

Acts 5: 1-12; “To Lie to the Holy Spirit”, Sermon # 18 in the series – “Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on March 25th, 2012, in the Morning Worship Service.

Last week I spoke to you about the early Church being of one heart and one soul in relation to their great desire to see that all the true needs of every believer among them was met. Now here this morning, sadly, we see that the Apostle Peter was called upon by God the Holy Spirit to deal with a problem related to this work of giving to the Lord’s work. A certain man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira did something for which they received an immediate judgment from God upon them. It says here in verse 4 that they lied to the Holy Spirit. It was because of the serious nature of the sins which were committed in these actions of theirs that they both were immediately judged. The reason that this is written down for us is so that we might not fall into similar sins, but rather that a godly fear of committing such sins might take hold of us.

The lessons that we want to learn this morning are related to the Holy Spirit Himself, and how important it is that we grasp His work and mission in the life of every believer. His work and mission, by the grace of Christ, is to make us into holy people. I have 3 truths to convey to you this morning about the Holy Spirit’s work and mission. 1st of all – I want you to understand that God the Holy Spirit sees perfectly all that takes place in your heart as a professed believer or as a real and true believer in Jesus Christ. 2nd – I want you to understand that He is able to communicate His knowledge of any person’s sins to other people if He decides that it is necessary. And 3rd – The Holy Spirit knows how to bring about a good and lasting and holy fear among God’s persevering people in the church. I pray that each one of us will take these truths to heart; that you will live remembering that the Holy Spirit is with every true believer.

1st of all – Let us consider carefully this truth: that God the Holy Spirit sees perfectly all that takes place in your heart as a professed believer or as a true and real believer.
(verses 1 and 2)

“But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession.” “And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostle’s feet.” When God the Holy Spirit is doing His greatest works, Satan also will strive with the hearts of men to produce his greatest deceptions. And those greatest deceptions are not always the kind that men see outwardly. As an example of outward deception, you will recall that when Moses came to Pharaoh with the message from God, “Let my people go and worship Me,” that he and Aaron performed miracles to accompany his words in order to show and to prove that God was with him in everything that he said.

You remember that when Aaron cast his rod before Pharaoh that it became a serpent. But Pharaoh called his wise men and sorcerers and they also did the same thing with their enchantments, it says in Exodus 7: 11. But will you not also remember that Aaron’s rod swallowed up all of their rods? Even so, God takes heed to His own cause of truth and righteousness to show the power of His judgments is greater than that of Satan’s schemes. God desires truth in the inmost being. The Holy Spirit unmasks the Devil’s schemes and brings them to light. The reality of this particular opposition to the forward progress of the gospel was not at first evident to all the gathered believers. But it soon would be. The opposition was very subtle.

It began as the sin of covetousness in the heart of this man Ananias. Ananias was covetous, he was very desirous, to have other people see him as very spiritual, even though he did not have the substance of Christian love and giving in his heart. As Joseph Parker has said, “It was the difference between a principle and a mere rule.” “Ananias tried to be a Christian from the outside.” “He put the hands of the clock to the right time, but left the mainspring broken and the pendulum still.” “We may imitate Christ, and yet not know Him after the Spirit.” “We may mingle with Christians, and yet know nothing of the spiritual power of Christianity.” (Biblical Illustrator, on Acts 5: 1-11) Jesus says that you

cannot serve God and mammon, but many people try. Ananias was one of them. Ananias “kept back part of the proceeds.

Dear believer, when you come to Christ, do not keep anything back from God which yours, but rather devote all to being used in His service. And when you give Him your heart, you are to hold nothing back. He would have all of you to be saved, or you will not be saved at all. He cannot and will not save just certain parts of you. No, He will go through every room in your heart-house, and He will discover all the secret sins that you have. He may even reveal to you things that you did not know about yourself. When you are coming to faith in Jesus Christ, the Father sends His Holy Spirit to shine His light into all the dark places and bring to your attention everything that you thought no one knew about. The Holy Spirit knows all. Therefore you must repent or you will perish.

