

THE HOLY AND THE HYPOCRITES

Acts 4:32 - 5:11

It was an exciting time in the Jerusalem Church. The excitement of the Pentecost Experience was at an all-time high. Opposition was growing against the infant church, but it was neither organized or persistent enough to quench the fire of the new believers. Instead of putting out the spark, those initial persecutions only served to fan the flames of faith.

Acts 3-6 relate a series of problems which struck at the church from both within and without.

Chapter	3:1 - 4:22	5:1-16	5:17-42	6:1-7
Distress in the Church	External Problem	Internal Problem	External Problem	Internal Problem
	Peter & John ○ Arrested ○ Tried ○ Released	Sin within the Church	Apostles ○ Jailed ○ Tried ○ Released	Schism & Complaint
Growth in the Church	Number of believers rises to 5,000	Fear of the Lord	Disciples increase in numbers	Disciples increase & Priests converted

There is a principle here. It is that problems are often a prequel to progress. Are you having problems in your life? Maybe your job isn't doing too well. Or your home life isn't what you wish it was. Have you been wearing out the pencil before the eraser? Cheer up! It could be that the Lord is getting ready for something wonderful.

AN ABUNDANT SHARING

The boldness of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin had a vital effect upon the members of the Jerusalem church. Acts 4:4 tells us that the number of men increased to 5000. The numbers seem to have increased to the point where they were no longer counting the

women and children.

1. The Unity of the Church.

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. (Acts 4:32).

None of the divisions which were to characterize the later church had taken place yet. If you want to see how quickly this changes, read the Corinthian epistles.

The phrase "common property" is translated from the single Greek word κοινον, describing "that which is shared."

The church is a body. A body is only healthy as long as it remains unified. If my nose were to take off in one direction and my feet in another and my mouth went on strike while my hands wandered into a corner to sulk, what would happen to my body? It would look ridiculous for a while and then it would begin to die. That is what happens when there is no unity within the body of Christ. Many of our Christian denominations contain only the rotting corpses of what were once real bodies.

The way in which this body life was manifested was in their sharing of their possessions to meet common needs.

Not one of them claimed that ANYTHING belonging to him was his own...

↔
But

ALL THINGS were common property to them

This passage has been described as a Christian communism. But that isn't exactly correct. This was really Christian giving.

Communism is a system of economics that gives the state the power to dispense all resources to the individual. In theory, everyone works and then everyone enjoys the equal fruits of those labors. This isn't what happened here. This wasn't a case of everyone pooling their wealth and their possessions so that all could enjoy the same level of economic equality as they depended upon the organization to fill their needs.

Instead, this was a case of people giving what they had to meet the needs of others

and then depending upon the Lord to meet their own needs.

Communism says, “We will all work together to put a shirt on everyone’s back.” Christianity says, “Take the shirt off your own back and give it to your neighbor who has none and then depend upon the Lord to provide your needs.”

The basis of such a Christian economic is that everything belongs to the Lord in the first place. I would suggest that this basic principle should not be absent from the church today. Our priorities ought to be a mirror of the priorities of that day.

2. The Power of the Church.

And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33).

The word “testimony” is μαρτυριον. It is the same word that Jesus used in Acts 1:8 when He said that the apostles would be WITNESSES. This was a fulfillment of that prophecy. Jesus said that they would be witnesses following the receiving of the power of the Spirit. And now it was happening.

This verse seems to be sandwiched in between verses 32 and 34. The verse before is talking about the finances of the early church. The verse following will also talk about meeting the needs within the early church.

Verse 32	Verse 33	Verse 34
<i>All things were common property</i>	<i>The apostles were giving testimony... and abundant grace was upon them all</i>	<i>There was not a needy person... they would be distributed to each as any had need</i>

Did Luke need some filler material to separate verse 32 from verse 34? Is this just a one-verse commercial and then back to our regular programming? No, this is here for a reason.

I want to suggest that the power of the witness of the apostles stemmed from the fact that their doctrinal belief produced a corresponding reality in their lives. James would have put it this way, you could see their faith by looking at their works.

