

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

A Cautionary Tale: Ananias and Sapphira

Acts 5:1–16

Let's turn together to Acts 5. Today we look at a cautionary tale from the early church and two individuals named Ananias and Sapphira.¹

Several years ago Sanja, Alastair, and I were watching an episode of that TV show, “Shark Tank.” If you are familiar with “Shark Tank,” you know that it's this show where people bring business ideas to investors to raise capital for their companies. And in one particular episode we watched, there were two entrepreneurs pitching their new product idea, which was an alternative to chewing tobacco. And they had these different flavors including chocolate, mint, and cinnamon. And afterwards, Alastair said to me, “Daddy I want some chewing tobacco.” That was a new one for me. What do you do with that?

Well growing up I had some friends who asked for tobacco as kids and their parents (I think in an effort to dissuade them) gave them some. And that worked surprisingly good as a deterrent for those kids. They never wanted it again after that.

But I figured that's probably not the best approach with Alastair. So I chose the route of “cautionary tale.” I told Alastair about the dangers of tobacco, how addictive a substance it is, and how it can cause things like cancer. Sanja then told Alastair about a good friend of hers from college who would chew tobacco. He actually contracted stomach cancer and died in his thirties, which was very sad. And I think Alastair got the point.

All of that to say this—there's great power in the use of “cautionary tales.” Some cautionary tales are fables that teach a point like the “Boy who Cried Wolf.” Some are true stories like Sanja's good friend from college.

In the OT, we have a few examples of this. Some have called them “penalty miracles.”² An example of this is when Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, were put to death for offering up unauthorized fire before the Lord (Lev 10:1–3). Also when the Ark of the Covenant was being transported, a man named Uzzah was put to death for touching the Ark of the Covenant with his hand when the oxen stumbled (2 Sam 6:5–11). The Ark was not to be touched (Num 4:15). Also the Ark wasn't supposed to be pulled by oxen. It was supposed to be carried by priests on poles (see Exod 25:14–15; Num 7:9; Deut. 10:8; 31:9, 25; Josh 3:15). God made that clear. So this man, Uzzah, became a byword in ancient Israel. So did Nadab and Abihu. You can hear the people say to one another in ancient Israel, “Don't be like Uzzah, Nadab, and Abihu. Obey the Lord and his precepts.”

Probably the best example of this was a man named Achan from the book of Joshua.³ In that book, the people of Israel were finally entering into the Promised Land.⁴ What Achan was to Joshua, Ananias

¹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 155: “Perhaps no passage in Acts raises more serious difficulties for Christian readers.”

² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 160. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 279: “Many scholars regard this episode as a ‘miracle of judgment,’ more specifically a ‘rule miracle of punishment’ or a rule (violation) miracle.”

³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 220 doesn't refer to this as a “penalty miracle” and he doesn't link it to Ananias and Sapphira in the NT because of the following: “The differences between Joshua and this text show that this OT text cannot be the basis for the event here. This event is not an “exact parallel” of Josh. 7, as four differences show (pace Haenchen 1987: 239–41): (1) Joshua has no miracle. (2) Here a lie is told to Peter, not a disclosure as with Achan. (3) The community does not suffer any loss. (4) There is no stoning; God acts directly. This kind of instant judgment is unique in the NT, although it is suggested in a text like 1 Cor. 11:30 about how some have died for taking the Lord's Supper inappropriately.”

and Sapphira were to the early church. Just as Achan interrupted Israel's process and progress in the conquest of the Promised Land, Ananias and Sapphira's act of deceit interrupted the process and the progress of the program of God. And as part of that, they destroyed Jericho... or to be more precise, God destroyed "Jericho" for them. And then they went off to a dinky little battle in the city of Ai (Josh 7:1–9). This battle in Ai should have been a piece of cake for the Israelites. Ai was nothing compared to Jericho. But something happened that prevented their victory.

Joshua 7:1 says this, "But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan ... of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel." You see, the Lord told the Israelites, "Don't take any plunder for yourselves at Jericho. Don't take any of it!" All of it will be dedicated for destruction, except for the "silver and gold, and every vessel of bronze and iron, are holy to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord" (Josh 6:19).

But someone... someone not very smart... disregarded that command of the Lord. This guy, this man from Judah named Achan directly disobeyed the Lord. So the Israelites go up to Ai, and they get their clocks cleaned by these Canaanites. Afterwards Joshua and the leaders cry out to the Lord in despair for what happened to these people. And then God explains someone has directly disobeyed him by taking plunder from Jericho.

So Joshua brings out all the people of Israel. And God identifies this guy Achan, whose sin has already caused the loss of lives in battle. And Achan is put to death with all of his family. And he and all of his possessions are burned in the valley of Achor (Josh 7:24–26). Achor means "trouble" in Hebrew. This is a reference to the trouble that Achan brought upon the Israelites.

What's the moral of that story? What does that cautionary tale teach us even here 3,500 years later? It's this: "Your sin will find you out." That's what happens with Achan. God calls Achan's sin, "an outrageous thing in Israel." It's outrageous especially because God had just dealt with the sin of the faithless Israelites of the previous generation in the wilderness and now they are finally entering into the Promised Land. And isn't it amazing how the sin of one individual has far-reaching implications for his family and for his tribe and for the whole community of God?

Now you might say, "That's so harsh. That's so severe." Well, that's *exactly* the point. God wants you to grasp the severity of his hatred towards sin. Here's the lesson the Israelites learned that day, "Don't mess with Yahweh!" "Yahweh is not a God to be trifled with." And this episode at Ai was necessary to shock the system of these Israelites, so that they would "think twice" about transgressing God's command again in the future.

To that you might say, "Where's the grace? Where's the love?" Well here's something else you need to consider in our New Testament, post-cross era. Without judgment, there's no such thing as grace. Grace is the removal of what we deserve. It's the removal of God's judgment. It is the cancellation of God's wrath. And until you understand God's holiness and God's righteousness and the extent of God's just and holy wrath towards sin, you'll never understand the concept of "grace."

Okay, so now let's turn our attention to Acts 5. The NT equivalent to those OT penalty miracles are Ananias and his wife Sapphira. Who are they and what did they do? And how did they become a cautionary tale in the NT community?

Write this down as the first *exposition* point from the passage. We'll talk application a little bit later. But before we talk prescriptively, let's just deal descriptively with this text. We'll see first in Acts 5:1–6...

1) A punishment **observed** (5:1–6)

Here's what Luke tells us. Look at verse 1.

⁴ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*. NICNT, 102: "The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God." Similarly Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 123 states, "What Achan was to Joshua, Ananias and Sapphira were to the early church. Just as Achan interrupted Israel's process and progress in the conquest of the Promised Land, Ananias and Sapphira's act of deceit interrupted the process and the progress of the program of God."