If you say that you have given your heart to Jesus, it means the whole devotion of your heart. You cannot hold on to any secretly treasured sin and bring it into the kingdom of God with you unless you want to be chastened by the Lord for it. Some say, “I will hold on to my secret love of money and keep some back for myself.” “I will give a little to the Lord, but I will keep all the rest for myself.” But do you not know that you were bought with a price? Do you not know that when Christ died for you that all of your heart would be His? Therefore He sends the Holy Spirit into your heart, so that as His Helper He can help you to see what needs to be gotten rid of. He wants you to understand where you need to change so that you will come to be more like Him. The Holy Spirit will examine your heart inch by square inch, and whatever there is of remaining of sin there, He would have you by His power go on to put it to death in your life. This practice of repentance and mortification of sin begins at conversion, and it continues throughout the life of the true Christian. I do not think that Ananias and Sapphira understood this, or were doing this.

Was Ananias a believer, or was he an unbeliever who was professing to be a believer? The text does not say. The Scriptures teach us that there is such a thing as a person being a false believer. The Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians Chapter 11 and verse 26 talks about being “in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, and in perils among false brethren.” The Lord Jesus in Matthew Chapter 5 speaks about false believers in verse 21 when He says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” He goes on to say there that there will be many persons at the Day of Judgment who will say to Him then, “Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

A person who practices lawlessness does not know the Lord, whatever He might say about himself. What does this show us? It shows us that a person can even have spiritual gifts to prophesy and to cast out demons and to do wonders in Christ’s name, who have never been saved at all. I tend to think that this is what happened here. Here we have a man and his wife who were very impressed with the spirit of giving that existed in the church in Jerusalem. They were very impressed that the believers were so much of one heart and one soul that they were helping many needy saints with their material needs. They saw Barnabas, who had land, sell it and bring the money and lay it at the feet of the Apostles, and they were impressed. They themselves were pretty wealthy people. They sold a possession of land which was theirs, and then they secretly decided together that they would come to the Apostles, saying that they were giving it all, when instead they were really only giving a part of it. Their taking this strategy would make them appear to be very spiritually-minded to all the church. They would be spoken about as being very generous people, when actually they were acting in a very covetous way. The love of money and their ambition to be seen as great philanthropists, and their desire to be applauded for it, these were their motives. The Holy Spirit saw all this perfectly, and He knew that He could not let this supposed gift of generosity stand as a witness to the grace of Christ. There was no grace of Christ in it at all. No, He would come against them because they were deceiving the Church. But even more, He would come against them because they were lying to Him. I want you to see this morning that the Holy Spirit is a Divine Person of the Holy Trinity, sent to you as

a gift from God the Father and from Jesus Christ Himself. You and I must come to see that the Holy Spirit has been given to us in order that we might be holy in all of our behavior; that we might be sincere and straightforward in our heart.

In the judgment of charity, we might think that this couple did not end up in hell, that God disciplined them physically unto death, so that their spirit might be saved in the Day of Christ. I believe that this does happen to some disobedient Christians. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians Chapter 11, verse 27. "Therefore whoever eats this bread or drink this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." "But let a man examine himself and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup." "For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." "For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep." "For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged."

When it says that "many slept" among them for their not discerning the Lord's Body in the Supper, it means that they died. They died having been brought down to the house of physical death by their not having dealings with the Lord over the way that they were living their lives as Christians. If they would have judged themselves, they would not have been judged. Let me ask you whether you believe that you can live the Christian life without having dealings with God the Holy Spirit over the things that you think in your heart; the sinful lusts and passions that lurk there and sometimes even take possession of your heart, which then lead you to the place where you are not acting or living like a believer? Do you really think that you can keep back the best part of what should be your obedience to God and to Christ, and give it over to the Devil to lead you? If you are a true believer, the Lord the Spirit will deal with you over it to bring you to your senses and bring you to your knees.