There is a principle here. The world will never listen to the reality of what we say

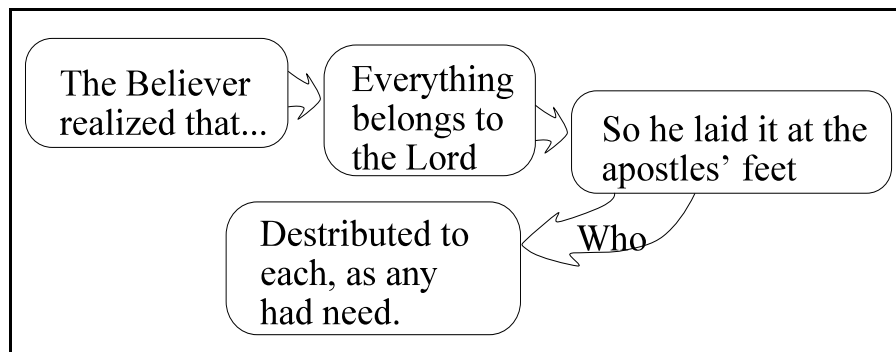
until it begins to see the reality of what we do.

3. The Grace of the Church.

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 sales ³⁵ and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:34-35).

In Acts 4:29-30, the church had prayed for a boldness in their profession of the gospel, and God answered their prayer through the pouring out of His Spirit. As we come to this passage, God is still answering their prayer, giving them a boldness with regard to their possessions.

Notice that this giving was directed toward needs. This was not merely a fund-raising drive. They were not trying to build a bigger building or to fund a larger television station. They were in the business of meeting needs.



There were no gimmicks or campaigns. You don't need such things when the Lord is there. When the Holy Spirit is working, you don't need a substitute.

AN ADMIRABLE EXAMPLE

Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), ³⁷ and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:36-37).

This is the first mention of a man who will become a familiar figure in the story of the

early church. His name is Joseph. It is a Hebrew name. It was a common name among the Jews. Though he was born in Cyprus, he had a family here in Jerusalem. We will learn that his cousin, John Mark, lived here.

This man is from the tribe of Levi. The Levites had a ministry of service to the Temple. Perhaps it was while he was serving in the temple that Joseph heard the message of the Gospel - that Jesus died for sins and was buried and that He rose again on the third day.

As a new Christian, Joseph was given a nickname from the apostles. You know about nicknames. They are names given to people that emphasize a certain characteristic about that person. Joseph's nickname was a Hebrew name. It was made up of two Hebrew words:

- a. Bar (בַּר) is the Hebrew word for "Son."
- b. Nebu'ah (נְבוֹאָה) is the word for "prophecy."

We know him as Barnabas. He was called "son of prophecy" or as Luke explains, "Son of Encouragement." Why was he called this? Because he had a ministry of encouragement. He encouraged the new church at Antioch. He encouraged Paul as a brand new believer. He encouraged his cousin John Mark after his failure in the First Missionary Journey.

If your friends or family were to give you a nickname, what would it be? Would it be a nickname for which you would be proud? For what do people know you? We do not know what caused people to give Barnabas this nickname. Perhaps it was because of the love-gift which he gave to the church.

Now Joseph... who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (4:36-37).

This was a love-gift. It was not mandated by the church. It was freely given. This gift was brought to the apostles so that they might dispense it as needed. Later it would be the deacons who would have the responsibility of dispensing such gifts.

AN ABOMINABLE HYPOCRISY

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full

knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 5:1-2).

I want you to know that if I had been writing the book of Acts, I wouldn't have included this story. It is a story that makes me uncomfortable. Up to this point, the church had been doing so well. The believers were persevering, in spite of the growing opposition to their message. They were praying together and eating together and sharing in personal needs together. It was the kind of idealistic setting of which I have always dreamed of being a part. Why did Luke have to go and mess it up by telling us this morbid story? Why is this passage so important as to be included in the Word of God? Because it's true.

