

The Bible deals with relationships, our relationship with God and with each other. There have also been some famous couples in the Bible: Ahab and Jezebel: They lived and died by the sword. Ruth and Boaz who married and lived happily ever after. There was David and Bathsheba who loved and lost. Of course; Mary and Joseph who trusted and obeyed. But perhaps one of the most notorious couples in the Bible is Ananias and Sapphira. They lied to God and died!

The first four chapters of the book of Acts records the story of the church these chapters can be summarized in four words: repentance, regeneration, revival and rejoicing. Then in chapter 5 we are introduced to a little word: *But!* The first four chapters of Acts represent life on the spiritual mountaintop but in chapter five the church comes crashing down into a spiritual valley. With the word *but* we see hypocrisy, thievery and trickery. In the first four chapters of Acts, the church was growing and faithful to God. God had brought life through the Holy Spirit to the church and now Satan was now trying to fight back by corrupting the church from within.

I thank God that he doesn't strike us dead when we tell a lie because there may not be many here this morning, and that includes me! God struck Ananias and Sapphira dead because He wanted to teach the church both then and now, an important lesson about hypocrisy and deceit, and lying to the Holy Spirit. To put this story in context, we go back to the last two verses of chapter 4: *And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the Apostles feet.* Barnabas had sold some property and he gave the money to the work of God. There is lesson here on giving from Barnabas.

He was neither arrogant in his giving, nor was he ashamed of his giving. His giving was done with a pure heart and it encouraged others to give. Barnabas didn't give so he could to give, his attitude was pure and it encouraged others. Ananias and Sapphira had seen what Barnabas had done, and they were encouraged to make a gift as well. Giving does encourage giving. When we see others give sincerely and selflessly it motivates us to want to give. But the giving of Barnabas was totally different from the giving of Ananias and Sapphira because they were motivated by pride!

They too sold some property and brought a portion of their money to the church, but here is where the similarity stops and the difference begins. Unlike Barnabas; Ananias and Sapphira wanted people to praise them for what they had given, and they wanted the approval of men rather than the acclaim of God. They wanted people to think they had given all of the proceeds of the sale when they had only given part of it. *A man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, and brought a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.* (v1-2) y

Their main concern was their reputation and not the church's wellbeing. They wanted the same reputation Barnabas had but they lacked his character. ***There's a difference between reputation and character? Reputation is what others say we are and character is who God knows we are.*** The root of Ananias and Sapphira's sin was pride; but the fruit of their sin was pretence. The sin was not in the giving, it was in the lying. When they sold this property, they didn't have to give all the money. They weren't under obligation to give any money because no promises or pledges had been made. Verse 3 & 4: *But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.* Their problem was they said they gave something, that they didn't give.

The Greek word for *keep back* means to *steal, to misappropriate, to embezzle*. Ananias and Sapphira made a promise they didn't keep and ***the Bible says: It's better not to make a vow than to make a vow and not keep it.*** We can fool the people with lies and dishonesty but we can't fool God for He knows our hearts, our motives and our lies!

Ananias and Sapphira thought they had committed the fool-proof sin and they would have gotten away with it but for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit exposed them by giving Peter the gift of discernment. Satan had infiltrated the believers through Ananias' pride, and pride will bring our downfall every time. Satan used this couple and convinced them they could get away with their deception. Instead of earning God's blessing, they earned Satan's affirmation when they allowed themselves to be used by him. God despises deceit and so God struck down Ananias and Sapphira. You may think that God was a bit harsh in this punishment just for telling a lie; the death penalty for one lie! But they had lied to God and their lies risked bringing the early church into disrepute. God had to take drastic action for they had tried to fool God.

Ananias and Sapphira were so foolish in their sin. When they first discussed their deceit, the Holy Spirit was there. When the land was put up for sale, the Holy Spirit was there. When the sale was agreed and the money changed hands, He was there. God knew how much they put in their pocket, and He knew how much they put in the bank. But to add insult to injury, they wilfully tried to lie to God when they should have been building His church! Satan will try anything to deceive us but God is in control. If we ignore the Holy Spirit warning us of sin in our own hearts, the Holy Spirit will warn someone else about what we're about to do.

