

## **The Dangerous Deception** **Acts 5:1-11**

Heinrich Schliemann discovered the ancient city of Troy in 1863. The city of Troy was made famous by Homer's Iliad. According to Homer, the Greeks besieged Troy for ten years without success. And then when the warrior Achilles was killed, many wanted to give up the fight. But the king of Ithaca, Odysseus, came up with a plan to get the Greek army into Troy. Odysseus built an immense wooden horse that may have looked something like this...

Odysseus and his warriors hid inside it. And after leaving the horse at the gates of Troy, the Greek army sailed away. The Trojans thinking the Greeks had given up and had left the horse as a gift, brought it inside the gates.

That night, while the Trojans were sleeping, the Greek ships quietly returned. The soldiers in the horse slipped out and opened the city gates. The Greek army quietly entered Troy and started fires all over the city. The Trojans awoke to find their city in flames. As they tried to flee, they were killed by the waiting Greeks.

The Greeks deceived the Trojans by making them think the thing presented them was a gift when in reality what lay inside was death.

Deception, practiced by the church, or more appropriately, members in the church is not to be taken lightly.

For just as the deception caused the collapse of the Trojan city, deception tolerated in the body of Christ can likewise cause the collapse of a healthy and thriving church.

Deception or hypocrisy is simply this, presenting something in a different light than what is really is true.

We need not fool ourselves. Deception knows no limits.

Some of us may be tuning out at the mention of deception, thinking the message is not pertinent, relevant, or valuable to us.

This would be unwise, for as we will discover in this message, all of us, every single one of us, are guilty of deception on some level whether it is to ourselves, to others, or to the Lord.

As we open our text this morning to the Book of Acts 5:1-11 we will find one of the most controversial narratives in the New Testament.

Up until this time, the newly birthed church has only known blessings. Sure, they have endured a few bumps from outside persecutors, but the church itself has only thrived.

The Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost and many were saved. The church experienced a surge as people began to focus on the Word of God and putting it to practice.

Peter's two sermons led thousands to faith in Christ. The young church learned courageousness through trials by practicing prayer.

The church was enormously captivated by the gospel as they practiced mutual humility toward the Lord and one another.

This humility and focus on mission led them to immense generosity.

Luke records one particular example of the community's generosity in the gift of Barnabas, who sold some land and gave the entirety of the proceeds to the church.

This leads us to our current text which is found in Acts 5:1-11.

What has up to this point been one chapter after another of excitement and expectation now takes a sharp turn to bring the church back to the reality of fighting against sin and the Devil himself.

*But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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? <sup>4</sup>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." <sup>5</sup>And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup>The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. <sup>7</sup>Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup>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." <sup>9</sup>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." <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.*

With Acts 5:1 the story turns from a simple transparent generosity to a dark deceitful hypocrisy.

The church had experienced deep genuine fellowship with prayer, Bible intake, and sharing life together.

While the Holy Spirit filled Barnabas and others to be generous with their lives and gifts, Satan filled Ananias and Sapphira.

Wisdom did not drive their motivations and actions and instead, foolishness, selfishness, and greed.

Luke begins the chapter with "But." At this we know there is about to be a dramatic change from the example of Barnabas' generosity.

Apparently, Ananias and his wife made the same public pledge to sell their land and give all the proceeds to the church.

Instead of following through on their pledge, which we find out was just a sham, they gave a part of the proceeds.

Nothing is wrong with giving part of the proceeds, the problems lies in the fact that they said they were going to give it all and after the sale, they said they gave it all.

As they present the gift to Peter, Peter calls Ananias of his deception and hypocrisy and pronounces the judgement of God on him.

At Peter's pronouncement Ananias falls dead from a heart attack, stroke, or some ailment.

A few hours later his wife comes through the door, not knowing her husband is dead and Peter offers her an opportunity to confess and repent.

She fails to take this opportunity and for her sin she falls dead as well.

