

Sweet and Sour Acts 4:32-5:11

Introduction

Our text this morning contains an account that is probably familiar to anyone who has spent much time in church

The fact that it is well-known is kind of odd seeing that it is an often neglected passage that most preachers would rather ignore than explore

The reason for its neglect isn't that it's difficult to understand but because it's difficult to withstand Scripture often acts as a mirror showing us ourselves and the reflection that we see from this account is not one that we necessarily want to see

But it is one that we must face if we want Brick Church to be a healthy, godly church

As we saw last week, Satan launched an attack on the fledgling church through persecution from outside forces

The Sanhedrin attempted to intimidate the apostles into silence and wound up invigorating the church to new levels of boldness as they continued to preach the gospel

But Satan is nothing if not tenacious and today we will see how he switches tactics and tries to harm the church from within

One thing we should understand is that Satan is powerful but he's not very original and he uses the same tactics over and over again

The trouble is that he knows human nature and he knows our weaknesses and proclivities and he is able to exploit them whenever we let our guard down

Our text this morning is **Acts 4:32-5:11**

It begins with a **Rosy Report** of the church in the time period after the Sanhedrin's attempted silencing of the apostles' preaching and teaching

We will see that the church is a church of unity, great power and grace, and a church that is filled with generosity

Then we will see a **Righteous Example** of that generous spirit in Joseph who is better known as Barnabas

And then our passage finishes with the account of a **Rotten Deception** in the account of Ananias and Sapphira

While this can be a difficult text to face, face it we must if we would be the kind of church that God desires us to be

We can't bury our heads in the sand, chant "La, la, la" and live in a dream world pretending all is well when it is not – we must face our deficiencies and let God work on us to correct them

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it like this;

"Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both. A community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis, which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered, permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community. Sooner or later it will collapse."

I. A Rosy Report (4:32-35)

As we begin to look at our text we must first note that it begins with a **rosy report** in verses **4:32-35**
Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

The religious leaders in the form of the Sanhedrin attempted to silence the apostles and the early church by their edict to refrain from speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus
And whereas the church could have understandably been cowed by this, they came out of the situation stronger and with great resolve

A. Unity

The first thing we notice in **verse 32** is that the church was known for its **unity**

There was total agreement in their motivations and their actions

They were united in the core of their being where priorities and intentions are formed

There was no division in their thinking and emotions

But we need to remember that unity is not the same thing as uniformity

The fact that they were unified in their purposes and activities doesn't mean they were all the same

One of the most divisive mindsets a church can develop is the idea that everyone must be the same

That we have to dress alike, carry the same version of the Bible, read the same authors, listen to the same music, watch the same programs, and so forth in order to be unified

The result of this kind of thinking is far too often a form of judgmental rigidity that results in people feeling unwelcome – or actually being unwelcome – and leaving the church

We must remember Paul's illustration of the church as a body made up of many different members all of which are different and yet working together for the common good of the body

A. W. Tozer is credited with saying that a hundred pianos that are all tuned to the same tuning fork will all automatically be tuned to each other

And so it is in the church – when we are each attuned to Christ we will have unity in the church in spite of our different personalities, temperaments, interests, and so on

We may never see things in exactly the same way but when we desire the same outcome our differences become minor and are easily worked out

And we see that the unity of the early church extended even to the issue of economics

We will have a great deal to say about this aspect as we proceed through the rest of the passage

But for now let's just say that these early believers had a common attitude toward the relative importance their possessions and their use

They were unified in the belief that people were more important than possessions and they were all willing to use their stuff to benefit their fellow believers

B. Great Power

Then in the first part of **verse 33** we see that the message of the church was one of **great power**

Looking back to verse 31 from last week we will remember that the entire church “continued to speak the word of God with boldness”

So, in spite of the Sanhedrin’s order for the apostles to stop speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus The message of the gospel continued to go forth with boldness and power

Of course we know that the boldness and power came from the indwelling Holy Spirit

The apostles and possibly some of the others were eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ and that was powerful testimony

