

“ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Acts 5:1-11

Introduction.

Our text begins with the word but, which tells us what we are about to read is somehow in contrast to what we read last week. Last week we heard about Barnabas who showed the transformation that had taken place in his heart by loving people more than loving his stuff.

Text: Acts 5:1-11

Prayer: Holy Father, as we come to your inspired Holy Word, we come to a hard text and we ask you by your Holy Spirit to give us ears to hear what you would say to us this morning especially as we come to the table of our Lord.

How many of you learned this story as kids back in Sunday School? Was it one of those flannelgraph stories along with Noah and the Ark, David and Goliath and Zacchaeus. “Kids, what did you learn in SS this morning?” “We learned this really cool story about this guy Ananias who told a lie and God zapped him, sort of like in Star Wars.”

This is one of the scary, hard stories in the Bible. This highlights the pros and cons of preaching week after week through a book of the Bible. The pastor doesn’t get to cherry pick favorite passages, and we are forced to hear the whole counsel of God’s true and inspired Word.

This story more than many in the Bible stirs up all kinds of questions. It is especially difficult for us modern readers. We get visions of Peter with super powers getting the Holy Spirit to zap people on the spot, without any chance to repent.

Some commentators say this is a legend made up to explain a couple of sudden deaths in the church. Some people go so far as to say this is a tyrannical God having a temper tantrum.

The Deception of Ananias and Sapphira.

What a contrast here to what Barnabas did. Up until now the early church has looked like it was full of angels rather than men and women. But now Satan rears his ugly head, and we discover this church like all churches is full of sinners.

Like Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira owned land and they decided to sell some land and give the money to the apostles to help the poor. But unlike Barnabas they decided to keep some of the proceeds from the sale for themselves. It was theirs to do with as they please so what's the issues, what's so wrong with that?

The key is found in the words *kept back*. The word literally means to pilfer or embezzle. In the Greek translation of the OT this word is used only once and it's in the famous story of Achan who kept back some of the spoils of war at the fall of Jericho, spoils that God specifically said were banned from being taken.

Achan embezzled or robbed God of what was His, with the knowledge of his family. It cost him and his family their lives.

I find it very interesting that that story happened at the beginning of the new nation of Israel starting out life in the Promised Land. And now the second time that word is used in the Bible occurs here at the beginning of the new people of God, the church. In fact, interestingly in our text the word church is used for the first time of this new work of God.

So, this particular word tells us that there was something wrong here, a wrong use of possessions, a robbing of God, a very serious sin.

There was no requirement to give any money or sell any land. And if any land was sold there was no requirement to give all the money. The giver was free to give as little or as much as they wanted. So, what's the sin?

First, they committed the sin of hypocrisy, which is an abomination to God. They stoop to fraud, to pass themselves off as something they are not. They wanted to be known as big givers in the church, in league with Barnabas. They wanted to look generous without being generous. We do this whenever we put on appearances that don't match reality, when we want people to think things that aren't true about us.

Second, they showed contempt for God by willfully lying to the Holy Spirit. They mocked God by showing no fear of God or of His judgment.

Third, they showed a lack of reverence for Christ and His church and His apostles.

Fourth, when confronted they denied any sin, covering up to avoid shame.

And as a result, the supernatural hand of God delivered the judgment of God and the church saw it up close and personal. And great fear fell on the whole church. Can you even imagine how you would respond?

This was clearly an extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit. We have to be careful in how we are to understand it. Let's consider four lessons we need to take away from this story.

Four lessons from Ananias and Sapphira.

The seriousness of sin.

At the beginning of Israel's life in the Promised Land and at the beginning of the life of the church God gives a revelation of His wrath and judgment on sin. He warns His people of the deadly seriousness of sin, that it is a matter of life and death.

God knows our hearts. Don't trifle with God, don't think He doesn't see and know, don't think that He doesn't care. Sooner or later our sins will find us out. That sounds like a lesson to be taken from this last week's news.

Maybe you have everyone here fooled, and your friends and family fooled. God's not fooled.

Are you living one way during the week or on the weekend, and another way on Sunday? Are you living a double life, are you living a lie? It's no secret to God. He knows our hearts.

Some of us might be lulled to complacency because God doesn't seem to care, He isn't doing what He did to Ananias and Sapphira. Why are we getting away with our sin when we deserve the same punishment?

First of all, God is God and it remains in the eternal counsel of His will to do as He please whenever and to whomever He pleases. It's not our place to tell Him what He must do, and question why do does what He does.

Second, how do you know He hasn't done this since then? We don't know all God's ways and why certain things happen to certain people at certain times. We don't know all the reasons behind certain sicknesses and deaths.

Third, this will happen to all people who remain in unconfessed, unrepentant sin. This is why Scripture says today is the day of salvation, and repent before you too perish.

At the beginning of this new venture, God made Ananias and Sapphira an example of the seriousness of sin and of the great judgment that is coming on all sin.

God is patient with us and slow to anger but don't presume on God's kindness and forget that God's patience is designed to lead us to repentance, not to become bolder in our sin (Rom 2:4).