Luke then tells us that great fear came upon the church.

A few things to note before we look at their particular offenses.

- They were not required to do anything.
- Christians are not morally accountable to apostles, church leaders, or any other humans, but we are mutually accountable because our actions affect one another.

## I. PARTICULAR OFFENSES

Just what were Ananias' and Sapphira's actual offenses?

**Spiritual posers**- theirs was a sham holiness.

They were not forced to sell or to give anything. They pretended to give more than he actually gave.

They wanted to present himself as being godlier, more righteous, more spiritual than they actually were.

There was no reason they had to give away anything. God did not want this church to be a poor church with no members having no wealth.

Nothing in the Scriptures, nothing in Christ's commands condemns wealth or the accumulation of wealth as sinful.

They could have said, "We sold the land for this amount, but are giving this amount because we need/want the rest of the money for something else" and nothing would have been thought of it.

This would be like some people on the day of Pentecost pretending to speak in tongues to appear Spirit-filled like the apostles.

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 this today:

- Creating the impression that 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 walk
- Misrepresenting our spiritual effectiveness
- What about you? Do you find yourself trying to appear more righteous than you are?

One of the questions we ask in our training D-Group is "Have you told any half-truths or outright lies, putting yourself in a better light to those around you?"

It is important for us to realize we regularly try to appear less sinful, less angry, less greedy, less prideful and more holy than we really are.

The danger in this is when we pretend to be something we are not, we are robbing others of an opportunity to minister to us and we are moving ourselves further from the body instead of closer to the body.

**Praise seekers/Prideful**-they wanted a reputation like Barnabas. They lived for the applause.

We desire admiration and acclaim.

Even those of us who don't like attention, who do not appreciate public displays of appreciation, enjoy being recognize and appreciated by those we admire or care about.

Ananias and Sapphira saw how Barnabas and the others received acclaim and their pride was stirred within them to seek the same attention.

Pride is the most dangerous of sins because it drives us with the motivation of self.

Pride is the enemy, the antithesis of all that's holy, of all Jesus desires for you.

Your pride will cause you to put yourself first, to forget about others, to not listen to someone's genuine concerns, to seek your preference over others.

Pride can cost you salvation. Pride can cost a marriage, a parent/child relationship, a church, and a life.

What about you this morning? Do you have pride in your heart? Is pride causing harm in your relationship with Christ?

Is pride ruining intimacy with others? Is it worth holding onto?

When we allow pride to rule our hearts, we are separating ourselves from Christ, his will, and his church.

**Liars**- they flat out lied about their giving.

They said they gave it all when they clearly did not.

The ease which we can lie without considering its ramifications demonstrate the sinfulness of humanity.

Lying comes naturally. I can watch my four-year-old, Jacob, climb in the cabinet, take out some candy, put it in his mouth, and start chewing. I ask him did he get candy and with a mouthful he says, "NO." I ask, "what's in your mouth?" and as he shoves this massive ball of half chewed candy down his throat, with a straight face says, "nothing."

We often think of lying as no big deal.

Lying is so prevalent most individuals do not even know when they are doing it.

The reason lying is so dangerous is that it contrasts with God's nature.

And God takes lying to the church personal because the church is his bride.

That's why the penalty was so fierce. By publicly pledging to the church their intended gift, they pledged to God himself, to the Holy Spirit who embodies the church of Jesus.

**Greedy**- they "kept back" part of the money. This phrase means to pilfer or embezzle.

It is the same Greek word used for the sin of Achan in Joshua 7 when he stole some of the enemy's treasure that was supposed to be destroyed.

Their greed was the same lust that caused Judas to betray Jesus.

Greed drove them to do the unthinkable, to lie to God, to dishonor the fellowship of the church, to grieve the Spirit of God himself.

Greed is birthed by pride. As pride puts self first, greed seeks to take more than is necessary for the purpose of ensuring that self is elevated.

