

“Rediscover Church: Holding Back”

Dr. Jay Howell

November 14, 2021

There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife’s knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles’ feet. “Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!” Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Acts 4:36-5:11

We’re about at the end of this series “Rediscover Church.” Bill Barron will wrap us up next week, so a quick word about what we’ll be looking at in two weeks’ time when we start the season of Advent.

There’s a part of the Old Testament known as the Minor Prophets, shorter books at the end of the Old Testament. Honestly, this is often flyover territory, but there’s a lot there. One of those prophets is named Zechariah, whose focus was on the return of the people of Israel from exile and the restoration of the Holy Temple of God in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed. What does it mean to prepare space for the presence of God? What does that have to do with Jesus, with Advent, with Christmas? Quite a lot, as it turns out. We’ll look at that throughout Advent, starting two weeks from today.

This morning, though, as we continue going through Acts chapters 3-5, we’ll ask again what these glimpses of the early church might have to say to the church today. In past weeks, some of those words have been comforting, some maybe downright convicting, but I dare say what we’re about to read may be the most confusing and challenging part in the entire Book of Acts. You’ll see why in a minute. We’ll overlap slightly with last week’s text, starting in chapter 4 verse 36, through chapter 5 verse 11.

[Read passage.] This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Yes, everyone. You heard all of that right. Right here in the Bible, we have a story of a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who like the rest of the believers sold what property they had, but unlike the rest of the believers, when they brought the proceeds to the church, they kept a little bit for themselves. And when they were confronted by Peter about it, first Ananias then a little later his wife Sapphira, they dropped down dead, and the rest of the church was scared to death.

Does this scare anybody else? Scares me a little bit. I've done plenty of Commitment Sundays, but I don't think I've ever done one on which the words lingering in the air were that two members of the church brought before the church their offering, but then drop down dead because they were holding a bit back for themselves.

Y'all know what we're going to be doing in a little bit, right? During our closing hymn, we're going to come up, as we're led, leaving our pledge cards at the front. Anybody else having second thoughts about doing that now? (8:45): Now I need you folks to be in prayer for everybody at the late service, because at that service, the final hymn they're going to be singing, I kid you not, and we didn't really mean to do this, is "Take My Life." (11:00): Now I asked all the folks at the 8:45 service to be praying for all y'all, because I told them what the final hymn was for this service—different closing hymn at the early service. Did you notice what it was? "Take My Life." (Both) Let's all just hope that the Lord doesn't take the lyrics too literally or else we might not all make it back to our seats. It'll be spoken of for years to come. "They were dropping like flies that November 14."

You might be wondering why on earth we're talking about a passage like this one, when the story here sounds a bit harsh, especially in the context of a Commitment Sunday. Well, the short answer is, it was what was coming next. We've just been going bit by bit through Acts 3-5, and this was what came next. But the longer answer is, yeah, we could've staggered the readings differently, but I didn't want to saddle Bill Barron next week with a passage like this one—that would've been a bit rude.

But I think the reason we kind of flinch at hearing a story like this is because it doesn't feel quite right to us, does it? Doesn't sound like it belongs in the New Testament, at least. Sounds more like Old Testament stuff, honestly. But here it is, right in the story of the church, the group gathered and empowered by the Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ.

I don't think it's a coincidence that Acts tells us this story right after telling us a story that's a bit more on the positive side. We talked about it briefly last week and reread it this week—the introduction of Barnabas. Barnabas did as it seems all these early Christians were doing: sold everything, then committed all the proceeds to the shared mission and communal life of the church. He was so generous and so encouraging that they changed his name. That was an example, a personal example, of how the church gathered faithfully in their commitment to each other, for the sake of the shared mission entrusted to them in Christ.

But then, there's an example of the opposite. Ananias and Sapphira sell their property, but before they commit all of it, they hold part of it back, but then present the portion as if it were all of it. That, it seems, is the real sticking point. As Peter says to Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart *to lie* to the Holy Spirit?" and then later, "You did not lie to us but to God." Same thing with Sapphira when she comes in a few hours later, again with the main sticking point being that she had been deceitful about what they were committing.

And that's something I want to make clear as we wrestle with this. This passage is troubling, no doubt, but I want to make sure it's troubling for the right reasons. Never in this text do we hear Peter calling upon God to smite Ananias and Sapphira. In fact, the exact reason for their death is a bit unclear. It just says they both fell down and died. It seems that for Acts, the point that was important to put across wasn't the precise way they died but just how serious it was that they were deceitful. It wasn't that they didn't sell their property and it wasn't that

they didn't bring *all* of the proceeds to the church, but it was their deceit in doing so, trying to pass themselves off as faithful and committed, when in reality they really weren't.

We already talked last week about how this practice of selling everything seemed to have faded pretty quickly, since we don't see so much evidence of it in some of the later letters of the church, but what remained consistent was a culture of commitment, generosity, solidarity, and sacrifice within the church, and that applied to how this community of early Christians were called to approach their resources, their money.

It wasn't easy being a part of this community. They were all too often ostracized from the rest of society—at best thought of as weird. They were considered with suspicion by Jewish and Roman authorities alike. And they weren't called to keep it quiet either, because their commission was to spread the news they carried, the good news that Jesus was alive, and to spread it like wildfire. Lying low wasn't an option. It wasn't easy being a part of this church.

