

“The Seriousness of Sin within the Church”

14 March 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Mothering Sunday Video

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 174 You're Worthy Of My Praise

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Acts 4:32-5:42

Sermon:

The story of the Church unfolds. They have just experienced one form of persecution - the threat of violence and physical harm which came from the Jewish religious and political authority, the Sanhedrin - but at heart, it was Satan's use of people and institutions to attack the Church. The apostles' response was to share the experience with the church and pray. The content of the prayer is important and I do not want us to forget it, but rather learn it and use it often when we find ourselves oppressed or threatened because of our belief in Jesus.

- *Consider their threats.* Leave the situation at the feet of Jesus the Righteous Judge; let Him sort it out.
- *Give us boldness to keep speaking of Jesus and the gospel.* Do not give up or withdraw, but ask for God's help to continue speaking, doing what is good, and living for Jesus.
- *Confirm the gospel in the Church with powerful signs and wonders.* Prove the truth of the gospel to us and to others. Let us see You work with power, Lord God.

That prayer was answered, and they were filled afresh with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.(v.31).

We will see later in Ch. 5 how this violent persecution intensifies in v.17-42, and this time they *are* jailed (v.18) and flogged (v.40), which was forty lashes minus one - not insignificant, as people were known to have died from such punishment. Yet they rejoice in being counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus (v.41). Satan can use individuals and institutions to perpetrate violence, threats and oppress God's people. It is to be expected, as Jesus taught His disciples (Matthew 5:11-12).

However, I want to make the focus of our thinking today about the significance of the experience of Ananias and Sapphira, and what their story teaches us about a second danger to the church, namely members who sin, specifically dishonesty and deception within the church and God's hatred and judgement of it.

This week, I read about a well-known Christian leader who has been found to have had a secret life of sexual sin. There has been much written of the harm done to his family as a married man, to the ministry he headed which carried his name, and of course to the wider Christian church. This is incredibly relevant, because Satan has not gone away. He is not creative and uses similar strategies year after year, decade after decade. The Church in Ireland has been devastated by sin within to the extent that our numbers are drastically falling, our effectiveness is limited, and our reputation is in tatters. We need to hear this

message and take heed. We need to fear the Lord and take seriously the lives we live when we profess faith in Jesus.

I. The Church is Healthy (4:32-37)

I hope you have learned a new word or been reminded of it - *koinonia* - fellowship, sharing, common, generous, a description of what the Church is to be. Luke's description shows how the early church had an amazing attitude to possessions (v.32). They had not given up personal ownership altogether, but they held to their possessions so lightly that they shared them with each other completely. In fact at certain times, particularly when a need was known, they would sell possessions to give to the person, family or situation of need. This was administered through the church (v.35); the term "*put it at the apostle's feet*" indicates a legal gifting, handing over to the church so that the church can meet the needs of its people. Just how generous they were to each other is recorded by Luke: "*There were no needy persons among them*" (v.34).

It is a remarkable community, but we must also note Luke's comment in v.32, because the primary role of the Apostles, in fact the reason they were chosen, was so that they could testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The church, then, had two main strands of service: proclamation of the gospel and care of people within the community. Many became Christians, the church grew (5:14), there were no needy persons, and much grace was upon the whole church (v.33). We will return to this in Ch. 6 next week, because it soon became apparent that, as the church grew, this arrangement was burdensome to the Apostles and needed to be addressed.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit moves us to love God and others, and where we can, we need to be speaking of Jesus and meeting need. This is incredibly countercultural and when we do so, we will know the sacrifice of such behaviour. We are influenced by our culture and we tend to hoard rather than share, to purchase rather than give, to hold tightly to what we own rather than hold lightly. However, that said, I believe we are a generous church, do have compassion, meet needs, and yet when we read these verses. We know we can all take further steps along that path of *koinonia*, sharing generously our lives and wealth with the church for the good of others.

II. The Story of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11)

The death of Ananias and Sapphira because they lied and tried to deceive the church and God is shocking, even offensive to us. The reality of divine judgement, so swift and severe, does not fit with how we want to view God. As C.S. Lewis said through his depiction of Jesus as Aslan: "*He is not a tame lion.*" So, we must deal with the reality of this account, understand what happened, and learn the seriousness of sin.

