

Acts Series Part 12

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 August 2009

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] I want to consider a very unpleasant topic this evening. Unpleasant and yet very familiar to us all.

Sin. We practice it constantly and yet seldom speak about it. The word has an old-fashioned ring to it and yet describes a very modern and current phenomenon.

And the passage that will allow us to identify certain features of sin is the passage that we've read in the book of Acts in chapter 5.

Now, this morning we were thinking about Barnabas and we noted that Barnabas is the positive example given by Luke of the manner in which in the church in Jerusalem their possessions were shared in common.

And we noted that Luke also presents a negative example. And it is this example that we will consider now.

[1 : 13] The example of Ananias and Sapphira. And as we do consider the passage, the angle, if you wish, from which we are approaching the passage is to discover what we can learn about sin.

Now, there is a great deal that the passage teaches us concerning sin. And I suspect that what we will highlight is really just scratching the surface.

But I hope that what we do know will be helpful for us all. Now, the incident itself is a familiar one.

But we can maybe just briefly retell the story to help us locate ourselves, as it were, and then move on to look at it from that angle.

What does it teach us concerning sin? Now, the story is a very repulsive story. It's a very chilling story. True for all that, but I think we can fairly describe it in those terms, repulsive and chilling.

[2 : 19] Ananias and Sapphira are part of the believing community in Jerusalem. And as such, they are witnesses of the generosity of Barnabas and others, no doubt, in selling land or property and bringing the proceeds of such a sale to the apostles' feet.

And they are, it would seem, though we can't state this categorically, but it seems reasonable to presume that Ananias and Sapphira were also among the wealthier members of the community.

And so, perhaps, and again, there's a degree of speculation, perhaps there was a sense of a certain expectation on the part of others that they would also give generously.

as others were doing. They perhaps are drawn by the prospect of being held in high regard by the community. Well, whatever the reasons, and we'll think a little bit more about that in a moment, they devise a plan that will allow them to satisfy those expectations that there may have been, to look good before others, and yet didn't involve giving too much to the church, something that they clearly wanted to avoid doing.

So, they sell a piece of land and bring part of the proceeds to the apostles while claiming that it was actually the full amount that they were bringing.

[3 : 47] We're not told what proportion of the total they actually handed over. Possibly, reasonably, I think we could imagine that it may have been a significant proportion.

As a very small proportion, it might have generated suspicions, and they wanted to look good and would have wanted to avoid that. If others were familiar with the property that had been sold, and if they had a rough feel for property prices, as no doubt many did, then if they had brought a miserly sum, then that would have been something that folks would have wondered, well, could that really be the amount for which the property was sold?

So, I imagine that it was a significant sum that was brought, but it wasn't the full amount, and they claimed that it was the full amount. And Peter is granted by God supernatural discernment as to the truth, and he, on the basis of that knowledge given to him by God, challenges and accuses Ananias, who had come alone to hand over the money, and as we've read, he dies on the spot.

Well, some three hours later, as the passage relates, his wife appears, ignorant concerning the fate of her husband, and she's given the opportunity to tell the truth by Peter, but chooses to persist in the attempted deception.

And she, on being confronted with her sin, and being informed of her husband's fate, she, too, drops dead on the spot. Now, this is pretty heavy stuff.

[5 : 32] Perhaps for us, many of us perhaps very familiar with these accounts, it doesn't maybe create the impression that I would imagine it would create on somebody reading this passage for the first time, maybe somebody unfamiliar with the Bible and curious as to what the Bible says, and they would read a passage such as this, and I would imagine many would be quite shocked at what it describes.

It is a very shocking account, and we ourselves, I think, would prefer to carry on hearing about a growing church, and signs, and wonders, and loving, generous believers, as has been our diet thus far, largely in the book of Acts.

And yet, we have before us this shocking incident, and how are we to understand its purpose, and what we can learn from it.

