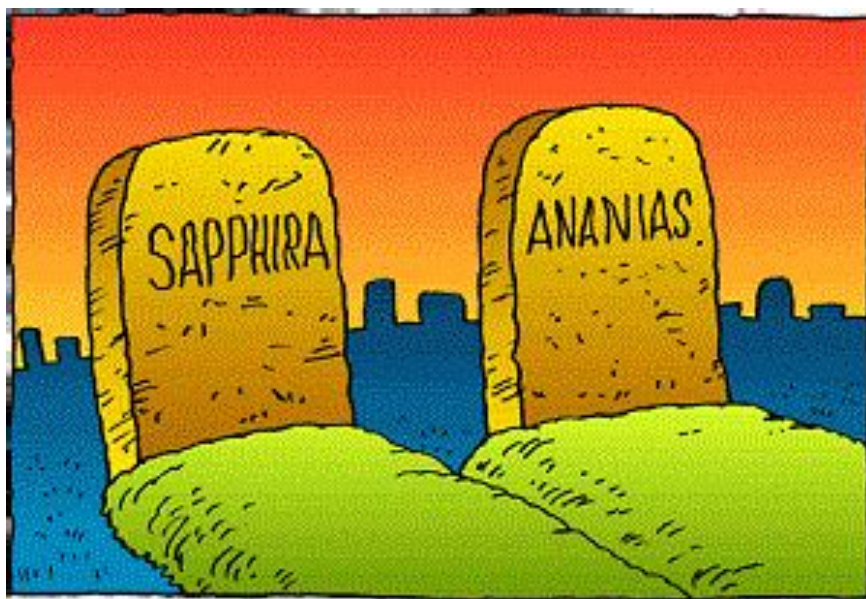

Ananias & Sapphira

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 2nd August

Acts 5_1-11

Part 7 in Acts series



Let's pray, Lord Jesus, open our hearts and minds afresh to receive from your word, amen

It's been a month since we last looked at Acts together and as I'm now up to ch 5 in my series at Prebbleton, let me set the context before we move into ch 5, and the rather dramatic event we just heard read.

Through Acts I have been highlighting the fact that when the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the people of God are working there will be Gospel growth.

We need that encouragement because in many contexts the church is not exactly mushrooming. It can look a bit bleak. But globally the church is growing. The one who said "I will build my church, and the very gates of hell will not prevent against it," that one, the Lord Jesus, is proving true to his word, as he always does.

Now we might well ask the question, why then is the church growing in one place and shrinking in another? There can be of course many dimensions to the answer. I have though, I think, given a pretty big clue to the answer in what I have drawn from the early ch of Acts. Again, where the Word of God, and the Spirit of God, and the people of God are working, there will be gospel growth.

As we reach ch 5 of Acts, and we may only be a week or two past Pentecost, the church could well now number some 20,000 believers. 3000 came to faith at Pentecost. Another few thousand following the healing of the lame man in ch 3 and the proclamation of the Gospel that followed.

Day by day the Lord is indeed adding to the number of those being saved. And obviously not in a miserly way. That's the good news. The bad news, is that where God is working there will be opposition. The one behind this opposition is the enemy of souls, Satan.

Good to know then that it's not an equal battle. Peter, thus far through Acts, is always one to point out, yes we killed Jesus, but God raised him from the dead."

In ch 4 the enemy mounted his first attack of this rapidly growing church. The Sanhedrin, the leaders in the Temple, the same ones who orchestrated the death of Jesus, they interrogated, and commanded Peter and John to speak no more in the name of Jesus.

The enemy, and the religious authorities, who are effectively carrying out the enemy's plan, they know that if the Apostles can be silenced, if there is no gospel proclamation, there will be no further growth in the church.

The Apostles take it to the church who then as a group lift their voices in prayer to the throne room. To the sovereign God who made heaven and earth. They pray strategically, recalling the fact that opposition is not new. And further, that God's plans and purposes have not been thwarted in the past. They carry that awareness into the current situation.

And we would do well to note that their prayers were not for safety in the face of opposition. They pray for boldness. They pray that God would continue to work healings and signs in the name of Jesus.

There is a mini Pentecost. The believers are freshly filled. They speak boldly. They are unified. They are generous. Houses and lands are sold to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding church. Again, from 120 to maybe 20,000 in a matter of weeks.

