

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Jesus' Faithful Witnesses... **...bearing witness to Jesus' life-changing message.**

(Studies in the book of Acts)

Sin's Devastating Wages

(Acts 4:32--5:12)

Study #7

Introduction: Mid-course corrections...

I'll invite you to imagine that you are a basketball coach. You've spent long days getting your team ready for the season's "big game."

You have studied and learned your opponents' weaknesses and strengths. You've developed a game plan designed to exploit their weaknesses and to weaken their strengths.

In the pre-game huddle, you remind your players of the strategy and break the huddle.

The game begins, and by midway through the first half, your players are following your plan perfectly - 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 halftime buzzer sounds.

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

If the other team successfully blocked your opening strategy, you'll tell your players to try something different. You improvise. You adapt. You overcome.

The first strategy didn't work, so try something else. Go small. Slow the pace. Pass more. Double team.

Successful coaches and all leaders know the importance of changing strategies when the current strategy isn't working.

This morning, we'll watch as the enemy of the church - Satan - changes his strategies.

To this point, Satan had tried all kinds of things to thwart God's plans.

He tried crucifixion. That appeared to work on Friday and Saturday. But Sunday's resurrection turned Satan's win into a runaway victory for God.

Then, he tried to permanently sideline Peter by tempting him to cowardice. And he did achieve a temporary win with Peter's three denials. But then Jesus restored Peter (John 21), and, by the Holy Spirit's power, Peter gave a great message on the day of Pentecost, giving God another win.

Satan tried persecution, orchestrating jail time for Peter and John. But the first disciples were all in for Jesus, so jail and threats of beating and attempts at intimidation didn't work. God - 3; Satan - 0.

The enemy then moved the Jewish leaders to try to cripple the church by physical beatings. But the disciples responded with prayer and the Spirit filled them with yet more boldness. Another win.

To this point, Jesus' followers have handled everything that's been thrown against them.

As the story of Acts continues, though, the enemy pulls out another, more insidious strategy, to defeat the Jesus movement.

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 the church passed through a hard valley, and today's main story is ugly. But Luke's report of the church's condition at the beginning is rosy.

Genuineness in Jesus' Church (Acts 4:32-37)

Genuine Unity (4:32a)

[32a] And the congregation¹ of those who believed were of one heart and soul...

There were, at this point, many thousands professing faith in Jesus. And there was great unity.²

The believers were united in their LOVE for and COMMITMENT to and TRUST in Jesus.

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

Genuine Generosity (4:32b, 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.

¹ 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. The total number of believers would by this time be much more than five thousand.

² 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 is, to be united in Jesus.

³ 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 will 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.

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

What changed was their *attitude* toward their possessions. Unity expressed itself in the way they kept a loose hand on their material possessions. What one person possessed was made available to help needy friends in Jesus.³

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 sales⁴ [35] and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each to the extent that any had need.⁵

This practice began spontaneously. It was loving. It was fueled by grace. It was effective.⁶ And it was powerful.

Genuine Power (4:33, 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ The Apostle John, who saw the first church in action with his own eyes, wrote, ***[1 John 3:17] But whoever has worldly goods and sees his brother or sister in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God remain in him? [18] Little children, let's 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**.” (see Acts 2:43; 3:7; 4:30) All of that probably was a part of what Luke referred to.

But notice that the mention of the “**great power**” of the apostles’ witness to Jesus’ resurrection follows right after the comment about sharing material resources.

I think Luke is saying that the “**testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus**” had as much to do with generosity in Jesus’ Name as it does with the miraculous.

There is evidence of the power of a risen Savior when people in stressful economic times (like what was happening in the first church OR like now) give of their means to meet needs in Jesus’ Name.

Now we could talk about the power of 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), [37a] owned a tract of land.

This Joseph⁷ is a major player in the larger story of Acts.⁸ Here, he’s so integral to the life of the early church that the apostles gave him a nickname - “**the son of encouragement**”⁹

Barnabas lived on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus and was one of those who had traveled to Jerusalem to observe Passover and then Pentecost.

Barnabas believed in Jesus on or shortly after the Day of Pentecost AND Barnabas owned property.

Luke doesn’t tell us where the property was located. (Palestine? Cyprus?) But he does tell us what Barnabas did with it.

[4:37b]...So he sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.¹⁰

There was no guilt trip or arm twist pressuring Barnabas to do what he did. No one 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 sale of his property to the apostles to do with as they saw fit was that he did it voluntarily.

Significantly, he also gave publicly. Everybody in the church knew that Barnabas had given and what he had given.¹¹

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

And the story of the generosity of Barnabas, the encourager, wraps up an altogether encouraging chapter.

- More people were finding life in Jesus through faith in Jesus.
- An overnight jail sentence of two apostles turned into bold witness.
- The church was emboldened for witness as an answer to prayer.
- Generosity expressed the love present in the community of faith.

