

WHAT'S IN MY POCKET?

Commitment Leads to Flourishing | Flourish Series (Part 4)

Text: Psalm 24:1-5; Acts 5:1-11

God's Grace So Powerfully at Work

The story we read from the book of Acts today is one of the most disturbing and confusing texts in all the Bible. It's not the kind of passage I would normally want to preach on when somebody is first visiting our church. It's not the sort of scripture I would be excited about reading to little kids. It isn't on my top ten list of texts for couple's devotions, though I'm sure it would spark conversation. The reason is because this passage at the start of Acts chapter 5 seems to depict God as a greedy, vengeful, demanding deity instead of as the generous, gracious, loving Being Jesus shows us he is. Yet, sometime God disturbs us in order to transform us. I think if you'll sit with this story, you'll find that God is providing us here with *a striking object lesson*, whose aim is not to discourage us but to lead us from death to life. So, hear the Word of God...

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property (Acts 5:1). The word "also" there reminds us that there is an antecedent to this story. As we studied two weeks ago when we read from Acts 4, the life of the first Christians was a remarkably communitarian one. From the time they were Jewish children, the disciples would have heard the words of the famous Psalm: **The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it (Psalm 24:1).** They would have grown up on the practice of tithing – of acknowledging God's ultimate ownership – by giving a tenth portion of their resources for the worship and work of God's temple. But then these same disciples had seen the Lord himself, the one who made and owned and was owed everything, voluntarily giving up his entire life on a cross for their sake.

And something switched for those disciples. Generosity wasn't an isolated act you performed to satisfy God's rules. Generosity was God's entire way, his M.O. The more you knew God, the more you were inclined to be like God. You began to see everything you are and have as a grace that could flow to help others. So, the early Christians had developed a practice of voluntarily making their resources available to one another to meet each other's needs. **God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:33-35).** And the witness of this amazing generosity and abundance resulted in thousands of new people pursuing the way of Jesus too.

The Lightning Bolt Lesson

This is the crucial context for the property sale reported in Acts 5:1. But this is also where the story gets a bit more complicated, because: **With his wife's full knowledge [Ananias] kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet (Acts 5:2).** Now, on the surface, this doesn't seem to be a problem, does it? I mean, nowhere in either the Old or New Testaments does it say that we HAVE to be totally generous, does it? I mean, God seems pretty pleased with the Israelites when they are committing a mere tenth to his explicit purposes. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus seems overwhelmingly pleased with Zacchaeus when he commits half of his capacity to the purposes of God's kingdom. So, who's going to find fault in Ananias or Sapphira for keeping some of the proceeds of their land sale for themselves?

Well, apparently, *somebody* sees something wrong: **Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (Acts 5:3-11)**

Well, yes!?!?! You bet **"great fear seized the whole church."** Are you telling me that if the offering plate comes around and I'm not all in there, there's this chance that a lightning bolt comes down from heaven and the ushers carry me out?! Thank you, but I think I'll watch the service on TV or livestream. Or does it work that way with the whole "Click and Give" thing too? Wow, now this is really scary and upsetting. God knows everything I have in all the pockets of my life. He knows what I am currently putting at his feet for his kingdom's work and what I'm keeping for my own purposes. Is He as demanding and dangerous as this story suggests? Did he ZAP Ananias and Sapphira to terrorize me or you into giving more? If God's that harsh, who's going to want to be a Christian? Once this story hit social media, how did the early church grow?

The Importance of Living in Truth

Please hear me clearly on this, because this very important passage is frequently misunderstood. *This is not a story about the amount any of us give. This is a story about the attitude we bring. It's not about what we do with our treasure; it's about what we do with the truth.* Truth matters a lot to God. What got Ananias and Sapphira in such trouble – what moved God to make their lives an early object lesson (i.e. a point not a pattern)¹ – is their lying. Peter says to Ananias: **You have not lied just to human beings but to God (v.4)**. Later, he says to Sapphira: **You conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord (v.9)** – in other words, whether God even knows you are lying. And it turns out that God did know.

As a family went to church one Sunday, a mother gave her child a one-dollar bill and a quarter. *"Sweetheart,"* the mother said, *"you can place either one in the offering plate. It's entirely up to you."* As they were driving home, the mother asked the daughter what she had decided to give. *"Well, at first I was going to give the dollar,"* said the daughter. *"But the pastor said that God loves a cheerful giver, so I felt like I would be much more cheerful if I gave the quarter instead."*² Well, at least that's being truthful. As Jesus observed in his famous parable of the housebuilders, you can at least make reliable improvements when you build on the rock of truth. That little girl might, over time, come to find even greater cheer by learning the huge impact that even greater generosity could have. But not if she got comfortable with lying to God and herself about the extent of her faithfulness. Not if she dropped in the quarter and pocketed the dollar and told herself that she was a generous person.