Ickson Adom states, "Greed eats up a person so that he or she is wasted away due to the heat of the bad traits...such as selfishness, anger, jealousy, and unhealthy competition. It sucks up every strand of happiness and results in death."

Greed:

- Makes us people who ignore God's word
- Causes us to see nothing but personal gain
- Robs us of compassion
- Changes our priorities

Greed destroys friendships, marriages, and churches.

Many years ago, a major American company had trouble keeping employees working in their assembly plant in Panama. The laborers lived in a generally agrarian, barter economy, but the company paid them in cash. After a week's work, the average employee would have more cash than he'd ever seen--so many of the workers were quitting--completely satisfied with what they had already made.

What was the solution? Company executives gave all their employees a Sears catalog. No one quit then, because they all wanted the previously unimagined things they saw inside that book. Their focus changed – and so did their priorities.

What holds your heart? Do you have contentment in life, in your marriage, in your job, with what God has blessed you with?

Do you find yourself seeking more for no rational reason?

If you are struggling with greed with getting “more,” recognize today that desire will only destroy because enough will truly never be enough.

**Deceivers-** The couple planned out what they did.

It was not an on the spot lie that slipped from their mouths, they put thought into what they did. Their sin to the church was premeditated.

Often, we plot and plan our sin in the depths of our hearts, and we rehearse its’ path in our minds thinking we are free from accountability, but God knows what is done in secret. There is nothing hidden from him.

Deception takes place as a final step prior to enacting our sin.

In deception, we fool not others, but ourselves.

As we deceptively plot what we will say, how we will get back at the spouse who hurt us, how we will show up our co-worker, how we will make someone else look back, we are actually deceiving ourselves.

We deceive ourselves by justifying our actions. We tell ourselves this particular sin ok because of these particular circumstances.

We deceive ourselves by thinking God will approve because “he wants me to be happy.”

**James tells us 1:14,** *“But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived (deception), it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”*

Ananias’ and Sapphira’s deception was shown to be fatal for them and the results can be the same for us.

**Satan’s instruments-**the devil destroys through love of money, falsehood, and hypocrisy. He tempts us to think sin is no big deal.

Notice Peter’s words to Ananias in verse 3, “how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?”

In Peter’s question he makes a point to show us that it was Ananias’ that allowed Satan to enter in his heart and corrupt it.

The community had one heart and soul, but Ananias’ heart was divided.

He had one foot in the community and the other with a foothold in the world focused on possessions.

This happened because Satan entered his heart just as he did Judas's. Like Judas, Ananias was motivated by money. And from this Satan, for the first time entered into the church.

Ananias and his wife were instruments of Satan to be used to bring disunity into the body.

Do not allow Satan to use you to bring disunity to the body.

If you find yourself always wanting more, always complaining about something the church does, always wondering why it wasn't done this way or that way; if you recognize yourself gossiping; if you find yourself being greedy with your money; if you observe yourself stepping away from serving but complaining about the lack of service, run to the Lord.

Satan's greatest desire for the church is to build disunity and he will use any number of tactics to achieve his goal.

Guard your heart against the attacks of Satan. Do not give him an open door to influence you to the detriment of the body.

**Spirit grievers-** they lied to the Holy Spirit. (One community of one heart and soul)

Have you ever made God a promise to get out of a tight jam? Have you ever promised something when you were scared?

Have you promised to start giving if you just get that job? Did you dedicate some stimulus money to the Lord?

And then inevitably something comes up and the promise you made fades quickly from your mind?

The act of dedicating the land to the church was strictly voluntary. Once pledged, however, it became a different matter.

In lying about the proceeds of the sale, they broke a sacred trust within the church.

Ultimately, they lied to God. To betray the church which the Spirit guides, empowers, and inhabits is to lie to the Spirit that fills the community.

## **II. THEIR NEEDS/OUR NEEDS**

Ananias and his wife could have avoided this pitfall and their deaths by understanding their needs.

And the same needs they had are the same needs we have.