But equally powerful, if not even more so, was the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within each believer – power that was made possible as a result of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ

In a very real way the changed and empowered lives of the church were a living testimony to the resurrection

C. Great Grace

Then we see in the last part of verse 33 that **great grace** was upon the entire church

What exactly Luke meant by this statement is debatable

It could mean that they were all filled with generosity – which would fit with the theme of this section

It could mean that the church enjoyed a good reputation with all – this is also true as we will see later

It could mean that they were the constant recipients of God’s grace – also likely true

The overall point I believe we should take from this statement is that they were the recipients of abundant grace which enabled them to be abundant givers of grace to each other and those around them

Grace received is best expressed in grace given and the attitude of the early church was one of graciousness toward all

D. Generosity

This is exemplified in the next characteristic of the church at this time – the church was marked by **generosity**

Look with me at **verses 34-35**

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Just as we saw when we looked at the sharing of the believers previously in **Acts 2:44-45** there has been a great deal of wrong teaching based on these verses

What we have here is not a form of “Christian communism” – not at all

There is no sense that the selling and sharing of goods was in any way forced or coerced

All who sold their houses or lands for the benefit of the others in the community did so voluntarily

And the verb form in the original Greek makes clear the sense that this selling was done from time to time as the need to do so presented itself

And financial help was given in proportion to need – this was not a blanket redistribution of wealth to all rather it was the gracious supply of real needs as the needs were presented

Let's take a few moments and look at some features of this practice that we should perhaps try to emulate

First, we see **genuine care** demonstrated toward those who were in need

As we saw in **verse 32** the people were united in valuing people over possessions

Here we see how that viewpoint worked itself out in a practical way

There was a willingness to sacrifice for one's fellow man and those who had been blessed by God used their blessing to bless those who were less fortunate

Second, we see **genuine trust** in the leaders of the church as they brought the proceeds from the sale of their property and laid it at the apostles' feet for distribution

There was no need to control how the money was distributed or to whom it was given

There seems to have been no need to be recognized for the gift or any sense that the giver wanted the recipient to be in their debt

In a very real way this meant that the recipients of the financial help were indebted only to God for the relief of their need

So, even though they knew that one of their brethren had made the financial sacrifice there was no need to feel embarrassed or indebted

I believe the people of Brick Church are to be commended for modeling this behavior

Since I have been associated with this church our Benevolence Fund has always been well supplied

And I have yet to see a genuine need go unmet once it became known

In fact, your generosity has been such that we have frequently been able to be a light to the community around us by providing assistance beyond our church family

II. A Righteous Example (4:36-37)

Joseph "Barnabas - Son of Encouragement"

By way of a **righteous example** of the kind of attitude and action that was being taken in the fledgling church Luke mentions a man by the name of Joseph who had been nicknamed Barnabas. Barnabas means "Son of encouragement" and the name was descriptive of Joseph's character.

This is the first mention of Barnabas in the book of Acts and we will hear of him many more times as we proceed through the book and each time we do, he is shown to be coming alongside and helping someone.

He left quite a legacy - one that any of us should seek for ourselves.

Let's look at what Luke wrote about Barnabas in **verses 36-37**.

Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

We notice right off that Barnabas was a Levite who had been born on the island of Cyprus. We aren't told why he was in Jerusalem at this time but Luke reports later on in Acts that he had relatives there - his cousin is John Mark who lived with his mother Mary in Jerusalem.

In any event, he was saved and became a part of the church and Luke mentions him at this time as an example of the generosity that was being shown in the church.

We can't be certain why Luke chose to single out Barnabas for mention.

It may have been the size of the gift that was outstanding or it may have been because Barnabas was the first to sell a piece of land and donate the proceeds for distribution.

Personally, I think that being first makes the most sense based on Barnabas' demonstrated character and the events that follow seem consistent with others trying to follow an example.

Barnabas is always shown to be at the forefront of any situation where a person needed consolation or encouragement so while we can't be absolutely certain it seems natural for him to have been at the forefront of noticing a need and providing for it.

