

Barnabas was a sparkling example of all the sterling qualities of the early church-unity, grace, power, caring, - especially caring. His original name was "Joseph", but he was nicknamed "Barnabas" ("Son of Encouragement") because that is the way he was (4:36). In Acts 4 he sells his real estate on the island of Cyprus and lays the proceeds at the apostles' feet for distribution to the needy. Every time we meet Barnabas in Acts, he is helping someone.

Things were going great in the new church. Always the enemy of God's loving plan, Satan had already begun a counterattack of outward persecution through the civil and religious authorities (Acts 4). But that tactic was not terribly creative or effective, so not the devil tried a different strategy and attacked the church from within. His agents were a husband and wife. The wife's name was "Sapphira," Aramaic for "beautiful," and the husband's name was "Ananias," which in Hebrew means "God is gracious." Few people's lives have contradicted their names more dramatically. Acts 5 records nothing beautiful or gracious about this unhappy couple.

Verse 1 and 2 describe their actions:

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 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.

Ananias and Sapphira had witnessed Barnabas' magnificent act and had seen the great respect that it drew from fellow believers. So they announced they too would sell their property and give it to the church.

However, they both agreed to claim to give the entire sale amount but hold some back, making everyone think they had given it all. If this happened today, Ananias would probably wait until the organ was playing "I Surrender All" and then haltingly come forward, laying his check at Peter's feet. Ananias and Sapphira's ruse was not a mere miscalculation in their checkbook but premeditated deception. This was pious pretense-religious sham-simulated holiness-Christian fraud.

What does God think of spiritual deception? This is an extremely serious issue for the Church. Ananias and Sapphira appeared to be Christians, and I believe they were. We ourselves are terribly susceptible to their sin, a spiritual error to which believers still fall. Their punishment was a "sanctifying discipline" for the church.

This is an important but for some reason neglected text. Spurgeon in his sixty volumes of the Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit anthology Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching has no sermon on this text. Yet, it remains an immensely important passage of scripture. Dr. Barnhouse, on the basis of this text, would never let this congregation sing the third stanza of "At Calvary:" "Now I have giv'n to Jesus everything; now I gladly own him as my King." "You see," he said, "if God acted in the same way today that he did in the fifth chapter of Acts, you'd have to have a morgue in the basement of every church and a mortician on the pastoral staff." The truth is, we would not have a pastoral staff either.

Why did Ananias and Sapphira do what they did? Possibly the Christian life was new and mysterious to them, and they just wanted to be on the inside of things, to really belong. Of perhaps they craved special recognition by the leadership. Or maybe they were swept up by the bandwagon effect. Applause or acceptance or acclaim may have been overly important to them. At the worst, maybe they were making a crass attempt to rise within the power structure, though I doubt they began with such low intentions.

I think that when they saw Barnabas' great generosity, they genuinely wanted to follow suit. But their motivations were mixed and when the money was in hand, they could not live up to their avowed intention. They were undoubtedly new Christians, and the habits of the old life were only a breath away. They overestimated themselves, a common error of new believers.

Spiritual Deception Punished (vv. 3-10)

Picture the scene. Ananias had just finished laying his gift at Peter's feet, and the organ has finished playing "I Surrender All." Ananias' heart begins to thump. He feels dizzy and confused. Why isn't Peter smiling?

Then 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? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." (vv.3-4)

Peter explained that Ananias did not have to give anything, but that in pretending to give everything he was now, instead of being filled with the Spirit, under Satan's control. In lying to the church, Ananias had lied to the Holy Spirit-that is, to God. And he was responsible for his actions because he had dreamed up this idea in his own heart. Poor, wretched Ananias.

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. (vv. 5-6)

The Greek word translated "gave up the ghost" (KJV;NIV, "died") is used in Acts to describe sudden, terrible, judicial death. This was divine judgement.

"The young men" of the fellowship, suited by their strength for such a task, carried Ananias' corpse away and buried him. The first recorded burial in the Christian community was that of a hypocrite.

We must be absolutely clear as to what Ananias' sin was. It was not casual deception. Rather, he feigned a deeper spiritual commitment than he had. We share Ananias' sin not when others think we are more spiritual than we are, but when we try to make others think we are more spiritual than we are. Examples of Ananias' sin today include: creating the impression we are people of prayer when we are not; making it look like we have it all together when we do not; promoting the idea that we are generous when we are so tight we squeak when we smile; misrepresenting our spiritual effectiveness (for example, saying, "When I was at the crusade I New York, I ran

the whole follow-up program,” when the truth is you were a substitute counselor.) When a preacher urges his people toward a deeper devotion to God, implying that his life is an example when in actuality he knows it is not, he is repeating Ananias’ sin. When an evangelist calls people to holy living but is secretly having an affair with his secretary, he is an Ananias. This gives us all a lot to think about, if we dare.