¹ But a man named Ananias,⁵ with his wife Sapphira,⁶ sold a piece of property,

Now this statement about Ananias and his wife comes on the heels of an incredible revival in Jerusalem. People are getting saved. People are getting healed. The church is blowing up with new converts. The generosity of the people is immense. At the end of **Acts 4**, Luke tells us that wealthier people in the fellowship were selling their possessions and giving the proceeds to the apostles. It was wonderful. It was utopia on earth. **And you might think to yourself, “This is a perfect church.”⁷ Well, no. As we’ll see in our passage today there’s no such thing as a perfect church.**

I heard a story once about Charles Spurgeon. A man came up to him once and was seeking his help in finding a “perfect group of God’s people.” And Spurgeon told this guy, “If you find such a group, don’t join it, for if you did, it would no longer be perfect.”⁸

There’s no such thing as a perfect church, even with the early church. It’s true that everything was wonderful and idyllic and joyful at the end of **Acts 4**, but then there’s that ominous word at the beginning of **Acts 5**, “But.”⁹

¹ But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife’s knowledge he kept back¹⁰ for himself¹¹ some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet.¹²

This word “but” at the beginning of **chapter 5** is used to contrast Ananias with the godly man, Barnabas.¹³ Barnabas was a wonderful example of generosity in the early church. He sold a field of his, and he brought the proceeds to the apostles’ feet.

And there must have been this great social pressure to keep up with the likes of Barnabas in the early church.¹⁴ Ananias and Sapphira, who were probably wealthy individuals in the church, didn’t want to be

⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 156: “There is a mild irony even in Ananias’s name, whose etymology is ‘God is gracious.’” Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 282: “Ἀνανίας is a Hebrew name (אֲנָנִיָּה, ‘Yah[weh] has shown favor’), and was a popular name among Palestinian Jews. Sapphira (Σάπφειρα) is an Aramaic name (שִׁפְרָה, ‘the beautiful one’).”

⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 282n1286: “The Hebrew name is שִׁפְרָה (Shiphra), the name of one of the Israelite midwives in Egypt... Sapphira is the fifth most popular name among female Palestinian Jews.”

⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 276: “The community of believers in Jerusalem was not perfect. There was temptation inspired by Satan, and the sin of deceit, caused by a selfish concern for a superior reputation, was exposed and judged by God, who knows the hearts of all people. God will not tolerate evil and deception among his people, who must be mindful of the fact that they should fear God as they are accountable to him who is holy, omniscient, and almighty.”

⁸ Taken from Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 201.

⁹ Technically the conjunction *δέ* can be used connectively and translated “and” or contrastively/adversatively and translated “but.” When it is used adversatively, it’s not as strong as *ἀλλά*. The conjunction *ἀλλά* is used in verse 4: “You have not lied to man, but [*ἀλλά*] God.” But the ESV translators (as well as the) are right to translate *δέ* with the English “but” in 5:1, since Luke is clearly contrasting Barnabas at the end of chapter 4 with Ananias and Sapphira at the beginning of chapter 5. See BDAG, *δέ*, 213.

¹⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 156: “Like Barnabas had pledged the full proceeds to the community. This can be assumed from the use of a rare Greek verb (*nosphizomai*, v. 2) to describe his action in holding back part of the money. The verb means to pilfer, to purloin, to embezzle. One does not embezzle one’s own funds but those of another, in this instance those that rightfully belonged to the common Christian fund. Significantly, the same rare verb occurs in the Greek version of Josh 7:1–26, the story of Achan, who took from Jericho some of the booty ‘devoted’ (i.e., set aside for God) for sacred use.” Marshall, “Acts,” in *CNTUOT*, 554: “The story of Ananias and Sapphira has a structural parallel with the story of Achan, who misappropriated what did not belong to him and suffered dire consequences. The verb *nosphizomai* (5:2) establishes a verbal link (Josh. 7:1; the verb is found elsewhere in the LXX only in 2 Macc. 4:32). Otherwise, however, there are no specific links; note that the sin here is deceit rather than theft, and that Achan’s wife is not expressly named as perishing along with him.”

¹¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 221: “The middle voice is an indirect reflexive: ‘He kept it for himself’ (Wallace 1996: 421). The term for ‘proceeds,’ *τιμῆς* (*timēs*), matches Acts 4:34.”

¹² Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 9, Kindle: “Always the enemy of God’s loving plan, Satan had already begun a counterattack of outward persecution through the civil and religious authorities (Acts 4). But that tactic was not terribly creative or effective, so now the devil tried a different strategy and attacked the church from within.”

¹³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 221: “The contrast to Barnabas is a key to this scene and also shows that Luke can discuss problems in the church, in contrast to some who argue that Luke’s portrait of the church in Acts is idealized.”

¹⁴ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*. NICNT, 105–6: “The desire to gain a higher reputation than is one’s due for generosity or some other virtue is not so uncommon that anyone can afford to adopt a self-righteous attitude toward Ananias. In a situation where those who followed Barnabas’s example received high commendation within the group, the social pressure on others to do the same, or rather to appear to do the same, must have been considerable.”

upstaged by the likes of Barnabas.¹⁵ And so they sold a piece of property too. But their actions were different than Barnabas.¹⁶

Verse 2 tells us that they hatched this plan. They concocted this scheme to get noticed in the church. They retained some of the proceeds of their “perceived” generosity. But they would present the rest of it to the apostles as if it was the entirety of the sale. It’s a very clever plan. Who’s going to know?

Now we don’t know exactly what happened here, but we have enough information to fill in the details.¹⁷

Let’s be clear about something, nowhere does the Bible say that we are required to sell all our possessions and give them to the church. Please don’t go home and do that this afternoon. Please don’t sell all your possessions and give away your car and move in with your parents. God doesn’t want that. The church doesn’t want that. Your parents don’t want that.

Barnabas wasn’t under any obligation to sell his property and give it all to the church. And neither were Ananias and Sapphira. So there must have been some deception here with the way that they went about this transaction. They must have told the other church members that the entirety of this land was being given over to God. You get the sense later in the text that they promised God that they would give the proceeds of this sale to the church. I’m sure it wasn’t the only thing that they owned. Probably it was just one of their landholdings. But still, they didn’t have to sell it and give all the money away.¹⁸

Well Peter knows immediately that something’s fishy here.¹⁹ They sell this property and they pretend to bring all the money and lay it at his feet. Peter knows what’s going on... probably the Holy Spirit is giving him special knowledge into their deception.

So look at **verse 3**.

³ But Peter said, “Ananias why has Satan²⁰ filled²¹ your heart²² to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?

That’s why I think there must have been some kind of vow made before the Lord, because why else would Peter say that he lied to the Holy Spirit?²³ So instead of Spirit-filled generosity, now we’ve got Satan-

¹⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 279: “The believers met in large numbers in Solomon’s Portico adjacent to the temple (2:46; 3:11; 5:12)... On some occasions probably thousands of people gathered to hear the apostles teach (4:4)... If Ananias and Sapphira had conspired to lie to the apostles about the proceeds of the sale of their property, they evidently liquidated a rather large piece of real estate as they clearly wanted to impress the apostles and the entire assembly of believers.”

¹⁶ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 9, Kindle: “I think that when they saw Barnabas’ great generosity, they genuinely wanted to follow suit. But their motivations were mixed and when the money was in hand, they could not live up to their avowed intention. They were undoubtedly new Christians, and the habits of the old life were only a breath away. They overestimated themselves, a common error of new believers.”

¹⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 283: “The scene presupposes that Ananias said something to the apostles. He probably described the sale of his property and asserted that he is now donating all the money from the sale to be used for the needy (cf. in v. 4 the emphasis on the voluntary nature of the sale of personal possessions and of the amount donated to the community of believers).”

¹⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 223: “The desire for human praise is more important to them than being faithful to God.”

