

No Perfect Church

Acts 5:1-11

DT- When the church has a correct view of God it grows.

We have been in this series looking at the book of Acts now for 5 weeks. So far we have seen great power as the Holy Spirit filled the Apostles in Acts 2 just after their time of preparation. Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost and thousands give their lives to Christ. We have also seen great grace as Peter healed a crippled man in Acts 3 and even with the first threat of opposition in Acts 4 we saw the grace of God moving to expand the church to over 5,000 families. Now today we will see a great fear washing over this new church. Power, grace, and fear are 3 things that should be present in the life of a church.

This early church seems perfect on the outside. Everyone is sharing possessions and looking after one another, people are putting their faith in Jesus and conversions are happening daily. From the outside it looks perfect, and it was a good healthy growing church no doubt, but we all know that there is no perfect church. If there are people involved, it will eventually get messy. As we go through Acts we will get to see firsthand how the leaders of the early church dealt with these things as best they could and with as much grace and truth as possible.

What will happen in our text today is a little out of the ordinary, but it is something that God has done on occasion throughout scripture. Let's pray and we will see why great fear washes over this not so perfect church.

PRAY

Back in 1997 Gatorade put out a commercial with Michael Jordan and Mia Hamm the soccer star. It starts with Mia trying to guard Michael in basketball which doesn't work of course; then it transitions to Michael trying to guard Mia in soccer which works in her favor. While this is happening the background song playing in the commercial is "Anything you can do I can do better." Michael and Mia continue to compete against one another but they move from their sports to fencing, and then tennis, and then track, and the commercial ends with them doing some sort of mixed martial arts. All the while the lyrics to the song keep playing; "Anything you can do I can do better. I can do anything better than you."

At the beginning of Acts 5 we have an “Anything you can do I can do better” kind of moment. Luke ends Acts 4 by telling us how the believers are united in heart and mind. How they share everything, and that there is no needy people among them. Then he tells us that some people are even selling land or houses and bringing that money to the apostles to give to those in need.

Then Luke shines a light on one of those people selling property, a man named Joseph who earns the nickname Barnabas which means son of encouragement. We’ve talked about how important Barnabas was to the early church, especially how important he was to Paul. Right after Luke mentions Barnabas selling property and bringing the money to the apostles, we meet a husband and wife. Ananias and Sapphira. They too sold property and brought the money to Peter and the apostles, but unfortunately their hearts had been turned by Satan and they lie about the money. Acts 5:1-2 says, “But there was a certain man named Ananias who, with his wife, Sapphira, sold some property. He brought part of the money to the apostles, claiming it was the full amount. With his wife’s consent, he kept the rest.”

They are both in on this deception. Claiming what they were giving was the full amount. The phrase “kept the rest” means to pilfer or embezzle. Why did they do this? I would say pride. Pride opens the door to every other sin. Once we are more concerned with our reputation than our character, there is no end to the things we will do to make ourselves look good.

Their deception is about to become a major point of emphasis for this early church. It should be noted that they did not have to give the full amount. What they gave was not going to be an issue; lying about what they gave and how much the property sold for becomes the issue. Peter, probably through the power of the Holy Spirit, somehow knows that Ananias is lying so he confronts him in Acts 5:3-6 and says, “Ananias, why have you let Satan fill your heart? You lied to the Holy Spirit, and you kept some of the money for yourself. The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished. And after selling it, the money was also yours to give away. How could you do a thing like this? You weren’t lying to us but to God!” As soon as Ananias heard these words, he fell to the floor and died. Everyone who heard about it was terrified. Then some young men got up, wrapped him in a sheet, and took him out and buried him.”

Wow. That seems harsh doesn’t it. Did God really need to handle things like that? Is God overacting here? There’s a few things we need to understand about this situation. First this was an attack of Satan from within the church. We need to be on the lookout for attacks from within.

1. Be on the lookout for attacks from within.

Peter says that Satan had filled his heart. God loves his church. The church was purchased by the blood of God's son and we exist to glorify God and do his work. Satan wants to destroy the church. If Satan can't beat the church from the outside, like we saw last week with the religious leaders telling Peter and John to hush, then Satan will try to get on the inside of the church and disrupt things from there.