For whatever reason, Barnabas was singled out for praise by Luke and it's likely that the church made note of his generosity at the time and perhaps even lavished praise upon him for it.

It would seem that Barnabas had pure motives for his action and that he made his contribution from a pure heart - that just seems to be in line with his character as it is revealed in the pages of Scripture. He truly is a righteous example of sacrificial giving for the benefit of others.

III. A Rotten Deception (5:1-11)

Ananias “God is gracious” and Sapphira “Beautiful”

It seems that the example of Barnabas was widely adopted in the church as we have already seen
The church was united in supporting their less fortunate fellows with the proceeds from sales of
personal houses and lands from time to time as needs arose

The church was gripped by love and compassion for one another and personal sacrifice was the norm

And then Satan imposed himself into the situation

Having failed to hurt the church by persecution from without he now turned his sights on hurting the
church from within

The greatest danger to the church has always been from within

We know to be wary and prepared for attacks from without but attacks from within seem to more
often than not catch us off guard - we just don't expect those from among us to bring us harm

In **5:1-11** Luke records the account of Ananias and his wife Sapphira and it's a very sad tale that should
really make us sit up and take notice

Let's look first at what Luke has recorded and then we'll take some time to dig into some things that
might not be readily apparent with a casual reading of the account and try to clear up some
misconceptions that have grown up around the account

Follow along as I read through the 11 verses in their entirety and then we'll break them down

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's
knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at
the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and
to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain
your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this
deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." When Ananias heard these words, he fell
down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose and
wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter
said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." But
Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the
feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Immediately
she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and
they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church
and upon all who heard of these things.

A. The Plot

Luke records a plot that was hatched by a married couple to sell a piece of property and to only donate
a portion of the proceeds to the church

It's clear that they are both in on the act as it says that Ananias kept back some of the proceeds with
his wife's knowledge

The Greek behind the words "kept back" speak of embezzlement or of skimming of the top it was a
misappropriation of funds that was equal to stealing

The same word is used in the Greek version of the Old Testament when describing Achan's theft in **Joshua 7:1** which Linda read for us earlier

The gift was meant to imitate the gift given by Barnabas while the holding back imitated the theft of Achan

B. Peter Confronts Ananias

Luke doesn't reveal how Peter knew of the withholding of funds but it's clear that he knew and when Ananias laid his gift at the feet of the apostles Peter confronted him

Notice that Peter asked Ananias why Satan had filled his heart to lie using the exact same wording as was used previously when speaking of being filled with the Holy Spirit

Ananias was influenced by Satan and not by the Holy Spirit and the implication behind the question is that Ananias had made that possible

As we have discussed previously we must prepare ourselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit actually fills us as he will but we must have ourselves prepared for his filling by emptying ourselves of pride and self-sufficiency, by being in and under God's Word, by communicating with God in prayer and communing with his people

In this way we begin to think God's thoughts along with him and we make ourselves into vessels that can be filled with the Holy Spirit

Sadly, when we fail to do this we leave ourselves open to Satan's influence

And for whatever reason, Ananias found himself in this exact situation and he yielded to Satan's ungodly persuasion

When Peter called him out for his sin and revealed that he had lied to God, Ananias dropped dead on the spot

And Luke records that some young men came forward, prepared his body, carried him out of the building and buried him immediately

C. Peter Confronts Sapphira

Apparently, no one went to find Sapphira to tell her what had happened to her husband because Luke reports that she showed up some three hours later apparently unaware

Peter asked her a very direct question regarding the sale price of the land and in so doing actually gave Sapphira the chance to redeem herself

She could have easily told the truth when asked but she chose to stick with the lie that she and Ananias had agreed upon

Having done so Peter then asked her how they had come to agree to test the Spirit of the Lord

In other words how they conspired to see how much they could get away with before God

Apparently, Peter wasn't expecting an answer because he went on to tell her that she was about to die and she dropped dead at his feet

