

Negative Example: Ananias and Sapphira

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This chilling account of the sudden deaths of Ananias (Hebrew, "the Lord is gracious") and Sapphira (Aramaic, "beautiful") makes us face the fact that God deals with sin, especially church members' deceit and lack of integrity. If God acts to preserve the integrity of the community that the gospel produced, we can have increased confidence in the truthfulness of the message itself (Lk 1:4). That's the good news for the inquirer. This narrative is bad news, though, for any who would take a casual approach to entering the kingdom of God.

A Man Who Was Good to His Family (5:1-6)

Living out their unity with the believers, Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold real estate (see 5:3), brought and placed money at the apostles' feet. This action paralleled Barnabas's (4:37), with one significant difference. In collusion with his wife, Ananias *kept back part of the money for himself*. Literally, he embezzled from the sale price. This is paralleled in the LXX report of Achan's sin (Josh 7:1), in secular sources describing the pilfering of gold dedicated to the god Apollos (Athenaeus Deiporosophists 6.234) and in the keeping back of crops that had been declared common property in the Celtic tribe Vaccaeii (Diodorus Siculus Library of History 5.34.3).

Peter exposes the fraud. He knows the truth, whether by hearsay, reading Ananias's face or Spirit-empowered insight. By asking Ananias why Satan has filled his heart for the purpose of lying to the Holy Spirit and embezzlement, Peter exposes the spiritual battle that is raging (compare Lk 4:1-13). Satan now attacks Christ's mission from within as he had done through Judas and Peter (Lk 22:3, 31). The "father of lies" (Jn 8:44) starts in the heart, the source of all decisions concerning possessions and their relation to God (Lk 12:34; 16:14-15; Acts 8:21-22; contrast 2:46; 4:32). Ananias shows not simply a lack of honesty in bringing only a part of the sale price but also a lack of integrity--bringing only a part while pretending to bring the whole (Stott 1990:109).

Peter now exposes Ananias's full responsibility: he had full control over the property before it was sold, and over the sale price before he contributed any portion to the common fund (5:4). This statement can help us understand the arrangements of having all things in common (2:44; 4:32) and the practice of selling property and bringing the proceeds to the apostles as a contribution to a fund for the poor (4:34-37; compare 2:45), for it shows the voluntary, even periodic nature of the process. Peter again asks the piercing question "Why?" This sin, like all sin, is finally not against human beings but against God.

But sin blinds us to the true nature of the offense: that our sin is against God. Sin also blinds us so that we choose short-term gains in this life, heedless of the long-term loss in the next (Lk 9:24-25). For Ananias it was the possibility of being praised for his generosity while keeping a secure nest egg for his wife (Hebrew *ktubah*, or dowry paid to a wife in the case of a unilateral divorce or at his death--see *m. Ketubot*; Derrett 1977:196).

As Ananias listens to this expose (NIV's *when Ananias heard this* does not do justice to the simultaneous action indicated by the present participle), suddenly he falls down and dies (*exepsoyzen*, used primarily in accounts of death as a result of divine judgment--Acts 5:10; 12:23; Judg 4:21). God, the knower of all hearts, has assessed Ananias's unrepentant heart and immediately judged him for his sin (contrast Acts 15:8).

Such a punishment, "death at the hands of heaven," was a recognized penalty in Old Testament and Jewish law. The punishments for partaking of the priestly tithe while ritually unclean and the strange fire of Nadab and Abihu are the closest parallels (Lev 10:1-7; 22:9; *m. Keritot*; Derrett 1977:197). No wonder great fear comes upon the Jewish Christian bystanders (compare Acts 5:11; 19:17).

Such discipline certainly has its deterrent value. The hasty, unceremonious burial of Ananias shows the believers recognize that God's judgment has fallen on one who by his embezzlement had violated the transparent unity of the Spirit-filled assembly (see Lev 10:6; *Semahot* 2:8). The young men (young in age, not office) cover his eyes and wrap his body in a shroud (*synesteilan*; the word *systellontos*, referring to a functionary related to burials, has been discovered on an inscription in a synagogue in Beth Shearim--see

Safrai 1976:776). Without the traditional rituals of mourning, Ananias is taken outside the city and buried.

Beautiful Conspirator (5:7-11)

Three hours later Sapphira arrives. Luke, given his mention of her ignorance, probably intends us to understand Peter's question to be about the agreed-upon false price, not the true price. Either way, his inquiry gives her an opportunity to confess or persist in her sin (compare Lk 22:48).

In response, Peter again uses the penetrating "why" question. The NIV emphasizes Peter's disbelief by phrasing it *How could you . . .* He reveals his knowledge of the crime and points out its implications for their covenant relationship with God. In the wilderness the Israelites through their unbelief and murmuring against God were actually putting him to the test to see if he would indeed punish sin. At Kadesh Barnea they discovered that he does (Num 14:20-23; Ps 95:7-11; compare Deut 6:16). So Ananias and Sapphira learn that in this life God can, and when he chooses will, punish sinners either by immediate death or by some other means. This can happen to those who claim to be, and may truly be, a part of his covenant people, enjoy his salvation blessings and yet deliberately sin and remain unrepentant (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Jn 5:16-17).

For Christians today this is still a temptation: to so luxuriate in the love and grace of God that we do not take seriously the consequences of our deliberate sinning. But God will not be mocked (Gal 6:7-8).

In a prophecy and an effective judgment, but not a curse, Peter declares that the young men who buried Sapphira's husband (*the feet of points* to their function as transporters of the dead) are at the door and will soon carry out another corpse--hers. Luke heightens the impact with the phrase *at that moment* (5:10).

Thus Sapphira too experiences divine judgment by immediate death, and the believers again respond with dishonorable burial. The lack of reference to wrapping the body may reflect the Jewish custom that women could wrap both men and women, but men could wrap only men (*Semahot* 12:10).

Great fear comes on the whole church. This is the first reference in Acts to the body of Christians as the "church" (*ekklesia*). This term, though used in secular Greek to describe citizen assemblies (compare Acts 19:32, 39), derives its special theological meaning from its use by the LXX to consistently translate the Hebrew *qahal*, the assembly or congregation of God's people. For Christians to use this word to describe their corporate identity was to claim to be the true people of God, the rightful heirs of God's promised salvation blessings. To find it at the climax of this passage only heightens the seriousness of Ananias and Sapphira's sin and gives explicit justification for the severity of their punishment. And Luke lets us know that the dread extended to non-Christians as well.

The message of this for Christian and non-Christian alike is self-evident. Christians must realize that the selfless, transparent fellowship of the church must never be violated by selfish hypocrisy. Further, it is proper to employ discipline to guard the church's integrity, unity and purity. For the non-Christian, this account is a warning: Think twice before joining this holy fellowship. Are you willing to pay the price--fully renouncing wicked ways and full-heartedly embracing Christ and other believers in his body, the church?