

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 5, 2010**

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

Acts 5:1-11

CHURCH AS IT WAS MEANT TO BE

Just last Monday I got the kind of email pastors often get. (No, not an anonymous email suggesting that I go into another line of work.) This one was advertising a new sermon series by a well-known preacher, consisting of five messages from Acts 3, 4, and 6 on the theme of “Church As It Was Meant To Be.” These three chapters do give us some amazing pictures of how God Himself was on the move in and through the lives of those first followers of Christ in the New Testament church.

The picture of the church at the end of Acts 4 is especially beautiful. In fact, it sounds a lot like paradise. It is the kind of church I think we would all like to be part of. Starting in verse 32, we read that there was unity in the church. The believers were all of one heart and mind (4:32a). They were all on the same page in their devotion to Christ and their love for one another. They shared everything they had with one another (4:32b). There was not a single needy person among them, because when there was a need, those who owned property or houses would sell them and then give the money from the sale as an offering to be used to help anyone in need (4:34-35). Peter and John and the other apostles continued to testify with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (4:33a). Great grace – God’s grace – was upon the church (4:33b), and they knew it. They felt it. They rejoiced in it.

To sum it all up, they had great unity in the church, which is itself a gift from God to be cherished and protected. There was great love in the fellowship, expressed in acts of great generosity. There was great power in the apostles’ ministries of preaching and healing. And they experienced great grace, as they saw God at work in remarkable ways. They breathed the air of grace. It really does sound like “Church As It Was Meant To Be,” doesn’t it?

NOT THE WAY IT WAS MEANT TO BE

But then we turn to chapter 5, and we find that there is trouble in paradise. What we see in the tragic story of Ananias and Sapphira is definitely not church the way it was meant to be. (When I refer to Ananias and Sapphira together, I’m going to call them “A and S.”)

If the church at the end of Acts 4 sounds like the perfect church, we discover in Acts 5 that somehow, some imperfect people got into the church. Can you imagine that? And they acted like the imperfect people they were. (Of course, that would never happen here, because we all have it all together, right? We’re all just like Mary Poppins – “Practically perfect in every way,” right? Unlike A and S, we would never give in to the temptation to try to make ourselves look better than we really are, would we? Of course not. Ha!)

A and S were members in good standing of the church in Jerusalem. They had aligned themselves with Christ and the fellowship of His followers. The name Ananias means “The LORD is gracious.” Sapphira means “beautiful.” But there was nothing beautiful or gracious about their conspiracy to deceive both the Holy Spirit and the church.

The way it looked to the casual observer, A and S did a good thing. Like others in the church, they sold a piece of property they owned, and then made a contribution to the church to be used to help anyone in need. Sounds like a good thing, doesn't it? The problem is that they weren't honest. When they presented their offering to the church leaders, they claimed they were giving all the money they had gotten from the sale. But they secretly kept part of the money for themselves. Both of them were in on it.

There was nothing inherently wrong with keeping some of the money. As Peter pointed out when he confronted Ananias in verses 3 and 4, they didn't have to sell their property. There weren't any church rules that required them to do it. There was no pressure to do it. People in the church were doing it because they wanted to, not because they had to. They were motivated by love. A and S were under no obligation to sell their property. When they sold it, they were under no obligation to give any of the money to the church.

But you know what they did. They pretended to give all the money they got from the sale to the church, when in fact they secretly kept back some of the money for themselves. They pretended to be more generous and more sacrificial in giving than they really were, because, like just about everyone, they wanted other people to think well of them and look up to them. They wanted to look good. They wanted recognition and praise. So they lied about what they had done. Their sin was not keeping some of the money, but attempting to deceive the church and, if it were possible, God Himself.

But Peter saw through it. He knew what they were up to. I think Peter had the spiritual gift of discernment. The Holy Spirit enabled Peter to discern what A and S had done. And the Holy Spirit gave Peter the courage to confront them with their sin. Confronting someone with their sin is not something that most of us look forward to or enjoy. But Peter exercised his courage muscle, first with A and then a few hours later with S. And God acted in a dramatic way to bring His judgment to bear on them.

There are three lessons I think the Lord wants us to learn from this tragic story.

1. YOU CANNOT FOOL GOD

The first lesson to learn is that it is foolish to try to fool God. It may be possible to fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, as Abraham Lincoln once said. But you cannot fool God. You cannot deceive Him. It is impossible.

