

Sermon- Equalizing the Internal and External Self

Scripture: Acts 5:1-11

Sunday, September 5, 2021

Last Sunday we looked at the end of Acts 4 where the early Christian community was at its best almost ideal state. They had an incredibly high level of unity of mind and spirit, they had boldness to witness to preach the Word of God and they had a community in which no needs went unmet. As a result, the author declares that God's great blessing was upon them all. That kind of blessing, I hope is the goal of anyone who is walking the Christian life.

But even in those days it was not like 100% of the members of the church were in of the same mind and spirit. There will always be those problematic individuals everywhere. Ananias and Sapphira were a couple who were not of the same mind as everybody else. And God chose to use them as negative examples and a warning for everyone. But this is also a very unique story that has almost no exact parallels in other parts of scripture and so it is one of those stories that is extremely hard to interpret. Yet it is an important story meant to teach us something. So that is what we will wrestle with today and examine how God is speaking to us through it.

When dealing with difficult territory, it is always helpful to start by defining the boundaries, by identifying what it is not. So that is going to be where we begin.

Firstly, I want to point out that Ananias and Sapphira's sin was not the sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit or the "unforgiveable sin". Why? Because one of the requirements for it being blasphemy of the Holy Spirit involves attributing to Satan something that which is the work of the Holy Spirit. The example being when Jesus exorcised a man in Matt 12, the Pharisees were saying "***It is only by Beelzebub the prince of demons that this fellow casts out demons***". And to that Jesus replies, "***I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone***

who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” So Jesus was saying, it is possible to blaspheme the Holy Spirit and that is an unforgivable sin. When you are dealing with unforgiveable sin, there are things about this act that falls outside every parameter of the Gospel. It is why the Gospel can save everybody but does not. But this is something that only God can know and speak to. As human beings we are not in a position to declare something as the unforgiveable sin and we should deal with this subject with great caution. When it comes to Ananias and Sapphira what is going on is that they were lying to Apostle Peter. Peter in verse 4, points out to Ananias that his action amounts to lying to God. In verse 9 Peter tells Sapphira that what she was doing was “testing the Spirit of the Lord”. As a result of this confrontation, they were so shaken by how they were exposed, that they go into a shock and die. This was severe judgement from God, but we are not told that they received eternal condemnation for this act. What we see is that they were judged immediately in this lifetime so as to serve a warning to everybody else that they should not even dream about lying to God. But they did not blaspheme the holy spirit and commit the unforgiveable sin.

Secondly, this story is also not about Apostle Peter cursing Ananias and Sapphira. Notice nowhere in the story does Peter spell out some disaster on them from his mouth. This incident is not like what you will see a little later in Acts 13 where Apostle Paul pronounces a word of destruction on a false prophet called Bar Jesus. In this case all Peter does is confront Ananias. At that point, they could have confessed their sin and repented of it. But that is not what happened. What happened was that they were so shocked that they died. Same with Sapphira. Now when I say they were shocked, I am again only speculating. We are not told what was going on in their head. But it is like they are shocked when they discovered that God knew the truth and it is possible that that triggered a massive heart attack and they died. But whatever happened please note

that what did not happen was the result of any sort of curse pronounced on them from Peter's mouth.

Why are these boundary conditions or what this story is not, so important? Because if we think of this story as something that happens so rarely in the Bible, it is easy to think that it is outside our normal day to day functioning and therefore minimize the significance of this story for our own lives. On the contrary, I am going to make the case today that Ananias and Sapphira's sin is a very common one and therefore we have a great deal to learn from their example.

So let's look at what this sin really is. We are told that Ananias and Sapphira sold their property and pledged to donate all the proceeds of the sale to the church. Doing something like this would place them in the group of those highly esteemed in the church, isn't? In the same league as the positive example we saw last week of Barnabas at the end of Acts 4. But here is the problem with making a pledge. Making a grand pledge is easy. Following through is the difficult part because acting on that pledge takes sacrifice. For example if that land was providing them some income, then they would have to be able to manage without that income. If the loss of that asset moved them from being financially independent to now being financially dependent on the church then that might include living with a level of uncertainty and trust that could be very uncomfortable.

In India there is a group of people who come from a place called Udipi in the south of India. They have made certain foods very popular across the country. As a result they set-up a chain of Udipi restaurants all over the country when chain restaurants were not heard of there. But what made these restaurants so successful is not just because they had good food. The most important secret sauce to their success was their very close knit community that would help each other out tremendously. So for example when a young person in the community was starting out new in a city or neighborhood

and need both financial and business help, all the other Udipi restaurant owners in the community will pool their financial resources and provide the entire capital required to the new comer free of charge. This was not a loan but a grant. They would also be provided book keeping help, cooks etc. The only expectation on this new comer was that when they established themselves and became financially successful, then when someone else from the community was trying to make a start in the city, they would pay it forward and contribute to the pool of resources to get the newest Udipi restaurant up and running. You can imagine that when you have a difficult and highly competitive business environment, this kind of co-operation is what gave the Udipi restaurants their leg up and ensured that they would be successful. In the early church world, the difficulty was not competition but persecution. But whatever the difficulty, in the face of extraordinary challenge, it was the extra ordinary level of co-operation among the individuals and network of local churches that made them incredibly successful. Everybody was making sacrifices, so that everyone was taken care off. And to make this work everybody had to be extremely united in mind and spirit which is what we are told the early church had.