If we can use the language that is used now, if the story sucks, well, it's because sin sucks. And if the account is shocking as it is, it's because sin is shocking.

And let's again consider the account, but as we do so, draw lessons that it brings to us concerning sin and the nature of sin.

[6 : 57] And we will note the lessons not in any order of priority, but rather as they present themselves or as we discover them in the flow of the account. And we'll simply mention a number of things that I think we learn concerning sin as we go through the passage with that concern.

The first thing that I want to say, or that I think we discover concerning sin in this passage and through this incident, is that sin begins on the inside.

Sin begins on the inside. The account begins by simply describing what Ananias did. A man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property and with his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest to put it at the apostles' feet.

It is entirely descriptive. This is what happened. But what happened begs the question, why did he do this? Why did Ananias do such a thing?

Well, he was tempted. And the temptation took root in his heart and he devised a sinful course of action, one that involved lying and deception.

[8 : 17] But well before the plan was executed, it had been conceived in his heart and mind. If our heart is twisted, our actions will necessarily, sooner or later, reflect the condition of our heart.

If we do not guard our mind, we will be with Ananias, easy prey to temptation. The heart is the heart of the matter.

As the prophet Jeremiah stated so clearly and eloquently, the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.

Who can understand it? Well, Jesus himself teaches us in this way, out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Some of the very things that Ananias was guilty of. Where do they proceed? Where do they come from? They come from the inside, out of the heart.

[9 : 30] So before we fall, or perhaps more honestly, before we continue to fall in sin, let's make the business of seeking a pure heart, a priority.

That seeking a pure heart would be your priority. That it would be my priority. Let's take seriously the warning of Solomon in Proverbs.

Above all else, guard your heart. Above all else, guard your heart. There are so many things for us to be concerned about and to give our attention to, but we would do well to take very seriously these words of instruction.

Above all else, guard your heart. We guard our homes. We guard our children. We guard our pension plans. We guard so many things. We ensure everything that moves and that doesn't move.

But here we are reminded, guard your heart above all else. Because sin begins on the inside. But what else can we say concerning sin as we continue to think about this passage?

[10 : 43] Well, we can say this, that sin thrives when the opinion of men is placed above the opinion of God. Now again, what we are doing as we come to that conclusion is in a sense speculating as to the motives of Ananias and Sapphira in behaving as they did.

We can maybe ask the question, well, we've said that Ananias was tempted, okay, but in what did the temptation actually consist? What was he actually tempted to do?

Was he tempted to steal money? Well, no, it was his own money. As Peter makes very clear and very clearly lays that out and says to Ananias, it was your field, it's your money.

Even after you sold it, you were free to do as you pleased with your money. So the temptation wasn't to steal. It was a temptation perhaps to selfishness.

Well, no doubt that was part of it. There was a love of money in Ananias, I have no doubt, and that may well have been part of the temptation that took root in his heart.

[11 : 54] But I think beyond that, the primary problem, the heart of the problem, seems to be the desire to be well thought of, to enjoy the approbation of men, that men would speak well of them.

This was their concern, that they would be congratulated and thanked and celebrated within the community. Look at Ananias, look at Sapphira, look at how generous they are.

Look how sacrificial they're giving. Look how great is their concern for the poor. And this is what they desire. This is what they wanted, that men would speak well of them.

Their concern was the opinion of men. This is what drove them to this tragic deception that they practiced.

And we are left to ponder, what about God's opinion? Were they not concerned about what God thought about them? Was there no thought given to God's opinion about these things?

[13 : 00] Well, the evidence suggests that seemingly very little concern for what God would think of them, for God's opinion of their actions.

And the years have passed, the centuries and the millennia, but nothing has changed. It remains true that the best defense against temptation is the fear of God.

The fear of God essentially being a concern to please God and a healthy fear of displeasing God, of being concerned about God's opinion, of seeking God's approbation, of aspiring to live under God's smile, of fearing God's frown upon us.

