

Acts 5:11

Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Luke, the writer of the book we call 'Acts' gives an account of the growth of the church

- He is particularly interested in the word that the apostles preached
- And includes 32 significant passages of direct speech
- As well as six great sermons that give us a clear picture of the core message
- For the essence of apostolic preaching can be distilled from Luke's account

But Luke intersperses his accounts of the apostolic preaching and teaching'

- With narrative recording what was happening among the people at the time
- The opening chapters of Acts have been marked by considerable growth
- The Christian community has grown first to 3,000 people and then to 5,000 men
- But the opposite side of the coin is that the apostles have been persecuted

After their preaching in Solomon's colonnade following the healing of the lame beggar

- Peter and John were summoned to appear before the Sanhedrin
- This was the same religious court that sentenced Jesus to death
- It was not the healing to which the religious leaders were objecting
- But healing in the name of Jesus
- But despite having been ordered to speak or teach no more in this name
- Peter explains that he cannot help obeying God to tell what he has seen and heard

It is against the backdrop of this spiritual battle with forces outside of the church

- That we now encounter the account of Ananias and Sapphira
- This turns out to be a spiritual battle with forces inside the church
- For it is an instance in which sin manifested itself
- And shows how the church dealt with it
- In fact, it is in this passage, that the word 'church' (5:11) is first used
- Warren Wiersbe makes the helpful distinction between the lion and the serpent
- Up to this point Satan's work has been in the style of the devouring lion
- But, as arrest and threats have not frightened the apostles into silence
- He now tries a more subtle tactic
- After all, as Satan is both a murderer and a liar (John 8:44)
- The church must be prepared for both kinds of attack

Following Peter's defence before the Sanhedrin

- Luke records, 'all the believers were on in heart and mind' (Acts 4:32)
- The hallmarks of a spiritual and growing church are plain for all to see
- It is fearless in its witness, fruitful in its ministry, fervent in its worship
- And faithful in its giving and use of resources

A notable example of faithful giving and use of resources is that of Barnabas

- Barnabas' real name is Joseph and he is a Levite from Cyprus
- According to the Old Testament, Levites were not allowed to own land
- So it is likely that this piece of land was his own burial place

As Acts unfold we will see that Barnabas lives up to his new nickname

- It was common at the time to give a nickname beginning with ‘bar’ meaning ‘son of’
- Bar-nabas means ‘son of encouragement/exhortation’
- Barnabas lived up to his name in what he did as well as what he said
- ‘A good name is better than fine perfume’ (Ecclesiastes 7:1)
- ‘A good name is more desirable than great riches
- to be esteemed is better than silver or gold’ (Proverbs 22:1)
- the Bible does not say so in so many words
- but probably Barnabas was commended in the congregation

Meanwhile, Ananias and Sapphira, probably also wanted to enjoy the acclaim of the church

- humanly speaking they already had good names
- Ananias is a Hebrew name meaning ‘God is gracious’
- While Sapphira is an Aramaic name meaning ‘beautiful’
- They also sold a piece of property
- Unlike Barnabas, this might not have been their only land
- But although they pretended to give the full price to the apostles
- They kept back part of the money

I COUNTERFEIT COMMITMENT

The word the NIV renders ‘kept back’ literally means ‘pilfer’ or ‘embezzle’

- It is a special choice of word for two reasons
- Firstly, it is the same word that the Greek Old Testament (LXX, a translation)
- Uses to describe Achan’s misappropriation of part of what had been dedicated to God
- In the time of Joshua, Achan kept a beautiful robe, two hundred shekels of silver
- And a wedge of gold worth fifty shekels for himself (Joshua 7:1-26)
- When these should have put into the treasury of the Lord’s house
- Consequently, as they went to conquer Canaan, the Israelites were routed at Ai
- The sin of Ananias and Sapphira is therefore directly parallel with the sin of Achan
- For in both cases, at a decisive time, they took what had been devoted to God
- Secondly, it is an unusual word to describe what you do with your own money
- For Ananias and Sapphira were under no compulsion to give the proceeds of sale
- However, it reminds us that ‘wrong use’ of what we think of as ‘our possessions’
- Is serious in God’s sight – we are really just stewards of what God has given us
- There is no place for an attitude that says, ‘it’s mine and I can do what I like with it’

There is a serious lesson to be learned from this

- At a time of great blessing in Argentina, believers gave so generously to the church
- That in Buenos Aires, their pastors had to tell them not to give to the church
- He wants your house with you living in it, he wants your car with you driving it
- The gospel demands not simply giving but stewardship and consecration

