

In this passage, Luke, the human author of the book of Acts, continues to describe the early church in the period shortly after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The book is about how Jesus began to build his church through the Holy Spirit after he had ascended into heaven. The passage that we are going to look at this afternoon/evening makes the point that along the good things that were happening as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers, there were also bad things that happened as a result of the work of Satan who was opposing the mission of Jesus to build his church. Luke has already told us about the opposition of the Jewish authorities who were seeking to suppress the message of Jesus and his resurrection by forbidding the apostles from preaching that message. In the verses immediately preceding our text for this evening, we have seen how the disciples of Jesus prayed for boldness and how that prayer was granted so that they “continued to speak the word of God with boldness.”

In the verses before us this afternoon/evening the Lord was also blessing his people with unity and care for one another, but at the same time Satan was active and he inspired Ananias and Sapphira to hypocrisy which the Lord judged swiftly and severely.

First we will consider the good. The gist of verses 32-37 of chapter 4 is that the members of the believing community “were of one heart and soul” and that unity was expressed in sacrificial care for one another. Verse 33 says that the apostles were preaching Jesus and his resurrection with great power and “great grace was upon them all.” The result of that “great grace” was sacrificial generosity so that those who were better off sold off some of their property and gave the proceeds to the apostles who distributed it to those who were in need according to their need. The result of “great grace” was great sacrifice and generosity.

Grace is unmerited favor from God for Jesus’ sake. Grace is a gift. Grace is a blessing. It is an expression of God’s favor on the basis of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And the grace that is highlighted here is sacrificial generosity. This is a very important point for understanding the Christian life in general and the sacrificial generosity in particular. It is a gracious gift of God through Christ and through the Holy Spirit when we are enabled to overcome our selfishness and are made willing to generous with the resources that God has entrusted to our care.

The willingness to be generous to help our fellow believers in need is not an onerous burden but a blessing, an expression of God’s unmerited favor, a blessing of salvation. We may tend to think of forgiveness as a gift and obedience of God’s commands as more of an obligation. But we must understand that while there is always an aspect of obligation when it comes to obedience in that we owe obedience to God, the desire, and the ability to obey God’s commands is a blessing of salvation. It is just as much a blessing as forgiveness and adoption and the gift of eternal life.

We see this emphasis in the Westminster Shorter Catechism in its definition of sanctification. “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace by which our whole person is made new in the image of God, and we are made more and more able to become dead to sin and alive to God.” You see, the way of selfishness is not the way

of life and blessing. The good life is not the life of selfishness, but the life of joyfully sacrificing in order to bless others. Selfishness is slavery in biblical thought, while the willingness to sacrifice for others is true freedom.

Now part of this picture is how we understand our possessions. In the context, where believers were filled with the Holy Spirit and the apostles were preaching Jesus with great power, these early Christians understood that their possessions were not their own. The text says, “no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.” This does not mean that they all sold everything they had and put it into the common pot. If we look at all the related texts, it is very clear that many of these believers sold some of their possessions to raise money to help the poor in their midst. Verses 36 & 37 of chapter 4 says that Barnabas, “sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

What Luke means when he says that “no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but that they had everything in common” is that these early Christians understood that God had not only given them their wealth and possessions to meet their own needs, he had also given them wealth and possessions to help those among them who were in need.

This is the idea of stewardship which is that all that all our wealth and possessions belong to God and are to be used according to his will. One of the reasons that God gives us money is to help those who are in need. If we look at how this principle was worked out in their actions, it is clear that these believers understood that a significant portion of their wealth belonged to the needy in their midst and that it was up to them to voluntarily transfer that wealth to the needy to whom it belonged. There is no hint here of coercion. The giving was strictly voluntary. But the people understood that their money was not strictly theirs; God had given it to them for the purpose of transferring some of it to the needy. Some of their wealth had been entrusted to them by God in order that they might use it to help those around them who were in need.

David Peterson gives a good summary of this point in his commentary on these verses. “They did not regard possessions as being exclusively for their own benefit, and were consequently not captivated by the need to hold on to them. As need arose, *they shared everything they had* in order to help others. Sharing was not a matter of compulsion, and only some property was sold. Possessions and money were disposed of at will, as individuals saw fit.” (p. 204-205).

We see further that the way that this ministry was handled is that the people gave the money to the apostles who distributed it to the needy. At some point this became too much for the apostles to handle and the office of deacon was born. But here we see already the way in which the church took care of the needy in their midst. The people gave the money to the apostles who distributed it to the needy. It just so happens that the special offering for our congregation today is for the benevolent fund. We are doing exactly what the members of the early church are described as doing in our text – only in our case the money is given to the deacons to distribute as needed.

It is important that the money “was distributed to each as any had need.” The help was given according to need. The church made sure that everyone’s basic needs were provided for. And the result was that “there was not a needy person among them.”