This is our best defense, our greatest defense against temptation. When we are more concerned about what others think and what others will say, then we are a very small step from sinning and in a whole variety of ways that we won't spend time listening this evening.

So that's a second feature, if you wish, a second characteristic of sin that it thrives when the opinion of men is placed above the opinion of God.

[14 : 25] There's another element that we find here in this account and it is this, that sin drags others down. We read in verse 2 that Ananias, with his wife's full knowledge, kept back part of the money for himself.

For Ananias to make this particular scheme work, he needed the participation and involvement and agreement of his wife.

He could not pull this one off alone. Necessarily, she needed to know. She would be interested in the sale of a jointly held property.

And so there was no way of doing this without her knowledge. And so Ananias drags her down with him. Now we don't know how this scheme was conceived.

It's not impossible that the idea came from Sapphira. We just don't know. But it certainly would seem to be the case that Ananias is the driving force and he involves his wife and drags her down with him.

[15 : 36] Was she a willing and happy participant? We don't know. But the reality is that she is dragged down by the one who ought to have been the spiritual head of the home, the one who ought to have been encouraging her to holiness and to truth.

And yet he is the one who drags her down into the mire of sin. And sin drags others down. We seldom sin alone.

We seldom sin in a vacuum. We seldom sin in a way that doesn't involve others. It has been so from the beginning in the very garden.

Sin drags others down. Now of course both are responsible and both pay the price for their sin. Both have to give account of their actions.

And yet it is sad to see how this husband is guilty of dragging down his wife in this way. And that is a solemn thing for us to consider in what measure we might be guilty of such a heinous thing.

[16 : 50] One thing for us to sin, that is heinous enough, but that we would be guilty in one way or another of involving others in our sin, of dragging others in, of involving others in that which is displeasing to God.

That is indeed a solemn matter altogether. But this truth also serves as a warning that we would be on guard, that we would be alert to those who would seek to drag us down.

Others in our circle of people who are around us, who we know, it can be even, in the home, at work, or in other circumstances.

Those who would seek to drag us in, draw us in to their wrongdoing. The sinner doesn't like to sin alone. The sinner feels uncomfortable when there are those around him who are not involved and doing as he does.

And there is this great desire to drag people down, that there would be comfort in numbers as it were. Sin drags others down.

[17 : 57] Let us be on our guard. But what else do we learn concerning sin in this passage? Well, we can say this, that sin conceives sin. In the case of Ananias, it began, according to our, in a sense, informed speculation, it began with a proud thought.

The desire to be applauded and celebrated by others. But of course, it doesn't end there. Sin, in the experience of Ananias, doesn't end with this fleeting, proud thought.

Serious though, that even alone was. No, the proud thought conceives sinful scheming. And sinful scheming gives birth to lying and deception and all that we have before us in the passage.

There is a snowball effect. It begins with a very small snowball, but we know as it rolls down the mountain how it becomes bigger and bigger and bigger and how things can just get completely out of control.

And so it is with sin. So often it begins in a way that seems to be under control. Our sin is manageable. It doesn't seem to have huge consequences.

[19 : 15] It seems to be something we can handle. We can handle it. But then it begins to get out of control. Sin conceives sin. Sin gives birth to greater sin.

And things get horribly out of control. And I imagine or I would suggest that the warning for us then is that we would beware of those little sins that seem so manageable and controllable because it is those sins that will conceive new sin and greater sin and all will then go horribly wrong for us and sadly for others too.

But what else can we say concerning sin as we continue to consider this passage? We can say this on the basis of what we read in verse 3 when Peter addresses Ananias.

We can say this that sin flourishes in a heart filled with Satan. Verse 3 we read Peter said Ananias how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?

And then goes on to describe what he had done. Peter's description of Ananias' heart is a very chilling one full of Satan. The language is quite repulsive to imagine describing somebody in this way.

