was itself a gift of preserving grace.

The King has preserved his church.

4. Application And Call To Christ

Before we end, I want us to remember that this text is not just telling us, Barnabas was generous, Ananias wasn't, so go and be more generous.

From the outside, Barnabas and Ananias looked almost exactly the same. Both sold property, both brought money, and both laid it at the apostles' feet.

Men couldn't see the difference, the church couldn't see the difference, but God could.

One was genuine worship. The other was a lie to God.

And that brings this text directly to us.

Is there any place where we are managing an appearance while hiding something from the Lord? Are we trying to appear more faithful, more generous, more holy, or more devoted than we really are?

The same King who judged Ananias and Sapphira is still King in his church today. And he still hates hypocrisy.

But if we're honest, there is more of Ananias in us than we want to admit.

We have all managed our reputation. We have all wanted people to think we're more devoted than we actually are. And if we had to stand before the holiness of God on the basis of our own righteousness, none of us would survive.

But here is the glory of the gospel.

The holy God who judged Ananias and Sapphira is the same God who did not spare his own Son.

Jesus Christ had no hypocrisy in him. There was no deception in him. His obedience to the Father was perfect. And at the cross, the righteous One suffered for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God.

The judgment our sin deserves fell upon Christ for everyone who belongs to him. And he didn't remain in the grave. He rose, ascended to his throne, and poured out his Spirit upon his church. This is how our King preserves a church full of sinners.

He doesn't preserve his people by pretending our sin isn't there. He brings us into the light. He leads us to repentance. And in Christ, our judgment has already fallen upon our Substitute.

So Awakening Church, don't hide from this King. Come to him.

If you are not in Christ, fear the Lord and flee to Christ. There is no safe place outside of Jesus. Turn from your sin and trust the One who was judged in the place of sinners.

And if you are in Christ, fear the Lord and cling to Christ. Remember the cliff. The fear of the Lord isn't driving you away from Christ. It's pressing you closer to him.

Standing in the brighter light of God's revelation in Christ does not make the holiness of God less fearful. It means we see his holiness more clearly than ever before. And the more clearly we see his holiness, the more glorious his grace becomes.

The King is still preserving his church.

All glory be to Christ our King.

5. Questions For Study

Please be encouraged to use these questions for reflection throughout the week and Awakening discipleship group discussions.

1. Acts 4:32–37 shows a church that was “of one heart and soul.” What produced this unity, and how was it made visible? Is there a difference between Christian unity produced by the Holy Spirit and unity that is maintained by avoiding difficult truths? In what ways

should genuine unity in Christ change the way we view our possessions, our time, and the needs of other members of the church?

2. Looking at the outside, Barnabas and Ananias did almost exactly the same thing. Why did God receive one act and judge the other? What's the difference between genuine obedience and merely maintaining the appearance of obedience? Where are you most tempted to care more about appearing faithful before other Christians than actually walking faithfully before God?
3. Peter says that Satan filled Ananias's heart, but he also holds Ananias personally responsible for his sin. What does this teach us about temptation, Satan's activity, and human responsibility? Does this affect the way you think and speak about your own sin? What's the danger of blaming our circumstances, other people, or spiritual attack for choices that we ourselves have made?
4. How do you understand God's judgment of Ananias and Sapphira? Was it serious, severe, or mandatory, and what was God teaching the church through it? Acts 5:11 says that "great fear came upon the whole church." What's the difference between biblical fear of the Lord and hopeless terror before God? How can the warnings and judgments of Scripture function as instruments of God's grace that drive his people away from sin and nearer to Christ?
5. In the sermon, I described the Christian life as a path with a deadly cliff on one side and the solid Rock on the other. Which of the three men are you most tempted to resemble? Do you sometimes minimize the danger of sin? Do you recognize the danger but trust yourself to handle it? Or does the fear of the Lord cause you to recognize your weakness and cling more closely to Christ? How do you understand this idea... We don't mature beyond the fear of the Lord. We mature in it.

Questions for small children during family devotion:

Please be encouraged to use these questions in family devotion throughout the week, especially for young minds learning about Christ.

1. Who made the church love and care for one another?

Parent guided answer: The Holy Spirit. He helped God's people love one another and share what they had.

2. What did Ananias and Sapphira do wrong?

Parent guided answer: They lied to God. They wanted people to think they had done something better than they really had.

3. Can we hide our sin from God?

Parent guided answer: No. God sees everything we do and knows what is in our hearts.

4. Why should we fear the Lord?

Parent guided answer: Because God is holy and sin is serious. Fearing God teaches us to turn away from sin, to fight our sin, and to kill our sin!

5. What should we do when we sin?

Parent guided answer: Tell the truth, confess our sin, and run to Jesus. Jesus saves sinners who trust in him.