



Time to Reflect

- Take a few moments in prayer. Ask God to help you with the issues that you might be struggling with in your Christian journey.
- How can we, the Twenty-First Century Church, radiate our faith in ways that could be described as irresistible?

Last week we saw how opposition against the Early Church emerged rather quickly. In the face of this opposition Peter and John remained faithful, Scripturally focused, and committed to prayer. Our passage ended with great encouragement as the Church really started to grow wider in mission and influence and deeper in faith. This week we encounter further problems and persecutions, yet through it all the Church continued to grow.

“Persecution from the outside and sin on the inside threaten the church. The only way to counteract this opposition is to obey God.”

(John-Michael Wong, *Opening Up Acts*, p49).

Passage Specifics

- As Acts 5 begins we can't help but recall the generosity shown by the believers who shared all their possessions (4:32-37). Barnabbas was specifically mentioned for selling a field and giving the proceeds to the apostles.
- Against this backdrop we encounter Ananias and his wife Sapphira. They also sold a piece of property (v1), gave some of the income they received to the apostles while retaining the remainder for themselves.
- Keeping some of the money was, in and of itself, not a sin because it was their own property. Peter even mentioned this (v4). The main problem here was to do with attitude and appearance. Ananias and Sapphira liked the idea of being seen to be generous, to follow the example of other believers like Barnabbas, but their appearance and the reality didn't match up. There was inconsistency between the public and private lives of Ananias and Sapphira.
- This became very clear when Peter spoke with Sapphira (v8). They were prepared to lie before God and God's people for the benefit of personal gain.
- We don't know their exact motive in doing this. Perhaps it was just the good old-fashioned lure of money. However, what is clear is that the opening eleven verses of Acts 5 teach us that truth matters.
- John-Michael Wong observes, **“The divine judgement of Ananias and Sapphira shows us God's desire for purity.”¹**
- There are two important lessons here. Firstly, we can't lie to God. He knows the inner secrets of our hearts. Secondly, God is holy and He wants us (as His people) to pursue holiness.

¹ John-Michael Wong, *Opening Up Acts*, p49.

- Note how a “Great fear seized the whole church...” following the Ananias / Sapphira episode (v11). This is the development of a deep respect for God and a love for God’s ways. Ultimately this was to lead to evangelistic success and further growth (v14).
- The early Christians submitted to God and pursued purity. They became powerful witnesses of the transforming love and grace of God. This led to the local communities respecting them. “...they were highly regarded by the people” (v13).
- “Once people saw the power of the church in its purity and love, they could not help but be drawn towards the love of God.²”
- We are reminded, in this passage, that true Christianity speaks loudly to all people. As C S Lewis wrote in his Letter’s to an American Lady, “How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible.”
- The second half of our passage reintroduces the theme of persecution. Jealousy emerged on the part of the religious leaders and the apostles were arrested (v17-18). God intervened directly in this situation (v19) and the apostles were commanded by an angel to “Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people all about this new life” (v20).
- There was to be no self-pity and no compromise response to being arrested. The only response was to remain faithful to God, trusting in Him, and focused on proclaiming the Good News (v21).
- (v22-25) tell us something of the shock that the religious leaders experienced. The apostles were brought, without violence or struggle (v26), to the Sanhedrin and they were charged with disobeying the strict orders they had been given to stop teaching about Jesus.
- The response of the apostles, led by Peter, is impressive (v29-32). They confronted their accusers with “...unflinching resolve and presented the essential gospel message to them again. But, instead of being ‘pierced to the heart’ with sorrow (2:37), the rulers were ‘cut to the quick with rage’ (5:33).”
- Isn’t it interesting to see how the same message, a message of Good News, can be received with such different reactions? This pattern still exists today. Some people respond positively to the Gospel while others seek to ignore it and some even directly oppose it.
- Evidently, tensions must have been running high in the Sanhedrin. Gamaliel, the most prominent teacher of his time and early mentor of the apostle Paul (Acts 22:3), sought to calm the situation (v34).
- Gamaliel drew on historical experiences and from his own learning. But for all that learning and experience he was unable to discern the will of God. He suggested that the apostles should be released and if their activity is of human origin it will eventually disappear.
- However, he did make a valid point in (v39). Regardless of human ability and skill, God’s plans will never be thwarted.
- Before being released, the apostles were still beaten and instructed to stop evangelising. But they simply couldn’t do this. They rejoiced in their suffering and continued to proclaim the Good News. The chapter ends with the wonderful declaration “...they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah” (v42).
- What a marvellous example for each of us of what it means to persevere when we encounter problems and trials. The apostles were able to keep pressing on because their faith was deep-rooted and passionate. The desire of their hearts was to make Jesus known to every person. They didn’t accept excuses and they were unwilling to be sidelined by circumstance.
- May we seek to follow their example and keep pressing on, radiating the love of God and making Him known.

² John-Michael Wong, *Opening Up Acts*, p52.