

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Acts 5:1-11

Well, right at the outset this morning, we need to acknowledge that we are looking at one of the more sharp-edged texts in the Bible in that causes the flesh of our hearts to rise up and cry “NO!” A message based on verses that speak of a time in the church where God intervened and struck dead those who were sinning is strangely foreign to us. Most Christians, especially in North America, are already quite uncomfortable with a God who not only allows suffering but also causes suffering; and are even more uncomfortable when God allows death; and completely resists and rebels against the idea that a God who claims He is a loving would dramatically put to death someone in the church who had done something wrong. After all, we’re all sinners aren’t we? Yes, we are. And this could happen to us also.

CS Lewis, in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, calls this kind of God “the Lord of Terrible Aspect.” Our God, Lewis writes, is not a God of “a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your way” – He is instead “the consuming fire himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’s love for his work.” The point is, as we are the created work of His glorious image, God loves us too much not to put our bodies to death in order to save our souls and the soul of His church. I pray this morning God would help us through this time in His Word to understand His love for us - not in the manner that we know love, but in the manner that the God who gave us life through the death of His Son Jesus loved us so much that He is willing to take our lives so we might know eternal life with Him.

In these past weeks, as we have been following the fire of the Holy Spirit through the reign of Christ in the hearts and lives of those in the first church in Jerusalem, we have been given a beautiful glimpse of what life was like in those days for the first followers of Jesus. After the dramatic events of the day of Pentecost, we saw the healing of a man crippled from birth and of the great response of that miracle, *and* the resultant resistance to the movement of the Spirit that rises up because of the fallen sinful nature that still lives within us. The first church lived in a dark world full of despair, with resistance on every side and yet met that resistance head on with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that flowed out of the life of the risen Jesus Christ. We ought to be that same church today. This week, as continue in our walk through the book of Acts, we step into Acts 5 and we stand today in the echo of Pastor Eric’s message last week from the end of Acts 4, where, after those in the first century church had prayed for more boldness of faith were now living out their lives in a great testimony of unity with one another “*with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus*” – “*and great grace was upon them all*” (Acts 4:33). Evidence of the “*great power*” in the hearts of those in the church was the “*great grace*” that poured forth from their spiritual unity: “*There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need*” (Acts 4:34-35).

With “*great grace*” they were able to give with “*great power*” as they had been given by their *great* God. There were no limits to their giving. No boundaries. If there was a need, it was met. They sold their fields. They sold their houses. They took the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. They let God handle the money, because after all, it’s all His anyway. They saw their possessions not as their own – and they did not give out of their abundance but they gave out of all that they owned. It’s been said that, “If you give something that you can live without, it’s not giving.” That’s absolutely true. We cannot live without the “*great power*” of the “*great grace*” of our most sovereign and God. As we live today because God has given to us through Jesus Christ, we are to give as we have been given.

Last week, Acts 4:36-37 gave us an example of someone within this church who with “*great power*” gave with “*great grace.*” us: “*Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.*” In the midst of the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of God’s people with “*great power*” producing and pouring forth the fruit of the “*great grace*” - we read of a man whose name is Barnabas who sold a piece of property he owned and gave all the money from the sale to the leadership of the church to use as they saw fit. It is more than significant that his name means “*son of encouragement.*” What an encouragement to know that God can work with “*great power*” in the hearts of a Spirit empowered people of God to sacrificially give of themselves to others with “*great grace.*”

It’s at this point we step into chapter 5, but in terms of English grammatical principles there should not be chapter division here, as chapter 5 begins with the word “*but*” which means the words to come are still dealing with the same subject as chapter 4. But in terms of *content* the word “*but*” is highly appropriate because, while we are dealing with the same subject as chapter 4, chapter 5 now deals with the reverse side of the subject. We are now turning a corner. In chapter 4 we looked at the bold character and unified nature of a Spirit-empowered church, and now in chapter 5 we will see the fallen character and sinful nature that still remained in the hearts of those in this Spirit-empowered church.