Now the basic principles here are simple enough. Applying them in our situation is a little more complicated. In our situation many of the basic needs of those who are not able to work are met through government programs. We may not believe that that is the government’s role, but it’s the way things are done and that means that some people who would otherwise be needy are not as needy. Further, we live in a prosperous country and most of our members are able to work and meet their own needs. That does not mean that there is no need for a benevolent fund and deacons to administer it, but it seems that there was more poverty in the early church than there is in our congregation. It does not take much sacrifice for us to help those who need financial help in our congregation.

But there is still lots of need. Clearly the need that is in view in our text is financial need, but it is a legitimate application of this text if we think of other needs besides financial. There are people who need attention – people who are alone – people who need help in other ways. It is a legitimate application of this text if we ask ourselves whether we are thinking of other needs people in our congregation might have that we might be able to meet besides financial needs.

And there are lots of opportunities to help other believers in need beyond our own congregation. The focus here is on other believers and the basic instruction of who we are to help is expressed clearly in Galatians 6:10 which says, “So then as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Some of our special offerings are about helping needy believers and others beyond our own congregation and of course we are not limited to special offerings. We can support Word and Deed which helps the needy in far-away places. We can support the Cambridge Pregnancy Resource Centre, and Voice of the Martyrs, and the Scott Mission and there are many other organizations that gather money to help needy people.

The needs are vast and so, while we may have fewer people who need financial help in our congregation than the situation described in our text, there is still plenty of need for us to address. And this text is calling us to consider our giving to help needy people. This text gives the impression that these early believers gave quite a bit to help the needy among them. Some of them even sold land or houses and gave the proceeds to help the needy among them. Our situation is very different from theirs, but there is no lack of opportunity to help needy brothers and sisters or needy people in general. And God in his providence has placed this passage before us this morning to encourage us to consider our giving for the needy in the light of the example of these early believers.

We have seen already that the giving described here was an expression of God’s grace in Christ towards the givers as well as the receivers. There is no question that what Luke is describing here is the fruit of the gospel

in the lives of these early believers and his purpose no doubt is to encourage such giving on the part of his readers, not as a burdensome obligation, but an attractive result of the grace of God in the gospel. And what he describes here is a calling for us to consider how the grace of God is reflected in our lives when it comes to this area of generosity to those who need help in whatever way, and part of that is considering that nothing that God gives us is really our own. It is given to us to be used and distributed according to his will and part of it belongs to the needy.

So we come to the story of Ananias and Sapphira. This is given as a contrast to the verses we just looked at. Verses 36 & 37 of chapter 4 describe Barnabas who “sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. That is a beautiful example of the grace of God in the gospel at work in Barnabas’ life. But Luke wants us to understand that there were also serious issues of sin among the members of the early church.

The Bible is very transparent about the sin that remains in and among the people of God. And that is encouraging, among other things, because it means that we should not feel that disturbing instances of sin among God’s people is somehow unusual. It has been like this right from the beginning. The grace of God in the gospel is certainly transformative, but it does not result in perfection in this life. Truly saved people can fall into grievous sin and there may also be those in the church who are not truly saved people – who are hypocrites.

That was the case with Ananias and Sapphira. They were hypocrites. Hypocrisy is having the appearance of godliness without the inner reality of godliness. That was the issue with Ananias and Sapphira. They sold a piece of land and they wanted the apostles to believe that they were giving all of the proceeds from that sale when in fact they were keeping back part of the money for themselves. They had no obligation to sell that property. They had no obligation to give the entire proceeds to the apostles. Their sin was that they said that they were giving all of the money that the sale had yielded when in fact they were giving only part of it.

And they did that blatantly and deliberately. They discussed it together before they did it. The text stresses that they had agreed together to make it appear that they were giving the total amount while keeping back some of it for themselves. It’s important to see that this was calculated and deliberate hypocrisy. Their purpose in giving the gift was to enhance their reputation in the congregation. The fact that they had discussed it beforehand shows that their primary motivation was to appear to be more generous than they actually were.

They did this because Satan had filled their hearts. This is in contrast to the Holy Spirit filling the hearts of his people. When the Holy Spirit fills the hearts of his people, they are generous to the needy and they are motivated by love and compassion and thanksgiving. When Satan fills people’s hearts, they may be more concerned with their reputation than with the inner love and compassion that leads to godly generosity.

We need to distinguish between the hypocrisy that a believer may struggle with and the hypocrisy that is the result of a hard and impenitent heart. In Ananias and Sapphira we see hard and impenitent hearts in that their hypocrisy was calculated and deliberate. I suspect that none of us is entirely free from hypocrisy in that there is some level of disconnect between how we want others to think of us and the inner reality. That is not to say that we are obligated to tell everyone every secret sin, but I think that sometimes we are more concerned with the outer appearance than the inner reality. Jesus addressed this when he said in Matthew 6:1, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them....” Presumably Jesus said that because it is something that we are all prone to do.

That does not mean that we are all heart-hearted hypocrites as Ananias and Sapphira were. But the example of Ananias and Sapphira here calls us to examine our hearts to see whether perhaps we are like them. This passage makes it clear that there can be people in the church like Ananias and Sapphira who are interested in appearing to be righteous while within there is no true godliness. The Bible deals with this quite frequently and that suggests that it is not uncommon. Another example is Matthew 6:2 where Jesus says, “When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.” Paul speaks about people who have “the appearance of godliness, but [deny] its power.” This is a serious matter. The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a warning that it is possible to be a member of the church and not be truly saved.

