

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

**Sermon Series:** Disciples, On the GO!  
(Studies of the book of Acts)

### **Faking It**

(Acts 4:32--5:16)

Study #7

#### **Introduction: Mid-course corrections...**

To start off with, I want you to imagine that you are a coach, and you have spent days getting your team ready for “the big game.”

You have watched film of your opponent and you’ve developed a game plan. You know your opponents’ weaknesses and strengths, and your game plan attacks those strengths and exploits those weaknesses.

In the pre-game huddle, you remind your players of the set strategy. You break the huddle and the starting five takes the court.

Midway through the first half, your players are following your plan perfectly. They are doing everything you told them to do - and they are getting demolished. The whole first half is a nightmare.

Every play your guys run fails. Every trip down the court, the other team scores. Finally, mercifully, the buzzer sounds. It’s halftime.

During the halftime break, what do you tell your players? Try harder? Keep to the game plan? Not likely.

If the opposing team successfully blocked your opening strategy, you’ll tell your players to try something different. You improvise. You adapt. You overcome. (Thanks, Marines)

If the first strategy didn’t work - try another. Go small. Slow the pace. Pass more. Double team.

Successful coaches, great business and military leaders - and, it turns out, Satan - all know that there is more than one way to skin a cat. And this morning, the enemy of the church changes his game tactics.

Satan had tried all sorts of tactics to thwart God’s plans.

He tried to do away with Jesus by crucifixion. That appeared to work on Friday and Saturday. But Sunday’s resurrection turned Satan’s victory into a runaway victory for God.

Then, he tried to sideline Peter by tempting him to cowardice. Sure enough, Peter failed, Jesus first restored him (John 21), then the Holy Spirit empowered him for service, (Acts 2) and God won, again.

He tried persecution, orchestrating jail time for Peter and John. But when you’re all in for Jesus, threats of beating and attempts at intimidation just don’t work.

We watched last Sunday as he tried to cripple the church by intimidation, threats, and humiliation. But, the first disciples successfully navigated those ploys. They stood firm. They spoke boldly. They prayed, the Spirit filled them, and they got bolder!

To this point, Jesus’ followers have handled everything that’s been thrown against them. But in Acts 5, we find that the enemy has other, more insidious, tricks up his sleeve.

We come to a passage that begins with the congregation enjoying “*one heart and soul*” community (Acts 4:32) and ends with the whole city of Jerusalem knowing “*great fear*” - the fear of the Lord. (Acts 5:11)

Between these high points, though, we will pass through a valley.

Before we get to the ugliness of the main story Luke fills us in on the general condition of the church. In a word, the church is doing great.

## The Genuine Article (4:32-37)

### Genuine Unity (v. 32a)

***[32a] And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul...***

There were, at this point, many thousands professing faith in Jesus<sup>1</sup> - and there was great unity.

That doesn't mean that everybody knew everybody else. It is impossible to know even a fraction of thousands of people by name, much less intimately. But it is possible, no matter how large the group, to be united.

And the first church's unity revolved around Jesus. They were united in their LOVE for and COMMITMENT to and TRUST in Jesus.

It goes without saying (but I'll say it) that the same holds for us. We here will experience the beauty of unity to the extent that we are each centered on Jesus. When your focus is on Him and my focus is on Him, we become the united church San Antonio needs to see.

This "one heart and soul" unity was not a mushy sentimental thing. It was a fleshed-out unity expressed in tangible love.

### Genuine Generosity (vv. 32b, 34-35)

*Their attitude (v. 32b)*

***[4:32b]...and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.***

The possessions owned by the disciples did not cease to be private property. (That will become clear shortly.)

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 4:4 tells us that the men numbered around five thousand. Obviously, women and children would have made up a big part of the church, and the total number of believers is much more than five thousand.

What changed was their *attitude* toward their goods. Unity expressed itself in the way they kept a loose hand on their possessions. What one person possessed was made available to help needy friends in Jesus. It became common practice for people to place their private wealth at the disposal of the community.<sup>2</sup>

*Their actions (vv. 34-35)*

***[4:34] For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales<sup>3</sup> [35] and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.<sup>4</sup>***

This practice began spontaneously. It was loving. It was fueled by grace. It was effective.<sup>5</sup> And it was POWERFUL.