“But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife’s knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 5:1-2). In the midst of the Holy Spirit working in great power with great grace in the hearts of God’s people, we see also the fallen sinful nature of humanity at work. We see a contrast here between the sacrificial spirit of giving in Barnabas and the self-centered spirit in Ananias and Sapphira. What is interesting here is that the name Ananias literally means, “God is gracious” and the name Sapphira means “beautiful.” But Ananias did not act as though God was gracious to him and Sapphira, though she may have been beautiful in the flesh, did not act in a way that reflected the beauty of God’s grace.

What is striking here is that in the midst of a great movement by the Holy Spirit of “*great power*” and of “*great grace*” in the hearts of God’s people - that suddenly God would strike people dead in their tracks because of something so small as just keeping some money for their own. Ananias and Sapphira sold some property to give to the church, just as Barnabas had done, but unlike Barnabas they held back part of it for themselves. We don’t know their financial situation, nor the need of the church at that moment, and so it would not be ours to judge if they had done wrong in keeping some for themselves.

But what we do know is that in the midst of a movement of “*great power*” in a Holy Spirit-saturated atmosphere of “*great grace*” - as Barnabas openhandedly and sacrificially gave of all that he had been given - Ananias and Sapphira *pretended* to give openhandedly and sacrificially of all that they had been given. What God was fatally purging out of His church here was not the act of selfishness but the heart attitude of *hypocrisy*. Hypocrisy is putting on a false appearance, trying to look good on the outside when things are different on the inside. The word hypocrite is actually rooted in the Greek word *hypokrisis* which literally means “the act of playing a part on a stage.” The essence of hypocrisy is deliberate deception: acting or pretending to be something that you really are not.

Our text for this morning speaks of “*great power*” and “*great grace*” in the midst of God’s people; now we read that when Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead by God there was “*great fear*” in the church. In fact, it says it twice: when Ananias died (5) and when Sapphira died (11). No doubt there would be “*great fear*” at Arrowsmith if the same happened here. Probably folks dropping dead because they didn’t give enough would increase our financial situation in the long run. Might not really help our attendance much in the short run though. This morning we ask the question: What “*great fear*” do we share with the first church in how God dealt with Ananias and Sapphira? Three things come to mind.

1) We should be struck with “*great fear*” by how such hypocritical, self-centered heart attitudes as those of Ananias and Sapphira could exist in a Holy Spirit empowered church of “*great power*” and “*great grace.*” The truth is the Bible tells us our sins are forgiven when we come to faith in Jesus Christ, but the Bible also tells us that we all will still continue to sin against God and against each other as long as we walk this earth. While it is true that salvation in Jesus Christ means that we now have new, cleansed, transformed hearts and souls, and we are now totally new creatures, inside and out – it is also true that the Bible does not define salvation so much as an *event*, as it does a *continuing lifelong process*. Even in Christ, both natures - the spirit of God and the spirit of our sinful flesh, are still present within our hearts. In Christ sin remains in us but in Christ sin should no longer reign. We still have the ability to sin, but in Christ we now have also been given an appetite for holiness. The dynamic for the flesh is still alive, but so also is the yearning for God that comes from the spirit of God that lives within us.

While Jesus’ death for our sins restores our relationship with God, we still must “*work out our salvation with fear and trembling*” (Philippians 2:12). This always will be the battle between the Spirit and the flesh within us until the Lord calls us home to glory. Because of the sinful nature that still dwells within the fallen human heart, the battle for that right relationship between man and his Creator is a *continuing process*. Richard Lovelace has written that: “A sinless man would love God with all of his heart, and soul, and mind, and his neighbor as himself, constantly and with full vigor. But the most advanced saint on earth has neither the faith nor the Spirit-empowered love to do this, and therefore a continual cleansing of our experience through the blood of Christ is necessary for us to be righteous in the sight of God, and this cleansing involves the awareness and admission of our falling short.”