¹⁹ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 197: “Peter discerned what was happening. Was this through the expressions of guilt on the faces of these two, as some have suggested? More likely it was a direct prophetic revelation from God.”

²⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 222: “References to Satan are rare in Acts (5:3; 26:16–18), but an echo exists here of Judas’s sin (Luke 22:2–3) and of a test Peter received from Satan (Luke 22:31–32; Johnson 1992: 88). Satan is present in other texts in Luke’s Gospel (10:18; 11:18; 13:16) and in three OT passages (Job 1; Zech. 3:1–2; 1 Chron. 21:1). The devil is noted twice each in Luke and Acts (Luke 4:2, 13; Acts 10:38; 13:10).”

²¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 222: “Satan filled, and the result was the lie. This filling is the opposite of earlier community fillings, of being filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:4; 13:52; 19:21).” Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 157: “Satan ‘filled’ Ananias’s heart just as he had Judas’s (cf. Luke 22:3). Like Judas, Ananias was motivated by money (cf. Luke 22:5). But in filling the heart of one of its members, Satan had now entered for the first time into the young Christian community as well.”

²² Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 123: “Ananias was ‘filled by Satan’; he was ‘satanized,’ meaning he was ‘controlled by Satan from within’ and therefore under satanic control.” BEDE: “Like a crafty, wicked, deceitful and fraudulent deceiver, he draws the human soul toward dispositions for malice by thoughts and enticements of vices, of which he is full... Therefore Satan filled the heart of Ananias, not by his own entering in, but by the injection of the venom of his malice.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 60.

²³ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 197: “When we lie to the church, we lie to the Holy Spirit. We see the developing theology of the church here. In 5:11 we find the first of twenty-three times that the word *ekklesia* appears in Acts. Saul/Paul finds out later that when he

filled duplicity. Instead of mutuality of soul and togetherness, we've got deceit and strife. Instead of God's glory coming down and rocking the congregation, we've got Satan scheming in the hearts of men. Ananias's treachery is threatening to compromise the entire operation of the church by letting Satan get a foothold. This is serious stuff that's happening here.²⁴

Peter continues in **verse 4**.

⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?²⁵ Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?²⁶ You have not lied to men²⁷ but to God.²⁸

Now let me just point out a couple things here. I don't want to lose the momentum of this story, but I want to direct your attention to two points of significance in **verse 4**.

First of all, understand that generosity is never mandated. **You can't mandate generosity!** And so Peter points out clearly here that this money was at their disposal. He says essentially, **"You could have done whatever you wanted with it. But instead of being honest before God and the church you tried to have it both ways. You tried to keep some of the profit for yourself, while concurrently appearing to be a man of great generosity before the church fellowship. That's duplicity! That's hypocrisy!"**²⁹ Hypocrisy made Jesus angry repeatedly in the Gospels (e.g., Matt 6:1, 5; 7:1-5; 15:7-9; 23:23). And now we have an example of it in the early church.³⁰

Notice too that Ananias lied ... not to Peter. He lied to the Holy Spirit in **verse 3**. And Peter says in **verse 4**, "You have lied not to men but to God." **Interesting! Everyone see that?**

Here's where I'm going with this. This is probably the most definitive statement on the Deity of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. So underline that in your Bible. And hear me on this.... this is so important... One God. Three persons.³¹ Our God is one. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (**Deut 6:4**). Our God is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit.³² **Everyone got that?**

persecuted the church, he was persecuting Jesus (9:4). Later he expresses the treasured teaching that the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12; 5:23)."

²⁴ For those who might say, "Well, they gave something rather than nothing. Why are they judged so harshly?" Calvin reminds us that "the sacrifices of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord" (Prov 15:8).

²⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 222: "This is not the only option Ananias possessed. Peter points out that Ananias had control and authority over the land both when it remained unsold (using imperfect tense verbs to stress the duration of the control) and once the proceeds came to him upon its sale (using an aorist to look at the event of the sale). There is nothing required of him by the community. After the sale, the proceeds are still under Ananias's authority (ἐξουσία, *exousia*)."

²⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 284: "While the first question ascribes the deception to Satan, the last question asserts the personal culpability of Ananias. This corresponds to Paul's understanding of sin: while sin is the result of Adam's fall in the past, controlling the behavior of all human beings (Rom 5:12-21; 7:7-24), every human being is personally responsible for his or her sinful actions (Rom 1:18-3:20)."

²⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 158: "Ultimately, he had lied to God. Not that he had not betrayed the community. Not that he had not lied to the Spirit. Rather, to betray the community is to lie to the Spirit that fills the community, and to falsify the Spirit of God is an affront to God himself."

²⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 223: "Although some scholars suggest that these verses are in tension with 4:32, 34, where everyone is portrayed as giving to the community (Haenchen 1987: 237), the story of Ananias and Sapphira shows Luke's frankness in that not everything was free of sin in the community. It also indicates that Luke's earlier remarks are hyperbolic. The bulk of the community is generous, but as in many communities, there are tragic exceptions."

²⁹ Sproul, *Acts*, 111: "Their sin was not in holding back some of the funds but in the pretense, the hypocrisy. They lied to the church. They lied to God. They lied to the Holy Spirit. They pretended that they were giving the full amount when they were not. Giving gifts to God is sacred business, and to taint a gift to the Lord by concealing it in the package of a lie is a kind of blasphemy against the sanctity of God. So, again, Ananias and Sapphira were killed not because they failed to give everything to God but because they lied about their gift."

³⁰ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 9, Kindle: "We share Ananias' sin not when others think we are more spiritual than we are, but when we try to make others think we are more spiritual than we are. Examples of Ananias' sin today include: creating the impression we are people of prayer when we are not; making it look like we have it all together when we do not; promoting the idea that we are generous when we are so tight we squeak when we smile; misrepresenting our spiritual effectiveness (for example, saying, "When I was at the crusade in New York, I ran the whole follow-up program," when the truth is, you were a substitute counselor). When a preacher urges his people toward deeper devotion to God, implying that his life is an example when in actuality he knows it is not, he is repeating Ananias' sin!"

³¹ BASIL THE GREAT: "Peter's words to Sapphira—'How is it that you have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? You did not lie to men, but to God'—show that sins against the Holy Spirit and against God are the same. And thus you might learn that in

Okay, back to the story. Peter calls Ananias out on the carpet for his hypocrisy. And we're all kind of wondering what happens now. Well conceivably God will give him a chance to repent and rectify the situation.³³ But instead something shocking happens. Something fear-inducing happens... Look at **verse 5**.

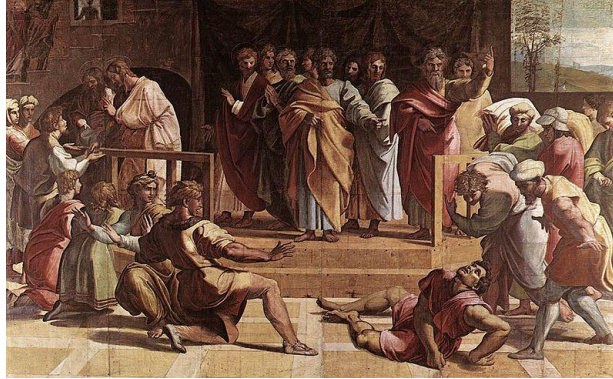
⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last.