Christ will become your Advocate with the Father as long as you are willing to repent of all of your sins, secret or open. So when you call yourself a Christian, and you do not desire to repent of them, and in fact you desire to promote them, you open yourself up to eternal death, and God will most certainly take your life. I personally do not believe that these two people were true Christians. Satan had filled their hearts to lie to the Holy Spirit. This was not a sin of infirmity or weakness. They had thought to deliberately lie to the Apostles and the church and get away with it. This was a most deliberate willful sin, and it deserved an immediate judgment.

There were no doubt many sinful thoughts that had been tolerated by these two in this area of covetousness which the Spirit strove with them over, perhaps for years to get them to see it, but they were always resisting Him. Thank God, that in true salvation, the person who is coming to Christ is given grace to desire that the Holy Spirit search him and know him, and see if there be any wicked way in him, and then lead him in life everlasting. Remember the words of Psalm 19, verse 12 – "Who can understand his errors?" "Cleanse me from secret faults." "Keep back your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me." "Then I shall be blameless, and I shall innocent of great transgression." That is the heart of a true believer.

2nd – I want you to understand that the Holy Spirit is able to communicate His knowledge of any person's sins to other people if He decides that it is necessary.

(verses 3-5 and 7-9)

"But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?" "While it remained, was it not your own?" "And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?" "Why have you conceived this thing in your heart?" "You have not lied to men, but to God." "Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last." "So great fear came upon all those who heard these things." "Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened." "And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" "She said 'Yes, for so much.'" "Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?' "Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."

Now these words ought to tell us something about the Apostolic office and the gift of discerning of spirits that was given to Peter at this point. Peter would have never known that Ananias had kept

back some of the price of the land that he sold for himself without the Holy Spirit revealing it to him. Nor would he have known that it was Satan that had “filled his heart” to do so, and thus lie against the Holy Spirit, unless the Holy Spirit had told him that it was so. The Holy Spirit deliberately brought this sin to the attention of the Apostle Peter, so that it would be addressed and dealt with by the church. The Holy Spirit did not deal with this matter apart from the authority of the church. We need to see this. I suppose that many people think that the thoughts of their hearts and the counsels that they take in private, with other people, to sin against the truth, and to sin against the Church of Jesus Christ, are never going to be found out by other people who are in authority to do something about it. But this is simply not true. This text proves that it is not true.

Our second point builds upon our first point. If the Holy Spirit knows exactly all that goes on in the heart of a true believer or a professed believer who is really an unbeliever, then He is also able to communicate that knowledge to others according to the will of God. Peter did not guess at the sin in Ananias and Sapphira’s hearts; he knew it perfectly because it was communicated to him by the Holy Spirit perfectly. See what a powerful ministry the Holy Spirit exercises in the lives of all believers, and even exercising it sovereignly over false believers. He is out to separate the precious from the vile in all of our lives, and in this particular case he used the Apostle Peter to do so. O the things which the Lord the Holy Spirit must put up with in our hearts while His precious ministry is taking place! O how sensitive we should be, not to grieve the Holy Spirit who has been “sealed unto us” until the Day of our Redemption! We know that we are true Christians because of the Holy Spirit’s work in us, bringing us to the place where we will deal with all of the remaining corruption of our hearts.

But let us understand that the Holy Spirit is far from helpless in regard to the serious heart offenses that He sees will destroy our souls if we continue in them. I believe that Ananias had very carefully and very secretly cultivated this sin of covetousness in his heart for many years. He had actually convinced his wife to go along with his reasoning. Peter says to him in verse 4 – “Why have you conceived this thing in your heart?” The Holy Spirit had no doubt patiently worked with him, through having the Apostles and other teachers in the church preach to him and tell him that covetousness was a sin, but Ananias secretly did not want to believe the witness of the Scriptures, nor did he think that his practice of covetousness was wrong. He was justifying it in his own selfish heart.