### Genuine Power (vv. 33, 36-37)

*Resurrection power! (v. 33)*

***[4:33] And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.***

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<sup>2</sup> While this is certainly radical action, it was not a new idea, but a command pulled from the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 15:4, Moses had instructed the people of Israel, "*There shall be no poor among you*" - meaning that the people of means were to help those in need. It also shows that God had (and has!) a special place in His heart for the poor. The early disciples of Jesus were taking God's Word to heart, ensuring that fellow Christ-followers would have his or her basic needs met.

<sup>3</sup> The practice of a common fund, fueled by the proceeds of the sale of the wealthier members' land and possessions, would necessarily eventually deplete the store of wealth. Thus, this had to be, of necessity, a temporary practice. Not because of this practice, but because of famine and persecution, by the time Paul was writing his letters, the Jerusalem church had become a very poor church, needing financial assistance from other churches to survive.

<sup>4</sup> At this early stage, the apostles supervised the distribution of relief funds, a ministry that would become more and more time-consuming as time went on, and which will lead to a crisis recorded in Acts 6.

<sup>5</sup> The Apostle John, who saw the first church in action with his own eyes, wrote, ***[1 John 3:17] But whoever has the world's goods and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? [18] Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.***

When we read the word “**power**” here, our first thought may be of “**signs and wonders**” and “**miracles**” and “**healings**.” (see Acts 2:43; 3:7; 4:30) And all of that probably is a part of what Luke is referring to.

But notice. The mention of the **powerful** witness of the apostles to Jesus’ resurrection follows right after the comment about their eagerness to share material resources with those in need.

I think it makes sense to say that the “**testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus**” has as much to do with generosity in Jesus’ Name as it does with the miraculous.

I’ll even ask you:

What greater witness to the resurrection of Jesus could we possibly give than a crystal clear message - JESUS SAVES! - backed up by putting our money where our mouth is, sharing our material resources when there is need?

There is genuine evidence of the power of a risen Savior when:

- a stingy person starts being generous; and
- people in stressful economic times (like the first church or like now!) start giving out of their reserves to meet needs in Jesus’ Name.

Generous living and giving is **powerful** stuff.<sup>6</sup>

Now we could talk about the need for generosity all day long. But Luke, knowing that a picture is worth thousands of words, offers up Generosity “Exhibit A”.

*Inspirational generosity (vv. 36-37)*

**[4:36] Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), [37] and who owned a tract of land...**

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Wagner, a well-known figure in modern missions, writes, “*Christians should not be poor.*” I am in complete agreement with what Wagner means here. He means that Christians who are poor should be able to expect their wealthy friends in Jesus to help them.

This Joseph<sup>7</sup> will become a major player a bit later in the story of Acts.<sup>8</sup> But even here, so early in the story, he’s so integral to the life of the early church that he’s got a nickname: “**the son of encouragement**” (or, in Hebrew, “**Bar-nabas**”).

Barnabas was a Jew who lived on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. He had been one of those who had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover and Pentecost. He came to faith in Christ on or shortly after the Day of Pentecost.

He was a man of means. He owned property. And while we aren’t told where the property he owned was located (Palestine? Cyprus?), we are told what he did with it.

**[4:37]...[he]sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.**<sup>9</sup>

No one laid a guilt trip on Barnabas or pressured him to do what he did.

Nobody suggested, “*Hey, Mr. Encouragement, it sure would be ENCOURAGING if you sold off some of your land to help the poor!*”

No, the beauty of Barnabas’ act of giving the proceeds of the property to the apostles to do with as they saw fit was that he did it **spontaneously** and **voluntarily** and (note this) **publicly**.

That’s right. Everybody knew **THAT** Barnabas had given and **WHAT** he had given.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> By referring to him as a “Levite”, Luke identifies Joseph/Barnabas as of the priestly line.

<sup>8</sup> Luke does elsewhere what he does here, calling attention to someone in a minor way who will later be high profile. This is the literary technique of *foreshadowing*.

<sup>9</sup> Laying the money at the feet of the apostles was a sign of his submission to their wisdom as to what to do with the money.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said that when it came to giving we were not to let our left hand know what our right hand was doing. (Matthew 6:3) Evidently, when the giver is not giving to get applause from those around him and is wanting nothing more than to bring glory to God and meet needs, it is A-OK to let the word out about who gives what.

This is Barnabas, the generous. He was all about helping the poor. He was motivated by love.

And the story of Barnabas' giving wraps up an altogether encouraging chapter.