He died right there in front of them all.³⁴ Ananias's sins found him out and his punishment was instantaneous retribution.³⁵ Wow, that's unexpected!³⁶ And Luke tells us afterwards in **verses 5 and 6**. And great fear [φόβος μέγας] came upon all who heard of it.³⁷

⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried³⁸ him.³⁹

There's a sense of urgency here as they bury him with great haste.

Here's Raphael's rendering of this incident with Peter and Ananias.⁴⁰ It's pretty striking.



"The Death of Ananias" by Raphael (c. AD 1515)

I like this painting because you can see the shock and awe that comes over the people after Ananias falls dead. And Peter's there with the other apostles looking on.

And notice too in **verse 5**, the people didn't get all high and mighty after this. They didn't feel superior to Ananias or think of themselves as "holier-than-thou." No, just like those incidents in the OT, the response of the people was fear (φόβος μέγας).⁴¹

every operation the Spirit is closely conjoined with, and inseparable from, the Father and the Son." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 60–1.

³² Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 124: "Verses 3 and 4 are a clear example of the biblical teaching that the Holy Spirit is God, for Peter accused Ananias of lying to the Holy Spirit in verse 3. Then, in verse 4, he said that Ananias had lied to God. Hence, to lie to the Holy Spirit means the same as lying to God."

³³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 280: "In the case of Ananias, Peter begins by asking six questions, evidently giving him an opportunity to respond, before asserting that he lied to God—none of these questions is harsh. In the case of Sapphira, Peter again begins with a question that gives her the opportunity to admit her wrong and repent, which she refuses to do."

³⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 279 suggests death by natural causes here (maybe a heart attack?). But that's implausible.

³⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 160: "But just as with God there is both justice and mercy, so with his Spirit there is also an underside to his blessing. There is his judgment."

³⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 285: "As Peter laid bare Ananias's heart and stated his rebellion against God, Ananias's heart gives out. Whether Ananias dies of a heart attack, induced by the public exposure of his deceit in front of the apostles and perhaps in front of thousands of believers in Solomon's Portico, or whether his death has supernatural causes, the timing of his death certainly is the result of divine judgment."

³⁷ JOHN CALVIN: "It was God's purpose to strike the rest with fear by the punishment of one person, so that they might conscientiously abstain from all deceit.... For God wished to give a general warning to all generations at that particular time, that all may learn to be sincere in their dealings with him." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 61.

³⁸ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 9, Kindle: "The first recorded burial in the Christian community was that of a hypocrite! Tragic!" Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 286: "Jewish cemeteries were located outside the city walls, following Jewish law (cf. m. B. Bat. 2:9). In Jerusalem the cemeteries consisted of tombs, distributed at random, that surrounded the city walls in three major areas north, south, and east of the city. About 800 tombs from the Second Temple period are known from surveys and excavations around the city limits."

³⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 158: "This was most unusual procedure. Burials were often fairly hasty in Palestine, but not that hasty, not, that is, except for death under unusual circumstances, such as suicides and criminals—and judgments from God."

⁴⁰ For more details on this painting, see the following webpage with closeups and explanations of Raphael's work: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-raphael-cartoons-the-death-of-ananias/#slideshow=1457702035&slide=0>

For our part, I don't think we should relish the downfall of another person whether it's Achan or Ananias or someone else we know who has been punished severely for their sin. I think we need to approach this passage humbly. I think we need to observe what's happening here and take note of this aspect of God's character. I think we need to receive this text as a "cautionary tale." This can happen to you. This is what God thinks of you harboring your sin. And I think that our attitude should be something like this, "There but by the grace of God go I." "This could be me. In fact, this should be me. I deserve that. And it's only the grace of God that has kept me from the same fate."⁴²

A lot of people might read this story and ask, "Why did God react so harshly towards Ananias in Acts 5?" But I think that's the wrong question. The better question is this, "Why doesn't the Lord always act this harshly towards the sin in you in me?" He could do that. That should be you and me lying dead because of our sin. "There but by the grace of God go I."⁴³

Believe it or not, I learned this lesson as a kid. In Sunday School, we used to sing this song called "Ananias and Sapphira." I haven't met very many people who know this song. And that's probably for the best, because it's a *really* creepy song. The song goes like this:

*"Ananias and Sapphira, got together to conspire a plot, to cheat, the church and get ahead.
They knew God's power but did not fear it, tried to cheat the Holy Spirit.
Went into the temple and then they both dropped dead!"*

If you thought "Ring around the Rosie" was a ghoulish, fatalistic song, think about singing "Ananias and Sapphira."

But we would sing that song faster and faster and pretend to drop dead every time at the end. And we sang it smiling and laughing. But really this passage is meant to inspire "fear of God." **Why are Ananias and Sapphira in the Bible? I think it's so that we might fear God and hate sin as much as God does. And we should take seriously the effect that sin has upon the community of faith that is the church.**⁴⁴

Now this sad story gets sadder. Write this down as a second *exposition* point:

2) A mistake **repeated** (5:7-11)

Look at **verse 7**.

⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in,⁴⁵ not knowing what had happened.⁴⁶

It's pretty remarkable that she doesn't know what happened to her husband. Perhaps they just threw him in a tomb without any formal ceremony since his death was so sudden and ill-fated. I don't know exactly how his wife was unaware of what happened, but she was.

⁸And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much."⁴⁷

⁴¹ KONRAD PELLIKAN: "A huge fear arose throughout the whole church of believers, but also the fear of this example seized those who did not yet believe. The good were summoned to greater piety by this punishment, but the wicked were being made afraid in their own sins and were being admonished to repentance. So by the punishment of a few, let us all recognize an opportunity for being more holy and prudent." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 62.

⁴² Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*. NICNT, 107: "The fear which fell on the whole community suggests that many a member of it (like many an Israelite when Achan was exposed) had reason to tremble and think, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

⁴³ KONRAD PELLIKAN: "The fact that these two lying spouses fell dead on the spot does not mean that everyone who lies or commits a crime will likewise perish in sudden death by an ordained punishment. It happened so that the rest would be summoned to repentance." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 63.

⁴⁴ MacArthur, *Acts 1-11*, MNTC, 155: "The action of God was meant to impress upon the church the seriousness of the sins of the saints."

⁴⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 286: "She probably knew that her husband had taken money to the apostles and expects to be greeted with gratitude and admiration."

⁴⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 159: "For all we are told, in this scene it may have been a matter of only Peter and Sapphira. Where had she been all this time? Why had she not been informed of her husband's death? Why did she now appear; was she looking for her husband? Luke was not interested in such details. His only goal was to point to the grim outcome of her duplicity with her husband. She joined him in the conspiracy with the funds. She would join him in death."

⁴⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 286: "Peter may not know at this point whether Sapphira was part of Ananias's deceit (as distinct from Luke's readers, who have been informed in vv. 1-2). His question is thus not designed to unmask her involvement in the deception, but to give her an opportunity to either corroborate what her husband had said, or to state the truth about the matter."

I guess the money was still there from where Ananias had left it. What's amazing here is that Peter actually gave her a chance to come clean and repent and make it right. **"Here's your chance, Sapphira! Don't blow it! Don't do something stupid! Don't lie right in the face of one of the apostles who leads the church! Don't test the Spirit of the Lord!"**

But what does she do?

