



"When God Exposes Hypocrisy"

by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

Preached on the 4th Sunday in Lent

Text: Acts 4:32-5:11

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IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST,
OUR CRUCIFIED, RISEN AND
ASCENDED LORD, WHO IS NOT
DEAD BUT ALIVE, WHO IS NOT IN

THE TOMB, BUT IS WITH US HERE, NOW WITH HIS LOVE AND HIS POWER AS HE LIVES AND REIGNS AT THE GLORIOUS RIGHT HAND OF GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. DEARLY BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD...

We are traveling through the book of Acts – the book of the Bible that records what happened to the Church after Jesus rose from the dead. So far it has been a wild ride... Jesus continues to direct his church, meeting with his disciples and teaching them for 40 days after he rose from the dead. He then sends the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter preaches about Jesus' death and resurrection, and 3000 people are baptized and become followers of Jesus. The church meets together, studies the apostle's teachings, prays, celebrates Holy Communion and cares for each other in a very generous manner. God then does a great miracle through Peter and John. A crippled man sitting at the door of the temple is healed by Peter in the name of Jesus and once again Peter is able to tell about Jesus' death and resurrection from the dead. The church grows to over 5000 believers but Peter and John are put in prison by the Jewish leadership and then are commanded not to speak or preach in Jesus' name any longer. We left the church last week as they were praying for God to give them the courage and the boldness to continue to speak in Jesus name despite the threats of the authorities. God responded to their prayers and the entire church was encouraged and spoke God's word boldly.

Acts 4: 32-37 continues the story... "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet."

Don't destroy the beauty of this by assuming that everyone was required to sell their possessions. The hearts and minds of the believers were of one mind and they willingly gave to each other as needs arose. The result was that there was no needy person among them.

This common heart and mind... this caring for each other... needs to be a constant theme among us as Christians. Nothing backs up our preaching and teaching more than our loving care for each other. Jesus himself told us this... John 13: 34-35, Jesus says "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Meanwhile the Apostles, with great power continue to preach and teach about Jesus' death and resurrection as the authorities look on in frustration. Then we get a specific example of this spirit of generosity that was flowing through the church like a mighty river. A believer by the name of Joseph, from the priestly tribe of the Levites sold some land he owned and put it at the disciple's feet to be used for the needs of the poor. It seems that the Apostles had given Joseph a nickname - Barnabas – which means 'Son of Encouragement'

Sadly there was a family in the church who witnessed this action and instead of being inspired to generosity began to desire that others see them as generous. Let's see what happened... Acts 5: 1-2, "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." Now let's make some things clear. Ananias and his wife were not required by the church to sell their property. Nor were they required to give all the proceeds from the sale. Rather – they were looking for the accolades of being seen as though they had given the entire proceeds.

But God sees all. God sees our hearts. And the heart's Ananias and his wife Sapphira were not where they should be. They were making a grand show so that they could be viewed as more generous than they actually were. This was hypocrisy. And hypocrisy is one of the most devastating spirits that can invade a church. For it fuels the fires of all those who mock the church and say, "Ah – their all just a bunch of hypocrites – so their message is a bunch of lies."

Listen to what happened next... Acts 5: 3-11, "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." 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. 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. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."

Lying to God's Holy Spirit. Testing the Spirit of the Lord. Ananias and his wife fell under God's judgment and dropped dead. The passage ends, "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."

A couple of questions... Why would God do that? How can a loving God take the lives of a man and his wife over a few dollars? Didn't Jesus die for their sins too? Were they not followers of Jesus? What happened to forgiveness and grace?

So often in the church we have people like Barnabas. People who do much good, are very generous, humble, and bring glory to God. Their actions towards others in need are bright shining lights in a dark world. We've read twice in Acts how many were just like Barnabas and that there were great voluntary acts of generosity going on in the church.

These acts of generosity were also fueling and supporting the preaching and teaching of the Apostles. The public viewed the followers of Jesus as genuine, loving, and caring. They were attracted to Jesus and the church.

But so often today we see the actions of a few completely destroy the actions of the many. Think about the Roman Catholic Church for a moment. So many in this Church are responsible for the first orphanages, the first hospitals, the first soup kitchens, and the first schools and universities. Literally thousands of Catholics down through the centuries giving their lives to help the poor and needy. There is perhaps no other institution in history that has done as much good.

Then, in the midst of all this good – a few very bad people who committed some horrible sins against young children. What is the result? Today everyone looks at priests or monks or nuns differently. Despite the selfless sacrifices of thousands of Catholics who supported and gave their lives to care for the poor and the needy all these actions are painted black because of a few hypocrites.

Can you see the devastation to the church and the mission? The church in Acts was seen by the public as generous and caring. If it were exposed that this was just a 'front' and that some of the Christians were 'faking' their generosity it would have brought the genuineness of the whole church into question and also brought into question all the good actions of those like Barnabas who had willingly and sacrificially given to serve the poor.

God was protecting the young church and exposing hypocrisy. And the message was clear. You're dealing with God, the Creator, the One who gives life and takes it away. God sees all, knows all, and is almighty. There is none like him.

He protects his young church from hypocrisy by exposing it and punishing those who would destroy the good work done by others. And he doesn't try to sweep in the incident quietly under the rug of history so that no body knows about it. God has engraved in Holy Scripture so that all Christians of all time can hear about it and learn from it. God is not embarrassed by his actions – and if you're embarrassed by it then you need to repent.

The followers of Jesus are God's Church. God's people. They are in a relationship with the one true God of heaven and earth. Hypocrisy will not be tolerated but rather, exposed! Let the world call us hypocrites but may God never find that among us.

Is that how you view the church today? It's not all fun and games. While it is completely true that God is loving, kind, merciful and forgiving – it is also completely true that he protects his people and the mission of the Gospel. Godly fear with godly joy makes for godly peace – and this is the best mix for the followers of Jesus.

God takes the mission of his people very seriously and perhaps we need to remember that. When we give, when we serve the church and help each other, let us remember to check our motives. We are to serve Christ and others. If we have hidden motives we need to be honest with them and repent of them because this is God's Church and we'd better not forget that.