It has been suggested by some that Ananias and Sapphira should not have been judged so severely as this was a work not so much of our sinful flesh, but rather by the evil one himself, satan: “*But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?’*” While it is true that satan had so “*filled*” and controlled Ananias’s heart that he was carried away in his actions, Satan’s activity in our lives does not remove our culpability. Verse 3 attributes the act to Satan’s infilling, but verse 4 places responsibility for his action squarely on Ananias: “*Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.*” The most serious thing Ananias did was to lie to the Holy Spirit, not keep back part of the money. When we lie to the church, we lie to the Holy Spirit. Since giving everything was not mandatory the particular desire that Satan had filled Ananias and Sapphira with was the desire for recognition by the church.

The question we then ask is: Can Satan *fill* our hearts of God’s people as Satan “*filled*” Ananias’s “*heart*”? Nothing in our text indicates that Ananias and Sapphira were not believers. In context of Acts 4 it would seem they were Christians who were fully engaged in the bold character and unified nature of a Spirit-empowered church. We get a clearer understanding of what Peter meant when he declared that “*satan*” had “*filled*” Ananias’ “*heart*” when we see that the original Greek word here for the English word “*filled*” lends itself being defined as “an influence that controls one’s activities.” R.C. Sproul sees Peter’s use of the word “*filled*” to denote satan’s influence in Ananias’ heart as a reflection of Peter’s words in 1 Peter 5:8: “*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*” Thus having one’s heart “*filled*” – influenced - by Satan happens to both followers of Jesus Christ and those who not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

In the context of our text for today we could say that having one's heart "*filled*" – influenced - by Satan denotes the times in the lives of followers of Christ when Satan gets them so obsessed with an idea or course of action that they get carried away and are blinded to the consequences. We see this in Ananias. He lied to win the affirmation and respect of the church – and it cost him his life, and the life of his wife. Why would God put Ananias and Sapphira to death for doing so? Lying to the Holy Spirit is serious because it causes us to be dishonest with God and to be dishonest ourselves. A key to receiving God's grace is acknowledging our need of him; an attitude of pride can close the door that permits God's grace to enter our lives. When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount, his first four Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–5) - "*The poor in spirit,*" "*those who mourn,*" "*the meek,*" and "*those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*" are united in not their hiding sinful nature and in accepting their need for God. In Christianity all power comes through grace. The one thing that can hinder grace is pride, which is the attitude that we deserve the blessings we get, which result in a superficial faith.

The truth is, as saved saints who continue to sin, we all are hypocrites at some level. We are all sinners; Paul calls himself the "*foremost of sinners*" in 1 Timothy 1:15. We are all in need of God's "*great grace.*" And just as the sin within our hearts battles against God, so to the devil who rules the world will focus his full attention and efforts at defeating any church of "*great power*" that is being led by the Spirit. We should be struck with "*great fear*" by how such hypocritical, self-centered heart attitudes as those of Ananias, Sapphira and us could exist in a Spirit empowered church of "*great power*" and "*great grace.*"

2) We should also be struck with "*great fear*" by how serious God is about sin in His people and in His church. Unlike us, God is really serious about sin. He passionately hates sin. That's why Jesus went to the cross. The Lord is serious about sin in His church. He wants us to take sin seriously. He does not want us to take lightly attitudes and actions such as hypocrisy, deceit, deception, lying, divisiveness, rebellion, gossip, critical attitudes or anything else that might grieve the Holy Spirit. The Lord is willing and He will discipline, purify, and purge in order to correct and protect the church and the glory of His name. God loves us too much to let us walk down a sinful path of fatal consequences. God is the "Lord of terrible aspect" who loves us so much He will kill our body to save our soul. God is serious about sin.

Peter said: "*You have not lied to men but to God.*" Every sin, all sin is against God. King David said to God: "*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment*" (Psalm 51:4). But we live in a world that does not like to shoulder the responsibility for its actions. We tend to blame others or minimize our sinful attitudes and actions. To do so is an offense to God. No one is to blame for *our* attitudes and actions. We freely choose to behave and think the way we do, regardless of our backgrounds, situations or experiences. We know that it is hypocrisy to try and create the impression that we are something we are not. We are sinners.