And she said, "Yes, for so much."

⁹ But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test⁴⁸ the Spirit of the Lord?

Here's the bottom line—she didn't grasp how significant her sin was. She didn't understand how much the Lord hates duplicity and false piety in the church. She didn't feel the weightiness of her sin, and how much it was an affront to the God of the Universe.

"Why not? Why didn't she?" you might ask. I don't know. I wish she would have. **But I also wish that people in our own day would see how much their sin is an affront to God.**

Peter says in **verse 9**.

Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."⁴⁹

¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet⁵⁰ and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.⁵¹

¹¹ And [here's the result... here's the silver lining in this story... here's God's great purpose in this tragedy] great fear came upon the whole church⁵² and upon all who heard of these things.⁵³

Do you get it? Do you see why this is recorded in God's Word? Here's what God is telling you right now, "Don't mess around with sin!" Don't trifle with the God of the Universe! Don't treat your sin like it's something small and insignificant... something that you can piddle around with! It's an offense to God!⁵⁴

For those of us who are Christians in this room, this should not be lost on us. Jesus Christ died for our sins. No small price was paid for them. So should we continue in our sin so that grace may abound? "God Forbid," says Paul in Romans 6:1–2!

Now let's talk about the "fear of God." At the end of **verse 11** and at the end of **verse 5**, Luke tells us that "great fear" came upon the whole world. **I think for many in America today, that verse is read negatively. "Fear is bad! It's bad." "Great fear came upon them? That's horrible. Perish the thought. What a tragedy!"**

⁴⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 287: "While Peter stated earlier that the deception was a lie against the Holy Spirit (v. 3), he calls it here 'testing' (πειράσαι) the Spirit. The use of this verb reminds biblically literate readers of the people of Israel in the wilderness who on several occasions 'tested' God through rebellion and apostasy, with dire results."

⁴⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 126: "In John 20:23, the apostles were given the authority to retain sin, and here Peter "retained" the sin of Ananias and Sapphira for punishment."

⁵⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 159: "Now she lay at Peter's feet, in the place of her money. She had joined her husband in conspiracy. Now she would join him in the grave."

⁵¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 227: "The absence of wrapping the body may reflect Jewish custom, where men do not wrap a woman's dead body (Semahot 12.10)."

⁵² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 160: "As the Spirit of God he must always be viewed with fear in the best sense of that word (*phobos*), reverent awe and respect. It might be noted that this is the first time the word 'church' (*ekklēsia*) occurs in Acts, which denotes the people of God gathered as a religious community. Perhaps it is not by accident that it occurs in the context of this story. The church can only thrive as the people of God if it lives within the total trust of all its members. Where there is that unity of trust, that oneness of heart and mind, the church flourishes in the power of the Spirit. Where there is duplicity and distrust, its witness fails." Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 227: "The term church ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*, church) is important in Acts and is used in a variety of ways. This is the first of twenty-three references in Acts (5:10–11; 7:38–40; 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22, 26; 12:1, 5; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3, 4, 22–23, 41; 16:5; 18:20–22; 19:32, 39, 40; 20:17, 28). Not all the references are to the church; the term can sometimes refer simply to an assembly of people (Acts 7:38; 19:32, 39–40; Witherington 1998: 219; OT: Deut. 9:10; 18:16; 23:1–2 [23:2–3 LXX]; 31:30; Josh. 8:35 [9:2 LXX])."

⁵³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 228: "Lying led to deceit and an offense against God. Sin almost never comes in a single package; it begets more sin."

⁵⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 161 is right to point out that "nowhere in the story are Ananias and Sapphira condemned to eternal perdition. Their death did not necessarily involve their loss of salvation."

But here's the truth—that verse should be read positively not negatively. It's a good thing to fear God. It's a good thing to have great “fear of God” reign down on the church. Why? Because the “fear of God” is one of the greatest deterrents to sin and self-destruction that we have in this world. Fear is our friend.

Let me illustrate it this way. When my son was little, I wanted him to do things because he loved me... I wanted him to obey me because of love and trust. But I'd settle for fear. When I'd see him about to cross a street and put himself in danger, I'd yell at him “Stop!” And I would hope in that moment that he'd obey me because of love and trust. But if that failed in that moment, I'd settle for fear. I wasn't picky. I didn't care if he responded in obedience because he loved me or because he feared me. Maybe for a time fear was the necessary motivator to get him to do what is right. We all know that's true as parents.

Here's where I'm going with this. Sometimes when our “love for God” fails us in times of temptation, our “fear of God” doesn't. And here's the thing with you and your kids. Listen up, parents. Your ability to punish your kids and inspire fear in them will wane in time. Parents just play this elaborate game of chicken with their kids. Eventually the kids realize that they are stronger and faster than their parents. And then the gig's up. And you hope that when the gig's up, you've trained them well enough to survive and thrive in this world.

But here's the thing with God. He is infinitely powerful. He is infinitely strong. He is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-righteous. And fear of him never ends. You don't outgrow that. And sometimes, even in adulthood, when your love of God fails to keep you on the path of obedience, your fear of God succeeds.

I speak from experience. Hopefully, we learn obedience through both our love of God and our fear of him. Those two things are not mutually exclusive. Deuteronomy 10:12 says, “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”⁵⁵

Now there's more to this story in Acts 5. There's more than just God inspiring fear in his people. There's a sense in which God purifies his people, in order to do a great work among them. There's a sense in which punishment purifies and leads to a great outpouring of his power. That's exactly what happens in the verses that follow.

Write this down as a third *exposition* point.

3) A power **unleashed** (5:12–16)

Look at verse 12.

¹² Now many signs and wonders⁵⁶ were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles [in other words this Ananias and Sapphira business was just par for the course. God was regularly doing stuff like that by the hands of the apostles]. And they were⁵⁷ all⁵⁸ together in Solomon's Portico.

Here's that picture again of Solomon's Portico.

⁵⁵ I realize that this causes consternation for those who are familiar with 1 John 4:18 and John's statement that “perfect love casts out fear [φόβος].” Obviously there is a kind of fear that is incommensurate with love of God. It doesn't seem possible that John, who was intimately familiar with the OT Scriptures, would have spoken disparaging about the fear of the Lord here. Is he referencing instead a fear of man (see Matt 10:28; 2 Tim 1:7)? Or maybe a fear of punishment in eternity? Christians should not fear God in the sense that they are afraid he will eternally punish them. But they should fear God who punishes and chastises those who belong to him.

⁵⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 291: “The ‘many signs and wonders’ which happen in Jerusalem indicate that God is answering the prayer of the believers who have asked for signs and wonders (4:30).”

⁵⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 291: “The imperfect in v. 12e (ἦσαν) suggests that when the believers met as a large group, they met in the temple complex. Solomon's Portico, located on the east side of the Temple Mount, was the location where the congregation of believers in Jesus met, worshiped, taught, studied, learned, and shared... The community of believers lives, worships, and works in the center of the Jewish people.”

⁵⁸ I assume the “all” here is a reference to all the believers. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 230 disagrees. “Although the reference to ‘all’ in the verse might be to Christians, given the reference to ‘together’ (ὁμοθυμαδόν, *homothymadon*; 1:14; 2:46; 4:24) and verse 13, where ‘the rest’ and ‘them’ are in contrast (Barrett 1994: 274; Polhill 1992: 163), it is more natural to read it as referring to the apostles, whose ministry is the passage's focus of description and reaction.”



