

Bible Study July 7, 2021

ACTS 5 (NEW KING JAMES VERSION)

Lying to the Holy Spirit

¹ But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. ² And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?

Even after the Holy Spirit had come, the believers were not immune to Satan's temptations. Although Satan was defeated by Christ at the cross, he was still actively trying to make the believers stumble, as he still does today (Ephesians 6:12; 1 Peter 5:8). Satan's overthrow is inevitable, but it will not occur until the last days, when Christ returns to judge the world (Revelation 20:10).

⁴ While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

⁵ Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. ⁶ And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.

⁷ Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much."

Here we see both internal and external problems facing the early church. Inside the church were dishonesty (5:1-11), greed (5:3), and administrative headaches (6:1-7). Outside the church was pressure from persecution. While church leaders were careful and sensitive in dealing with the internal problems, they could not do much to prevent the external pressures. Through it all, the leaders kept their focus on what was most important—spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ.

⁹ Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰ Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. ¹¹ So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

The sin Ananias and Sapphira committed was not stinginess or holding back part of the money—whether to sell their land and how much to give was their choice. Their sin was lying to God and God's people by saying that they had given the whole amount while actually holding back some for themselves; they were trying to make themselves appear more generous than they really were. This act was judged harshly because dishonesty, greed, and covetousness are destructive in the church, limiting the effective work of the Holy Spirit. All lying is bad, but when we lie to try to deceive God and his people about our relationship with him, we destroy our testimony for Christ.

Some read the account of Ananias and Sapphira being struck down and accuse God of being harsh. *I thought God was supposed to be loving and forgiving*, they think. *I thought all that wrath stuff was for Old Testament times*. With an emphasis on grace and mercy, we can easily overlook the equally important truth of God's holiness. We must remember that God has not changed (Malachi 3:6). He still hates sin as much as he ever did. His judgment on Ananias and Sapphira produced shock and fear among the believers, making them realize how seriously God regards sin in the church. Ananias and Sapphira also revealed through their actions that they didn't really believe God is who he says he is. They were trying to appear as devout as Barnabas, and they put their own need for acclaim and desire for approval ahead of humbly serving God.

Continuing Power in the Church

¹² And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. ¹³ Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. ¹⁴ And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

What makes Christianity attractive? People were attracted to the early church by expressions of God's power at work; by the generosity, sincerity, honesty, and unity of the members; and by the character and wisdom of the leaders. Today it is easy to be drawn to churches because of programs, eloquent speakers, beautiful facilities, or preferred styles of worship. Have our standards slipped? God wants to add believers to his church and help them grow deep in their faith so they can go out and serve the world. Is your church keeping this bigger picture in mind regardless of its size or the talents of its members?

People whom Peter's shadow passed over were healed—not by Peter's shadow, but by God's power working through Peter. What did these miraculous healings do for the early church? (1) They attracted new believers; (2) they confirmed the truth of the apostles' teaching that Jesus was who he claimed to be, the Son of God; and (3) they demonstrated that the power of the Messiah, who had been crucified and risen, was now with his followers.

Imprisoned Apostles Freed

¹⁷ Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, ¹⁸ and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.

The apostles experienced power to do miracles, great boldness in preaching, and God's presence in their lives, yet they were not free from hatred and persecution. They were arrested, put in jail, beaten, and slandered by community leaders. Faith in God does not make troubles disappear; it makes troubles appear less frightening because it puts them in the right perspective. Don't expect everyone to react favorably when you share something as dynamic as your faith in Jesus. Some will mock you, some will envy the joy you have, some will feel threatened, and some will just not be interested. Expect some negative reactions, and remember that you must be more concerned about serving God than about the reactions of people (see 5:29).

The religious leaders were jealous—Peter and the apostles were already commanding a great deal of respect among the people, perhaps even more than the religious leaders had ever received. The

issue, however, was that the religious leaders demanded respect and reverence for themselves, while the goal of the apostles was to bring respect and reverence to God. The apostles were shown respect not because they demanded it but because their actions deserved it.

