

THE COUPLE WHO DUG THEIR OWN GRAVES

Acts 5:1-16

The story of Ananias and Sapphira has waved its warning across the path of men for these centuries, because humanity has not changed much with the passing of time. It still seeks bargains in religion as it does in the markets. We have here a case of agreement. Ananias and Sapphira were one in:

I. Devotion.

They were husband and wife. There is no indication of any discord existing between them. Doubtless, they were regarded by their friends as constituting an ideal couple, being congenial and cooperative in all their dealings.

II. Discipleship.

Ananias and Sapphira were Christians. They were influential in the early church. They owned property, which was quite unusual at that time, and especially among the members of the church. For the most part, the group was made up of exceedingly poor and underprivileged folk. Ananias and Sapphira were not only members of the church; they were active members. They were present at all the services, and unlike many today, took an active part in the life and ministry of the church.

III. Disposition.

Like others who possessed property, they sold what they had in order to give to the work of God. They were following the noble example of such men as Barnabas. Both husband and wife agreed to make this contribution in order that distribution might be made to those in need.

IV. Deception.

1. Their mission was sublime.

This was to give. They were familiar with the words of the Lord Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." The impulse to give to the cause of Christ is to be commended. We are never so Godlike as we are when we give. We are never as happy as when we are giving to and for others so, before condemning this couple, let us praise them for the fact that they did share the desire to give, and backed it up with their gifts.

2. Their motive was selfish.

Their names were inscribed among the 100 percenters--those who had given their all. When they sold their possessions and saw the money lying there before them, they regretted the stand they had taken previously. It was then that they decided to "keep back part of the price of the land." Where was this decision made? Probably in some secret place.

Imagine their feeling of pride when that list of names was read aloud in the assembly! Perhaps there were those in the gathering who looked upon them with envy because of their generosity. Ananias and Sapphire had given up everything for God and others! But was it true? Of course it wasn't. Alas! they wanted credit for giving all.

Think of the many in our churches today who have declared to the world that they have dedicated their lives to Christ, and who in spite of these claims live otherwise. These people attend church services, but secretly love the things of the world. They sing, "I will go where you want me to go" in the church, and then go out and do whatever they want to do and go wherever they want to go. What a contradiction!

What a denial of their dedication to the Lord!

3. Their manipulation was satanic.

"Why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Spirit." Verse 3. They were the founders of The Ananias Club whose duty is lying, whose devotees are liars, whose dues are lies, and whose dad is the devil. Satan told Ananias and Sapphira that they had a right to keep back part of the price of the property, and they foolishly listened to him.

What was their sin? Professing more than possessing. They were pretenders. And a pretender is a hypocrite. They were under no compulsion to sell their property; and having done so, they were under no compulsion to hand over to the church the entire proceeds; but when they made out that the part was the whole, they lied to the Holy Spirit, being actuated by Satan.

The effort to deceive is very plain in this story, but their deception went further than they thought. They tried to deceive the apostles and found that they were trying to deceive God also. The effort to deceive others proved that they deceived no one but themselves. This is the word of the sacred writer, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." We deceive no one but ourselves.

V. Detection.

God knew their sin. All their hypocrisy became known to the apostles. Finally, all knew them for what they were. Little did they realize that judgment was about to strike. "Be sure your sins will find you out."

Their effort to deceive the apostles was exposed. Their victories were short-lived. Their sin overtook them.

Their exposure, which was complete, teaches us the shame of shams. The lives of many are filled with shams; they cannot stand close inspection. Some make vows in the heat of enthusiasm and when the enthusiasm passes the vows are forgotten. Some people make solemn vows to tithe their incomes, but they can never find a convenient starting place, or they find so many places where they can use the Lord's tithe that they borrow it from Him and never pay it back. Let such people remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira. God is not deceived. Shams will turn to shame. It takes more than artful dodging to measure up to our promises and God's requirements.

These two were seeking short-cuts to glory. They were seeking bargain-counters in religion, and they met with shocking disappointment. People usually do in all kinds of bargains, but especially in matters of religion.

This couple wanted the blessings of religion without living the religious life. They wanted the honor that goes with generosity without being generous. They wanted the praise that goes with noble living without living nobly. They wanted the blessings that come to saints without being saints. They wanted greatness at the cheapest possible price. But, as in most cases, they got what they paid for. The grade of honor they received was in keeping with what they paid for it. Many people want to go to heaven when they die, but they are not at all interested in the heavenly life here on the earth. They are like many who are mentioned in the Old Testament as those who worshipped the Lord and served Baal. Out of fear they go to church, and then rush away gladly to do evil.

. Destruction.

1. Sudden. verses 5-6.

Ananias was denied the chance to repent. He knew that he had done wrong, and perhaps wanted to make the wrong right, but this privilege was denied him.

2. Severe.

The penalty inflicted was that of death.

3. Supernatural.

"Thou hast not lied to men, but to God." verse 4.

4. Solemnizing.

"And great fear came on all them that heard these things." verse 5. And after the judgment passed upon Sapphira in like manner, we read these words: "And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things." verse 11.

Largely through this sudden, severe, supernatural, and solemnizing judgment, the church was unified--"and they were all with one accord" verse 12b; magnified--"but the people magnified them" verse 13b; multiplied--"And believers were the more added to the Lord" verse 14; and satisfied.

This incident of Ananias and Sapphira was another one of those regrettable things that sometimes come into a church family. Each generation is shocked by the tragic misfortune of some notable leader who falls into shameful conduct. Christianity's most serious problem has been internal tragedies. Some examples:

1. The betrayal of Judas--one of the trusted twelve.
2. The denial of Peter--another of the chosen ones.
3. The doubt and unbelief of Thomas--also of the selected group.
4. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira.
5. The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, the first two missionaries sent out to evangelize the world.
6. Our church--this church has never been greatly embarrassed by the organized forces of Satan on the outside. Objectors, arguments, and quarrels inside the church in previous years have been far more injurious to the church than all the opposition from without.

God works through human agents. He works by men and through men to enlighten the world, to heal the sickness of men, to build a higher civilization, and to enrich the world with literature, art, and music. He has chosen to work through men.