More and more people are finding life in Jesus through faith in Jesus. The disrupting overnight jailtime of the apostles was overcome by bold witness and an earth-shaking prayer meeting. And the whole thing resolves into a beautiful scene of loving, genuine community.

We're on guard, though, when we read the first word of Acts 5: *But...* That word puts us on notice. Trouble's coming.

And what follows is ugly. There is no more gut-wrenching story in Acts than what we're about to see. Here, there is lying and deceit and theft and hypocrisy.

But before we even look at the story I at least want to point out something of the way in which the Bible presents its characters.

It's been a long time since the saying, "*The camera doesn't lie*" has been true. Ever since the advent of digital photography (really, long before that), the camera lies all the time. Photoshop can make anybody look like a million bucks.

You can take a picture of someone, airbrush wrinkles, whiten and straighten teeth, fill in eyebrows, fix a nose - and, voila - perfection.

The Bible doesn't do that. The Bible never photoshops. It shows people, warts and all.<sup>11</sup> The more you get to know your Bible, the more impressed you'll become that it doesn't hide the blemishes of its heroes.

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<sup>11</sup> History tells us that the face of the great English statesman, Sir Oliver Cromwell, was disfigured with unsightly warts. An artist who had been commissioned to paint Cromwell's portrait gave an idealized picture of him without any blemishes on his face. After the sitting, Cromwell walked around to see what the artist had put on the canvas. He returned the canvas to the artist with these instructions: "*Take it away, and paint me warts and all.*"

Study any of the Bible's heroes - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon - and you'll learn about their heroic sides and their dark sides. You will learn from them how to walk with God and you'll learn what to avoid.

The Bible is an altogether honest book. It tells it like it is. And, in what follows, we find the Bible hopelessly objective as Luke even included THIS story in his history of the early church.

### **Hypocritical Counterfeits (5:1-10)**

#### **A Husband/Wife Team to Forget (vv. 1-2)**

***[5:1] But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, [2] and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.***

I know. At first blush, it looks like this husband/wife team did what Barnabas did. They both owned property. They both sold property. They both laid money at the feet of the apostles.

But when we look closely we see that there is a very important difference. You see the words "***kept back.***"

In the ancient literature, the word we translate "***kept back***" is a very negative word.<sup>12</sup> It refers to acts of robbery or embezzlement. It describes the misappropriation of funds.

Apparently, Ananias and Sapphira told people - the apostles? the congregation? - that they were going to do what Barnabas did.

They likely took a vow stating that they were going to give the entire proceeds of the sale of their property. But, when it came time to fork over the money, they gave only a portion of the money.

Now, that would have been one thing. It's unfortunate, but it happens that sometimes we aren't able to keep our end of a bargain.

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<sup>12</sup> Nosphizomai (νοσφιζομαι) - in Titus 2:10, Paul urges bondslaves to not "pilfer" from their masters, using this same word.

If things in their situation had changed, maybe they couldn't give what they originally said that could give. This would have involved breaking a vow - a serious matter, but something that could have been dealt with.

What they actually did, though, was far worse. They told the apostles that the amount of money they were giving **WAS** the amount for the entire sale of the property.

So, we're not dealing with a need to re-negotiate a deal, or even with promise-breaking. We're dealing with deceit. They are guilty of dealing with the church hypocritically.

The essence of hypocrisy is pretending that things are different than they really are. Hypocrisy presents a face that is not true.

And Ananias and Sapphira were out to make their gift appear more praiseworthy than it was. They wanted the church to think of them as "that lovely Barnabas-like couple."

They wanted the prestige that came with sacrificial giving without the inconvenience of it. Their motive in giving was not to relieve the hardship of the poor, but to photoshop their reputations.<sup>13</sup>

So, we enter the story right after Ananias had presented his money to the apostles. He lays the money down and then hangs around, eager to hear the praise that will certainly come.

### **Ananias' Bitter Harvest (vv. 3-6)**

*Peter deals with Ananias (v. 3-4)*

**[5:3] But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart<sup>14</sup> to lie to the Holy Spirit<sup>15</sup> and to keep back some of the price of the land?**

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<sup>13</sup> In Ecclesiastes 5, Solomon writes about worship. He says, given where God is ("**for God is in Heaven**") and where we are ("**you are on the earth**") we should let our words in prayer be well-chosen and few AND we should pay whatever we vow to God. Further, it would be better to not vow at all than to vow and not pay what we have vowed to God. Good for us to remember.

