

For the past few weeks we have been thinking about a description of a church we would all like to be a part of. The church in Jerusalem is a church where the Holy Spirit is clearly at work. It is a church that the Lord Jesus is clearly building. But is it too good to be true? Is it really a perfect church? Look at the first word of Chapter 5. It's the word "but". The moment we are tempted to think that it is a perfect church, we see "but". But, all is not well. There is something wrong. There is a concern for this church. There is a danger. And what follows in chapter 5 is one of the most shocking passages in the New Testament, even in the whole Bible. We see sin present in the church of Jesus Christ and we see the judgment of God against that sin, the immediate and merciless judgment. What is happening here? What is this sin? Why this judgment which seems to be severe in our eyes? What is happening here and what lessons are there for us in this tragic story?

If I were to summarize this passage in one sentence I would use the words of the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 1:15 "Since he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct. For it is written, You shall be holy, for I am holy."

**Sin** - If Barnabas is presented as a model to be emulated, verse 1 describes a model for us to be avoided. However, our first impression of this couple is pretty good. As Barnabas did, this couple also sell a property. In verse 8 we see that it is a field. So they do exactly the same thing as Barnabas. And their two first names also make us think that they are a good couple. Ananias means: "God is full of grace" and Sapphira means "beautiful". Even in verse 2 there is nothing to suggest that there is a problem. We just see them discussing together to see how much of the money they got for the field they are going to donate to the church.

Peter said in verse 4 that it was indeed their field and that they were free to do whatever they wanted with it. The same goes for the money received for the field. They are free to keep everything, give everything, give 10% or give 90%. The sin is not that they don't give all the proceeds from the sale of the field. At first glance, they are a model couple. Giving money to provide for the needs of others is a good thing. So what is the sin? The sin is their lie. The sin is their saying that they had given everything when in reality they had kept a part for themselves. In verse 7 Peter asks the question: "Tell me, is it for such a price that you have sold the field?" Sapphira could have answered, "No, we sold it for a higher price and decided to keep some money for ourselves." If she had said that, Peter would have said, that's fine, thank you for your generosity. But she is lying. She said, "Yes, that's the price. Here is the price we got for the field and we gave everything to God!" This is a lie. This couple is lying. But the question must be asked, why are they lying? Why say they gave away all the proceeds? I think there are several reasons.

The text does not say so explicitly, but there may be spiritual jealousy. Maybe they are jealous of people like Barnabas. It may be that Ananias and Sapphira seek to be praised in the church. Maybe they want to enjoy the same reputation. There is jealousy.

There is surely hypocrisy. They want people to believe that they are more generous than they actually are. They want to sound like they gave everything. They seek to convey an impression of piety and generosity which is false. They practice their so-called righteousness in front of men to be seen. But their giving is not motivated by a love of God or a compassion for others. Everything is false. This is hypocrisy.

But in Peter's response we see something even more serious. Certainly there is hypocrisy, lies, perhaps jealousy, but in verses 3 and 4, Peter puts his finger on what is the most serious sin here: "Why did Satan fill your heart, to the point of lying to the Holy Spirit?" V4b "You did not lie to men, but to God". Here is the great sin. They know God sees them. They plot together, knowing that it is a lie, knowing that it is deception, knowing that it is against the law of God, knowing that God sees them but that makes no difference to them! All that matters is the approval of the men. Despite everything they had seen and heard. Despite seeing firsthand the power of God at work. Despite hearing the gospel preached with power and conviction of sin, they choose together to try to deceive God. They deny his power. "God will not see. God won't know. God won't do anything." There is contempt for God, contempt for the law of God, contempt for the people of God. In verse 9 there is a terrible phrase: "How have you agreed to tempt the Spirit of the Lord?" Tempt the Spirit of the Lord. Here is the great sin of God's people throughout their history, tempting God, provoking God. Time and time again God's people provoke him with their infidelity, their idolatry. "We know you see us God. We know you hate lying and we don't care! You won't do anything!" They stand before the face of God. They look God in the eye and they lie.

