

**Great Fear Siezed the Whole Church - Acts 5:1-11**  
**Argyle – 7/16/17 – Studies in Acts**

**Introduction to Worship**

How important is the church to you? You can think about that question in terms of this local church, or in terms of the capital “C” church. This morning’s Scripture passage forces us to ask that question. So, how important is the church to you?

**Introduction to Scripture**

Last week we had a couple of power surges that played havoc with our audio and video system. Kudos to our tech crew for minimizing the distractions of those surges. One of the things we missed when the projectors shut down was Bryan’s picture of dogs playing poker. (Picture) So, here it is. Do you remember the point he was making with it? If not, ask him after worship.

Today we are going to look at the account of Ananias and Sapphira. I have to admit that this is one of those passages most pastors, myself included, are hesitant to preach on. If this had been 20 years ago, I probably would have picked a different passage from this week’s *Discovery* readings to preach on. One commentator wrote, “The sobering account of Ananias and Sapphira strikes a sour note in Luke’s otherwise upbeat account of the church’s earliest days.” Another wrote, “Probably no account in Acts has provoked more wrath from critics than this one has.” Still another wrote, “Many readers of this story are offended by what they regarded as the severity of God’s

judgment.” With those glowing recommendations, let’s take a look at Acts 5:1-11.

(Read)

### Bible Study Tool

Acts 5 begins, “Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property.” The word “also” alerts us to look at what happened before this, because there is apparently a connection. This is an example of what Bryan talked about last week, the importance of understanding the context of a passage when we are studying the Bible. The story of Ananias and Sapphira doesn’t really make sense if you don’t know what happened just before this.

At the end of Acts 4 is a summary of how united and generous the early church was. Luke concluded this section with an example of this generosity in action. He wrote, “<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.” This was the context for what Luke wrote next about Ananias and Sapphira. “Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet.” Notice the parallel language in the two accounts. They both sold property. They both brought money and put it at the apostles’ feet. It’s almost as if Luke is giving us another example of generosity in the early church. But almost misses the mark by a lot. So, the immediate context can help us understand the meaning of a passage.

It is, also, helpful to read a passage in the context of the larger Biblical story. For instance, we read in John 10 Jesus' claim to be "the good shepherd." We ask ourselves, "Where else does it use shepherd language in the Bible?" Many of us would think of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd." If we wanted to explore this more, we could go to a website like [blueletterbible.org](http://blueletterbible.org) and type in the word "shepherd." (Picture) We would come up with lots of verses about shepherds, including verses that talk about God shepherding his people. So, when Jesus claimed to be the "good shepherd," it was in the context of what the rest of the Bible said about shepherding.

If you have a reasonable working knowledge of the Bible, when you read the story of Ananias and Sapphira this week you might have thought this story sounded familiar. In the words of Yogi Berra, "It's déjà vu all over again." There is a story in Joshua 7 about a man named Achan that is similar to this one in Acts 5. Achan took some things that belonged to God, lied about it and at God's command he was stoned to death. In fact the word Luke used in Acts 5:2 to describe Ananias' sin is the same word that is used of Achan's sin. In the New International Version it is translated as "held back" in that Ananias and Sapphira held back some of the money they made on the sale of the property. Literally it means "misappropriated" and elsewhere is translated as "to steal."

Reading Acts 5 in light of the incident with Achan helps us understand better what is going on here. When studying a passage of Scripture, it helps to consider both its immediate context and the context of the larger Biblical story.

### **Introduction**

Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of land and gave a portion of the proceeds to the church. However, they lied about what they had done, instead giving the impression that they had given the whole amount of the sale to the church just like Barnabas. As a result they were both struck dead and the whole church was seized with great fear.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira was filled with warnings to the church in their day and ought to warn us today. Like most warnings, they are given as acts of mercy. When the weather forecaster warns us to take cover because of an impending storm, that is an act of mercy. When the road sign warns us to slow down because of road construction, that is an act of mercy. When the warning on the side of a product tells us how to handle it safely, that is an act of mercy. So, hear these five warnings from this account as acts of God's mercy toward you. I will comment on some of these warnings in more detail than others.

### **Warning of the Inevitability of God's Judgment**

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a warning of the inevitability of God's judgment. This is the thing that really jumps out to us in this passage. Most of us are aware that God judges people for their sin and apart from being forgiven and reconciled

to God through faith in Jesus' death, people will ultimately face God's judgment. But that is way ahead in the future. And as a result, we are likely to forget about or discount God's judgment. But right here in the middle of a wonderful story about the growth of the early church is an unsettling description of God's judgment.

What did Ananias and Sapphira do that caused such an immediate response from God? On the one hand what they did is not any worse than what most of us have done in our lives. They stole some money and lied about it. That's wrong, but the severity of God's judgment surprises us. The issue here appears to be timing. This is where the account of Achan's sin is instructive. He, too, stole some things, lied about it and was immediately judged by God. Achan committed his sin in the early days of the conquest of the Promised Land. Ananias and Sapphira committed their sins in the early days of the church. Most commentators identify this timing as the key to understanding God's immediately judgment since they are not the last people to have stolen from or lied to the church. But they did it when God was doing something new in his people. The integrity of the new work was fragile and needed to be reinforced.

It is like the story that has been in the news this past week about the man who was arrested for stealing money from a cancer charity. He put out collection jars in businesses all over the area, collecting tens of thousands of dollars, but he didn't send the money to the charity. Those kinds of events jeopardize the future of charities, so it is important that there be a severe penalty.