**[4] While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."**

Let's notice the key points of Peter's remarks.

First, (and if you're a conspiracy theorist, you're going to love this), this sinful action is the result of teamwork between Ananias and Sapphira and the devil.

The devil found a weakness in the souls of this man and this woman, a chink in their armor, and he exploited it, attacking Ananias and Sapphira at the point of their greatest vulnerability.

But they weren't just duped or tricked. They were active partners in the sin. They knew exactly what they were doing. So, yes, the act was diabolical. But both Satan and the couple are guilty.

Second, Peter affirms that Ananias had full authority over his own possessions.

There was never any compulsion for him to sell the property. Having sold it, there was no rule that said he give away the proceeds of the sale. He would not have been in the wrong if he had kept it all.

And, he could have kept some of the proceeds to himself and laid some of the proceeds at the apostles' feet. That would have been a fine plan - if he had just said, "*I'm only giving a portion.*"

But, having promised to give it all, he should have given it all.

Third, Peter accused Ananias of "*lying to the Holy Spirit*" and "*lying to God.*"

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<sup>14</sup> Most New Testament references to Satan's activity relate to believers rather than to his impact on the unbelieving world. The New Testament teaches that believers can open themselves up to satanic influence through a variety of sins - greed, rebellion, unresolved anger, lack of forgiveness among them.

<sup>15</sup> Ananias' sin of lying to the Holy Spirit should not be equated with the unpardonable sin of Matthew 12. His and Sapphira's salvation is never placed in doubt in this passage.

Now, there are two ways of seeing this.

One way is to say that, yes, Ananias lied to the church. But, since our sins are always ultimately against God, what was worse than lying to brothers and sisters was that he lied to God's Spirit.

But, Luke might be saying something else.

He might be saying that in making the promise to the church, Ananias was making the promise to the Holy Spirit (who indwells all who are a part of the church). In breaking his word to the congregation of believers, he had also broken his word to the Spirit of God.

No matter how you slice it, what Ananias has done is a felony.

And it wasn't a "victimless" crime. This hypocritical action did genuine harm. The poorer believers did not receive the full amount they had been promised. People suffered because of his deceit.

And now, having been dressed down by Peter, the Lord Himself deals with Ananias.

*The Lord deals with Ananias (vv. 5-6)*

***[5:5] And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. [6] The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.***

We don't attribute Ananias' death to Peter's forceful personality, or to the shock to Ananias' system when he recognized his guilt. He was judged by God - and he died.

This is severe judgment, and judging from the reaction then - ***"great fear came over all who hear of it"*** - they were just as shaken by this judgment as we are today. God - who shows Himself to be loving and gracious in Jesus - struck Ananias dead. That is clearly what happened here.

And the story is not over. Besides Satan, there were *two* human actors in this deceitful hypocrisy. His wife, Sapphira, was in on the deal.

But Sapphira had not been there when Ananias presented the money to the apostles, and she doesn't know that she is now a widow.

### **Sapphira's Sin Reaps Death (vv. 7-10)**

*Late to arrive (vv. 7-8a)*

***[5:7] Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.***

Peter and the rest would have had three very sobering hours to reflect, pray, think - knowing that Sapphira would soon show up.

When she arrived, Peter asked her a question. His question was framed so as to give her the chance to come clean.

***[5:8a] And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?"***

I'm sure that the dollar figure Peter suggested was the figure that Ananias, her husband, had given.

*Quick to lie (v. 8b)*

***[5:8b] And she said, "Yes, that was the price."***

She lied, just as her husband had done. And the Apostle Peter instantly took her to task.

*Two lies; two funerals (vv. 9-10)*

***[5:9a] Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test?"***

A child will put his big toe over the line to see what will happen when he disobeys mom and dad.

When that happens, parents need to lovingly convince their child of two things. One, *"We're crazy about you! We love you unconditionally!"* and *"You can't lie. You can't disobey. We won't let you get away with it."*

Ananias and Sapphira weren't convinced that they needed to take God all that seriously. So, they pushed the envelope. They lied. They deceived and played hypocritical roles.

Maybe they wanted to see how far they could go without getting caught, or if caught, how far they could go without getting punished.

First Ananias, and now Sapphira, have gambled and lost.

***[5:9b] "Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." [10] And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.***

We're not surprised that this day's events had a profound impact on those who were aware of what had just happened.