What is the story? Like Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property. However, they together decided to keep back part of the money. The word used here in v.2 is *nosphizomai*, meaning "misappropriate" and in Titus 2:10, the word is translated "steal". This accusation is most likely made because they had previously agreed with the church that they would give all the money for the piece of property, but instead held it back or stole it. We must note that there was no compulsion on them to sell the property or to give all the money (v.4). Such an action is always a totally voluntary one.

Peter discerns what they have done (by the gift of the Holy Spirit) and he links their actions to following the prompting of Satan: "*how is it that Satan has so filled your heart, that you lied*

to the Holy Spirit?" (v.3). They lied to God and were deceitful. This is the modus operandi of Satan as Jesus taught: *"for he is a liar and the father of lies"* (John 8:44). So, they stole, from the church and from God, and they lied or were deceitful toward the church and God. This was a ploy of Satan to undermine and compromise the young Church. He did the same thing with Achan, whom we read about in Joshua 6. When the Israelites crossed the Jordan and were establishing themselves in the promised land, he stole the things devoted to God; he and, sadly, his family were put to death. I read this quote which aptly summarises the reality and emphasis: *"They were not so much misers as thieves, and above all liars."*

Accepting the reality of the situation, that this was serious sin and they experienced swift, divine judgement, what should we learn from their fate?

III. Lessons for the Church

A. The seriousness of sin

It is important that we do not forget the context: the fellowship of the church. The characteristic of that fellowship was open and honest relationships with God and each other. They loved God and they loved each other, and in that there was tremendous blessing and power. I read of an African saying which was prevalent at a time of the East African revival: *"we live in a house without ceilings or walls"*. In other words, there are no barriers between the members of the church and God (absence of ceilings) or between the church members (absence of walls).

Jesus taught often about the seriousness of hypocrisy.

- *"You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye."* (Luke 6:42)
- *"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."* (Luke 12:1).
- In Luke 15:13, Jesus was incredibly angry that the Pharisees would not allow a crippled woman to be healed on the Sabbath when they readily led their donkey to water on the Sabbath. *"You hypocrites"*.

We are not meant to say one thing and do another. It is vital that we recognise the need for honesty and integrity in our relationships with God and each other in Church. Conversely, we need to understand how serious God takes dishonesty and deceit within the Church by those who claim to be His followers. So, where can we start to obediently work this out in the Church?

B. The significance of promises made to God

We need to be careful with the promises we make to God. We make promises to God in baptism, as parents or as individuals, as the church does to the parents and the individuals. If we make these without honesty or integrity, that is profoundly serious in God's eyes. Promises are made to attend church and to encourage teaching of the things of God. The church promises to do everything we can to encourage the child or individual in their faith. We realise these are not always easy promises to keep, but let us be honest and talk about what can be done to help each of us keep the promises we make to God.

Similarly, when we become members of the church, we promise to God, before the church:

in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, to endeavour to live in a way that reflects well on Jesus;

to support the church in its worship and work to the best of our ability;

to submit to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to seek its good.

To make promises and deliberately not keep them is a very serious thing. Integrity before God is vital.

C. The integrity of our relationships

However, in fellowship, we all also need to ask God to help us be honest and have integrity towards each other.

- Resolving not to gossip or criticise another church member.
- Resolve, as far as is possible, in love to deal with the reality of any issue between us.
- Be open and accepting of others, even those you disagree with.
- Stop saying “I’m fine” when you are not.
- Admit your struggle with sin to another you trust (a particular sin).
- Encourage and allow the church to pray for you.
- Commit to others within the church, either a 3D group or some other group of people within the church

None of us have perfect relationships, but the direction of travel must always be towards each other. When we see ourselves taking decisions that remove us from each other or from the fellowship, we are walking in the wrong direction; that is contrary to the Holy Spirit and indicative of sin. Let us confess our poverty in relationships and ask for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

D. The importance of church discipline

The Presbyterian Church was in the past known for its discipline, and as I read for this sermon one commentator named us for our fencing of the table at communion - warning people that communion should not be taken if we are not believers in the Lord Jesus, are out of fellowship with the church, or have a sin we are conscious of, in keeping with the instructions given by the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth in 1st Corinthians 10-11. These should be dealt with first and then communion taken. We were also known for the Kirk Sessions publicly naming sinful behaviour in the church and putting such people out of church for a period of time to encourage repentance. Today we do not do such things, and indeed we have shifted from possible excessive discipline to probably being too lax, but we do recognise that it is important.