This is one of the places where the early church would congregate.⁵⁹ This is the place where Peter healed the crippled man and thousands of people got saved in **Acts 3**. This is one of the few places that was large enough for the church at this time to gather.

And so here they are again later in **Acts 5** doing their thing in the temple at Solomon's Portico. This is probably the place where Ananias and Sapphira died.

And now, look at this. this is remarkable to me. Look at **verse 13**.

¹³ *None of the rest⁶⁰ dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.*

That's wild. The people were like **"This is amazing. This is awesome. God is moving in their midst. I can see it."**

"Well then, why don't you join them?"

"O no! I don't want anything to do with that."⁶¹ I'd rather watch from the sidelines, thank you very much."⁶²

I always laugh when people say, "If only God would show up in some powerful way, then I'd believe him." O would you now? These people saw God do amazing things. And that didn't convince them to believe!

Luke says, "None of the rest dared join them." They might have said to themselves, **"Yeah, people get healed over there, but people die too. I heard about Ananias and Sapphira! I'm probably one of those people who would die, so I'll just keep my distance."**

But nevertheless they still held them in high esteem. In other words, those unbelieving Jerusalemites in **verse 13**, who were rejecting the whole enterprise, held them in high esteem, even though they didn't join them.

Other people, on the other hand, saw these miraculous things and got saved. Look at **verse 14**.

¹⁴ *And more than ever believers were added⁶³ to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,*

Remember what I said last time—there's too many people to count now. There were multitudes of men and women. First there was 120, then there was 3,000, and then there was 5,000 more men. Now there are just too many to count. It was multitudes and multitudes of both men and women.

Look at **verse 15**.

⁵⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 130: "Because there were so many believers now, it was no longer possible to congregate in the Upper Chamber of Acts 1:13. While that room was obviously big enough for one hundred and twenty people, now there were at least ten thousand Jewish believers. They had to meet in a place where many could gather and hear what was being taught, and that was in Solomon's Porch, a long, covered hallway stretching along the whole length of the east end of the Temple compound. Hence, the early church met within the confines of the Jewish temple."

⁶⁰ I assume "the rest" here is a reference to "the rest of Jerusalem" who have not become believers in Messiah Jesus. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 231 disagrees. "In all likelihood, the rest are believers who recognize the tense environment in which the apostles are working."

⁶¹ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*. NICNT, 109: "The death of Ananias and Sapphira scared off all but the totally committed."

⁶² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 163: "The people were awed by the power of the apostles, seeing the miracles worked through their hands, and perhaps having heard the report about Ananias and Sapphira. They did not run up and join the Christian band in the colonnade but kept a healthy distance (v. 13a)... The power of the miracles attracts. The awesome power of the Spirit that judges also demands commitment and responsibility. Before that power the crowd kept its distance with healthy respect, unless they were willing to fully submit to that power and make a commitment."

⁶³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 292: "The imperfect passive 'were added' (προσέτιθεντο), which implies God as agent of the action: it was God himself who caused people to overcome their unbelief, their hesitation and their fear and to come to faith in Jesus as Israel's Messiah and Savior."

¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets⁶⁴ and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow⁶⁵ might fall on some of them.⁶⁶

Jesus told his disciples that they would do even more powerful miracles than he did (**John 14:12**).⁶⁷
Case in point, right here in **Acts 5**.

¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem⁶⁸

Notice now that the gospel is starting to spread beyond the city of Jerusalem. That's the big theme of the book of **Acts**—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Jesus isn't just for Jerusalemites. Salvation is available to all men, Jews and Gentiles alike. We'll see that unfold more in more in the following chapters of the book of **Acts**.

¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits,⁶⁹ and they were all healed.⁷⁰

So just to recap, the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira led to the purification of the church, which subsequently led to an outpour of God's power. **I wonder how many churches fail to see God's power unleashed in their midst because they fail to purify themselves. "O no, let's not do church discipline. That's uncomfortable. That offends people." "O no let's not keep each other accountable or deal with sin in our church. That would chase people away, and we want to grow."**

I wonder how many churches fail to experience God's power because they fail to fear God and take him seriously? And instead of their church being filled with radical converts for Jesus Christ, they are filled with weeds and tares and false-converts. And instead of being this vertical place where God shows up and brings his glory down, it becomes hopeless and ineffectual. God save us from that!

Before we talk application, let me just say one thing about the unleashing of God's power in these last few verses. For the record, I don't think the unleashing of God's power is going to look the same in our own era as it did in this first century apostolic era.

Peter and the other apostles did some things that are not normative for our own day. And this whole incident where Peter's shadow was able to heal people, that's not something that I see happening today.

⁶⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 292: "Jews living in Jerusalem carried sick relatives and friends out of their houses (ἐκφέρω) into the streets. It seems that the large number of thousands of believers made it impractical to carry all the sick people up to the temple complex into Solomon's Portico. The term translated as 'streets' (πλατεία) denotes a 'wide road' or 'street.' In Jerusalem, the main street which ran from northwest to south, leading from the New City via the Tyropoeon Valley to Robinson's Arch at the southwest corner of the Temple Mount, was 10 meters wide, paved with stone slabs measuring 2 by 4 meters (with a sewer beneath the street up to 4 meters deep). Most of the other streets were more narrow, and without pavement."

⁶⁵ JOHANN SPANGENBERG: "His shadow did not do this, but rather the apostolic office did. We read that several people wanted to bury a man; seeing Moabite warriors charge into the land, they threw the man into the prophet Elijah's grave. And as he entered the grave and touched the bones of Elijah, the dead man came back to life and stood on his feet. Who here resurrected the dead? Not the bones of Elijah, but God himself, who wanted with this sign to confirm that Elijah was a true prophet of God." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 66.

⁶⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 293: "Some evidently believed that Peter's shadow (σκιά) had healing power. The Greek syntax suggests an element of uncertainty in their expectation (particle ἄν), and the indefinite pronoun (τις) indicates that only some, not all, of the sick were expected to be healed through Peter's shadow."

⁶⁷ For another interpretation of John 14:12, see the following article on this statement by R.C. Sproul entitled "What Did Jesus Mean When He Said We Would Do Greater Work Than He Did?" 12-18-15: <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/greater-works>

⁶⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 294: "In the Hellenistic-Roman period, the towns and villages in Judea which are attested in literary sources or through archaeological finds include the following (listed from north to south and from west to east): 1374 Modiin, Bethel, Beeroth, Aialon, Bethoron, Masepha, Ataroth, Rafat, Gazara, Betoannaba, Rama, Gabalda, Gabaon, Carnaea, Emmaus, Beth Thamar, Cariath Iarim, Anathoth, Moza, Sorech, Bethphage, Bethania-Bethany, En-Kerem, Beth Ther, Beth ha-Kerem, Azekah, Bethlehem, Betholetepha, Drusias, Caphetra, and Jericho."

⁶⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 232: "Healing comes to the sick as well as to the demon-possessed as the two categories are distinguished here." Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 131: "This verse makes a clear distinction between mere physical sickness and demonic problems. It is wrong to teach that all physical afflictions are caused by demons. In fact, the majority of physical ailments are due to human frailty, not due to sin or to demons."