And if Peter hadn't said anything, the members of the church would never have known. Everyone thinks "What a pious couple. What a model of love and compassion!" But God sees. God knows. And God has seen. The sin

**Judgment** - We all agree, I imagine, that the sin of Ananias and Sapphira is indeed a serious sin. But what about God's judgment? Isn't there something in us that thinks the judgment is a little harsh? V5: "Ananias heard these words, fell down and died." He drops dead. His death is indeed God's judgment against him. Verse 10, the same thing happens to Sapphira. Their sin is serious, but does it deserve death? Let's be honest, if God carried out the same judgment against our sin, there would be a bunch of corpses in this room. We would all be dead if God acted with the same judgment against anyone who gives a false impression of false godliness. If God did this every time we sought the approval of men, there would be no one left in the church.

But God doesn't always act like that. So why do it here? Let's see the context and then also other examples elsewhere in the Bible. The context here is the beginning of the New Testament church. This is a new stage in the history of the people of God. Jesus has gone. The Holy Spirit has come with power. It's a new start. And it makes us think of other new beginnings, other new stages. Take the example of the Garden of Eden. A new beginning for the people of God. And what's going on? Tempted by Satan, a man and his wife conspire to disobey God. The first couple listen to the voice of Satan. They decide that God will not punish them: "You will surely not die." They take what is not theirs and then they try to hide their sin. And God is coming. God judges and death enters the world, spiritual death, physical death. Sin against God has terrible consequences.

And then we think of yet another new beginning for God's people when they enter the Promised Land. They're coming out of Egypt. They cross the desert, cross the Jordan. They will take possession of the Promised Land. Here is a new stage for the people of God. And right after the capture of Jericho, as the people are entering the promised land, a new chapter in the history of the Old Testament church, in Joshua 7 we see the sin of Akân. He steals the ornate robe, he steals silver and gold. He says to himself, "God will not see. There is theft. There are lies. And we read in Joshua 7.1 that "the anger of the Lord was kindled against the Israelites."

The consequences of sin against God are serious. Israel loses a battle against Ai and God says to Joshua in verse 12: "I will not continue to be with you unless you destroy the devoted things among you." God is holding back his presence. He withholds his blessing. And the judgment of God against Achan? It's death.

In the Garden of Eden, in the Promised Land, and in the new church of Jesus Christ, an affront to the authority of God is made, an affront to the holiness of God. God's people provoke God. They put God to the test. They say, "Obeying God is not that important. God won't say anything. God is too kind." And in these three pivotal episodes in the history of God's people, God acts to judge so that his people understand that God is a holy God, a just, pure God, a God whose eyes are too pure to see evil. The people of God must understand that God demands holiness "You will be holy because I am holy."

The first lie in human history was what? Genesis 3.4 "You will surely not die." The first lie seeks to minimize the seriousness of the sin. God said, "Disobeying God is serious." Satan said, "Go on! Relax! God will do nothing!" God acts to say "Yes I will! I am holy. And my people must be holy." This message needs to be heard and understood at the beginning of the history of mankind, at the beginning of history in the Promised Land, at the beginning of the history of the Christian church. We must not think in the church that God is indifferent to sin. We must not think that God doesn't see. You cannot persist in sin with impunity.

Throughout the last week I asked myself the question: Ananias and Sapphira, were they true disciples of Jesus? Were they really converted? The text does not tell us. But suppose they are not true genuine believers. What does this story teach us? It serves to warn the person who has a facade of piety, who wants to make a good impression in the church but who refuses to repent and surrender his life to King Jesus, who refuses to take up his cross and follow Jesus. It is a warning to the person who enjoys the idea of being a part of the church, who gives the impression of being a disciple of Jesus but in his heart there is no saving relationship with the Savior. And that story says to that person, "God sees your heart. God sees your motives. What sees through the facade. And God is angry with you. If you don't repent, if you don't kneel before Jesus, God will judge you as He judged Ananias and Sapphira. Do not take the grace of God lightly. Don't provoke God. Don't make fun of God. Do not think that since God has not judged you yet, that you can persist in your rebellion with impunity. If God hasn't judged you yet, it's to give you time to repent so don't provoke God. Come to him in repentance and in faith. He sees you and he will judge you if you persist in your refusal to give your life to Jesus. You can hide the reality of your heart from the sight of others, but not from God. Hebrews 4:13: "And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to give an account."