The question is, *why* is it important? As any parent or person in authority will tell you, it is because the purpose of good discipline is correction and the fostering of better attitudes, behaviour, and life choices. It should always be done in the context of relationship and it is at heart the exercise of proper authority.

Let us look at what happened in this case to the church and society. Great fear seized them (v.5, v.11) and the fear of God made them both wary (v.13) and curious or interested (v.14). No doubt no-one followed the example of Ananias and Sapphira.

In church, we have pastoral responsibility for those in the church. Greatest responsibility rests with the elders, the leaders of ministries, and teachers of God's word. However, in keeping with the priesthood of all believers, each member has responsibility for other members. This is the reality of being part of a body - when one part hurts, the whole body feels it; when one part is sick, the whole body is not at full strength (1st Corinthians 12:26).

Sin, in whatever form within Church, is a hurt or sickness and it needs to be treated; failure to address the issue and offer the remedy is neglect and ultimately harmful. An oncologist or surgeon would not say to a patient with cancer, "I will not offer you chemotherapy or perform surgery, because it will be difficult and painful." No - they give the painful treatment for the purpose of restoring life.

When we appreciate the seriousness of sin within church, we will seek to deal with it patiently, tenderly and in love. Listen to Paul's words to the church in Corinth: *"Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it-I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while- yet I am now happy, not because you were made sorrowful, but because your sorrow led to repentance"* (2nd Corinthians 7:8-9).

As a church we have responsibility for the spiritual wellbeing of each other, and that means we need to show a deep interest in each other's lives and, when necessary, address sin in each other's lives. To not do so is unloving. The aim of all intervention, though not easy, is to prevent serious consequences in their lives and in the church. Discipline takes sin seriously; it encourages us to stop walking in the wrong direction; its aim is to bring us to repentance and life.

God acted against the sin of Ananias and Sapphira to protect the Church from such sin and as the story of the church continues to unfold, we see that the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers brought respect, fear, conversions, and miracles, particularly through the healing ministry administered through Peter (v.12-16).

The continuing growth of the church made the Jewish authorities jealous (v.17); the gospel again reminding them of their sin in being responsible for the death of Jesus made them furious (v.33). The persecution increases as the apostles are jailed, flogged with the forty lashes minus one, and warned to stop telling *"the people the full message of this new life"* (v.20).

God intervened in two ways to protect the church. Firstly, He sent an angel to release them from prison for the purpose of proclaiming the message (v.19-20). Secondly, Gamaliel, a Pharisee, spoke in closed session, highlighting historical examples of religiously motivated uprisings and argued for time to see if this movement was of God or not (v.34-40). In both, we see God's sovereign protection of the Church and they are released, full of joy because they suffered for the name of Jesus.

The church has been saved from Satan's deception and from sin within. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they are able to offer the message of life. That is why it is imperative that we likewise are serious about sin within the church, and we all seek to be pastorally aware and lead

people away from it, with loving discipline if necessary. Living for Jesus is serious, because it is vitally important that we all, together, walk in obedience to God in the way of life.

Praise: Jesus Paid It All

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: For The Cause

Benediction: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all evermore. Amen.

Discussion & Application:

Ch. 5:1-16

- What did Ananias and Sapphira do wrong?
- How did Peter and God view what they did?
- What are the consequences for:
 - Ananias and Sapphira?
 - Peter (and the apostles)?
 - the church as a whole?
 - the wider society?

Ch. 5:17-42

- What threat are the Apostles facing?
- How does God intervene and for what purpose?
- Verse 29 is an important principle! What are its implications, for the Church and for you personally? (Try to be specific.)