Ch 4 ends with the account of Barnabus selling a field that belonged to him and laying the proceeds at the apostles feet. It looks very much like the enemies first attack and strategy to intimidate and silence, has backfired. Because now it is not just the Apostles speaking. Now a much larger group is boldly speaking about Jesus.

Time for another strategy. This one is more of a threat. More dangerous. More likely to disempower and damage the church. Strategy one, intimidation and threats from the outside. Strategy two, compromise, from the inside. We might struggle with our passage today. People dropping dead on the spot when confronted is certainly challenging.

Now as we unpack a little what happened, let's bear in mind this principle. The greater the threat, the greater, and more dramatic the response.

We all know this principle to be true. An example. Way back, say if one of my children climbed up on the coffee table and jumped of, I might growl at them a bit and say why I thought that wasn't a great idea.

If they did something really dangerous, like trying to stick a fork in a power socket to see what might happen, I would be far firmer in my discipline, and rightly so. Because more is at stake. The greater the threat. The more drastic the response.

In the 80s one of my prayer warriors and mentors, a godly woman in her late 70's, had a saying that has remained with me for 4 decades. "Beware the pint of poison in the lake of good." In other words, don't underestimate the danger, and the power of sin.

If the enemy can get us to compromise our faith, lower our standards, turn a blind eye to things that need to be dealt with and challenged, he can gain an amount of control over our lives, and he can seriously disrupt, or not discredit our witness.

As we look at the actions of, and the judgement upon Ananias and Sapphira, let's talk for a moment about what wasn't the problem. It wasn't a problem that they held back some of the money. The land was theirs before it was sold. The proceeds of the land was theirs after it had been sold. They could have kept, and or, given as much, or as little, as they wanted.

End of ch 4, Barnabus sells a piece of land and laying the proceeds at the Apostles feet. Ch 5 begins with the word "but". That is a clue that something is about to change. In this case for the worse.

In the Greek the words Luke uses as he talks of holding back, as A&S did, the words are also used in two other contexts. Joshua 7 and Titus where the context is stealing from God.

It may well have been that when Ananias and Sapphira saw the generosity Barnabas, and the response of the church, they entered into an agreement to sell the land and give all the proceeds, just as Barnabas had done.

If they had make that deal, their failure to keep the agreement, amounted to theft, and the language used in the only three contexts, Joshua 7, Titus, and Acts 5 implies we are talking about what amounts to theft.

The problem then, wasn't just that they held some of the proceeds back.

- The problem was, possibly, they were failing to honour and agreement and were stealing from the church.
- They were definitely pretending to be more generous and spiritual than they were.
- They were definitely lying to God.

Vs 3 “ why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit”. Vs 4 “ you did not lie to us but to God. vs 9, “how is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test?”

Let's talk generally. We might be able to fool ourselves. We might be able justify our actions in our own, or others eyes. But the one who knows us better than we know ourselves, knows the truth.

King David gave us Psalm 51, the great confessional Psalm written in response to his committing adultery and murder. He also gave us psalm 139 “ even before a word is on my tongue O Lord, you know it completely.”

God knows us even better than we know ourselves. We can't hide from, and we can't fool God.

- There is certainly danger in compromising our integrity.
- There is certainly danger in thinking we don't have to be honest with ourselves and others.
- There is a far greater danger in thinking we don't need to be honest with God.

What happened to A & S is a stark and rather dramatic reminder of that. Remember this though. If we understand the Gospel, we understand that we are all sinners, and we are saved by grace if we turn to the Lord Jesus.

- That means we don't need to pretend.
- We don't need to save face.
- Imagine if we could be both truthful and real, and be comfortable in our own skins.

Such is the good and the potential of the Gospel.

Back to what happened to A & S. The context of Acts is important, and we need to factor that in, lest we get a bit nervous about the idea of confronting sin. I dare say we would be a bit nervous about speaking truth to each other, even in love, if we thought folk might start dropping dead on the spot. The context is very important. I think it true to say that at the beginning of a new venture, or a new journey, you have to lay a few ground rules.

