

Bible Study 16 – Acts 5:1-11 – Lying to God!

We pick up where we left off last week. We are at the beginning of chapter 5 and we will focus on verses 1-11. This is a challenging passage that sometimes leaves its readers with as many questions as answers. Often, I have been asked why there was no opportunity for repentance and restoration for Ananias and Sapphira? We are simply not told. What we have is a summation of what took place and so we cannot rule out that opportunity was not given in much the same way as it was for Judas before he chose to go out into the night and betray the Lord Jesus thereby sealing his fate! What we can say is that this grave story teaches us that denial and deception can have serious consequences. Let us turn to the passage...

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part 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 at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." 9 But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet 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. 11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

1. Ananias and Sapphira colluded in deceiving the church: But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

a) Ananias and Sapphira provide us with a stark contrast to Barnabas, the son of encouragement, who in the preceding verses sold property and gave the proceeds to the church via the apostles...

b) Ananias and Sapphira were under no compulsion to give anything to the church. The contributions were voluntary, although I suspect there was a degree of pressure because others were doing so...

c) Ananias and Sapphira nevertheless dishonestly conspired to deceive and defraud the church claiming that they were giving the full proceeds from the sale to the church...

2. Ananias and Sapphira are confronted by Peter on behalf of the church: But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part 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 at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? ...7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much."

a) The Apostle Peter acts on behalf of the church in confronting Ananias and Sapphira in turn. The scriptures teach us that the church from its inception had office holders, a structure, and a disciplinary process.

b) The Apostle Peter asks why Ananias and Sapphira have acted in this way to expose their deception...

c) The Apostle Peter articulates on the heart of the matter. Hence, he asks Ananias why he contrived this deed in his heart. The heart in the Bible speaks of the centrality of our beings and includes the affections, emotions, thinking and will. So, we might conclude thereby that Ananias and Sapphira loved money more than God and were prepared to deceive and in effect defraud (because they claimed all the money raised from the sale was for the church), and the will because they acted on their feelings and thought!

The Apostle Paul was later to write: For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs (1Tim.6:10). The Bible is not saying that money and the material things that it buys are evil in and of themselves but rather when they become an idol and rule our hearts then such things quickly become a root of evil. People then deceive and defraud and are prepared to go to extraordinary lengths for fortune and fame.

3. Ananias and Sapphira had conceitedly and devilishly sought to deceive and deny God: But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ... You have not lied to man but to God.”

a) The Apostle Peter exposes the enormity of their deception which I suspect might appear relatively trivial to most folks today. We live in a secular world here in the West and the church has by and large adopted and absorbed its worldview. ‘Fear God, and keep his commandments’ is not something we often hear. ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning wisdom’ is similarly rarely heard in the mainstream churches. The Bible nevertheless says that God will not be mocked. And that he is our ultimate Judge.

There is a parallel story recorded in chapter 7 of the Old Testament Book of Joshua where Achan similarly defied and sought to defraud God at the outset of Israel’s (the church in the Old Testament period) new life in the Promised Land.

God calls his people to a life of integrity, sincerity, and love, as a beacon of light and life to the world. And while he is infinitely gracious and merciful it is nevertheless undeniable that he is also infinitely wise and just. Moreover, it is a truism that we bring much mayhem and misery upon ourselves and others when we defy and deny him in breaking his Law of Love. Sin the Bible teaches damages not only our relationship with God but also with others. We will not be free of it this side of glory and therefore faith and repentance ought to be a way of life for the Christian, but it is important to recognise how an individual’s sin impacts the life of others. A little leaven leavens the whole lump says the Bible! And I think this is why Peter was quick to publicly expose Ananias and Sapphira’s duplicity.

b) The Apostle Peter exposes the evil behind their deception: Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ... You have not lied to man but to God.” Therefore, Peter states that it is that evil and malevolent spirit, known as the Tempter, that has filled Ananias (and Sapphira’s) heart to deceive and defraud. Just like he did Judas Iscariot to betray the Lord Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

c) The Apostle Peter exposes the enmity of their action not so much against the church but against God.

The church is the dwelling place of God. The Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the church to empower and equip her for faithfulness and fruitfulness in her worship, work, and witness. What hope for the church and those she is called to bring good news to if she is no different to the fallen world around her?

4. Ananias and Sapphira’s con cost them their lives: 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. 7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” 9 But Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?”

Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet 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. 11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

a) The Bible teaches that the wages of sin is death and that is surely exemplified for us in the example of Ananias and Sapphira. Now, let us note that neither the Apostle Peter, nor the church he represents, condemn the couple to death. That is not in the church’s power, thankfully. The church’s highest censure is excommunication when someone found guilty of obvious heresy or wrong-doing and they refuse to repent. Their membership of the church is revoked. In other words, they are put out. Peter here only exposes Ananias and Sapphira’s deceit.

b) Also, it is worth noting that it is nowhere explicitly stated that God condemned them to death. That said, I think that is implied in the text, especially by the hurried nature of their non-ceremonial burials! However, one cannot rule out the possibility that they died due to the exposure of their deception and their overwhelming sense of guilt!

That said, we are expressly told in the Letter of James that There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy.

And the Apostle Paul writes: For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil (2Cor.5:10).

c) Finally, we note the impact that Ananias and Sapphira’s deception and resulting deaths had on the church and those she witnessed to: And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

As the wise man says in the Book of Proverbs: The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Pro.9:10).

Questions

1) What emphasis do you think should the ‘fear of the LORD’ have in the Christian life and witness? What does the phrase mean?

2) How do we show our love for God?

3) How important is the church in God’s plan and purpose for humanity?

It was Cyprian that said, we cannot have God for our Father if we do not have the church for our mother! Why?