19 But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.”

The angel of the Lord gave the apostles a command that, when followed, would lead to a brutal flogging (5:40). If that strikes you as odd, it is probably because of the prevailing idea among many believers that obedience inevitably leads to blessing (defined as a problem-free, blissful existence). Serious students of the Bible know, however, that obeying God often results in pain and suffering—the forces of evil do not want God’s way to prevail. They also recognize that being persecuted for Christ is a deeper kind of blessing. What biblical commands, if obeyed, might result in discomfort for you today? Will you commit to live them out anyway?

21 And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.

Suppose someone threatened to kill you if you didn’t stop talking or writing about God’s work in your life. You might be tempted to keep quiet. But after being threatened by powerful leaders, arrested, jailed, and miraculously released, the apostles went back to preaching. This was nothing less than God’s power working through them (see 4:13)! When someone is convinced of the truth of Jesus’ resurrection and has experienced the presence and power of his Holy Spirit, they have the confidence to speak out for him. This is just as true for us as it was for the apostles.

The Temple at daybreak was a busy place. Many people stopped there to pray and worship at sunrise. On this day, the apostles were already there, ready to tell everyone the Good News of new life in Jesus Christ. Also at daybreak, the high council of the leaders of Israel was gathering, preparing to question the apostles. This would be no small trial. The religious leaders would do anything to stop these apostles from challenging their authority, threatening their secure position, and exposing their hypocritical motives to the people.

Apostles on Trial Again

22 But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, 23 saying, “Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!” 24 Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. 25 So one came and told them, saying, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!”

26 Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. 27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, 28 saying, “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!”

29 But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men.

The apostles knew their priorities. While we should try to live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:18), conflict with the world and its authorities is sometimes inevitable for a Christian (John 15:18). In some situations, we won't be able to obey both God and human authority. At those times we must obey God and trust his Word as the ultimate truth. Let Jesus' words in Luke 6:22 encourage you: "What blessings await you when people hate you and exclude you and mock you and curse you as evil because you follow the Son of Man."

³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.

³¹ Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."

Gamaliel's Advice

³³ When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. ³⁴ Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while.

The Pharisees were the other major party in the Jewish high council with the Sadducees (5:17). The Pharisees were the strict keepers of the law—not only God's law, but also hundreds of other rules they had added to God's law. They were careful about outward purity, but many had hearts full of impure motives. Jesus confronted the Pharisees often during his ministry on earth. Oddly enough, a Pharisee named Gamaliel became an unexpected ally for the apostles, although he probably did not support their teachings. He was a distinguished member of the council and a teacher. While Gamaliel may have saved the apostles' lives, his real intentions probably were to prevent a division in the council and to avoid inciting the Romans. The apostles were popular among the people, and killing them might start a riot. Gamaliel's advice to the council gave the apostles some breathing room to continue their work. The council decided to wait, hoping that this would all fade away harmlessly. They couldn't have been more wrong. Ironically, Paul, later one of the greatest apostles, was one of Gamaliel's students (22:3).

³⁵ And he said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. ³⁶ For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. ³⁷ After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. ³⁸ And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God."

⁴⁰ And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. ⁴² And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Peter and John had been warned repeatedly not to preach, but they continued despite the threats. We, too, should live as Jesus has asked us to, sharing our faith no matter the cost. We may not be

beaten or thrown in jail, but we may be ridiculed, ostracized, or slandered. To what extent are you willing to suffer for the sake of sharing the Good News with others?

Have you ever thought of persecution as a blessing, as something worth rejoicing about? This beating suffered by Peter and John was the first time any of the apostles had been physically abused for their faith. These men knew how Jesus had suffered, and they praised God that he had allowed them to be persecuted like their Lord. If you are mocked or persecuted for your faith, it isn't because you're doing something wrong but because God has counted you "worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus."

Home Bible studies are not new. As the believers needed to grow in their new faith, home Bible studies met their needs and also served as a means to introduce new people to the Christian faith. During later times of persecution, meeting in homes became the primary method of passing on Bible knowledge. Christians throughout the world still use this approach when under persecution and as a way to disciple new believers, support one another, and worship God together.