If Peter had not discerned what Ananias and Sapphira were doing they might have become as influential as Barnabas. Satan could have worked through them to cripple this brand-new movement. Instead, God stops this attack of Satan before it can ever get started. We see this and wonder if God is overreacting. We might not say that out loud but we think it. What would happen if all the liars were struck dead in the church today?

Although this may seem drastic to us God has actually been consistent about judging sin severely at the beginning of new periods in salvation history. Just after the tabernacle is erected, God killed Nadab and Abihu for presenting false fire to the Lord; that's Leviticus 10. He also killed Achan for disobeying orders after Israel had just begun to enter the promise land, that's Joshua 7. Uzziah is killed in 2 Samuel for touching the ark of the Covenant. Even in the NT we see God's judgement fall upon people like Elymas the sorcerer who was struck blind in Acts 13. Even Herod is eventually struck with intestinal worms in Acts 12.

At certain major transitional times for the Israelites and now for the church, God has brought judgement and wrath to remind us to be on the lookout for attacks from within. We wonder if God is overacting here but honestly Ananias got what we all deserve. Thankfully God only does this at the beginning of major movements of the Spirit. I believe the reason we think this seems harsh is because we grossly underestimate the depth of our sin. We de-emphasize and play down just how much impact our sin has on our life and the lives of those around us. We think this is harsh because we forget what our sin cost God to secure our redemption. Ananias got exactly what we all deserve but by God's grace and patience he doesn't bring down his judgement upon those of us who have literally committed the exact same sin.

Part of this demonstration of judgement was to show this early church that Satan doesn't just operate outside the walls of the church. He wants to get on the inside. That's where he can do the most damage. If you are not attempting anything important for God, if you are not breaking new ground, not witnessing, not serving in any particular way, Satan will probably leave you alone. You're not really moving the kingdom forward in any significant way so why bother you. You're already accomplishing what he wants. Apathy is one of the tools of Satan.

On the other hand, if you really are trying to do something for God—if your walk with Christ is effective, if you have a strong prayer life, if you have been witnessing to others, if you are trying to minister to the needs of real people and demonstrate the real love of Jesus Christ—Satan will absolutely attack you. You will have to be on your guard against him.

How do you guard yourself against Satan? James 4:7 tells us how to do that where it says, "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

Notice what must happen before you can resist Satan. Submission. You want to guard yourself and your family and your church against Satan and resist him; it will take submission to God first. How do we submit to God? Look at how Jesus submitted to God. Jesus spent time with the father and that allowed him to submit to God and his will, and he was able to resist the temptations of Satan. Jesus spent 40 days alone in fellowship with God before Satan tempted him.

If we're going to be on the lookout for attacks from within, and we want to do that well, then we better spend some time with the father getting ourselves ready and prepared for the attacks of Satan.

The young men have buried Ananias and the text says that about 3 hours later Sapphira came in not knowing what had happened. Where was she? I assume she took the money they lied about and went shopping. We don't know where she was or why she hadn't heard about her husband's death but Peter asks her this question in Acts 5:8-10, "Was this the price you and your husband received for your land?" "Yes," she replied, "that was the price." And Peter said, "How could the two of you even think of conspiring to test the Spirit of the Lord like this? The young men who buried your husband are just outside the door, and they will carry you out, too." Instantly, she fell to the floor and died. When the young men came in and saw that she was dead, they carried her out and buried her beside her husband."

I'm going to borrow a phrase that Rick Burgess says often in his teaching for my second point today. My men's ministry guys will probably recognize this right away. Sin always matters.

2. Sin always matters.

Peter can't fathom why they would test the Holy Spirit like this. The problem was not that Ananias and Sapphira didn't give all the money, it was that they pretended to give all the money to receive the same recognition as Barnabas. The problem was their sin of hypocrisy and lying. Falsehood destroys fellowship. Lies destroy relationships. If left unchecked and undisciplined sin can destroy a church. Sin always matters. Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote, "Sin has many tools, but a lie is the handle which fits them all."

We take our sin too lightly. In some ways we have become callous to it. We don't mourn our sin like we should. When was the last time you wept over your sin? James 1:13-15 says, "And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death."