This was the deceptive nature of his sin. This is what led to his being judged by God. Those ultra religious Jewish men who put Stephen to death in Acts Chapter 7 had heard Stephen preach to them the truth about the history of the Jewish people; their rejection of God’s word to them at various critical points. Stephen related to them that when the Lord Jesus came, they rejected Him and had him crucified. Stephen says to them in verse 51 – “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!” “You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so you do.” Those men probably did not think that they were resisting the Holy Spirit, but they were. They were resisting Stephen’s preaching to them, which could have led to their conversion and their having the gift of eternal life; but they were “always resisting the Holy Spirit”.

I want you to understand that the Holy Spirit is not obliged to have mercy upon men and women who do not want to hear the truth about themselves. His intention is to open the eyes of people, in accordance with the eternal will of the Father, and in conjunction with the Sacrificial death and resurrection of the Son of God, to bring life to all those who will believe. All people who are outside of Christ, the Bible says, are dead in their trespasses and sins. They cannot change their own heart; it is true. But they will have no excuse in the Day of Judgment that they did not believe in the gospel when they heard it. And they will have no excuse for not crying out in prayer to God to change in them what they found that they could not change in themselves.

But this man Ananias and his wife thought that they could lie to the Holy Spirit and get away with it. Such deception existed in their hearts. They had seen the true and sincere generosity of Barnabas and others, and yet since they had a double heart, they thought to lie and test the Spirit of the Lord. O, what sad self-deception! O, the eternal consequences! The Holy Spirit gave them no further space for repentance. I believe that they died and perished in their sins. Let us understand that at any time

God sovereignly chooses to, He can reveal a person's secret sins to the whole world. He did so here, in order to make them an example. But He is also merciful and He often chooses to patiently work with people so that they might see the sinfulness of their own heart and the depths of their depravity before it is too late.

"My Spirit shall not strive with men forever," it says in Genesis 6, verse 3, for he is indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years." That was how long God strove with the Antedeluvian World in the days of Noah before He sent the flood. But the Spirit works as He will with all men. Sometimes he does not wait long to bring judgment where he sees a hard and dangerous heart. This is what I want you to see. His intention is that people repent, but men who are going to endanger Christ's Church, seeking to undermine the good work of the Spirit in bringing them to continue in one heart and one soul, this He must oppose. If they will not repent, especially as a professed Christian, then they will perish.

That is what happened here, and it resulted in immediate judgment following Peter's words of indictment on the guilty sinners. This is a highly unusual case, but we dare not think that it has no application to ourselves. The Holy Spirit was able and willing to reveal this man's sin, in all of its condemning details to Peter, the proper Apostolic authority to convey it to. And so we should realize that the Lord is well able, even in our own day, to reveal the sin of any unrepentant Christian to the church, that the church may together lovingly bring that person under the church's discipline if necessary.

How can we apply this truth to ourselves here today? Let us take notice of church authority. Many Christians in our day do not want to recognize church authority. Authority was given to Peter to confront this problem of their sin by the wisdom and power of the Spirit being given directly to him. This Apostolic authority no longer exists here upon the earth. It does not exist in Popes, or bishops, or priests. They are false and unbiblical authorities. But pastoral authority still exists. And the authority that a pastor or elders wield is not their own authority. It is the authority of the truth of the Apostolic written Word of God, accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit's working.

There are still occasions where this authority, in connection with the church, needs to be exercised in church discipline of a member who falls into sin. Why? To hold people who join the church accountable as members of the body. This is what the Bible clearly teaches. It is so that the work of the Lord may go on with one heart and one spirit in relation to our sincere obedience to Christ, and that God may bless us with lasting fruit, which will be to His glory. There may be hypocrites in the church, but God the Holy Spirit knows how to deal with hypocrites. Sometimes a member's sins if not dealt with by themselves in the presence of the Holy Spirit, come to light. And when they come to light, then the pastor and the church must address them if they do not repent. Why? To be faithful to God and to the soul of that person.