There was a much better way open to Ananias. “Peter and my friends, Sapphira and I were going to give everything, but we have decided to keep some for our needs. We would like to do the same as Barnabas did, but we do not feel we can at this time.” If they had been honest, God would have used and multiplied what they did give.

Spiritual deception is heinous to God. When we lie to believers, we are not lying to them but to the Lord.

Ananias was already cold in his grave when Sapphira showed up.

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” “Yes,” she said, “that is the price.” Peter said to her, “How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.” At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. (vv. 7-10)

Imagine the effect this must have had on the church. Many knew the erring couple. No doubt, new friendships had developed with them. But now they were dead by God’s hand. Luke says there was “great fear” in the church (v. 11), and along with it, I am sure, much soul searching and long bouts of prayer. We must not take the unyielding holiness and the judgement of God lightly. What if such a thing happened today? Can you imagine if a pastor or other church leader was speaking falsehood to the church and suddenly fell over dead? What would that do to us? We would surely begin to think about our own integrity or the lack of it.

Some have a hard time accepting this passage because God did not give Ananias and Sapphira time to repent. It is said that there was no show of Christ’s compassion or restraint, that Christ’s dealing with Judas, whose sin was a thousand times more heinous, did not descend to this level. God did this because the future of the church was at stake. Ananias and Sapphira were saved but intentionally dishonest and deceptive.

Spiritual Deception Discussed

Why was God so severe? Because this was a pivotal time in the church history. “The way Ananias and Sapphira attempted to reach their goals was so dramatically opposed to the whole thrust of the Gospel that to allow it to go unchallenged would have set the entire mission for the church off course.” A similar thing happened in the case of Achan as the children of Israel prepared for a new era in the Promised Land. The destruction caused by spiritual pretense is clearly more far-reaching than we can imagine. We know it has poisoned the life of the Church throughout its history. “Hypocrite” is the secular cliché for the churchgoer, too often rightly so.

We know also that spiritual pretense disease our relationships within the Church. Ephesians 4:25 says it perfectly: “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.”

Dante portrayed hypocrites in the Eighth Circle of Hell wearing gilded capes that were beautiful to the eye but were actually made of lead, producing the burdened cry, “O weary mantle of eternity.” Beautiful as hypocrites may be in appearance, they carry debilitating weight throughout life, suppressing the life of the church.

The consequences of deception are incalculable, and yet it comes to us so naturally. We are deceivers by nature. Satan, a liar from the beginning, brought about our fall by convincing us to believe his lies, making us children of deception. Our culture is riddled with untruth. Media advertising and hype provide us with a litany of hyperbolic deception: “easier win than before,” “toilet paper soft as a cloud.” Unbiased samplings tell us most people prefer Coke-“The Real Thing.” Strangely, equally unbiased samplings tell us most people prefer Pepsi. Smoke a Marlboro and you will become the epitome of big-country, bronco-busting masculinity. You will also smell like a camel and run the risk of dying from cancer.

We so naturally alter the facts. My three and a half pound smallmouth bass quickly becomes four pounds. Have you ever been talking freely and enthusiastically and suddenly realized that you were exaggerating? Deception is addictive.

Regardless of our sinful nature, the grace of God is powerful to change us from the inside out. Nevertheless, habits of deceit are easily formed and hard to break. We are deceivers by nature and because we live amidst deception, spiritual deceit is all too common in the church. God says in the most dramatic way that it should not be so. “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” The body can only enjoy health and function correctly when each part passes the truth to the brain. If it calls hot cold and cold hot, it will dysfunction. The body of Christ is sometimes ill because of falsehood.

Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira about their heart deception. Their story is a call to confront ourselves. Do I practice spiritual deceit? Do I attempt to make others think I am more committed than I am? These are serious questions. In the larger picture, it is a matter of life and death- maybe not our own, but someone else’s- perhaps our children, our grandchildren, our relatives, our neighbors. Possibly God is calling us to confront another believer, as Peter did. Nathan did the same thing to King David: “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7). We must help each other to remain honest and obedient to God.

Luke goes on to tell in verse 11 that “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.” They began to honestly assess what God wanted of them and where they were in their spiritual lives. Verses 12-16 record a continuance of great power manifesting itself in remarkable wonders and the expansion of the Church. When the church is great-with great unity, great grace, and great care- it is perpetuated by great honesty. We must keep our spiritual life on the up and up.

This demands some practical steps. First we should take an honest look at our lives regarding deceit. Are we truthful people? Do we engage in exaggeration and coloring? Are we promoting spiritual deception about our own commitments? Are we trying outwardly or subtly to make ourselves appear to be what we are not? Perhaps, to acquire objectivity, it would be helpful to seek the perspective of another person-your spouse, if you are married or perhaps an honest friend.

Second, honestly lay the results before the Lord. Repent of all sin, relying on His grace. Ask God to remove habits of deception so that truth becomes a habit instead.

Third, covenant that with the help of God you will consciously refrain from lying in all its forms and will repent immediately from any failure in this area.