The name "Ananias" means "God is gracious" (Hebrew). The name "Sapphira" is Aramaic for "beautiful."

The Bible doesn't paint a picture of the world as seen through rose-colored glasses. It presents life the way it really is.

I remember once my high school-aged daughter coming to me with questions after she had read an agnostic's critique of the Bible. His approach had been to go to some of the lesser-known narratives that describe God's people committing adultery and murder, exhibiting cowardice and showing a disregard for their families. Then he turned up his nose and proclaimed, "If that is what God is like, then I'll take the devil!"

Sky asked me, "Does the Bible really contain those things?" I answered, "Yes it does. In fact, it contains a lot worse than that." And I took the time to show her some of the gritty stories within the Bible. I didn't do that to shock her. It did it to show her that the Bible is real life. It describes real people in real situations and it doesn't pull any punches in showing real sin.

I think that it is unfortunate that we have gotten into the habit of treating the Bible as though it were a situation comedy. You are familiar with those half-hour television shows where, no matter what is the problem, it is resolved by the end of the show. The Bible is not a situation comedy. Not all of the problems have a "quick fix" to them. Sometimes the "fix" is a painful process. And this is one of those times.

1. The story of Ananias and Sapphira is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In each case...
 - The people of God were experiencing victory.
 - Greed caused the rebellious to "keep back" a part of the spoils. The Greek phrase in Joshua 7:1 of the Septuagint is identical to that which Luke uses

here in Acts.

- The trespass involved the keeping of that which had been declared to be devoted to the Lord.
- The required punishment was the death of the offender.

I would suggest that this comparison is deliberate. You are supposed to read this story and you are supposed to be reminded of the Old Testament story of Achan and you are supposed to realize that the God of the New Testament is the same who is the God of the Old Testament and that He is not to be taken lightly.

2. Contrast with Barnabas.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property... (Acts 5:1).

Notice how this section begins. It begins with the conjunction “but” (δε). This indicates a contrast with the preceding passage. The contrast is between Ananias and Sapphira over against Barnabas.

Barnabas	Ananias and Sapphira
Owned a piece of property.	Owned a piece of property.
Sold it and gave all of the proceeds to the church.	Sold it and pretended to give all of the proceeds to the church.
His act showed a desire to serve the Lord and His church.	Their act showed their desire for people to think highly of them.
His sacrifice brought glory and honor to the Lord.	Their hypocrisy was designed to bring honor to themselves.
His was an act of worship.	Theirs was a lie to the Holy Spirit.
He became a leader in the church and a companion of the Apostle Paul.	They were struck dead.

In both cases, the result was that God was glorified. God was glorified in the gift of Barnabas. And God was glorified by the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira.

3. The Sin.

Ananias...kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 5:1-2).

I can imagine how this came about. Perhaps Sapphira hears at the woman's prayer breakfast about the gift that Barnabas had given. She comes home and tells her husband the news. He says, "You know, we have that piece of property out in the country. We don't use it much and it would be nice to give it to the church."

They go to their real estate agent and list it with him and within a few weeks he calls them with a prospective buyer. The client is wealthy and eager to buy and he offers them a lot more money than they were counting on.

"Wow! Look at all of this money!" they exclaim. And then they begin to think of themselves. "You know, it would be nice to put some of this away for a rainy day. We could finance a weekend away in Jericho or maybe even get a time-share condo in Caesarea."

And so, they decide to give only a portion of their profits to the church. However, a problem arises. They reason that they might look bad if people compare their gift to that given by Barnabas. After all, he did not hold back any of the funds. People might think that they are cheap. Ananias might not be called to lead in prayer anymore and Sapphira might be ostracized in the Woman's Prayer Group.

"It's no business of theirs if we make some profit through good business! After all, who will know the difference? It is only a little white lie - a victimless crime and it can't hurt anyone."

AN AWESOME ADMONITION

3 *But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price 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."*

5 *And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it.*

6 *The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. (Acts 5:3-6).*

The sin of Ananias is confronted by Peter. This confrontation is both immediate and public.