The famous hymn by Francis Ridley Havergal, ‘Take my life and let it be’ is challenging

- In my experience the line people get uptight about is ‘take my silver and my gold’
- But once we have given our moments and days, our hands and feet, our voice and lips
- Our intellect and will, our heart and love – ‘silver and gold’ seem inconsequential
- Nevertheless we should not be unaware of the power of wealth in our lives

When Jesus gave his kingdom manifesto in the Sermon on the Mount

- The first four Beatitudes said virtually the same thing
- To be ‘poor in spirit’, ‘mourn’, to be ‘meek’, to ‘hunger and thirst after righteousness’
- These are hardly the qualities that we associate with the rich and wealthy
- The motto of the rich is that you can get anything at a price
- But the faith of the believer is that everything comes by grace
- Undeserved, unmerited – of infinite value and free!

Jesus told the people:

“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

(Luke 12:15)

Then he told them the parable of the rich fool

- A man had a good harvest, he had done so well he had no place to store it all
- So he tore down his barns to build bigger ones, to store all his goods
- Then he could take things easy for a few years, eat, drink and be merry

But God said to him:

‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God.”

(Luke 12:20-21)

The ‘dangers of wealth’ is probably not a common theme in today’s preaching

- Maybe because we have ceased to insist on the way of the cross
- As the only way of authentic Christian discipleship
- The way of the cross will not accept unethical business practices
- Poor treatment of employees or poor work for the employer
- And it challenges the unselfish and unchristian use of resources
- and thoughtless giving

Even devout Christians talk about tithing and giving while confusing the two

- in the Old Testament, the Israelites gave one tenth (a tithe) as an offering to God
- that was their obligation
- in the New Testament, the people were not holding back at a mere one tenth
- they knew their obligations
- they went beyond these to sacrificial giving
- there is no point in any preacher trying to cajole a congregation into giving more
- when God touches our hearts
- he will deal with our giving also
- that is what happened with Barnabas
- that is what did not happen with Ananias and Sapphira
- they wanted to appear different from what they really were, embarking on a

II DANGEROUS DECEIT

When Peter confronted Ananias, he said that ‘Satan has so filled your heart’

- many of Satan’s activities in the Bible are with believers
- this filling is not the same as demon-possession
- rather it is the things of Satan that have filled his heart

The danger here, as almost always, is to fall into one of two unbalanced extremes

- there are people who deny the person and work of Satan
- while on the other hand there are people who have an unhealthy obsession with Satan
- I do not deny the person and work of Satan
- But I trust that I do not have an unhealthy obsession with the devil or the demonic

When a person acts in an unbalanced or uncontrolled way

- More often than not there may be spiritual, physical and psychological reasons
- We must not jump to the earnest but dangerously ill-informed conclusion
- That anything less explainable than a broken leg is a work of the devil
- It is vital to be careful before diagnosing the direct work of the devil or the demonic
- Something that I have never done without reference to other believers
- Something that I advise church members not to do

It is easy to see how Ananias succumbed to the temptation

- gaining the esteem of the church and keeping some of the money
- is a dangerous deceit, but it is a scheme that has filled his heart
- it is an occasion, not uncommon in the lives of Christians
- when temptation gets believers so obsessed with an idea or course of action
- that they are blinded to the consequences
- that seems to be exactly what has happened here
- Ananias has been tempted and become carried away with his actions
- He could have done whatever he wanted with the money
- He could have openly held back what he thought was right and given the rest
- How we treat the church is how we treat God
- In persecuting the church, Paul came to understand he was persecuting Jesus
- In lying to the church, Ananias was lying to the Holy Spirit

Ananias and Sapphira lied simply to have the esteem that Barnabas had won

- It was the kind of giving and false witness, where the glory of self was at the centre
- Ultimately, the glory belongs to God
- So holiness and truthfulness need to be the hallmarks of our lives
- Because our holy and truthful God wants us to be holy and truthful
- Even if the wider world thinks that to behave in such a way is unnecessary

The scripture passage concerns the temptation that comes from world wealth

- It is right that we do not underplay that in our materialistic society
- But we should not be blind to other sources of temptation – not just money but
- Sex, power, lies, drugs

In every occurrence, is it not that people give into the first steps of temptation?