### **The Church Moves Forward (v. 11)**

***[5:11] And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.***

This would be the very healthy "*fear of the Lord*". Reverence and worship and holiness followed the cleansing brought about by the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. And that was followed by another season of great health for the church of Jesus.

The rest of the passage (vv. 12-16) tells us that...  
...the apostles were empowered by God to perform more miracles;  
..."***multitudes of men and women***" were added to the ranks of those who believed;  
...word of what was happening was getting out, so that those from outside Jerusalem were making their way to be healed of diseases and to find deliverance from Satan's power.

A story like the one we have seen this morning invites us to praise God for using anything - even severe judgment of the ugly sin of hypocrisy - to push His purposes in Jesus forward.

But this story also invites us to a time of serious and sober reflection. Our time of reflection will revolve around two questions.

### **Conclusion:**

First, let's ask what might have been going on in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira that prompted them to do what they did?

*What were the conditions that led to the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?*

It was wrong to lie about how much money they gave, to have defrauded the poor, and to have put the Holy Spirit to the test. But, why did they do it?

Try this on for size.

Ananias and Sapphira sinned because they cared too much about what other people thought of them. They were more preoccupied with their reputations than they were with the approval of God or with the welfare of the poor.

That's them. What about us?

When you and I read the account in Acts 5, we may or may not feel the burn of conviction if we are only asking ourselves, "*Have I ever given less than I promised to give? Have I ever lied about how much I actually gave?*"

But the application of this story transcends the exact story we find in Acts 5.

What if each of us asked ourselves, now, "*Do I sometimes allow my interest in a good reputation to prompt me to put a good 'spin' on my actions, or exaggerate my good deeds, when telling a story? Am I willing to 'pad' my good reputation, even if I have to throw someone else under the bus to do it?*"

Around here, that's what we call living with a mask. It's a pretend life, and it's not the authentic life to which Jesus calls us.

Any one of us might fall into the same kinds of sin into which Ananias and Sapphira fell.

To the extent that the Spirit of God uncovers the darkness of hypocrisy in our hearts, to that extent, He is calling us to repent of the desperate love of the approval of our friends.

We are to turn from a love of reputation and ask God to transform us into the real deal - people who have a passion to please Him, people who are hungry to serve others, people who are genuine.

Second, let's explore the reason for the severe judgment that was inflicted on Ananias and Sapphira for their sin.

*Why such a severe punishment?*

I've read a variety of explanations as to why God did what He did, here. Some are more helpful than others.

One explanation for God's severity here, is that God was "*making a point*" at the beginning of the church age. He was teaching His people that sin is no light matter. Consequences can be severe.<sup>16</sup>

This way of explaining what happened in Acts 5 calls on you and me to realize what MIGHT happen if we sin.<sup>17</sup> God reserves the right to judge us severely for sin. (And if that is the point, it does help us understand why more Christians aren't falling over dead today...)

However, that's not the way I see it.

I see what happened in Acts 5 as a living illustration of the truth of something the Apostle Paul would write later, **[Romans 3:23] The wages of sin is death.**

Yes. The wage sin pays is ALWAYS death.

When I sin against love, intimacy dies. When I sin by cheating, trust dies. When I sin by lying, the truth dies.

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira resulted in their physical death, but their physical death was a symbol of the death that had already happened because of their sin.

Their sin of hypocrisy killed the **[Acts 4:32] one heart and soul** community of the church and it killed love for the poor.

Community dies when you or I...

- ...pretend to be doing better than we really are;
- ...put a better spin on our actions than we should;
- ...try to impress others by exaggerating our righteousness; or
- ...act more out of concern for our reputation than for the needs of others.

If you look in the mirror and see hypocrisy or pretense, can you also see that the path you are following is the path to death?

Jesus invites you to choose life! And the path to follow to find that life is the path of repentance. To the extent that you are aware of the sin of hypocrisy, God is calling you to repentance.

Choose openness and transparency. Off with the mask! And watch God transform you AND use you.

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<sup>16</sup> Much as he dealt severely with Achan (Joshua 7), at the beginning of Israel's time in the land of Canaan). As Achan died for taking an article of gold from the defeat of Jericho, so God dealt severely with Ananias and Sapphira to drive home the need, early on, of holiness and obedience. A decent point, but, I believe, not the main point here.

<sup>17</sup> Or even that what happened to them WILL happen to us at a future date (the Judgment Seat of Christ).