George O'Leary is the football coach at the University of Central Florida. But in 2001, he was fired from his position as head coach at Notre Dame just a week after he was hired, when it was discovered that he had padded his resume years earlier to make his academic and

athletic background look better and more impressive than it really was. He never corrected his resume, and his deception came back to bite him.

Jack Genot wanted to be a hero so badly that he made up a story about serving with the Marines and being held as a POW during the Korean War. On the uniform he wore on special occasions he displayed fake medals he had ordered from a catalog – a Bronze Star, a Silver Star, and two Purple Hearts. He would march in parades and talk to school children about his war “experiences.” He even got a special license plate reserved for wounded veterans by forging discharge papers. But then someone got suspicious and began to investigate his claims, and eventually Genot confessed his deception, saying he couldn’t stand living the lie any longer.

And then there is Marilee Jones, who served as dean of admissions at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) from 1997 to 2007. She resigned after admitting that the resume she submitted 28 years earlier, in 1969, for an entry-level position in admissions at MIT was filled with lies. She had misrepresented her academic record, to make her resume more impressive, and, by her own admission, did not have the courage to correct her resume at any point in her career. Ironically, she wrote a book called *Less Stress, More Success*, in which she said: “Holding integrity is sometimes very hard to do because the temptation may be to cheat or cut corners. But just remember that ‘what goes around comes around,’ meaning that life has a funny way of giving back what you put out.” That proved to be prophetic in her own life.

Lots of people lie to make themselves look good. To make themselves look better than they really are. To get a job. To get ahead. To get recognition or praise. And a lot of times, they succeed. Unlike Marilee Jones or Jack Genot or George O’Leary, they never get caught.

You can deceive people into thinking you are something you are not. You can pretend to be something you are not, or to be better than you really are, and you may or may not get away with it. But, as A and S learned, you cannot deceive God. Nothing is hidden from His sight. He sees what no one else sees. He knows what nobody else knows. Not only does God see and know everything we do, He also knows the motives of our hearts. He knows the condition of our hearts. He knew the condition and the motives of the hearts of A and S. And He knows the condition and the motives of your heart.

You may be able to deceive me and get away with it. But you cannot fool God. You cannot deceive God and get away with it. That is the first lesson.

2. GOD TAKES SIN SERIOUSLY

Lesson number two is this: God takes sin seriously. Sin is a serious thing. The sin of A and S was not a trivial matter. It was nothing to wink at or to mess around with. Deceit is spiritually disastrous. It destroys trust. It is toxic to relationships.

What A and S did was so serious that God took drastic action to expose their sin, and to punish them. God would not allow His church, still in its infancy, to be poisoned by this sin of deceit and hypocrisy.

Sin has consequences. Sometimes the consequences are delayed. Sometimes they are immediate. In this case, it was immediate. When Peter confronted Ananias with his sin, he dropped dead. Right on the spot. A few hours later, when Sapphira showed up, it was “déjà vu all over again.” Peter asked her about the real estate deal, giving her the opportunity to come clean and to repent of her part in the duplicity. But she stuck to their story. And she, too, dropped dead.

You may think that the punishment God imposed on A and S was too harsh or too severe. I don't think God needs us to defend or justify His actions. His judgment is always perfectly just. Even when we may not like it or understand it. We can be glad that, in His mercy, God does not immediately strike us all dead when we engage in deceit or any other sin.

Why, then, did He punish A and S so swiftly and so severely? He did it to send a message about how seriously He takes sin in the church, and that this kind of sin, the sin of deception, if not dealt with decisively, will destroy the church.

3. GRACE IS AVAILABLE

Lesson number three: Grace is available to sinners. God is a God of grace and mercy. The story of A and S didn't have to end the way it did. It could have had a much different ending. If they had only come clean and confessed their deception. When confronted by Peter, each of them could have confessed what they had done, told the truth, repented of their sin of deception, and received forgiveness.

Forgiveness was available to A and S. Grace was available. But they were unwilling to repent and receive.

Forgiveness and grace are available to you, too. Whatever your sin, whatever my sin. God's forgiveness and grace are available to us. If you are living a lie of some kind, if you have been trying to deceive your brothers and sisters in the church, or even to deceive God, into thinking you are more spiritual or more godly than you are, give it up today. Stop playing that game. Repent and receive the forgiveness and grace that only God can give. It is available to you.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.