So can we imagine just how crucial it was for fidelity to each other to be beyond reproach? Can we even imagine how destructive it would be for one of them to attempt to deceive another, and not just deceive them, deceive them into thinking they were faithful and committed, when really they weren't? Can we imagine that, is that something we can fathom today?

It's hard for me to consider that. I mean let's be honest, we can all think of someone in our minds that if we weren't being entirely kind, we'd say, yeah so-and-so tries to pass off being this faithful person, but then look at their life, they're not that way. We can all think of someone like that. But would we say that someone like that, is a threat to the very existence of the life of this church? No, probably not. In reality, that's just kind of how it is. Every church has its committed core, and then those that are kind of on the periphery. And you want those folks on the periphery to move in closer, but you don't consider them horrible people or existential threats.

And it makes me wonder, because the world of the church we read about here, in which deceit is this existential threat, is so different than the one we live in. Makes me wonder, has church gotten too easy? Have we made it too easy? Have we put too much emphasis on being accessible that we've watered down the enormous claims of the gospel, and therefore blunted the seismic impact that the gospel can have on someone's life?

For example, when the message from the church sounds like “God loves you just the way you are,”—and I'm not discounting that good news, God does love us as we are; we don't have to do or say or think anything that would make God love us or love us more—but when our message sounds like “God loves you just the way you are,” without any other word on how the grace of God can change us, transform us, sanctify us, it can come across as, “God doesn't care what you do; he just wants to be in your life in whatever way you'll give him, whatever amount of time you can carve out on your schedule for him.” It turns God and a life of faith into this low-impact, low-importance matter of convenience. Tend to it when you have a spare minute.

And I think that's a mindset that we—and not just in our particular church, but including our particular church—I think that's a mindset that we have cultivated. Now first, and I feel like I'm making this distinction more often during this series, since we're talking so much about what the church could and should look like, first, if this Jesus guy isn't something you're sold on, then I'm glad you're listening, and I hope you keep listening. But for those who say, “Yes, I'm a Christian,” have we made it too easy on ourselves?

And it's not that we come out and say, “Well you have to do this and do this and do this in order to consider yourself a Christian,” because then it's just trying to work our way into God's graces, and that's not the point, but when we speak of the gospel of Christ, we're talking about something that can and should transform someone's

life. That's what we say. But then we take an honest look at our lives of just how big an impact our walk with Jesus actually does make, and we find we're acting as if just a sliver of attention to it is really what Jesus meant when he said "Take up your cross and follow me," at what point do we have to come clean? Is the good news that Jesus is alive permeating every square inch of our lives, into our families, into our work, into our wallets, or do we prefer keep it in a more convenient box? Are we bringing our all, or are we holding back and lying to ourselves and each other in the process?

That's what was at issue in the early church, and that's what was so troubling about Ananias and Sapphira. For the community's own survival, it meant they had to be honest with each other; each had to *know* that the other was all-in, or else it didn't work. That's still true. This church thing, this Jesus thing, this faith thing simply doesn't work if it's a gathering of the halfhearted, and it definitely doesn't work if we lie to ourselves about it.

Now out there right now, one of you, maybe more than one of you, is thinking, "Preacher I can see where you're going with all this. This is about to become a squeeze for more money for the church coffers." And if that's where you are, I get it. I can be a bit cynical myself, and I'd be thinking the same thing.

So if that's where you are today, here's my challenge to you. And if you've been at any of our stewardship gatherings over the past few weeks, you've heard me say something similar. If the only thing holding you back from letting the gospel of Christ impact every facet of your life, your family, your work, and your giving, if the only thing holding you back in particular from embracing the life-giving discipline of giving sacrificially is skepticism about me, then first, let's get together. Would love to talk with you. But I'll go ahead and spoil the surprise, because when we get coffee or lunch, this is the challenge I'll give you. Double what you typically give, and give it to someone else. Don't give it to this church. Give it to another church, another ministry, something in service to God, and then come talk to me in a year. (This is when Robyn and BT are going, "Jay, you've got to stop saying that!") I am so confident of the impact that it will have on your life, recentering your life, in this case starting with your wallet, around the gospel, and that is much more important to me.

Because honestly, are we saying that God needs your money? Did God need Ananias and Sapphira's money? No. Never once in history has there ever been a moment in which God said, "You know, I was going to do an amazing thing, but Jay didn't cough up that extra \$20 when the offering plate come by, so I guess the deal's off." Never happened. But you know what God wants? Your heart. All of it. Because he knows, as I hope you start to feel, that our lives are most in sync, most in harmony, when all of it is centered on him.

I made a bit of a joke out of the closing hymn that's going to be our hymn of commitment in just a few minutes, "Take My Life." But I wonder if we might hear a few of the words that we'll sing. "Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee. Take my moments and my days; Let them flow in ceaseless praise, Let them flow in ceaseless praise." Are these words of half measures? Are these words of a church that's holding back? Are these words of a church that's lying to itself? No. These are words of a place of faith finding joy in giving all unto God.

There's an interesting tidbit, right at the end of this passage today. I try not to end sermons on a bit of Bible trivia, but in this case we might do it. At the end of the passage, after Sapphira dies, v. 11 says, "And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things." You hear that and you might think, "Well, yeah, I'd be scared too." But the fear isn't what I'd like us to focus on. It said, "Great feat seized *the whole church*." In all of the ground we've covered in the Book of Acts so far, it's after *this* happens that, for the first time, the church is actually called the church. I wonder why that is.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.