### **They needed a healthy fear of the Lord**

God demands respect, so as we look at this story we should not think, "God would never do that to me."

We should instead say, "God is not mocked"

The Bible is full of instances of individuals who have mocked God and paid the price with their lives.

Proverbs tells us that the beginning of wisdom is fearing the Lord.

If we do not stand in awe of God, we are unwise.

This story should make us repent and say, "God, have mercy on us!"

### **They needed the application of the gospel**

The only remedy for sin is the gospel.

Sadly, many believers think the gospel only applies to salvation, but a healthy and growing believer and subsequently church regularly applies the gospel to their lives.

The gospel frees us from addictions to self and stuff.

Let this story remind us of how badly we need to understand and apply the gospel of grace to our lives.

Have you applied the gospel to your life lately?

The gospel reminds us of our identity in Christ and as we grow in our Christian identity we learn we are bound to him and not to this world.

### **They needed to live in repentance**

The reality is every one of us are guilty of hypocrisy. We are all guilty of not living up to the gospel standard. We are all guilty of trying to act like we are.

This story reminds us of not only the need to repent, but to repent at once.

Do not wait until judgement to repent. Repent as soon as the Spirit shows you your sin.

Is there something in your life you need to repent of right now?

This story calls the church to repent while it is still time.

## **III. PRACTICAL REMEDIES**

Chuck Swindoll suggests three responsibilities from this passage.

As representatives of Christ we have three significant responsibilities:

### **We have a responsibility to maintain personal integrity**

Make truth a priority and cultivate a lifestyle of transparency and authenticity-the opposite of hypocrisy

When we search through the Word and allow the Word to search through us, we will find things that bother us and that do not line up with Scripture.

Do not hide this. Lay it before the Lord and allow him to deal with it.

The times I have ignored the Word and the Spirit and tried to either hide my temptation and sin, to deal with it myself, or pretend it wasn't a big deal have always resulted in discipline from the Lord.

Allow the Word, allow the Spirit to do its work. Will it be easy? Painless? Quick? No, but it is necessary for personal holiness and kingdom effectiveness.



### **We have a responsibility to maintain a clear conscience.**

The way to keep personal and godly integrity is to maintain a clear conscience and the way to maintain a clear conscience is to daily, openly, and honestly confess and repent of our sin.

When our consciences are bothered by unrepentant sin our minds, our emotions, and our bodies are affected.

Failure to regularly confess and repent of sin develops callouses of conscience and what once pricked us sharply, now is dull and blunt to our hearts.

It's not that we do not recognize it as sin any longer, but that we are not bothered by it.

When we have a clear conscience before the Lord, we are ready and able to be used by him for his glory and his kingdom.

### **We have a responsibility to be authentic.**

Ananias and Sapphira failed to be authentic to the body.

They put on masks to be someone they were not.

It's okay to not be okay.

I'm encouraged when another believer admits to having struggles.

I'm convinced the church as a whole would benefit from going to a Celebrate Recovery or Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to learn how to be honest about our struggles and learn how to build people up who are struggling instead of tearing them down.

One of the reasons we fail to be authentic is because we are afraid if we tell someone we struggle with anger, depression, or alcohol; if we admit we have a porn problem; if we share that we are sleeping with our boyfriend or girlfriend; if we admit to sin in our lives we are afraid we will be shunned.

Listen and this is vitally important to understand this. This is a place for the broken. Not the once broken and fixed, but the broken.

Just because we are in Christ does not mean we do not have cracks, dents, and scuff marks on us.

We are a church, a family where we can share our struggles and our failures and still be loved.

We are a place where you can lay your heart bare and it will not be trampled on but will be picked up and nurtured in the love of Christ.

### **Practically this means we:**

Use the word to take an honest look at our lives regarding deceit

Honestly lay the results before the Lord and repent

Covenant with God to consciously refrain from engaging in deceit with self, others, and him and repent immediately from any failure.