But it may also be that Ananias and Sapphira are true disciples of Jesus, truly converts who have simply yielded to temptation before them. They are seduced by the approval of men. Their thoughts are those of men and not those of God. And if so, there is a reminder for us who are Christians, followers of Jesus. If we are tempted to think that our sin is not serious, that our sin will have no consequences, that God is a God of grace and that he doesn't really mind, we must know that there are always consequences of our sins. Maybe the consequences won't be as obvious as they are here, but there will always be consequences.

If we take sin lightly, if we persist in it, there are bound to be consequences for our relationship with God. We will become lukewarm towards God, towards his Word, towards prayer, towards his people. We will have less desire to enjoy fellowship. This will have a negative impact on our relationship with others, on our testimony.

God has compassion on his children. He is slow to anger. He is rich in love, but since God is love, God will discipline those he loves. There will be no condemnation for anyone who is in Christ but there can be discipline. In Hebrews 12 we read: "For the Lord corrects him whom he loves: he chastises all those whom he recognizes for his sons" The child of God can know the chastisement of God, the discipline of God. He can, like David in Psalm 32, moan all day long, feel the hand of God on him night and day. God can withhold his blessing because of our sin. Let's be clear. We cannot persist in sinning against God with impunity.

Dear friends, each of us should regularly examine ourselves. We all have to examine our hearts, examine our motives. "Is the life I lead in front of others really the reality or is it a facade to gain the approval of others? My beautiful pious words, are they just beautiful words that hide a heart that persists in sin? Do I lead a double life, one life for church on Sundays and another life at home or at work? Am I testing God with my spiritual hypocrisy? Am I lying to God? Am I provoking him with my refusal to repent? His Word has touched me time and time again. I have heard his voice many times. I know what he demands but I persist in my sin. God wants his people to be holy and pure and these verses show us that he is ready to act to purify his church.

**Grace** - Maybe you find it hard to see the grace in this story. But it is there. It is there in Peter's question in verse 8. Peter does not have to ask Sapphira this question. But Peter's question gives Sapphira an opportunity to confess. The question gives her an opportunity to repent. Peter gives her the opportunity to put an end to the facade, to remove the mask from her deception. Behind this question from Peter there is another question: Do you have something to confess to God? Are you hiding something from God? Do you have something to say to God? God gives you this opportunity to tell him the truth, to repent. Grace is offered. And this morning, with the proclamation of the Word of God, the grace of God is offered. And this passage asks us the same questions: God is there. You don't have to try to hide anything. He sees everything. But he asks you to confess your sin to him. He asks you to speak to him, to kneel before him and to tell him the truth, the truth so long hidden from view but known by God.

The table in front of us is an invitation to come and confess, to end the lies, to say "Enough! I can't go on like this anymore. I don't want to go on like this anymore. Lord, you know everything. You see my life, my heart, my facade. I can't hide anything from you. Forgive me. Show me mercy. Pull me out of the mud of my sin and set my feet on the rock." What do you need to say to God this morning? He will listen to you. He is waiting for you with open arms. Grace is offered. He is ready to forgive everything. This is what this table reminds us of. Jesus gave his life, he shed his blood to pay the debt of our deception, our lies, our facade, our hypocrisy. It's hard to confess. It's hard to take off the mask. It's hard to ask for forgiveness, but this bread and this wine reminds us that forgiveness is there, forgiveness is assured. Salvation is assured because Jesus assures it through his broken body and his shed blood. Sapphira refused the grace. She rejected the opportunity that Peter gave her. This was the last chance she had. Grace is offered to you this morning. Don't refuse it. Come. Confess! Take off the mask! Lay down the burden of your sin at the feet of the cross and God will forgive you in Christ.