

Acts 4:36-5:15: Hypocrisy and Sincerity in God's People

1. **Paradigms:** When Luke says they “kept back” some of the proceeds of their property sale, he uses an obscure term (*nosphizō*) found in the LXX translation of the story of Achan, “who kept some of the booty from the spoils of war that had been devoted to God” (Fernando, 196). Drawing on this parallel, Fernando points out,

At the start of Israel's life in the Promised Land, [God] showed for all time—through the judgment that followed Achan's sin (Josh 7)—what he thinks about deception. At the start of the life of the church, he again showed—by his judgment on Ananias and Sapphira—what he thinks about deception. We may not see such judgment today, but God has told us once and for all what he thinks of such sin. (200)

It is reasonable to assume that Achan was not the last Israelite to pocket the spoils of war, much as Ananias and Sapphira were not the last Christians to misrepresent their giving for the sake of public acclaim.

Acts 5 feels for some like a jarring contrast to the God of grace. How does the parallel with Achan illuminate this? If, as Jesus led the people of God across the metaphorical Jordan, God *hadn't* sent the same message, what would his silence have conveyed?

2. **The bottom line:** Commentators agree that God's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira is intended to send a strong, clear message. What is the message?
 - a) First, **don't put God to the test**, as Israel did at Massah, since “the presence of the Spirit in the church is not without dangers” (see also 1 Cor 11:30). [Kaiser]
 - b) This passage emphasizes “the **reality of the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence in the church**, and the solemn practical implications of that fact. ‘If any man destroyeth the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, and such are ye’ (1 Cor 3:16+).” [Bruce]
 - c) There are three clear judgment miracles in Acts: Ananias and Sapphira; the death of Herod; and the blinding of Bar-Jesus. In each case they are **ignoring or opposing the activity of God** in their midst. [Davids, IVP DLNT&D]
 - d) God is **offended by pretense to piety**. “Left unchecked, it might well multiply. It would certainly place into positions of honor people whose conduct did not deserve it.” [Carson, *For the Love of God*]
 - e) “Luke seems to be underlining **the great evil of sinning against God's people**. Falsehood ruins fellowship.” [Stott]
 - f) While riches in themselves are not evil, **money poses a dangerous temptation to sin**. [David Williams]

3. **Holiness and purity:** Tim Mackie calls the introduction to Acts a “tale of two temples.” In Pentecost, the tongues of flame indicate the presence of the Spirit much like the dwelling of God’s Spirit in his holy temple. “The sudden deaths may also recall the priests who died in God’s presence in Lev 0:1-5” (Keener 205). God shows here that he dwells in the community of believers with no less holy power than in the temple (see also 1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21).

Much as God did not generally strike dead those sinners who entered the temple, he today patiently tolerates hypocrisy, deception, gossip, and all manner of hateful behavior among his people. How would we behave differently if we were able to fully comprehend that God is as holy as he is loving, generous, and patient?

- a) In the OT, holiness is dangerous. Is our experience of church community *safer* for not pursuing holiness?
 - b) Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8). How does a church limit its ability to be used by God when it fails to pursue holiness—and what possibilities does a church open itself to when it earnestly seeks holiness, not in a sense of legalism, but out of a desire to know God and love others better? (Cf. 1 John 3:2-3; 2 Tim 2:21-23.)¹
4. **“Satan has so filled your heart.”** This account presents Satan as a key player, as he is elsewhere in Luke-Acts.² Satan, in Scripture, lies, tempts, and accuses. For example, under Satan’s influence, a healthy believer is tempted to take the first steps of emotional closeness with someone not his or her spouse, believing the lie that the small choice will have a small impact. This leads to an affair, a ruined marriage, and eventually the accusations that the transgressors are unredeemable, beyond God’s love. Satan’s initial small temptation can lead otherwise upright Christians to do things which seem completely out of character. It’s quite possible that those who knew Ananias and Sapphira would have considered this act of public deception out of character.

Think of a fellow believer you have known who was led into sin this way. What might have helped prevent the full development of temptation to lie to sin to accusation?



Fun fact: “Ancient groups that required members to turn over their possessions usually had a waiting period during which one could take one’s property and leave (see the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Pythagoreans).” Regarding those who lied about turning over everything to the community, “The Dead Sea Scrolls excluded such an offender from the communal meal for a year and reduced food rations by one-fourth.” (IVP BBC)

Further fun fact: “Jewish tradition said that when an adulteress drank the bitter waters of the temple (Num 5) she immediately died; other stories are told of rabbis who pronounced judgment or (in later stories) disintegrated foolish pupils with a harsh look” (IVP BBC).

¹ “Luke’s depiction of the sanctity of a church experiencing God’s power contrasts starkly with Western Christendom’s sometimes merely institutional church and its merely routine meetings. The intense presence of God’s Spirit (5:3, 9; cf. 4:31) left no room for nominalism or mere pretense of commitment (cf. 5:13)” (Keener 207).

² Much as Jesus is tested by Satan, “God’s servants face Satan’s activity through disciples (5:3; Luke 22:3), sorcerers and magicians (8:9-11; 13:8-11; 19:13-16), and demons (16:16; cf. 5:16)” (Keener, 204).

Background and Leader's Notes:

Extra questions:

1. What do you find problematic about this passage?
2. Have you ever heard anyone preach on this passage?
3. What was the crime of Ananias and Sapphira?
4. Did Ananias and Sapphira go to hell?
5. Peter's knowledge of their echoes accounts of Jesus himself (Lk 6:8; 9:47; 10:13; 11:17; 21:6-36). This phenomenon is sometimes called a "word of knowledge." <insert question here>