Our celebration is guarded, though, when we read the word that followed the story of generosity.

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

⁸ Luke does elsewhere what he does here, using foreshadowing by calling attention to someone in a minor way who will later be high profile.

⁹ Hebrew, “**Bar-nabas**.”

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

Luke writes, **[5:1] But...** - and that one word puts us on notice. Trouble's coming.

What follows is an ugly story of lying, theft and hypocrisy.

But before we turn to the story, I want to point out something about the way the Bible presents its characters.

It's been a long time since the saying, *"The camera doesn't lie"* has been true.

Old photographs could be "touched up." Digital technology makes it easier for the camera to lie. It's even easier now, with AI. 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, just as they are, warts and all.¹² The more you get to know your Bible, the more impressed you'll be by how it doesn't hide its main actors' blemishes.

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.

We're impressed that Luke included THIS story in his book.

Hypocrisy in Jesus' Church (Acts 5:1-10)

A Hypocritical Husband / Wife Team (5:1-2)

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

If you didn't listen to what I just read carefully, you would think that this husband / wife team did just what Barnabas did.

They both owned property. They both sold property. They both laid money at the apostle's feet to do with as they saw fit.

But on closer examination, we see a very important difference. You see the words **"kept back."**

In ancient literature, the word we translate **"kept back"** is a very negative word. It refers to acts of robbery or embezzlement. It describes the misappropriation of funds.¹³

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

It appears that they made clear 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.

Maybe their situation changed and they couldn't give what they originally said that would 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 canvas. He returned the canvas to the artist with these instructions: *"Take it away and paint me warts and all."*

¹³ See Titus 2:10, where, using the same Greek word is used here, Paul urged bondslaves to not "pilfer" from their masters.

¹² 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 essence of hypocrisy is pretending that things are different than they really are. Hypocrisy presents a face that is not true.

Ananias and Sapphira wanted the church to think of them as *“that lovely couple...they’re just like Barnabas.”*

Their motive in giving was not to relieve the hardship of the poor, but to photoshop their reputations.¹⁴

So, we enter the story right after Ananias had presented his money to the apostles. He laid the money down and then hung around, eager to hear the praise that was certain to come.

Somehow, the Apostle Peter had inside information that all was not on the up-and-up.

The Bitter Fruit of Hypocrisy

Ananias’ bitter harvest (5:3-6)

Peter dealt with Ananias (v. 3-4)

[5:3] But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart¹⁵ to lie to the Holy Spirit¹⁶ and to keep back some of the proceeds of the land?” [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.”

Notice the three key points of Peter’s remarks.

First, the sinful action was the result of teamwork between Ananias and Sapphira and the devil.

This is Satan’s new strategy. He found a weakness in the souls of this man and this woman and he exploited it. He attacked Ananias and Sapphira at the point of their greatest vulnerability.

But it was not that they were duped. They actively participated in the sin. They knew exactly what they were doing. Sure, the act was diabolical. But the husband and the wife were as culpable as Satan was.

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

- There was never any compulsion for him to sell the property.
- Then, having sold it, there was no rule saying that he had to give away the proceeds of the sale. He would not have been in the wrong if he had kept it all.
- Then, Ananias could have kept some of the proceeds for himself. No harm, no foul, 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, Ananias ***“lied to the Holy Spirit...to God”*** (vv. 3, 4)

I think that Luke was saying here that in making the promise to the church, Ananias was making the promise to the Holy Spirit (He dwells in all of those who are a part of the church). In breaking his word to the church, he had broken his word to the Spirit of God.¹⁷

No matter how you slice it, what Ananias did was a felony.

¹⁴ In Ecclesiastes 5, Solomon wrote 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.

¹⁵ 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, including, but not limited to: greed, rebellion, unresolved anger, and lack of forgiveness.

¹⁶ Ananias’ sin of lying to the Holy Spirit should not be equated with the unpardonable sin of Matthew 12. His and Sapphira’s continuing status as children of God is never placed in doubt in this passage.

¹⁷ It is possible that Luke was saying, *“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.”* I prefer to think that his lie to the church WAS a lie to the Holy Spirit.

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 dealt with Ananias.

The Lord dealt with Ananias (vv. 5-6)

[5:5] And as he heard these words, Ananias collapsed and died; and great fear came over all who heard about it. [6] The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.¹⁸

We don't believe that Ananias died due to Peter's forceful personality. He wasn't shocked to death when he recognized his guilt.

No. He was judged by God - and he died.

This is severe judgment, and judging from the reaction - ***"great fear came over all who hear of it"*** - the bystanders were just as shaken by this judgment as would have been and 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 we'll look at this more as we close, but the story isn't over.