God's judgment is rarely immediate, but that shouldn't lull anyone into a false sense of security. As Peter wrote, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."(II Peter 3:9) The story of Ananias and Sapphira is warning of the inevitability of God's judgment.

### **Warning of the Reality of Spiritual Warfare**

Second, the story of Ananias and Sapphira is a warning of the reality of spiritual warfare. Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?" It is significant that Peter sees behind Ananias' actions, the influence of Satan.

As you have heard me say on many occasions, as Christians we are fighting three enemies – the world, the flesh and the devil. The influence of the sinful world is against us. The influence of our own sinful natures is against us. And the influence of Satan is against us. The Apostle Paul warned the Ephesians to put on the full armor of God so that we can take our stand against the devil's schemes.

We are daily engaged in a spiritual battle that requires us to use the weapons of God's word, prayer, righteous living, faith, integrity, the gospel and confidence in our salvation. If we don't recognize the reality of spiritual warfare, we will be unprepared for the battle.

## **Warning About the Seriousness of Sin**

A third warning we see in this passage is a warning about the seriousness of sin. Ananias and Sapphira died because they stole some money and lied about it. You might object that the money was theirs and that although they lied about their donation, they didn't really steal the money. But when they communicated that they were giving the entire proceeds of the sale to the church, that money became God's. That is why Luke used a word that means "misappropriate" or "steal" to describe what they did.

If I were to ask this morning if anyone here had ever stolen something or lied, I am pretty sure that my hand would not be the only one that would be raised. We are sinners. We may be forgiven and redeemed sinners through our faith in Jesus Christ, but we are still sinners. We want to be careful that we never develop a casual attitude toward our sin. We want to be grieved by our sin and repent of our sin and be motivated to accept the Spirit's help in removing sin from our lives.

Peter gave Sapphira an opportunity to repent of her sin and she ignored it. When the Spirit makes you aware of sin in your life, don't delay repenting of it. If you are a believer, it is not an issue of forgiveness, but of fellowship. You are already forgiven for all of your sins through faith in Christ, but your sin is a hindrance in your fellowship with God. Furthermore, it is a hindrance in your spiritual growth and in your usefulness in kingdom work.

## **Warning About Your Responsibilities as a Spouse**

Fourth, this story is a warning about your responsibilities as a spouse. Here is another Bible study tip for you. On Tuesday, I was listening to this passage on a CD as I was driving in my car. The words, “with his wife’s full knowledge” jumped out to me in a way they hadn’t when I had read this passage earlier. Sometimes when we listen, we will hear things in a passage that we don’t see when we read it. Until that point, I hadn’t recognized the significance of Sapphira’s cooperation with Ananias in his sin.

In Genesis 2 we read that after giving instructions to Adam on how to live in the Garden of Eden, God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” on that it was not good for him to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18) Adam needed help in obeying God’s instructions, so God created Eve and the institution of marriage. Richard Lovelace says that the main purpose of marriage is our sanctification, but we sadly fail to realize this and often resist our spouse’s attempts of help us become more godly. Gary Thomas has subtitled his great book *Sacred Marriage*, “What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?”

Ananias should have never drawn his wife into his sin and as soon as she became aware of his plans, she should have confronted him, not consented to join him.

## **Warning About the Value God Places on the Church**

The last warning I want to point out from the story of Ananias and Sapphira is the warning about the value God places on the church. If you had asked Ananias who he had lied to, he would have said “Peter and the other leaders of the church.”

But Peter said to him, “You have not lied to men but to God.” (Acts 5:4). If you had asked Sapphira who she had deceived she, too, would have said “the leaders of the church.” But Peter said to her, “How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?”

God so closely identifies with the church, that he sees how we treat the church as an expression of how we treat him. So, to give to the church is to give to God; to serve the church is to serve God; and to lie to the church is to lie to God.

Argyle Presbyterian Church is a human institution with all of the problems and challenges of any human institution, but we are also a divine institution which God has created and set apart to be his instrument in this area. We want to make sure that we share God’s high opinion of his church.

### **Conclusion**

Several years ago part of County Route 47 washed out during a heavy rainstorm creating a 10 foot deep and 15 feet wide gully in the road. The town highway crew put up flashing traffic barrier and a sign warning that the road was closed. Late that night the fire company was called to a motor vehicle accident in that vicinity. The dispatcher informed us that there was a vehicle down an embankment. Sure enough, when we arrived there was a man looking at an overturned pick-up truck at the bottom of that gully in the road.

The man turned out to be the driver. He was not seriously hurt. We asked him what had happened. Well he had come to the place the road had been blocked off and driven around that barrier and wound up in the gully. We asked him why he had

ignored the warning the highway crew had placed in the road. He explained that the sign said “Road Closed – Bridge Out Ahead” and he knew that there was no bridge on that road so he assumed it was okay to go around the flashing barriers. The highway crew had closed several roads that night and that was the only sign available. The intent was pretty clear.

The warnings in this passage about the inevitability of judgment, the reality of spiritual warfare, the seriousness of sin, the responsibilities we have as a spouses and the value that God places on the church are here to protect us. God wants us to live the full, whole and healthy lives that he created us for. Like the man in the truck, we sometimes think we know better and are tempted to avoid God’s warnings. I encourage you to remember the foolishness and arrogance of that man when you encounter any of God’s warnings.