This example has been given to us as a warning, a shot across the bow, a wakeup call to all the church about the seriousness of the judgment to come. There is hope, which will be the focus of the sermon this evening. We have an advocate when we sin, if we trust in Jesus.

The maliciousness (malevolence, wickedness, hostility) of Satan.

How often did Jesus warn the disciples about Satan and his attack on God's kingdom. Satan hates the church and here he is finding chinks in the armor, finding willing partners for his evil intentions.

We live in a spiritual world with spiritual forces and powers at work and we have a spiritual enemy of our hearts.

This young church was growing so fast, from 120 to 10,000 to 20,000 and it was being built in enemy territory and Satan hated it. He will try anything to discredit and destroy it.

In the computer world there is a thing called *malware*, short for malicious software, computer programs designed to infiltrate and damage our computers and spread viruses that cause our computers to slow down or crash, steal our identity and just wreck all kinds of havoc.

I was reading an article about the 13 signs you might have a malware infection and the last one was the scariest. When your computer is running just fine with no problems.

They are like demons in the computer world. Satan is the first malicious virus of the universe and his virus infects the entire universe. His virus was downloaded to Adam and Eve and it has spread into every heart since then. We have this hidden chip on the motherboard of our heart.

Satan is at work here finding any subtle way to attack, to stir us up, to divide us, to discredit us, to get us off track, to stop the Gospel, to blow up marriages, to steal our kids, to get us grumbling, complaining, bickering, gossiping, tearing down, bearing grudges, withholding forgiveness and grace, making us impatient or selfish.

But especially beware when you think everything is just fine and you let your guard down. Doesn't Jesus teach us to pray daily, deliver us from evil (and the evil one)? Guard your heart! Pray for daily deliverance from the one who if he can will get us to lie to the Holy Spirit.

The holiness of God.

Some people think this was too harsh and cruel a punishment for such a sin. But when we say that we show we are comparing ourselves to each other and we are not taking into

account who the sin is against. If this story shocks or offends us, then we do not yet have a high enough understanding of the holiness of God and the seriousness of sin.

Remember when Uzziah reached out to steady the Ark of the Covenant and was instantly struck dead. Was that a harsh God, no that was a holy God, more holy than we can conceive.

Those who complain against the excessive severity of God are making themselves judge of God, putting Him on the stand to answer for His actions. Instead of pointing the finger at the holy God, we should be pointing the finger at ourselves and examining our own hearts to see if there be any evil way in us.

The question is not is God too harsh, the question is what do I deserve and what should I do before I stand before such a judge?

God is not a cosmic grandfather or Santa Claus or just the big guy upstairs. God responded to this sin because of His holy and righteous wrath against sin. The holiness of God requires that He deal with sin. By this one external sign God makes clear to all of us what kind of God He really is.

It is pure grace that God doesn't now treat us as our sins deserve. But a day is coming.

Hebrews 10:30-31 For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The fear of God.

We are so used to thinking about loving God, as if that is the highest and best thing. So, we have a hard time grasping fearing God.

But consider something for a moment. In the Bible, almost every time the fear of the Lord or the fear of God is mentioned it is a positive thing. Everyone who fears the Lord receives a blessing, something good. And for those who don't fear the Lord negative things happen.

Proverbs 9:10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Proverbs 10:27 The fear of the Lord prolongs life.

Proverbs 31:30 The woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

Psalms 112:1 How blessed is the man who fears the Lord.

Psalms 34:7 The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them.

Psalms 145:19 He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He will also hear their cry and will save them.

Psalms 103:11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him.

Psalm 25:12-14 Who is the man who fears the Lord?

Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.

13 His soul shall abide in well-being, and his offspring shall inherit the land.

14 The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him,
and he makes known to them his covenant.

This warning was effective for a great fear fell on the church. To fear God is an honest response. God is God, God is utterly holy and pure and perfect and mighty and full of splendor and glory. It is right to tremble before such a God and wait to hear Him say, "Fear not."

This story should make all of us tremble, it is a call to take our faith more seriously.

Implications and applications.

At this table we see all four of these lessons. We see the seriousness of sin that the cross was the only solution. We see the maliciousness of Satan who entered Judas' heart thinking he could kill Jesus and derail everything. We see the holiness of God who sent His only Son to bear His just and righteous wrath against sin. And we rightly tremble with a reverent fear of God and these holy gifts of God. Remember Paul's warning in I Corinthians:

I Corinthians 9:27-30 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

Never take holy things lightly. We are way too flippant and casual with God and holy things. We can bring trouble on ourselves and on our church if we don't take holy things seriously. John VW told me one of the biggest hurdles for him being an elder was handling these holy things and giving them to God's people. That's right.

Christ is here, don't trifle with Him. Don't come holding on to your hidden sin and double life. Come humbly, honestly, confessing and repenting and turning from any pride, deception, lies. Come broken hearted, with fear and faith knowing this meal is cause for worship and joy.

I Peter 5:6-9 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, 7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. 8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith.

Father, we are not worthy, change our hearts, convict us of sin, bring us to repentance, meet us and feed us here.