How do we tell the difference between hypocrisy that is remaining sin in the heart of a believer and hypocrisy that is the result of a hard and impenitent heart in an unsaved church member? The answer has to do with our inner life. Paul’s description of his inner struggle in Romans 7 is helpful here. He says in Romans 7:18-19, “For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.” Verse 22, “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being.” And then verse 24, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

If we apply this to hypocrisy, we will notice when we are more concerned with outward appearance than inner reality and we will hate that sin, confess it to God, fight against it and look to Jesus for forgiveness. There is an inner desire for godliness – to be truly loving and generous and compassionate – to be more like Jesus. There is struggle against sin, and trusting in Jesus for forgiveness. A person who is an unsaved hypocrite will not have this inner struggle – this love of God’s law and a real desire to keep it not only externally but from the heart. Jesus describes that in the Pharisees in Matthew 23:28 when he says, “So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Next we need to consider God’s severe judgment on Ananias and Sapphira. He struck them dead on the spot – first Ananias and then a few hours later Sapphira. Why did God do that? Clearly he does not do that all the time. In all the rest of the NT we have nothing quite like this, but we do have a few examples in the OT. One

OT story that is often noted as a kind of parallel to the story of Ananias and Sapphira is the story of Achan in Joshua 7. In that case Achan took some of the plunder from the defeat of Jericho contrary to the LORD's command and the LORD exposed him and commanded the people of Israel to stone him and his family to death. In both cases the LORD exercised severe judgment in a situation of a new beginning for his people. In Achan's case Israel had just entered the promised land. And in Ananias' and Sapphira's case, it was the near the beginning of the post-Pentecost church.

In both cases and in all similar judgments of God, the Lord is highlighting his holiness and the seriousness of sin. His people are a holy people and when there is unrepentant sin in the congregation the sinner must be judged. In the case of Ananias and Sapphira the Lord acted directly in supernaturally putting them to death. He is making the point that his people are a holy people and unrepentant sinners must be removed from the congregation.

The Lord does not normally judge so directly. This very dramatic instance was sufficient to make the point God is a holy God and his people are a holy people and sin must be dealt with either through repentance and faith in Jesus or by removing an unrepentant sinner from the congregation. The way that this is normally done in the NT church is through church discipline. Church discipline has a number of purposes, which include seeking the repentance of someone who is living in sin, but one of them is to remove the unrepentant from the congregation. Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom to the elders of the church and one of the purpose of the keys is to shut impenitent sinners from the kingdom of God. In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus teaches that a person who will not listen to the church calling him or her to repentance must be treated as a "Gentile and a tax collector" which means he must be treated like a person who is part of the world and not part of the church.

Our WCF expresses the point about the holiness of God and his people when it teaches that one of the purposes of church discipline is "for vindicating the honor of Christ and the holy profession of the gospel, and for averting the wrath of God which might justly fall on the church if it should allow his covenant and its seals to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders." (Chapter 30:3)

The result of God striking down Ananias and Sapphira in judgment was that that "great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things." That is a good thing. Certainly one of God's purposes in his dramatic judgment of Ananias and Sapphira was that both his people and others who heard of it might fear. If we think about the fear that this incident might provoke in people, its clear that it is a fear of the holiness of God and his wrath against sin and his terrible judgments of sin.

Fear is not the only thing that God wants to see in his people. We are also trust in his mercy in Christ, to be confident of his love as our heavenly Father, and to rejoice in him. But he also wants us to fear him as is clear from this passage. This kind of fear is not incompatible with trust and confidence of his love in Christ. Those who are following Jesus are to be confident of his love and at the same time to fear him because of his holy wrath against sin and unrepentant sinners.

This kind of fear leads us to tremble before the holy wrath of God, but also to cling all the more to his promises of forgiveness and mercy in Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 speaks of Jesus as the one “who delivers us from the wrath to come.” We believe in Jesus so that we will not perish, but have eternal life. Coming to Jesus for salvation includes fear of the wrath of God against our sin and once we have come and are safe in Jesus, there is still to be an element of trembling before the fearful judgment of God against sin. The rest of the church who heard of the death of Ananias and Sapphira and were trusting in Jesus, were safe from the wrath of God because of Jesus’ righteousness, but still they feared when they heard how God had dealt with them.

So let us also fear the Lord. If there is anyone here who is not trusting in Christ this afternoon/evening, you should fear when you think of how God judged Ananias and Sapphira because that same wrath is abiding on you and if you do not repent and believe in Jesus you will experience that wrath for all eternity. You should fear and flee to Christ. And for those who are trusting in Christ, let us fear God as we reflect on his judgment on this hypocritical couple. Hebrews 12:28 describes acceptable worship as worshipping with “reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” And may that fear lead us to cling all the more to Jesus in whom we are delivered from the wrath to come.