1. Sin Uncovered.

Peter confronts Ananias with his sin. We do not know how Peter knew about it. He may have known through perfectly natural means. Or the Lord might have revealed it to him. The point is that he sin was revealed.

Sin has a way of doing that. The thing that you thought you did when no one was looking has a tendency of coming back at you at the most unexpected times.

Moses found that out. He thought that no one had seen him commit murder. And then there was this slave announcing it for all the world to hear.

There is a principle here. It is that all sin will be revealed. Nothing that is hidden will remain hidden. The thing that you did in secret is known and will be made known. As Christians, we are on display. Not just to the world, but to principalities and powers.

When we first moved into our house, we didn't have a lot of money. Our living room has a lot of windows and one day, Paula took down all of the drapes and washed them. They were old and fragile, but Paula didn't realize just how fragile they would be. They completely disintegrated in the washing machine.

As I said, we didn't have a lot of money in those days and we couldn't afford to buy new drapes. So for nearly a year, anyone who happened to drive or walk by our house could look into our living room and see whatever was going on inside.

Knowing that makes you life differently. You don't walk out into the living room unless you are fully clothed when you know that anyone can see in.

By the same token, knowing that we are on display and that all we do will be made known should motivate us to live differently.

2. The Public Nature of the Confrontation.

Peter treats a public sin in public. This is called Confrontational Christianity. To

be quite honest, I'm not very good at confrontations. I would much rather say to myself, "Self, you don't need to involve yourself in that person's life. His sin is his own business. Just let him go and let God take care of it."

However, I am my brother's keeper. I cannot and you cannot afford to permit sin within the church to go unchallenged. Why not? Because sin has a leavening effect. Like a little yeast in a lump of dough, sin spreads its influence throughout the entire body.

3. A Satanic Motivation.

Notice what Peter says is the motivating force behind the sin of Ananias. He is called "Satan." This is a transliteration of a Hebrew name - שָׂטָן. It is Hebrew for "Accuser."

We ought to note that there was an instance in which Jesus referred to Peter as "Satan" (Matthew 16:23).
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Ananias had forgotten that he was a part of a spiritual war. He might have been looking at all of the persecutions which were coming against the Christian church and he might have thought that this was the total extent of the battle.

What he forgot is that we do not wrestle with flesh and blood. Our warfare is INTERNAL. The battlefield is within. The battle for this world will be won or lost as it is fought within the hearts of men. That is why the Crusades were such a miserable failure. They were an attempt to conquer for Christ by means of the sword.

The Kingdom of God is being built today. Do not make the mistake of looking for the kingdom in lofty cathedrals or in elegant structures. The kingdom is found in the hearts of men.

4. The Representative Nature of God's Minister.

³ *But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...?"*

⁴ *"...You have not lied to men but to God." (Acts 5:3-4).*

As we read the passage, we see that Ananias had not lied to the Holy Spirit. He wasn't even talking to the Holy Spirit. He was talking to Peter. But he had forgotten that Peter was the representative of the Holy Spirit upon earth. To lie to the Holy Spirit's representative is the same as lying to the Holy Spirit Himself.

This brings us to a question. Who is the Holy Spirit's representative today? Who is the minister of God today? In the early days of the church, it was the apostles and prophets. Those foundational ministries were later followed by those of evangelists and pastors and teachers.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists and some as pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Notice that the gifted people were given to the church for the purpose of getting the saint to do the work of service. Who are the saints? You are!

Here is the principle. There is a direct correlation between the way you speak to each other and the way God hears you praying to Him. There is a direct correlation between the way you love each other and the way God sees you as loving Him. There is a direct correlation between the way you forgive each other and the way God forgives you.

Do you want to treat God good? Then treat one another good because, as you do to one another, so you are doing to God. I'm not making this up; Jesus said it first.

³¹ *"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.*

³² *"All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³ and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left." (Matthew 25:31-33).*

This describes the Second Coming of Christ. When He came the first time, it was as a little baby. When He comes the second time, it will be as a conquering King. He will separate between those who are His people and those who are not His people.