The truth is God judges, not out of anger but out of love. He judges in order to wake us up - and because of who we are in Christ, His loving judgment begins with His church: "*For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?*" (1 Peter 4:17). Our Lord Jesus, who forgave sins, who loved sinners, who treated the worst of sinners with greatest of gentleness, always became deeply angry when he dealt with one particular sin: *the sin of hypocrisy among God's people, which is the sin of hiding and pretending and lying about sin.* Jesus called the Pharisees, "*white-washed tombs*" for trying to look good on the outside while they were full of pride and self-centeredness on the inside. The reason Jesus hated hypocrisy so much was because it points people away God by drawing them towards the individual who is seeking personal admiration by either affirmation or sympathy. This sin, like all sin, is rooted in self-centered pride, which focuses on external behaviors rather than internal motives. When we think we can hide our internal sin by actions to the contrary, we lie to the Holy Spirit. God is so serious about sin, so serious about this sin in particular, that He will dramatically intervene.

The first church we see in Acts was not a perfect church, which has been true throughout the history of the church. But the early church, under Peter's leadership, immediately dealt with the problem they faced. Because of that, this event did not hinder its growth. Immediately following our text for today verse twelve tells us: "*Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles*" – and goes on to speak of those early followers of Jesus being held in high esteem as the church continued to grow. If there is true fellowship in a Christian community, then when sin appears in the body, it will be confronted. If sin has not been dealt with decisively, the chances of healing for the one who has sinned are greatly reduced, as the freedom of forgiveness is not there to protect them. which has fatal consequences. When Christians sin against the body of Christ, they lose their peace, their body loses its power, and they lose the blessing of God. We should be struck with "*great fear*" by how serious God is about sin in us as His people and in His church at Arrowsmith Baptist Church.

3) We should also be struck with "*great fear*" by what this all means for us today. We could look at our text for today and discern that Ananias and Sapphira lost their lives because, in wanting to look more generous than they really were, they lied to God and to the church. The real issue God is dealing with here is *the harboring and hiding of our sin behind the mask of spiritual well-being*. Holiness begins on the inside, when the God's Spirit is planted deep within the soil of our hearts and souls, which ultimately grows until it flowers into the full bloom of "*great grace*" by the watering of the Spirit's "*great power.*" *Pride* is the dark cloud of sin that keeps the life-giving light of God from shining on the spirit of holiness in the soil of our hearts and souls. *Hypocrisy* is the hot, dry wind of pretending and hiding our sin that causes the living water of God to dry up the spirit of holiness planted deep within us. But humility and sincerity and honesty and truth are the means by which God breaks through the dark clouds and pours the water of His grace and love and mercy and forgiveness into our lives. While the severity and harshness of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira may stun us this morning, *the greater wonder is that God delays His righteous judgment in virtually all other cases in our lives*. Ananias and Sapphira received exactly what they deserved; *the greater wonder is why we do not receive what we deserve*. While we know and believe and cling to God's love and mercy and grace, God's Word today should cause us to pause and take stock that in reality God does not tolerate everything. Someday He very well could call each and every one of us to account and wrathfully deal with us all as individuals and as a church.

And yet, as I say these words, I'm not so sure we think He will do so. We have, for the most part, lost our fear of God. Despite the fact that the "fear of the Lord/God" is spoken of 144 times in the Bible (19 of those are in the New Testament) we still have a hard time coming to terms with what the reality that we should fear God. Our lack of fearing God is the reason there is little respect for any authority today. We see this in Romans 13:1-2, "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.*" One would think that last sentence would cause us to fear God, but our fallen nature is quite good at justifying our rejection of authority. One of the greatest reasons we no longer see a danger in rejecting the idea of fearing God is that we have ceased to insist on the way of the cross as the only way for followers of Jesus to live their lives. Countless Christians have forsaken the humble, sacrificial path of the cross for the cause of self. The New Testament often talks about living with a fear of the consequences of sin and of displeasing God: "*Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire*" (Hebrews 12:28–29). The truth is, we cannot come to worship and operate on a human level, without ever reckoning with the living presence of God in this room. God is powerfully present here this morning, just as you and I live in the power of His presence every moment of every day of our lives, no matter where we are. The truth is, you and I cannot know God on any level without coming to terms with the awesome fact that God hears and knows every thought in our mind, and sees and knows every imagination, desire and attitude of our heart. We are in fatal error if we think God's grace is just another name for His tolerance. Rather let us consider Hebrews 10:31: "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*"