That, I think, is the challenging message of this story from the book of Acts. God leaves a single spot on the floor of Acts to make clear how crucial it is that we live in truth. For centuries, people have debated what constitutes the one **"sin against the Holy Spirit"** that Jesus says is unforgivable (Matt 12:31). The sin, I believe, is shutting yourself off from the truth, denying God the ability to shine light into your life, and contenting yourself completely with who you are and the way you are. Once you are that smugly self-assured, you can't be reached by God's grace anymore.

One of the small steps we take in the direction of that shutting down, is this: *We tend to measure our faithfulness by what we put out there for God or others instead of by what we hold back.* In our family life, our work life, our church life, and elsewhere, we want to be evaluated mainly by what we've put out there on the table. Look at me, I did the dishes or made the dinner. Look at me, I got the assignment done or pleased the client. Look at me, I showed up at practice or did the drills. Look how faithful I've been. But what we're not facing truthfully is what we've kept in our pocket – what we haven't invested in the way of love, forgiveness, servanthood, communication, or some other resources we held to ourselves. No circle of human community ever reaches its potential until its members shift their focus from the "good enough" mentality to the "what else do I have to offer" mindset. *It's in truthfully examining what's in our pockets that breakthroughs to flourishing finally come.*

The Gift Is the House We Are Building

The truth is that God owns all, gives all, and asks for our willingness to make all available for his purposes. The early Christians got this at some level. They left their nets and followed Jesus. They made their time, talent, and treasure completely available to him. As long as we continue to think that being a Christian is about loaning God a little bit of OUR resources, or tipping him a percentage for his service to OUR Kingdoms, we will be living a lie. This isn't discipleship. It's merely religion. Most religions are about pacifying some god with some sort of nominal gift. Discipleship is about living one's whole life for the God who is the Source of it all anyway.

This Take Root adventure we've been on has been a continuing invitation to take stock of our discipleship. For some of us, the number we put on that Commitment Card last year represented the largest step of faith we've ever taken. For some others of us, it wasn't really that. Our commitment was a bit like Ananias or Sapphira's. It was far less than what our finances could have made possible. But God is stirring some of us now, not because of fear but because of faith. He's awaking us to what we have in our pocket that could make so much difference. So, when we turn in our Commitment Card next week, there's going to be a new number on it -- one that better reflects what our true capacity is to bring flourishing into the lives of others – and not just others.

The story is told of a wealthy old man who called into his office a contractor with whom he'd done business for many years. The rich man handed him a check for an enormous sum. "I want you to take this money and use it to build for me a dream house. I want you to use only the best materials and the finest craftsmanship. Spare no expense. Make this house something truly wonderful."

The contractor left the office, fingering the check, and began to think: "If I take this money and am clever with it, I can make out quite nicely on this deal." And so that is just what he did. He built the foundation and walls of the home with cheap materials, but covered them with veneers that made them look fine. Within the walls, he installed plumbing and electrical wiring that was shoddy at best, but outside installed fixtures that looked expensive and well-made. He cut corners on insulation and roofing materials and everywhere else that wouldn't be noticed till long after the rich man was dead. And the tidy sum he saved, he simply *pocketed*.

The day came when the wealthy man came to take delivery of the house. When he saw the great mansion, he beamed with joy and thanked the builder profusely. *"It looks like everything I had hoped for. And that is especially good news. For you see, you have served me so long and so well, that this house is actually a gift for YOU."*

Do you and I get that, every day, we are building a house of one kind or another? With every block of generosity and every stroke of grace, we are constructing an eternal

character, a certain kind of church, a particular kind of world. What quality do we want that house to be? So, here are some things we can do to help us with this:

1. Take an inventory of what you've made available to God's purposes
2. Make a list of what's in your pocket still
3. Move something from List #2 to List #1

Remember, you don't have to get things perfectly, but you don't have forever to start setting things right. As the Early Church discovered on the day they buried Ananias and Sapphira, sometimes, it is only when we are staring death in the face that the beauty and goodness of living for God with all that we are becomes truly clear. That expansion of heart and vision happened for a remarkable couple in our church recently. I hope their story will challenge, encourage, and inspire us as we receive it now...

[VIDEO TESTIMONY: Brian and Barb Renwick]

Let's pray together...

Lord, where we have not yet reached into our pocket to be part of your work of grace in the lives of others, inspire us to take and offer what we can. Where we have found being your stewards harder than we'd imagined before, encourage us to finish strong. And where you have increased our faith or finances in a way that allows us to build a larger blessing, challenge us to stretch further – that through our generosity, we might imitate you who reached deep and reached out, for the sake of the world. In your name we pray. Amen.

¹ Michael E. Phillips, *Leadership*, Vol. 7, no. 4

² Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky