



**"Withholding from God"**  
**Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"**

*Acts 5:1-11*

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Reformation & Commitment Sunday

**Acts 5:1-11 Ananias and Sapphira**

(NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? <sup>4</sup> Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

<sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup> Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

<sup>9</sup> Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

<sup>10</sup> At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

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**Introduction.**

When Rev. Jones picked up the phone, Special Agent Swartz from the IRS was on the line.

"Hello, Rev. Jones?"

"Yes, this is he."

"I'm calling to inquire about a member of your congregation, a Dr. Shipe. Do you recognize the name?"

"Yes, he is a member of our congregation. How can I be of service?"

"Well, on last year's tax return, the doctor claimed he made a large tax-deductible contribution to your church? Is this true?"

"Well, I'll have to check with our bookkeeper to verify this information for you. How much did Dr. Shipe say he contributed?"

Agent Swartz answered, "Twenty five thousand dollars. Can you tell me if that's true?"

There was a long pause. Then the pastor replied, "I'll tell you what, you call back tomorrow. I'm sure it will be!"<sup>i</sup>



It's risky business to withhold from God! This morning we read about a couple who found this to be true, and the consequences involved more than just the IRS. As we continue our study in the book of Acts today, I want you to notice three things: the deceit of a couple; the judgment of God; and lessons we can learn.

### **I. The Deceit of a Couple.**

One of the great challenges in preaching through a book of the Bible is that you can't skip over tough passages like this one. It forces you to deal honestly with the text, and it holds your feet to the fire of accountability with God. It is in times like this when we might be tempted to cut out a verse or two from Scripture because the passage offends us or we can't make sense of it.

It reminds of a time when I was studying the Sermon on the Mount with some interns at the church I previously served. We were going around in a circle reading a passage, and one of the interns stumbled over the words. She paused and said, "I'm sorry. I'm having trouble reading this passage because back in high school I struck through these words in my Bible with a pen because I didn't like them. They seemed too demanding!" The Bible is demanding, and an honest study of Scripture requires us to deal with difficult topics and tough passages like this one.

Luke tells us there was a man named Ananias who, together with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. Then, with the full knowledge of his wife, Ananias held back part of the money for himself, and he brought the rest of it and placed it at the apostles' feet. We learn from Acts 4 that Joseph, a Levite priest from the island of Cyprus, who earned the nickname Barnabas because of his great encouragement, had been the first to do this. This is the same Barnabas who along with Paul becomes a major character later in the book of Acts. He sold a piece of property and gave *all* the proceeds to the church to help meet the needs of the poor.

I suspect Ananias was envious of all the attention Barnabas received for his generosity. Perhaps he thought, "I've got some property. I could sell it and give the money to the church, too. Maybe I'll get a nickname when they see how generous I am! Besides, that piece of land hasn't been appreciating as much as I thought it would, and I might as well get it off my taxes. And, hey, I can keep some of the money for myself. No one will know the difference."

From all appearances, Barnabas and Ananias did the same thing. Both sold a piece of property. Both brought the proceeds of the sale to the apostles, and both committed it to their disposal. The difference was that Barnabas brought *all* the proceeds from the sale, while Ananias only brought a portion, and the problem was that Ananias represented to everyone that the amount he gave was the full amount of the sale of the land. He committed the double sin of dishonesty and deceit. Ananias was a hypocrite; he pretended to do something that in reality he didn't, and he lacked integrity.

Author and pastor Gordon MacDonald, who will preach at our church next Sunday, writes, "Who of us, in the dark places of our lives, does not want to be overly admired, respected, even envied? Left to our devices, we crave each bit of self-worth that can be built upon the applause and regard of people. Thus the temptation: give them something to admire you for."<sup>ii</sup>

My friends, the problem comes when we are deceitful so others will think better of us than they really should. We shade the truth, we cut corners, we tell half the story, and we present



an image all in an effort to get people to think more highly of us. We, too, are hypocrites, actors on a stage, pretending to be someone we're not.

When you and I fail to maintain our integrity, when we are deceitful in how we represent ourselves, we should not be surprised when God's judgment comes our way. Ananias and his wife Sapphira discovered this to be true in their own lives, and it should serve as a warning to every one of us.

## **II. The Judgment of God.**

The text tells us the apostle Peter sensed in his spirit that what Ananias said about the sale of the property was not the whole story. It appears the Holy Spirit gave the apostle special insight into the situation, and he challenged Ananias on what he had done. Peter affirmed the right of private ownership of property, but he also spoke about the role of Satan in leading Ananias to do what he did. He explained that this sin was offensive to God, and he said that Ananias had not lied to people but to the Holy Spirit. At this Ananias fell down dead.

Later on, Sapphira came in. Where had she been? Shopping? Getting her nails done? How did she miss the news? We're not told. We don't really know. What we do know is Peter asked her about the sale of the property, too, and he gave her an opportunity to distance herself from the deceit of her husband. However, it was clear she had been a part of the plan from the beginning, and the same judgment fell on her as she died on the spot, too. Sapphira's name was as beautiful as a jewel, but her heart was as hard as a stone. She made one wrong move, and she paid for it with her life.

I have to confess I have some trouble with the harsh consequences of this couple's sin. Sure, they were guilty of hypocrisy, and they tried to make everyone think more highly of them than they should. They weren't honest, and they lacked integrity. But was this sin so bad that it warranted death? Did the punishment really meet the crime? After all, they did give a lot of money to the church. Shouldn't that count for something? Perhaps you and I would feel better if they had just received a slap on the wrist instead of being struck dead by God.

However, the more I have studied this passage, the more I have come to see its strategic importance in salvation history. The early church could not afford to get off track. Everything was moving in the right direction, people were coming to know the Lord every day, and God would not allow sin rear its ugly head even in subtle ways like this. There are other occasions in the Bible when God responded with harsh judgment in similar situations, and every time it had to do with the critical nature of the new work which God was doing in the world. Each instance sent a clear message that the people were not to damage the credibility of their witness in the world, and the consequences for sin were strong.

For example, when Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron in the Old Testament, tried to offer a sacrifice of incense to the Lord in a different manner than was specifically prescribed (Lev. 10), the priests of Israel had just been ordained for the first time, and they were beginning their ministry of worship in the Tabernacle after the Exodus from Egypt. Nadab and Abihu thought they knew better than God, and the consequence of what they did was they died for their disobedience.

Another person who experienced a similar fate was Achan (Joshua 7) who secretly stole a robe and some money for himself during the conquest of the Promise Land. There is also the



example of Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6 who died when he tried to steady the Ark of the Covenant in a manner that was contrary to the Lord's command.

In each of these instances, God was doing a new thing in salvation history among the people, and it was important that everyone be clear they should give careful attention to doing things God's way and not their own. We should also note that in each instance the ones who died thought they had a better idea than God, and their pride and deception was their undoing.

When it comes to character development, followers of Jesus should look first at the nature of God, and we should reflect on the Lord's agenda in the world. If we are ever tempted to think we know better than God, or if we ever think we can get away with deception, we should think again. As Paul writes, "*Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. A man reaps what he sows*" (Gal. 6:8).

Authenticity in the Christian life is a must for the follower of Jesus Christ. There should be a congruence of the inside of our lives with the outward expression of our faith. We must be honest with ourselves, honest with God, and honest with other people. For the Christian, what you see is what you should get.

### **III. Lessons We Can Learn.**

There are several lessons we can learn from this passage. *The first is it wasn't about the money; it was about honesty and integrity.* If I sell my watch for \$100 but say I got \$80 for it and put the money in the plate as if it were the whole amount, quietly pocketing the difference and taking a bow for being generous, even if I have limited math skills I know that adds up to 100 percent deceit. God expects more of me, and as a follower of Jesus I should be known as much for my honesty and integrity as for my generosity.

A second lesson we can learn is that *pride and generosity just don't mix.* They are like oil and water. God delights in seeing us share our time, money, and resources for no reason other than the joy of giving. When our motives are pure, then giving can be easy. You and I enjoy giving gifts to people we love, and we take pleasure in bringing a smile to someone who is dear to us. However, when we give with an expectation of receiving back, it puts a damper on things. We put too much emphasis on the reaction of the recipient, and it takes away the joy of giving. We've all experienced what it's like when someone has given us a gift with strings attached. It's just not a joyful exchange. And when we give expecting a pat on the back or to see our name carved in stone, the joy is gone, chased away by a hunger for approval that can never be fully satisfied.