Church discipline is in order that the member in sin might be brought to repentance. Is this done to shame them publicly for their sin? No, not intentionally, but it may be necessary that they experience shame, and this is what always happens when a person really sees their sin. But ultimately, we know, and we glory in the fact, that all church discipline is undertaken out of love for the offending member. It is undertaken in order to bring them to repentance and to see them restored. You should thank God if you are in a church which will hold you accountable if you have fallen into sin; if they see you going astray. Always thank God for a pastor who will bring to your attention a sin which he sees in your life. He is not looking to harm you spiritually; he is looking to help you spiritually and to be a good under-shepherd to Christ in his speaking to you of what has come to his attention.

It is easy for the Holy Spirit, because He is God, to arrange the circumstances which will reveal the sin of any person to the proper human authorities in the church when He knows that it will be for their everlasting good. Ecclesiastes 11, verse 20 says, "Do not curse the king, even in your thought; do not curse the rich even in your bedroom; for a bird of the air may carry your voice and a bird in flight may tell the matter. Now is Solomon speaking of literal birds here? No. The Holy Spirit is the heavenly Dove who descended upon Jesus at His baptism, and publicly confirmed His righteousness.

And the Lord Jesus kept perfectly God's holy law so that you, dear believer, could be saved. And as there are probably some here who, as of yet, do not know Christ, I must urge you not to resist the Holy Spirit's motions upon your heart. Do not resist your need to be savingly changed by Christ's grace. Do not resist His good work of revealing to you, in your heart of hearts, your own sinfulness.

The only way to come to have a pure heart and true, is by faith in Jesus Christ. When you believe in Him, all of your sins of the past are covered. They will not be brought up by Him again. He will not be exposing them to the world or to the church. When you believe in Him, all of the sins that you may discover in your heart day by day as a Christian are covered by His precious blood. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and Just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The only way to maintain your heart before God is to realize that every day of your Christian life, Christ Himself is with you in the Person of the Holy Spirit, and He it is who is guarding you and guiding you into all the truth so that you will not sin presumptuously against such a loving God and Savior.

And then 3rd – The Holy Spirit knows how to bring about a good and lasting and holy fear among God's persevering people in the church. (verses 11 and 12)

"So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things." "And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people." "And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch." "Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly." You see two kinds of fear at work here in the hearts of men. There is a craven fear that was created in the hearts of unsaved men who heard about Ananias and Sapphira's sudden deaths in conjunction with the Apostle Peter's words. And then there was a godly fear which was reinforced and strengthened in the hearts of all the true believers who heard of it. On the part of some of the unbelievers, they "dared not join" the company of believers and become members with them because of God's decisive judgment of this couple. They truly feared the possibility of such a thing, and thus would not join the church.

What can we say to this? It does not appear, at first glance, that they were a "seeker friendly" church there in Jerusalem. We can say that this, that this was not the goal of the early Church to be seeker friendly, but it was their stated purpose to preach the truth of the gospel and the Word of God, and accompany it with doing good works. But remember that it also says here: "But the people esteemed them highly." How could this be? I think that, again, it was because the Holy Spirit was so powerfully working in the hearts of the Apostles and the congregation of this church that the people could see their love for God and their love for one another. They also saw that their love was governed by the truth of the Scriptures and accompanied by the great working of the Holy Spirit to do many signs and wonders through the Apostles, among the people.

This incident of Peter's dealing with Ananias and Sapphira did not bring a division in the church. Rather it says that they were still, "all of one accord in Solomon's Porch". In verse 14 it says that "believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. Let us conclude by saying that true working unity in the Church of Jesus Christ is not something contrived by men, but rather it is established by the Holy Spirit Himself. And is only sin which disrupts the on-going work of the ministry and potentially hinders the progress of the kingdom of God. Here today we have seen that wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit are such, that even those intrusions of sin can be decisively dealt with, and the Church still advance in numbers, truth, and holiness. May each of see the importance of our developing our personal relationship with Christ and our being sensitive to the Holy Spirit's good work and mission in our lives – to make us holy.