⁷⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 293: "For Luke, it was not the shadow of Peter but God who caused healings to happen when people come to faith in Jesus (3:16; 4:10, 30)." Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 164: "One is reminded of Jesus' own healing ministry as recorded in Mark 6:53-56 and the similar response of the people."

I think that Peter was given unique, apostolic authority to perform miracles very much like what Jesus did. And so what we see here is something descriptive, not prescriptive for us. Peter and Paul and the other disciples in **Acts** are able to do things that we can't do. And that's okay. That was God's way of exploding the gospel throughout the world in the first century.

Now sometimes I wish I could heal people on command like Peter, and strike people dead on command when they sin against the church. But I'm probably better off not having that ability.⁷¹ How many people are glad that I can't strike people dead on command? I'm glad too. And I'm glad that no one in this room has that authority. It was something unique in the apostolic era, and I don't believe it's normative for us to have those abilities.

But I do believe this. The enduring principle here for us is that God moves and works powerfully in those places where unity, purity, and sincerity are guarded.⁷² I do believe that we can turn off the tap of God's power in our midst by harboring sin in our community of faith. **So don't do that! Deal with sin. Get rid of it. Fight the good fight against sin.**

Let me put it even more simply than that. In **Proverbs** it says this, "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers" (6:16–19). **Ananias and Sapphira** were guilty of at least three of those seven things: 1) "a lying tongue," 2) "[devising] wicked plans," and 3) "[breathing] out lies." I would also make a case for a fourth thing: "[sowing] discord among brothers."⁷³

The point is this, the favor of the Lord is not going to rest on a community of faith where these types of sins are tolerated. God hates them. **And one of the reasons that this story of Ananias and Sapphira is recorded is so we as the church, as a community of God's people would grasp just how serious he is about preserving the purity of the church.**⁷⁴

We are all sinners, yes. We have all fallen short of the glory of God, yes. We all come to Christ broken and twisted and dysfunctional with bad habits that need to be broken. But those habits *must* be broken. Otherwise we trample on the blood of Jesus that has been shed for our sins. Take this cautionary tale seriously. This is why Ananias and Sapphira are in the Bible! To show us how important it is to deal with sin in our hearts.

So what are we going to do about this? How are we going to apply this passage? Well do this.

Application:

1) Deal quickly and decisively with **sin**

Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:19, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." Don't minimize sin. Don't pretend it doesn't exist. Don't excuse it with some lame excuse, "I can't help myself." Or "I'm not like most people." Or "That's just the way I am, deal with it." No, deal with sin! Get a handle on it. Don't try to theologize it away with some statement like, "More sin, more grace. I just need more grace than everyone else." That is such an affront to God.

⁷¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 296: "Most pastors are presumably thankful that they do not have the prophetic insight into the motivations of the members of their churches that Peter had in Acts 5—what they already know from personal confessions, and from stories of third parties, is depressing enough."

⁷² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 161–2: "The same Spirit that gave the community its growth also maintained its purity. This seems to have been Luke's point, for the Ananias and Sapphira story is bracketed by an emphasis on the unity of the community (4:32–35) and the power of the Spirit in its midst (5:12–16)."

⁷³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 284 suggests that they committed all of these except for the shedding of innocent blood.

⁷⁴ MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 156: "God's desire for a pure church, and His willingness to take drastic steps to achieve that desire, were obvious for all to see. It was time, as Peter was later to write, 'for judgment to be with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?' (1 Peter 4:17). Perhaps Peter remembered this incident when he was inspired to write from Psalm 34, 'Let him who means to love life and see good days refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile' (1 Peter 3:10)." Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 162: "The church, when it is the church, is a holy community, the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16f.). Disunity, duplicity, and hypocrisy always "believe" the Spirit and hinder his work. If the church is to have genuine spiritual power in its life and witness, it must be an environment of the Spirit, devoted to maintaining its sanctity and purity."

Hear me on this, “If God’s grace hasn’t changed you, it hasn’t saved you.” If you are the same person today that you were five years ago or ten years ago or thirty years ago, I challenge you right now to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). Are you really saved? Have you really given your life to the Lord? If you have, then there should be evidence of the Holy Spirit’s transformation in your life.

Now let me deal with the specific sins that are dealt with in this passage. Write this down:

a) Root out every hint of **untruthfulness**

Do you fudge facts? Do you exaggerate? Root it out! Do you let people believe things about you that aren’t true? Do you remain silent when an untruth is circulated? Root it out! Do you cook books? Do you massage details? Do you talk a big game and promise things you can’t deliver? Root it out.⁷⁵

I had this coach once who used to tell us all the time, “Don’t write checks your body can’t cash!” It was a great statement. It means, don’t try to do something on the basketball court that you are not capable of doing. Don’t pretend to be Michael Jordan. You’re not. Church, don’t be untruthful with your intentions. Don’t write checks your body can’t cash.

Also, do this.

b) Get your **money-lust** under control

This was at least part of Ananias and Sapphira’s issue.⁷⁶ You might say, “I don’t have a money-lust problem, Tony.” Okay, well let me ask you this, “Do you spend more money than you make?” If you do, you might have a money-lust problem. Do you buy things you can’t afford? If you do, you might have a money-lust problem. Do you begrudge your spouse because they don’t make enough money to support you? If you do then you might have a money-lust problem! Do you refuse to give back to the Lord a portion of your income? If so, then you probably have a money-lust problem.

Let me ask this question. This’ll apply to all of us. “Are you an American?” Anybody here an American? If you’re an American, you probably have a money-lust problem or you are at least tempted by it on a daily basis. “Why do you say that, Tony?” Because materialism and consumerism has totally run amuck in this country!

“What’s the cure for that? What’s the cure for materialism?” We saw it at the end of Acts 4—It’s generosity. Here’s one way to get your money-lust under control – give some of it away. You might say, “Well how much do I give away, Tony. What percentage should I give away?” I don’t know. But here’s a suggestion. This’ll help—give it away until it starts to hurt, and then give a little more. And see if that doesn’t get your money-lust problem under control.

Also, write this down as c).

c) Don’t play the game of **spiritual pretense**

There is nothing more obnoxious in the church than false piety.⁷⁷ Some people have mastered the art of hypocrisy, pretending to be something they are not, portraying themselves as more righteous or more generous or more holy than they are. Jesus hated hypocrisy. He hated it when people feigned godliness. He would dress down the Pharisees publicly for their spiritual pretense. Don’t play that game. Just be sincere and honest and humble.

When you make mistakes, admit them. When you’re struggling with sin, confess it. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (Prov 3:34; 1 Pet 5:5–6; Jas 4:6–7).

2) Respect the church as the place of God’s **presence**

I’ve said this already, “Don’t trifle with the God of the Universe.” But let me say this as well, “Don’t be flippant with sin as a member of Christ’s bride, the church.” I believe that one of the reasons that Ananias and Sapphira’s sins were especially heinous to the Lord was because their sin jeopardized

⁷⁵ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 9, Kindle: “When the Church is great — with great unity, great grace, great power, and great care — it is perpetuated by great honesty.”

⁷⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 162: “Luke, who as a physician probably had known personally the pitfalls of wealth, of all the Gospel writers gave the strongest treatment of money’s dangers. Ultimately the temptations of money ensnared Judas (Luke 22:5; Acts 1:18), the rich young man (Luke 18:18–23), and the rich fool (Luke 12:15–21). The same quest for material security trapped Ananias and Sapphira.”