[20 : 42] Your heart is full of Satan. Satan has filled your heart. And it's all the more chilling as it stands in obscene contrast with the words just a few verses back in chapter 4 and verse 31 that describe the community of faith.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. This is how the church in Jerusalem is described and yet in obscene contrast of Ananias it is said how is it that Satan has so filled your heart?

Well chilling but also revealing revealing and reminding us that we do indeed have an enemy of our souls. He is real and he exists and he is actively seeking seeking to seduce us to seduce you into sin.

Satan exists and he is active today. I was at the induction in Roskeen on Friday evening and it was a very happy and inspiring occasion and Ian was saying a few words at the close of the reception and he was thanking Kenny MacDonald former minister of course of Roskeen for words that he had addressed to Ian during the service and he was remembering how at the first communion that they celebrated at the congregation of South U.S.

and Bembecula Kenny MacDonald was the visiting preacher and he had the privilege we might say of welcoming to the table on that occasion I think it was 28 new members that was the fruit of two or three years of pastoral and evangelistic endeavor and these new members were coming to the table for the first time and Kenny MacDonald very tenderly and lovingly invited them to the table but as they were about to disperse from the table Kenny MacDonald had a parting shot for this group of young believers and he said this remember that the devil knows your phone number well it doesn't seem a very encouraging thing to say to a group of young believers who have participated in the Lord's Supper for the first time and yet how wise to remind them remember that the devil knows your phone number and he knows your phone number and he knows my phone number and he is ringing on that phone to seduce us into sin he is real and he is active now is it the case that this active participation of Satan in the sin of

[23 : 30] Ananias and Sapphira is it the case that this in any way exonerated them of guilt could they turn around and say well it's not my fault it's the devil's fault well they could not Satan is active but the Bible assures us that he can be resisted not only can he be resisted but James reminds us that if we resist him he will flee from us and so if we fall under the seducement of Satan his involvement is clear and yet we remain responsible and so there are no excuses it is a warning for us but it provides us with no excuses sin is present and sin flourishes in a heart filled with Satan what more can we say concerning sin well from the words of Peter as he continues to address

Ananias towards the end of verse 4 he concludes with these words you have not lied to men but to God and these words remind us or instruct us that sin is essentially an affront against God you have not lied to men but to God of course he had lied to men but what Peter is saying is that in the first instance the aggrieved party is God himself you have not lied to men but to God and this reference to lying to God and the manner in which it follows on from the reference to lying to the Holy Spirit in verse 3 is quite properly often highlighted as evidence for the divinity of the Holy Spirit you see at one moment he says that Ananias had lied to the Holy Spirit and then seamlessly in the same discourse he says that he had lied to God and quite rightly we take this passage as part of the material the evidence of scripture to come to the conclusion that the

Holy Spirit is indeed God but of course though that is true and though it is helpful for us that is not Peter's intent Peter here isn't concerned with theology Peter's concern is to stress the gravity of the sin of Ananias and Sapphira and its gravity consists in this that it was against God that is why it was so serious God was the aggrieved party in their sin they had no concern for the opinion of God but God had great concern for their sin against him we have sung the psalm where David comes or gives expression of how he has come to understand this following his sin of adultery and murder against thee thee only have I sinned and in thy sight done this ill cried out

David to his God Joseph also understood this when he was tempted by Potiphar's wife and cried out how could I commit this great sin against God and this loss of a sense of God and of the very notion of sinning against God opens the floodgates to all manner of sin and we only need to look around us to see that that is so in our society there has been a loss of the knowledge of God a loss even of a sense of God and certainly a loss of any notion that we can sin against God and so for example in the area of sexual morality that opens the floodgates anything goes you see if you take God out of the picture then anything between consenting adults is fine where there is a victim then even in our society there is some conception of right and wrong well if there is a child hurt or if there is a wife cheated upon then well yes there is a victim and so that is bad but if two consenting adults do as they please then what can possibly be wrong with that who can possibly object and why have those around us and why has our society come to that conclusion because we have lost any conception that