³⁴ *"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*

³⁵ *"For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; ³⁶ naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'"*

37 *“Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see
You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to
drink?
38 “‘And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or
naked, and clothe You?
39 “‘When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’
40 “The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to
the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the
least of them, you did it to Me.’ (Matthew 25:34-40).*

The unbelievers are quick to protest, “Lord, if we had known it was You, we would have acted differently. We would have visited You; we would have clothed You; we would have baked You a cake.”

And Jesus answers, “That’s the whole point. If you had known it was Me, then your actions would have been selfish in nature.

A man died and went to heaven. When he arrived there, he found an angel with a clipboard who said, “Before you are allowed to enter heaven, I must ask you whether you have ever committed a totally self-sacrificial deed?”

The man replied, “As a matter of fact, I was walking down the street and saw this big burly biker mugging a little old lady. I ran to him and I punched him in the nose and then picked up the old lady to her feet and told her to run away and then I kicked the mugger in the stomach.” The angel was visibly impressed and asked, “Wow! When did this take place?” The man replied, “Oh, about 5 minutes ago.”

If Jesus were being mugged, would you help Him? If He were hungry, would you feed Him? If He were thirsty, would you give Him something to drink? If He came to your doorstep, would you invite Him in? Jesus says, “You do it, because that is Me.”

AN APPREHENSIVE CONGREGATION

7 *Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife
came in, not knowing what had happened.
8 And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for
such and such a price?” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.”
9 Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to*

put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? 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 fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.*

11 *And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:7-11).*

I imagine that Sapphira came in looking for her husband. Perhaps she had sent him to the store with some of the money from their recent profits and he hadn't returned. She begins to wonder what he might be doing.

The scene of three hours earlier is repeated. Peter asks her about the gift they had given. He is giving her the opportunity to repent. But she does not. She repeats the lie that her husband had told earlier. And suddenly she falls to the floor.

Why did God kill these two people? It is because God takes His church and the vows made within His church very seriously, even if we don't. Take marriage vows. Divorce has reached epidemic proportions. It is a result of people not taking their vows seriously.

It is dangerous to be a Christian. It is dangerous because if we do not discipline ourselves, then God will do it for us.

4:23	4:32	5:1	5:11
Speaking with Boldness (4:29 & 31)	Congregation Giving with Boldness	Ananias & Sapphira Keeping & Lying	Great Fear (5:11)
Great Boldness		Great Fear (5:5 & 11)	
Obedience		Sin	

The result of this incident was that *great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things. (5:11)*. This fear was two-fold:

1. It was a Fear that Involved the Whole Church.

I'll bet that the next time the offering plate was passed, giving was a lot higher. Fear is an appropriate response to God. If you have never feared God, then you have never met God.

Christians need to learn to take God seriously. We need to learn that God is not to be trifled with. He is not just a genie that we can put into a bottle and keep over the mantle of the fireplace. He won't fit into our nice, comfortable boxes that we make for Him. He is very big and He is very dangerous.

The Chronicles of Narnia are a set of storybooks for children; although those of us who are children at heart are allowed to read them, too. In those books, the Christ-figure is a magnificent lion named Aslan. When first hearing of the lion, Lucy asks the question, "Is he safe?" The answer comes back, "Safe? Of course he isn't safe. He's a lion. But he's good." Jesus is like that. He isn't safe. He has power over boys and girls and countries and worlds and universes. But you can take comfort in the fact that He is good.

2. It was a Fear *"upon all who heard these things."*

These were people outside the church who heard the news of what had happened. You would have thought that church membership would have peaked out after this. After all, members are being struck dead. People began to fear the church. But this fear had the opposite reaction. In verse 14 we shall read that there was an even greater influx of new converts being constantly added to their numbers as people from outlying districts began to travel to Jerusalem to witness the power of God at work.

Why doesn't the world fear the church today? It is because the church has lost its zeal for holiness and, as a result, the church is powerless. When the church again begins to be holy, the world will again begin to be impressed by its power.