- And find that, having done so, they have little control over themselves
- Once the breach has been made in the wall, the trickle of water becomes a torrent
- Obsessed with desire, people lose sight of reality, willing to risk everything
- Often because they were weak and were in the wrong place at the wrong time

Deceit is spiritually disastrous, it is a sin

- In the folly of our misplaced judgment
- We might consider the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira disproportionate
- No doubt human reasoning could come to the same conclusion over Achan
- But that is to miss that the episode was pivotal in the life and mission of God's people
- The whole enterprise, for Israel of conquering Canaan
- For the church of evangelising the whole earth, was threatened at its start

It is clear that God will respond to serious sin in the life of the community

- The wrong use of possessions and money was serious
- But the specific sin was lying about it
- Until then the church had been one in heart and mind, even about possessions (4:32)

Why does God not appear to judge his people like this today?

- The answer appears to be that at the beginning of a new age we see this power
- At the beginning of the land of Israel in Canaan with Achan
- At the beginning of the new community of the Church with Ananias and Sapphira
- Just as the healings today are less frequent than in New Testament times
- So such judgement is also less frequent – but that is not to say it never happens
- When Christians sin against the body, they lose their peace, the body loses its power
- The blessing of God is withheld
- Surely that is descriptive of so much of the westernised contemporary church
- God does not always show his judgement publicly – but that is not to say he is asleep

So often, in the contemporary church, the decision about every moral matter is no decision

- How surprised the bystanders must have been when they saw Peter
- Rebuke the giver of such a large contribution
- But it is not the status of the person or the size of their contribution that matters
- If the matter is sinful it has to be dealt with decisively

We can imagine the reaction of some people to such discipline

- 'is there no forgiveness in Christianity?'
- the subtle subtext of this can often be that people might leave the church
- if we say that something in which they are involved is wrong
- and as there are many churches from which to choose they might go elsewhere
- that, inevitably is true, but will that steer us
- into the position of calling 'wrong' – 'right'?

Ananias and Sapphira were marked by

I COUNTERFEIT COMMITMENT – this resulted in

II DANGEROUS DECEIT

Yet we should not miss the point of the story which is:

III FERVENT FEAR

A key aspect of this story is fear resulting from judgement

- this was fear that comes from knowledge of God's holiness
- and the consequences of sin
- as with so much theological error the root is a misunderstanding of God
- in fact, as 'theology' literally means God-study, that is not surprising

Misunderstanding the nature of God often means misunderstanding his holiness

- misunderstanding his hatred of sin
- misunderstanding the depths of his love, grace and mercy
- misunderstanding the reality of his judgement
- misunderstanding the wonder of his forgiveness
- but we should not think that in describing God in this way
- we are dealing with abstract concepts but realise we can see all this in person
- in Jesus, and particularly through his death upon the cross

When I say, 'understanding', what I really mean is 'beginning to understand'

- when we look at the cross we understand God's holiness
- for it is the work of Jesus as sin-bearer, the causes the Father to forsake him
- it is when we look at the cross that we see the depths of God's love, grace and mercy
- for it is when we look at Jesus upon the cross that we see these in person
- it is when we look at the cross that we understand the reality of his judgement
- for it is when we see Jesus upon the cross that we see God's wrath against sin
- it is when we look at the cross that we understand the wonder of his forgiveness
- for it is when we see Jesus upon the cross that we understand –
- the price of forgiveness is not our repentance but his death for us
- when the critic asks, 'is there no forgiveness in Christianity?' Take them to the cross

The idea of going through life fearing both God and the consequences of sin

- seems strangely unattractive in an age where people are obsessed with feeling good
- in fact, whether or not 'it feels good' has become the test of moral choices
- fear is not our enemy but our friend
- sometimes it is natural fear that keeps us from doing something profoundly daft
- sometimes it is spiritual fear ('awe', if you like) that keeps us from sin
- how then is fear our enemy?
- we must make the distinction between 'terror', a fear incompatible with love
- and 'reverential fear', a fear compatible with awe
- the fear of God and the consequences of sin are the theme of this story
- yet, in the grace of God, there is still time to meet with Jesus and be transformed
- maybe someone here today is nurturing a dangerous deceit, a counterfeit commitment
- money, sex, power, lies, drugs – you have got to break with it

I COUNTERFEIT COMMITMENT – this resulted in

II DANGEROUS DECEIT – showing us the importance of

III FERVENT FEAR – leading us to a knowledge, awe and reverence for God