Sin always matters, because of the wake it leaves in people's lives and because of how it can grow and metastasize in people and in churches. This is why God stopped this sin right away. Protection of the church. It worked. Imagine if you were one of these young men who carried Ananias out. Put yourself in their shoes for a second.

What would the conversation be like as you carried him out and buried him? Maybe they were completely silent. Certainly, they would have been in total shock. Perhaps they thought about a lie that they had told once and started to get that uneasy feeling in their stomach. Then imagine you come walking back in and the guy's wife drops dead as well. Peter tells you to take her and go bury her as well. Do you come back a third time? Do you maybe knock first and sort of stick your head in to make sure there's not a third one?

No doubt this must have had a major effect on these young guys, and they got the message loud and clear; sin always matters. Luke adds one more piece of information to this tragic yet remarkable story. It reminds us, as it certainly did for this early church, that we need to establish a healthy fear of God.

3. Establish a healthy fear of God.

What Luke says is rather obvious but still important to communicate to anyone reading this letter. In Acts 5:11 Luke writes, "Great fear gripped the entire church and everyone else who heard what had happened."

I bet it did. I bet they had record offerings for the next month or so. We have to remember though, that this was not about the money but about the hypocrisy, and lies that were told by Ananias and Sapphira. Perhaps most of all this was about making sure Satan didn't get a foothold in this new church. This is the first time the word church is used in the book of Acts.

Not only was the church gripped with fear but everyone who heard the story was shocked as well. Did this cause people to be timid about joining this new church? What happens when people are afraid of the church? Is that good for church growth? Honestly, when the church has a correct view of God it grows. Church growth is not all about the programs you have or the methods you use, it's about our view of God.

How do you view God? Do you have a healthy fear of God or like this early church do you need to establish a healthy fear of God? Hebrews 12:28-29 says, "Since we are receiving a Kingdom that is unshakable, let us be thankful and please God by worshiping him with holy fear and awe. For our God is a devouring fire."

Is that how you see him? Is this what you think of as you worship him? Do think of God as a consuming fire? Do you worship him with a holy fear and awe? When people do not fear God the church is not going to grow. When God is feared the church grows. God wanted the church to be on the lookout for attacks from within because he knew they were coming. This incident was a way to remind them of that. It was always a way to remind them that sin always matters. That the consequences of sin can reach further than we think and the consequences of sin can last longer than we might imagine. Perhaps most importantly this event was meant to establish a healthy fear of who God is, because when the church has a correct view of God it grows.

I'd like to help us establish a more correct view of God. I'd like to help us establish a healthy fear of God. But I'd like to do that in a little different way than what we see here in Acts 5. I don't know how you view God right now. Sometimes it depends on what you're going through, sometimes what you've already gone through determines your view of God.

At Christmas we use these beautiful phrases from Isaiah to describe him as a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He is those things. But he is also depicted in Revelation 19 as a king ready for battle. Revelation 19:11-16 says, "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no-one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: king of kings and lord of lords."

To have a correct view of God we have to stop trying to put God in a box. We have to view him as Father, Son, and Spirit. He is the God of all creation. We see his wrath and his grace. Without the wrath of God we would never be able to understand the depths of his love and the measure of his grace. We deserve what happened to Ananias and Sapphira because of our sin. Yet God's grace and forgiveness through his son Jesus covers our sin. Jesus took upon himself the wrath of God.

When the church has a correct view of God it grows. I'm going to ask the worship band to go ahead and come back onto the stage. To steer us towards a more correct view of God, and establish a healthy fear of Him, I want us all together to pray out loud some portions of Psalm 90. Psalm 90 is not a prayer of David but a prayer of Moses. This psalm is a prayer we should probably be praying more often. We'll put certain portions of the text on the screen, and I want you to pray out loud with me.

Psalm 90

Lord, through all the generations you have been our home!

We wither beneath your anger; we are overwhelmed by your fury. You spread out our sins before you—our secret sins—and you see them all. We live our lives beneath your wrath, ending our years with a groan.

Who can comprehend the power of your anger? Your wrath is as awesome as the fear you deserve.

O Lord, come back to us! How long will you delay? Take pity on your servants! Satisfy us each morning with your unfailing love, so we may sing for joy to the end of our lives. Amen.