

Judgment for Lying to the Holy Spirit; Blessing in the Early Church

Acts 5:1-11

Acts 5:1-11: *“But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. ² And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles’ feet. ³ But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? ⁴ While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” ⁵ Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. ⁶ And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.*

⁷ Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter answered her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?” She said, “Yes, for so much.” ⁹ Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” ¹⁰ Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. ¹¹ So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.”

Background Notes

Acts 4 records the beginning of persecution of the early Christians. Believers have continued to suffer persecution throughout the history of the Church, from that day to this. Besides the external problem of persecution, the early church also faced internal problems. Acts 5 is the record of an internal problem of lying, hypocrisy, and dishonesty. Acts 6 describes an internal problem of complaining by believers.

These same kinds of internal problems continue to plague the local church today. Once again we see that the book of Acts is not only a history of the early Church - it is very practical instruction for dealing with problems in local churches today.

Barnabas, a believer from Cyprus, sold some land and gave the money to the apostles to help meet the needs of the early Christians. Acts 4:36-37: *“And Joseph, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”* This is the same Barnabas who helped and encouraged Paul after Paul became a believer (Acts 9:27), and who later accompanied the apostle on Paul’s first missionary journey (Acts 13).

Barnabas' act of generosity was recorded here as contrast with the dishonesty of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Remember, there were no chapter divisions in the original book of Acts.

It's important to understand that it was not a sin for Ananias and Sapphira to sell their property and keep some of the profit for themselves. In fact, it would not have been wrong if they had kept all the money for themselves (v4). Their sin was that they pretended they were giving the whole price of the land to the Lord. They wanted the recognition and praise that comes with sacrificially "giving everything" - even though they had not given everything. Peter said that this dishonesty was lying to the Holy Spirit. And this sin was so serious that it cost Ananias and Sapphira their lives.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Holy Spirit is God.

Did you ever realize that verses 3-4 are a "proof text" for the deity of the Holy Spirit? *"But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God" (v3-4).* Notice: **when they lied to the Holy Spirit, they lied to God.**

This is a great passage of Scripture to show the doctrine that the Holy Spirit is God. The Bible teaches that God is a Trinity, or a Tri-unity. God is three Persons, each Person is fully God, yet there is only one God. So - **God is One in essence but three in Persons** – the Person of the Father, the Person of the Son, and the Person of the Holy Spirit. There are three distinct **Persons** in the Godhead.

The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is that God is One in essence, but there are three **Persons** in that oneness – the *Person* of the Father, the *Person* of the Son, and the *Person* of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is assumed in the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus said, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."*

The triune God is **not** revealed in Scripture as being "three *phases*" or "three *modes*." No! Occasionally I'll hear Christians say something like this: "God revealed Himself as the Father in the Old Testament; God revealed Himself as the Son in the Gospels; and God revealed Himself as the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. No! In fact, that's **heresy!** It's the old error of "modalism" creeping back into the Church. The people who say that mean well, but that statement is heretical. So let me emphasize it again: it is **incorrect** (and even heretical) to say that "God reveals Himself in three different '*modes*'!"

God the Holy Spirit is a Person, so don't refer to the Holy Spirit as "It." The Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit as "He," and so should we.

a. When we sin we don't grieve an "it." We grieve the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 4:30: *"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."*

b. We're not taught by an "it." We're taught by the Person of the Holy Spirit. John 14:26: *"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to remembrance all things that I have said to you."*

c. We're not guided into truth by an "it." We're guided into truth by the person of the Holy Spirit. John 16:13-15: *"However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth... All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you."*

d. An "it" doesn't intercede for us. The Person of the Holy Spirit intercedes for us.

Romans 8:26, *"Likewise, the Holy Spirit also helps in our weaknesses, for we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groaning that cannot be uttered."*

Here in Acts 5:3-4, the Holy Spirit is shown to be God Himself. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is God.

2. There is a "sin unto death."

1 John 5:16 says that there is a "sin unto death" for the believer. A believer can commit a sin, or continue to live a life of sin, to the point where God disciplines that believer with death. It's far better for that believer to be removed from this earth, for his own sake and for the sake of the purity of the Christian testimony. Such was the case of Ananias and Sapphira. Removing them maintained the purity of the early Church. This discipline of purging had a good and solemn effect on the early Church. Great fear (or reverence) came upon the church as a result. 1 Corinthians 11:30 states that some sinful believers at Corinth were sick and some "slept in death" because of their abuse of the Lord's Supper.

Now the big question: Does God ever discipline a believer with death today? Yes, sometimes He may - for that believer's own good as well as to maintain the testimony of the local church and the body of Christ. Wouldn't you, as a believer, rather be taken home to Heaven early, if you were so involved in a life of sin that to live longer would do further damage to yourself - as well as to the body of Christ? 1 Peter 4:17 says that judgment begins with the family of God.

God may still use the discipline of death today - but be careful not to make hasty or erroneous judgments! Keep in mind two significant *cautions* regarding "sin unto death."

a. Just because a believer is sick or dies, don't jump to the conclusion that illness and death is God's discipline. Christians get sick and die for all kinds of reasons – not just for committing a heinous sin!

b. While the “discipline of death” still exists today, there are no apostles who are authorized to administer it, as Peter did here. Excommunication is the highest and strongest form of discipline that church leaders can authorize today. The “discipline of death” is in God’s hands alone.

All of us are called to minister to believers who are under the discipline of God, to turn them back from the error of their ways before it’s too late and before God must remove them with the discipline of death. James 5:20 says, *“He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”* And Galatians 6:1 says, *“If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently...”*

Practical Application

Don’t test the Holy Spirit!

Peter said to Sapphira, *“Why is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?”*(v9). “Testing the Spirit of the Lord” means that you try to see how much you can get away with before God judges. It means to presume on God’s grace, and to stretch the limits of His longsuffering and patience. Don’t test the Holy Spirit.

Notice in the context that dishonesty and hypocrisy were considered testing of the Holy Spirit. We don’t tend to regard a little hypocrisy as serious sin, or “a few white lies” as serious sin – but Acts 5 teaches that they are! Peter said that Satan had filled their hearts, causing their dishonesty, hypocrisy, selfishness, and lies (v3).

Is it possible that any of us is testing the Holy Spirit by committing these sins right now? Lying is a serious sin! Hypocrisy is serious sin! Dishonesty is serious sin! Let’s examine our hearts. Don’t test the Holy Spirit!