At the level of the individual transaction, if you were going to sell your assets and declared that you are going to donate all of it to meet the needs of the church community, it was a very big deal. People would be very appreciative of so big a sacrifice. This is the outside story.

What if there was more to this story? What if there was another story going on inside of Ananias and Sapphira? What if they desperately wanted everybody to think as highly of them as people thought of Barnabas. At the same time they were not comfortable with what it meant financially and could not live with the consequences of their decision? As a result they make a plan. And the plan was to keep a portion of the proceeds for themselves in a way that no body would know. Now the scripture does not tell us what

percentage of the proceeds they kept for themselves. Was it 10% or 50% or 80%? We don't know. What we do know that they kept something back in secret. Because secretly they must have thought that having that financial cushion was what would save them in rainy day or in their retirement or whatever their reason may have been. That is the story going on inside themselves.

When you put these the inside and outside stories together you see that they wanted to have it both ways. They wanted the oomph of being in the Barnabas club, but they were not ready for the financial sacrifices or that level of dependency on God to sustain them. This friends is the inside outside disconnect we see in Ananias and Sapphira.

I mentioned earlier that this particular story is very unique in the Bible but this inside outside disconnect is an extremely common condition. Most people project certain things on the exterior and means something else inside. For example, Bill Gates gave away a lot of money for various good causes. But we now know that he was angling for the recognition of a Nobel Peace Prize. Hitler hated the Jews and built factories to exterminate them. But on the outside he was not projecting himself as a killing machine but as a savior of the German people. These are the extreme cases but they cover two extremes from Extreme Philanthropy to Extreme Fascism. It is not difficult to see how this disconnect operates for every case in between.

You will remember that in Matt 23 Jesus Christ himself talked about this when he was described the Pharisees as hypocrites for being like cups and dishes that were clean on the outside but filthy on the inside with greed and self-indulgence.

But here is the thing. A redeemed person who has been washed clean by the extreme sacrifice of the Lamb of God is supposed to be different. That is because a Christ follower is someone who has been turned inside out right? A christ follower is someone who declares to the world that there is nothing good in us, that we are sinners deserving nothing less than death. That our insides are as bad as it gets. And that Christ

has died for their sins to make us clean, right? No Christ follower ever said, Christ died so that my skin could be washed clean right 😊 The surface dirt can be taken care off in one shower. Christ's work was on our insides and so every Christ follower is exposing their insides to the world because only then can Christ's work in our lives be seen. But that also means that Christ followers need to make their insides look like their outsides.

Now many in the church do lead exemplary and commendable lives. Not necessarily all the time. We do fall, but then we address it, recover from it and continue to lead authentic lives. Lives where the inside matches the outside.

But the story of Ananias and Sapphira tell us that when you live in an environment of high standards, the temptation to fake it and project something on the outside that is different from what is on the inside is strong. When I am with my mentees the temptation to gloss over the times I have skipped by morning devotion time or that I have some ill feeling in my heart is very strong. We all have to be very mindful of this. Because this desire to project a good look to the others can sow a disconnect between our inside and outside selves we have to catch it as soon as possible. One place where church people might do this is when people ask us to pray or we offer to pray for someone but don't end up praying for that person. To forget is human, but to offer to pray for someone without having a system to add people to a prayer list is where there is a significant outside-inside disconnect.

There is another place of inside outside disconnect that can affect church people. This is with our intentions. This is something I was reminded of in myself just this week so let me share this with you when it is fresh in my mind. When I decided to go into ministry, it was to serve God. This is what I told myself and this is what I told God. After all I was just answering God's call to serve him. But this last week as I was working on the something for the International students, I felt that the people around me were not appreciating something that I had done. And as I thought about it, I began to realize that they are not

likely to appreciate it because they don't fully understand what it was that I had done or why it was necessary. But as I reflected on this further, I began to see my own hypocrisy. Because after all I had told everybody I was working for God. But then I found myself missing the human recognition. That would make me no different from Ananias and Sapphira! What I needed to do was look at all the ways God was indicating to me that he knew what was going on and was pleased with the outcome and I should have been more than satisfied with that.

There are many such areas that are commonly used to project a better version of ourselves to those around us. That makes the externals of the church community look better than it really is. That in tempts others within the community to project a whitewashed image of themselves that inflicts real harm to themselves and others. The church is not a place where we come to project an image but a place of healing and restoration. And that can only happen when we bring our real authentic selves. We don't want to be like a hospital where everyone walking in is trying to impress each other and the doctors about how healthy they are and as a result, no health issue is caught or treated and everyone leaves just as they came in. The story of Ananias an Sapphira is a powerful cautionary tale about the dangers of projecting a false exterior.

Let us as a Church community grow closer to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by bring even more of our inside selves out, by bringing our spiritual struggles to light so that people will see how Christ actually makes the sick well. Then maybe the sick may get the idea that this is a place for them as well. Let us pray.