As the redeemed Hebrew slaves arrived at Mount Sinai where the 10 commandments were given to Moses, the people were warned to stay back from the mountain. Any who disobeyed were to be put to death. To reinforce the need for distance, any who disobeyed were to be shot with arrows. Get the point. The people get it. They say to Moses "you speak to us and we will listen, but don't have God speak to us or we will die."

At any beginning ground rules are needed. The people of God have been slaves in a pagan culture for over 400 years. They need to re-learn a fundamental, and foundational, lesson as they begin their journey towards the promised land. The lesson? God needs to be taken seriously. So too, as the NT church is birthed, and is blossoming, 20,000 in a matter of weeks.

At this foundational stage:

- best learn the danger of thinking we can get away with compromise.
- Best bat out the idea that can get away with hypocrisy, and thinking that integrity does not matter.

We might wonder why A & S were judged so harshly. We might say:

- But it's not like abusing children.
- Or manipulating and taking advantage of a vulnerable person
- Or denying the basic tenants of the Gospel and leading people into error and heresy through false teaching.

We might say, at least A & S were trying. They were being generous. They were contributing to the needs of the church.

Remember the big picture. What's at stake? Satan is trying a second and more dangerous attack. The inner battle, if not checked, has a greater potential to disrupt the spread and influence of the Gospel.

A & S were believers. There is no hint that the judgment they faced was anything other than the ending of their human lives. When confronted, the fact they dropped dead on the spot would give some clue that their conscience was still very much alive. Maybe their hearts just gave out.

We don't know. All we know is they were given a chance to repent and come clean. They didn't. When confronted that they were lying to God, and putting the Spirit of God to the test, they dropped dead on the spot.

Not unsurprisingly, vs 5, great fear seized all who heard of it. Vs 11 and great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

John Stott, when dealing with this passage, points out the danger of compromise and the importance integrity. He also emphasises the need for church discipline. Why? Because sin that is not challenged is greatly used by Satan to disrupt and discredit the Gospel.

Jesus himself, warns of the danger of being a stumbling block. "Better for you to have a millstone tied around your neck, and be cast into the sea," he says. That vs comes directly before, and is a part of the passage in Mk 9, that advises that we deal with that which causes us to stumble and sin, in the strongest possible terms.

If your eye is a source of sin, pluck it out. If your hand or foot lead you into sin cut them off. We are not to take the advice literally. But we are to take it seriously. Deal with that which leads to sin whatever it takes. Ultimately we know what it takes. Death. Jesus death.

As apprentices of Jesus, if we took the danger of sin more seriously in the church, and nipped hypocrisy and compromise in the bud, we would not give the enemy the ground to sow his seeds of destruction. The church's reputation would not so easily be discredited.

Thank God that we all, like King David, in Psalm 51, can come before God, no matter what we have done.

- We come with penitent and grateful hearts.
- We come asking for his mercy, forgiveness, and cleansing.
- We come seeking what God wants for each of us, "truth in the inward being." AKA integrity.

It's there in Psalm 51:6 "you desire truth in the inward being".

Later in the Psalm. "restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit: then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Psalm 51 gives a powerful model for evangelism?"

Interesting to see what happens directly after the A & S incident. And we are wrapping up.

- Firstly, God continues to work signs and wonders through the apostles.
- Secondly, even those who were either opposing, or avoiding, the believers were a bit nervous and dared not join them. Yet even with that avoidance going on, the believers are held in high esteem. We could say there was a healthy respect, even if at a distance.
- Thirdly, vs 14, yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women.

Intimidation has not worked. Compromise, because it was quickly and dramatically judged, has not worked.

"Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women." It looks very much, doesn't it, like every time the enemy try something, and God counters, gospel growth is the result.

Pastorally and application wise, how can this encourage us, and help where when we know any are struggling?"

Firstly, we can be sure that God is sovereign. And ultimately, nothing will stop the advance and spread of the gospel.

Secondly, through prayer, we can bring ourselves, our loved ones, any known to us, to the very throne room of the Sovereign Lord, and ask for help. Hebrews 4:16, Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and grace to help in time of need.

Whatever the situation. Whatever the challenge. Whatever the attack outwardly, or inwardly, we have one who will help us.

Where the Word of God, and the Spirit of God, and the people of God are working, there will be gospel growth. As for opposition? God is sovereign. For our part we can take God seriously, and keep short accounts, in respect to sin.

Let's pray.....