As a church we will not come to know the “*great power*” of God and the fruitfulness of His “*great grace*” until we come to terms with our individual and corporate sin, and deal with those sins with truth and love and reverent obedience. Yes, God is “*merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*” (Exodus 34:6). But we risk so much in our families, in our church, in our lives when we turn from His sovereign will, when hide our sin, and when we convince ourselves that we are something we are not. The truth of God is: when we criticize our church or when we criticize others in the church, we cross the same line Ananias and Sapphira fatally crossed. God calls each one of us to deal with our own sin, and then pray for our church and for those within our church family.

The moment you or I pretend to be something that we really are not, the second we assume before one another a stance of spiritual maturity which we do not possess, at that moment death enters in -- just like that. We are, at that moment, immediately cut off from the flow of the life that comes from Jesus Christ. That doesn't mean we are no longer Christians, but it does mean that the life of the body of Christ is no longer flowing through us. Instead of being part of a living, vital body, we become a dead and unresponsive cell in that body. The tragic sickness of the church is pretending to be something we are not. God knows who we truly are and over time He'll either expose us or take us out.

God's Word reveals to us today that public rebuke gives people a sense of the seriousness of sin, and that in turn acts as a deterrent to sin. As born again followers of Jesus sobriety should mark our behavior regarding sin in the church as we heed the words of Paul in Philippians 2:12: “*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*” When we fear the holiness of God and the consequences of sin, we avoid sin. Thus, the fear of displeasing God and of the consequences of sin does not take away the enjoyment of life, but rather it is the gateway to true enjoyment of life with God. The fear of God is the gift of the Spirit that empowers God's people to be His living witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world that desperately needs God. The fear of God is the power of the Spirit that gives life!

*Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.
All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.
For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great.
Who is the man who fears the LORD? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.
His soul shall abide in well-being, and his offspring shall inherit the land.
The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.
My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.*
Psalm 25:8-15

*The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.
As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.*
Psalm 103:8-18

*Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!
Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack!
The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.*
Psalm 34:8-10

It is the practice in some resort towns in Arizona to spray-paint the grass green in the winter to lure tourists to what looks like a lush vacation spot. That's hypocrisy. What happens in these resort towns though is that when the first spring rains come, the paint is washed into the gutters and streets, which reveals how false the image was of the picture-perfect lawns really were. God does the same in His church; when He rains down the reign of His presence and power onto our lives, we will be exposed for who and what we really are. If we are living false lives for Christ before the world and before one another in His church, the consequences are always fatal. Sometimes it's immediately fatal; at other times, most of the time, it's a slow numbing death of the soul for both the individual and for the church.

The good news is that once the first church was purified of the infection of hypocrisy, "*great power*" and "*great grace*" were evident once again. After they dealt with the sin in their midst, "*great fear*" passed - "*many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles*" (Acts 5:12). The verses that follow verses speak of many coming to faith and many being healed by Jesus. Brothers and sisters, as we continue to pursue the venture of faith that God has called us to at Arrowsmith, we must all take off our masks and admit we are all inadequate. None of us here has any ability that is adequate; none of us has the humble confidence we should have. God has sovereignly allowed us to be insufficient for the task before us, in order that our total sufficiency would be in the God who created us, in the Jesus who loves us, and in the Holy Spirit who indwells in us. May God lead us to become a community of "*one heart and soul*" that gives "*great grace*" with "*great power*" to deal with our individual and corporate failings with "*great fear*" of the holiness of God and the consequences of sin, so we might enter gateway to true enjoyment of life with God, as we cling to our most holy God, who loves us deeply. "*It is a fearful thing*" and a joyful thing "*to fall into the hands of the living God.*" Amen? Amen!

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