I am sure that when Ananias went to church that day, he thought he would be treated with great respect and be praised by the fellowship. But the Holy Spirit had been working in Peter's heart and he knew about the deception.

God made an example of Ananias to encourage the other believers to remain faithful. The last words Ananias heard were *you have not lied to men but to God*, and then *Ananias, hearing these words, fell and breathed his last. So, great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.* (v.5 & 6) Then in v7: *Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.* It appears that Sapphira didn't go to church, maybe she was out spending the money they'd kept back!

When she appears, God through Peter; gives her a chance to tell the truth but she too maintained the lie. *Peter asked: Was this the full amount you and your husband received for your property? Yes, she answered, the full amount. Peter said to her; Why did you and your husband decide to put the Lord's Spirit to the test? The men who buried your husband are now at the door and they will carry you out too! At once, she fell down at his feet and died. The young men carried her out and buried her beside her husband. The whole church and all the others who heard of this were terrified.* (v8 & 10)

This couple had paid the price for the pride and selfishness. The story of Ananias and Sapphira illustrates not only the seriousness of sin in the life of the church, but it illustrates the seriousness of God's judgment. It's tempting to only focus on the loving, gracious and forgiving God. And we tend to think of the wrathful God being confined to the OT, but here at the beginning of the church God is demonstrating that He will not be disobeyed. Yes, those who love Christ will be saved but that doesn't mean we are free from judgement. Each of us will have to account for our conduct as God's disciples on judgement day. ***Although Christ has atoned for our sin, we are still subject to God's judgement.*** The story of Ananias and Sapphira is not some legalistic OT warning; this story takes place in the Christian church and it's an illustration that God disciplines his children!

If we are sitting here thinking: *I've lied to God*, then take this opportunity to ask forgiveness because God will not stand for rebellion in His church. Some have been disturbed by some decisions taken in the Church of Scotland but don't let these decisions affect your faith because God is our final judge. Through the Holy Spirit, God empowers his church. He builds faith in His disciples and He builds his church. But that same Holy Spirit guards the purity of the church. In the early church of The Acts, the Holy Spirit corrected rebellion, and continued the growth of the early church.

*The whole church and all the others who heard of this were terrified. All the believers met together in Solomon's Porch. Nobody outside the group dared to join them, even though the people spoke highly of them. But more and more people were added to the group; a crowd of men and women who believed in the Lord.* (verses 10 to 13). After God had punished Ananias and Sapphira, some people were scared to join the church but still others joined them and the church grew. This early church feared God and fear of the Lord is something we have to rediscover as a church. This fear is not the fear we may have for a bully or a wild dog. This fear is more of an expression of respect and an acknowledgement of God's awesome power. This fear is measured with the love that a child may have for a parent.

To summarize: The story of Ananias and Sapphira teaches us three lessons: The first lesson is this: ***Honesty with God is vital. We cannot lie to God and get away with it.*** . Secondly: ***Hypocrisy will ultimately be exposed and ultimately be expelled, and God hates hypocrisy.*** Third and last: ***When dealing with God, our best policy is humility.*** Our church is far from perfect, but then we're far from perfect ourselves and that's why Christ died for us.

A minister visited a hard-hearted man to discuss bringing him to faith and into church. The man just sat there expressionless, making absolutely no response.

He listened as the minister presented the gospel, then thinking he would brush the minister off, he said: *Well preacher, I hear you have a lot of sinners in your church.* The minister replied: *You're right, our church is full of sinners.* Then he paused and put his hand on the man's shoulders and said: *But there's always room for one more.*

The fact is that we're all far from perfect. No point in lying about that but thank God, Jesus not only died for Peter, James, and John, he died also for Ananias and Sapphira. And He died for you and I. Praise the Lord, **Amen.**

(1972 words)