God is the aggrieved party when we sin we have lost all sense of God we have lost all sense of responsibility and accountability to him and so the flood gets open and we see and experience the sorry consequences of that sin is essentially an affront against God but these same words of Peter you have not lied to men but to God tell us something else about sin and to put it very crudely it is this that sin is stupid sin is stupid you see if we if we just think for a moment how Peter describes the sin of Ananias you have lied to God it's difficult to conceive of anything quite so stupid how can any right thinking person imagine that he could pull the wool over God's eye how could any right thinking person imagine that he could con God or deceive God the one who knows all things sin is at heart so incredibly stupid so foolish to lie to God

[29 : 12] Oscar Wilde is reputed to have said there is no sin except stupidity well I don't share that perspective but it is certainly true that sin is profoundly stupid and I don't think any of us want to be stupid but what else can we say two more things I want to comment on as we draw to a close one further thing and then one more and it is this that sin kills and destroys in the account it's a dramatic confirmation of that as first Ananias and then Sapphira dropped dead on the spot and so this truth that sin kills is vividly represented demonstrated but shocking as this account is there is a sense in which what we have here is simply a fast forwarding of the ultimate consequences of sin and what is the ultimate consequence of sin well it is death the wages of sin is death sin kills that is what the Bible tells us what does

James tell us concerning that ultimate and necessary consequence of sin in James and chapter 1 and verses 14 and 15 words I'm sure we're familiar with what does James say there in chapter 1 and verses 14 and 15 but each one is tempted when by his own evil desire he is dragged away and enticed then after desire it is conceived it gives birth to sin and sin when it is full grown gives birth to death what we have here in this account is simply as it were a very fast and rapid coming to the necessary conclusion sin kills sin destroys it not only kills and not only brings death to the perpetrators of sin but it destroys that which is good and that which it infects and that really explains on this occasion the very radical action on the part of God God's concern is that the sin would not destroy this nascent fragile vulnerable church the cancer had to be extirpated before its rottenness could infect all and we might also note that in this cleansing because that is what it is in this cleansing of the church in

Jerusalem a solemn warning is delivered to all and all got the message as we read on more than one occasion great fear seized the whole church and terrible though it was it was a good thing that they got the message sin kills and destroys but one final thing we would note and it's very related to what we've just commented but it is this that sin will be judged sin will be judged the sin of Ananias brought upon him the judgment of God the sin of his wife Sapphira brought upon her the judgment of God as we think about the death of these two individuals there is some debate as to the actual cause of death if you wish the physical cause of death some suggest that the shock of being discovered produced a heart attack that there was a physical reaction that led to the death of both

Ananias and Sapphira well that could be I don't know but regardless of the immediate physical cause what is crystal clear is that we have before us in this passage God acting in judgment now many recoil at this very notion but recoil as we may it remains a reality that we have to come to terms with sin will be judged and to put it more personally sinners will be judged God will not be mocked we may seem to get off scot-free in this life and we may get off scot-free in this life but none will be absent and all will be revealed on the last day sin will be judged sinners will be judged well what to do as we consider these truths concerning sin well certainly we begin surely by examining ourselves by examining our heart by seeking to identify a sin in our own lives and very particularly sin that has taken up residence in our lives that we would identify and that we would repent of that sin that we would come to the one who is ever ready and ever willing to forgive us if we would but confess it if we confess our sins we confess them to a

God who is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness and so I would say to you examine yourself and as you identify sin in your life then come to the forgiving God who is ready to forgive you confess your sin come in repentance and trusting in Jesus and he will cleanse you but also let us guard our hearts as we are instructed to do above all else guard our hearts that we would leave sin aside that he would leave it behind and that we would seek to live holy lives pleasing to God will God help us so to do let us pray let us pray quake we we we we we we we we