⁷⁷ MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 153: “None are so ugly in God’s sight as those who flaunt a spiritual beauty they do not possess. Ananias and Sapphira were nothing more than sinning saints feigning spirituality.”

the health of the church. Church is the place where God wants to bring his glory down. Church is the place where God wants to be glorified and to broadcast his goodness and holiness and his salvation throughout the world.⁷⁸ And so when selfish, sinful saints screw that up, that makes God furious.⁷⁹

So leaders and parishioners alike, respect the church. It's where God manifests his presence. Let me say this about God's presence in the church—it brings both grace and correction. I think there's a sense in which those guys who wouldn't dare join the church were right. They knew that there was a higher standard that they would have to submit to if they joined the church. And so they said, "No thank you." They didn't want to be purified in that way.⁸⁰ They passed on God's grace, because they couldn't handle the expectations that God would put on them as well.

You know Jesus challenged us to count the cost (**Luke 14:28–30**).⁸¹ And the Christian life isn't a gravy train. God promises to chasten and purify us. And that's a good thing. I'm glad he doesn't leave us the way that we are. Who wants to stay the same? I don't want to. So respect the church as the place of God's presence, and receive the correction that God brings.⁸²

3) Welcome fear as **friend**

In the Bible, fear is both negative and positive. John tells us that "perfect love casts out fear" (**1 John 4:18**). But that's not the same "fear" that's recorded in **Proverbs** where the Bible says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (**9:10**). So we need to distinguish between good fear and bad fear. **Acts 5** is about good fear.⁸³

You know if I were to summarize this entire cautionary tale with one statement, it would be this, "Fear God." I think that's what Luke is driving home here—"Fear God." You might say "No, the main point is that we need to be honest." Or "Don't be greedy!" Or "Don't be falsely pious!" Or "Don't be stupid by lying to God!" You could make a case for all of those. But really, those are byproducts of the ultimate message here. The ultimate message is this: "Fear God."⁸⁴

I realize that we might have some people here today who are hearing about the fear of God for the first time. You might say, "I've done things much worse than Ananias and Sapphira, Pastor Tony." You might be feeling right now the weight of your sinfulness and your need for forgiveness. Listen, it's right to fear God. He is fearsome. But you don't have to fear him as your enemy. You can fear him as your

⁷⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 295: "The weekly meetings of the congregation thus focus on praise, gratefulness, and obedience to God and his revelation in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ. Churches that focus on entertaining people have degenerated from places of divine presence to places of human soliloquy. Instead of being in dialogue with God, people have a monologue with themselves."

⁷⁹ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*. NICNT, 104: "What he is concerned to emphasize is the reality of the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence in the church, together with the solemn practical implications of that fact. So early was it necessary to emphasize the lesson later formulated by Paul: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are" (1 Cor. 3:16–17)."

⁸⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 296: "God's presence brings both grace and judgment. One of the main errors of "liberal" theologies is the notion that God is a gracious father who forgives and often overlooks the faults of his children. It is impossible for sinful human beings to liberate themselves from God's judgment. If there is no judgment, there is no grace. Grace without judgment is senile bonhomie."

⁸¹ For more on counting the cost of following Christ, see the following podcast by Pastor John Piper entitled, "Following Christ Is Costly — But How Do You Count the Cost?" 01-29:18: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/following-christ-is-costly-but-how-do-you-count-the-cost>.

⁸² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 296: "The possibility of God's judgment on sinners on this side of eternity is also mentioned in 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20; Jas 5:20; 1 John 5:16–17... God's temporal judgment on believers does not imply eternal damnation, particularly if Rom 8:31–39 and other passages are interpreted in terms of a certain assurance of salvation. If Ananias and Sapphira were believers, it should be remembered that the passage makes no statement concerning their eternal salvation or lack thereof."

⁸³ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 207: "Some might say that temporary joy through sin is better than a life of fear and trembling. I respond that this fear and trembling is the gateway to lasting and truly satisfying joy."

⁸⁴ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 206–7: "The idea of going through life fearing both God and the consequences of sin seems unattractive in our age where people are so devoted to good feelings. Fear is considered a bad feeling, and therefore people think it is wrong. If the Bible views living in fear favorably, we must reflect on it if we are going to convince people of the relevance and attractiveness of the Christian way in today's society. Actually, fear is a friend that alerts us of the danger of sin. But we live in a world where many think that enjoyment is possible primarily through what the Bible calls sin (e.g., through sex outside marriage or through enjoying violence). People who think in this way consider fear as a spoiler of fun and of good feelings. They are wrong."

Heavenly Father. You have an opportunity, right now, to become a child of God. You can have all of your sins forgiven... past, present, and future sins.

I don't know if Ananias and Sapphira were believers or not. Some say yes.⁸⁵ Some say no.⁸⁶ Some say they were punished with an early death as believers. I actually would lean in that direction.⁸⁷ But the truth is we don't know. The text doesn't specify. Ultimately that's between them and God, and it's too late for them to change their destiny now. But it's not too late for the people in this room. You can still repent and receive the free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. You can do that today.

I'm going to go ahead and ask our worship team to come up now, and as their coming up let me ask every person in this room, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your Savior? Have you had your sins forgiven?" If not, then today is the day of salvation for you. Put your faith in Christ.

⁸⁵ MacArthur, *Acts I–II*, MNTC, 153: "It is best to see them as genuine Christians for several reasons. First, they were included in the 'congregation of those who believed' in Acts 4:32. Second, they were involved with the Holy Spirit, thus indicating a relationship to Him. Third, if they were not Christians, what lessons about sin did this give to teach all the resto who were true believers? Fourth, Satan can become personally involved in believers (cf. Matt. 16:1–23; Eph. 6:12; 1 Peter 5:8–9). Finally, death can be divine chastening for a believer (1 Cor. 11:30–32; 1 John 5:16)."

⁸⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 282 is undecided. But he gives evidence for the possibility that they are presented as unbelievers: "In addition to 5:1, (ἀνὴρ δέ τις Ἀνανίας) the term ἀνὴρ δέ introduces in Acts a new character in 3:2 (τις ἀνὴρ χελοῦς, the lame man); 8:9 (ἀνὴρ δέ τις ὀνόματι Σίμων, Simon, the Samaritan magician); 8:27 (ἀνὴρ Αἰθίοψ, the Ethiopian eunuch); 10:1 (ἀνὴρ δέ τις ἐν Καισαρείᾳ ὀνόματι Κορνήλιος, Cornelius, the Roman officer in Caesarea); 14:8 (τις ἀνὴρ ἀδύνατος ἐν Λύστριος τοῖς ποσὶν ἐκάθητο, the lame man in Lystra); 16:9 (ἀνὴρ Μακεδὼν τις, a Macedonian man)—all unbelievers, at least when they are introduced. The statement in v. 13a—that people in Jerusalem infer from the fate of Ananias and Sapphira that they should keep a safe distance from the apostles and the congregation—supports, perhaps, the possibility Ananias and Sapphira were merely sympathizers rather than authentic believers in Jesus."

⁸⁷ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*. NICNT, 107 says, "There is no point in asking if Ananias and Sapphira were genuine believers or not, because there is no means of answering such a question."