*Another lesson we can learn is that part of the problem for Ananias and Sapphira was a case of wanting to keep up with the Joneses, or in their case keeping up with Barnabas.* They wanted to be known, they wanted to be admired, they wanted to appear as generous as Barnabas, and it caused them to be dishonest.

Ever year I get publications from educational institutions and organizations to which I give that provide a listing of all the donors by dollar amounts. If you give over a certain amount, you are listed in your classification – for example, the bronze circle, the silver circle, or the gold circle. Sadly, vainly, I will often look down the list to see which category I'm in. Next I compare who else is in my group. I look to see who is in the category above me, and I wonder if I could join their select group next year. Then I scan the lists below me and smugly think I am more



generous than they are. Finally, I catch myself and ask, “What are you doing, you big dummy?!” How much like Ananias and Sapphira I am in my heart of hearts. Maybe you are, too.

Earlier in the service I shared with you that last week Lorie and I were in Cape Town, South Africa, for the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. It was a remarkable international gathering of 4,000 people from around the world, only 400 of whom were from the U.S. 196 nations were represented, and it was a glimpse of heaven as people from just about every language, tribe, color, and ethnic group were there. A highlight of the conference for me was the small groups. Each of the 4,000 participants was divided into groups of 6, and we sat around tables during the plenary sessions. After a Bible study or a message, we would spend time in our small groups and discuss things together. It was a rich experience.

Here’s a picture of my small group. Seeta is from Nepal. Joice is from South Africa. Dave is a Canadian who works with the disabled in South Africa. Crystell is from Cameroon and now works in Belgium. And Tuma is from Papua New Guinea. It was an amazing experience to hear about the lives of these special people and how God was using them in their contexts despite limited resources. I was convicted about the radical individualism of my faith, and that of the Western church, and the opulence and materialism of my own lifestyle compared to theirs. Lorie and I were reminded at this conference that half the world lives on less than \$2 a day.

You are I are busy trying to keep us with the Joneses here in Westlake. Friends, I’m here to tell you that in the global context we are the Joneses! We should live a bit more simply so others can simply live, and we should give sacrificially out of the incredible abundance of our lives so the work of Jesus Christ can advance around the world. God is not mocked, my friends. He knows everything about us, including our spending habits. And you and I will give an account to Him one day for the way we have lived our lives. That, is a sobering reality.

## **Conclusion.**

Some passages push us, they prod us, and we squirm a bit when we read them or we may even come away a bit angry. We prefer stories of forgiveness; we like tales with happy endings. Then there are passages like this one. We’ve just got to sit with it and let it be, and we’ve got to live in the ambiguity and harshness of it all.

It is best with a passage like this one to reserve judgment until further insight by the Holy Spirit, or even until we get to heaven itself when the Lord will provide all the answers to our questions. If nothing else, this text makes it clear that God is not only a God of mercy, He is also a God of judgment, and when He is doing a new thing in the world, every believer needs to take their discipleship and their giving very seriously, holding nothing back.

Are you generous with the Lord, my friend, or are you withholding from God? Are you more concerned with what people think of you than you are with doing the right thing? Are you tempted to shade the truth in order to make yourself look better? Then this passage is for you, and it’s for me. We need to read and pray through it. May God do His work of transformation in each of our hearts this day.

Gordon MacDonald says it well when he writes:

“Generosity is soul work that yields rich rewards.

“Generosity isn’t about money; it’s an attitude of the heart.



“Whether you're financially comfortable or have only modest means, the choices you make about what to do with the gifts God has given you - talent, energy, influence, time, resources - provide a remarkably accurate picture of the shape of your soul.

“Those who hoard their gifts, living with clenched fists, suffer the sadness of a pinched soul and a miserly existence, never experiencing the extravagant blessings that come to those who live with open hands and a giving heart.

“Jesus said, *‘Whatever measure you use in giving - large or small, it will be used to measure what is given back to you.’*”<sup>iii</sup>

Good words to remember as we make our commitments to God for next year. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Source unknown.

<sup>ii</sup> Gordon MacDonald, *A Resilient Life*, p. 187.

<sup>iii</sup> Gordon MacDonald, *Secrets of the Generous Life*, back cover.