There were *two* human actors in this hypocrisy. Ananias' wife, Sapphira, was in on the deal. But Sapphira hadn't been there when Ananias gave the money to the apostles...and she didn't know that she was now a widow.

Sapphira's bitter harvest (5:7-10)

Late to arrive (vv. 7-8a)

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

That's three very sobering hours. Peter and the rest had that much time to reflect, pray, and think, knowing that Sapphira would soon show up.

When she arrived, Peter framed the question he asked her in such a way that she had every chance to come clean.

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

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, for that price."

Just like her husband had done, she lied. Peter 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?"

Sometimes, a child will put his big toe over the obedience line to see what will happen when he disobeys mom or dad.

When the big toe crosses the line, parents need to lovingly convince their child of two things.
One, *"We're crazy about you! We love you unconditionally!"*
Two, *"You can't lie. You can't disobey. We won't let you get away with it. There will be consequences."*

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

¹⁸ In the ancient world, due to decay and the spread of disease, burial was normally taken care of very quickly after a death

Whatever. Neither of them took God all that seriously. So, they crossed the line. They lied. Pretending to be committed disciples, these two children of God revealed that it was all for show.

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 collapsed at his feet and died; and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

Of course, the day’s events made a profound impression on those who were aware of what had just happened.

The Forward March of the Church Continued (v. 11)

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

This “**fear**” was the very healthy “*fear of the Lord.*”

Reverence for God followed the severe judgment of this couple. And that was followed by a season of restored health for Jesus’ church.

The rest of the passage tells us that...
 ...God empowered the apostles to perform more miracles. (vv. 12-13)
 ...“**multitudes of men and women**” believed and were added to the church. (v. 14)
 ...word of what was happening was spreading, prompting people to make their way to Jerusalem be healed of disease and delivered from Satan’s power. (vv. 15-16)

This story invites us to praise God for using anything - even severe judgment - to push His purposes in Jesus forward.

But the story also invites us to personal reflection.

God intends that our time in His Word should lead to reflection that invites the Spirit’s conviction, that will lead to life change.

Our time of reflection revolves around a couple of questions.

Conclusion:

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

When I read the account in Acts 5, it can be helpful for me to reflect on their sin and ask myself, “*Have I ever given less money than I promised I would? Have I ever lied about how much I have given?*”

Those are good, honest questions. The answers to those questions could prompt a turn to more honesty. Maybe even to increased generosity.

But those questions might not invite the Spirit’s search or the Spirit’s conviction to the point of leading me to personal transformation.

A more helpful direction for reflection would be along the lines, “*What was going on in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira that prompted them to do what they did?*”

It seems to me that Luke wants us to ask that question because of the placement of their act of sin immediately after the story of Barnabas’ example of loving generosity.

So, after some reflection, here’s what I think.

Ananias and Sapphira sinned because they cared way too much about other people’s opinions of them. They were more concerned with their reputations than they were with the approval of God OR with the welfare of the poor.

That’s them. What about me?

I get to the soul-convicting point of what we’ve seen today when I ask:
“Do I sometimes / often allow my interest in a good reputation to tempt me to put a good ‘spin’ on my actions, or to exaggerate my good deeds when I’m telling a story?”

This is the essence of hypocrisy.

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

To the extent to which the Spirit of God uncovers hypocrisy in my heart, to that extent, He is calling me to repent of the love of the approval of other people and to live solely for His approval.

Through what we've seen in the Bible today, I believe that God is calling us all to turn away from a love of reputation. He wants us to ask Him to transform us into the real deal - people who actually are passionate to please Him, people who really want to serve others.

Reflection time. Have you been wearing a mask of pretending to gain a reputation that doesn't reflect reality?

If so, it's time to take off the mask. Get real with God and with a few good friends and get started on the life-giving path to change.

Why such a severe punishment?

Second, let's ask, "*Why did God respond to this sin with such severity?*"

There are a variety of explanations out there as to why God did what He did, here. Some are more helpful than others.

Rather than go into any of them, I'll tell you what I believe is going on here in Acts 5.¹⁹

I see what happened in Acts 5 as a living illustration (or "a dying illustration") of the truth of something the Apostle Paul would write in his letter to the Romans, **[Romans 3:23] The wages of sin is death.**

The wages 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 we...

- ...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.
- ...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 or hiding or secret-keeping, 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.

Confess your sin to God. Turn from your sin and walk in integrity and in community.

¹⁹ One of the more popular explanations for God's severity is that God was intent to "*make a point*" to the church at the beginning of the Jesus movement. He was teaching His people that sin is no light matter. Sin can bring severe consequences.

This explanation of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira calls us to realize what MIGHT happen if we sin. God reserves the right to judge us severely for sin. A decent and true point, but not what I think is Luke's point.