D. The Result

It's easy to believe what Luke writes next in **verse 11**

I think we would all agree that great fear would be the emotion of the day if people in the church started dropping dead in the middle of a service in judgment for their sins

The result of the news of their deaths was reverential fear and respect for God and his righteousness

Further examination of the account

We've already seen how the practice recorded here by Luke was not "Christian communism"

No one was compelled to give up their property rights it was all voluntary and of their own free will

Peter makes that point very clear to Ananias in **verse 4** where he reminds him that the land was his to do with as he wished and the money from the sale was also his to do with as he pleased

The sin was not in the amount given since there was no expectation that anything at all *be* given

We need to read between the lines a bit to get to the bottom of what Ananias and Sapphira were guilty It appears that they were **guilty of deceit** - *not* of being stingy

Perhaps they had made a vow before the church that they would sell this piece of property and donate the entire amount to the church and then had second thoughts after they saw how much money it was It's easy to see how such a thing could happen

Let's say they thought the property would bring \$10,000 on the open market but it actually sold for \$12,000

They could easily rationalize that they meant to give \$10,000 so it would be okay to pretend that was the sales price and just give the \$10,000

No one would be the wiser and they would have \$2,000 in their pocket

The sin in this case would be two-fold

They would be guilty of the sin of **dishonesty** in holding back what they had vowed because they had vowed to give the purchase price

And they also would be guilty of the sin of **deception** because they were willing to let others believe that they had actually given the entire amount - that was Sapphira's blatant lie

I once had a similar temptation although I would not have received accolades for generosity as a result

When I was still working in the Tool & Die trade I worked for a company for right around 10 years as a tool designer

Actually, I worked for them twice for a period of about 5 years each time with a break in between when I ran my own tool design company

The company gave out Christmas bonuses to the employees each year

My bonuses were consistently the same amount when I worked there the first time so when I went back I had expectations as to what the bonus would be when Christmas rolled around

But when I got the check my bonus was half of the amount I had gotten previously

I'm ashamed to say that I was ticked off about it - it really bothered me that the bonus was so small

I only fumed about it to myself and to Kathy but still as I thought about it I became convicted of my ingratitude and my poor attitude toward a gift that they didn't have to give me at all

Then when the next year rolled around I thought again about my attitude and how poor it had been so I quietly determined that I would donate whatever my bonus check was to the church

As far as I was concerned my bonus that year would be zero as I would keep none of it

When I opened the envelope you can imagine my shock to see that the bonus amount was back to what I had received the first time I worked there

It was twice what I had received the year before and was therefore twice what I had anticipated giving
I have to admit there was a brief struggle as I tried to rationalize that God knew what I meant...
But I kept sensing God saying, "I heard what you said. Show me what you meant." and in the end I gave it all and I felt really good about being able to give a more generous gift than I had planned

No one knew of my plan before I did it and I gave it anonymously as cash so I would receive no human credit so I can honestly say I didn't make the contribution for the praise of men

It was a transaction that was between me and God

And I only share the story with you now to show just how easy it would be to do what Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of

There is wide-ranging agreement that Ananias and Sapphira conspired to have their fellow believers think more highly of them than they deserved

But my point is that even if their intention and their actions were known only to God, their infraction was serious because it was evidence of a flawed character

Even so, we have the tendency to look at the fact that God exercised divine judgment upon them and struck them dead as maybe just a little over the top

In our day it has become normal to expect that people aren't telling the truth

In advertising we call it "puffery" and we know that deception is the order of the day as the sellers try to make their product look good and in doing so they often make it look better than it really is

Anyone who has ever eaten at a fast-food place and held their anemic, smashed burger up to the picture on the sign knows exactly what that looks like

The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira show us just how seriously God takes sin in his church

Were Ananias and Sapphira actually a part of the church? In other words, were they believers?

I think they were - although there is debate about the matter and we can't say for certain either way
In **1 John 5:16-17** we see that it is possible for a believer to commit sin that leads to death

And in **1 Corinthians 11:30** Paul speaks about believers who by sinning have become sick and even died
Clearly it's possible for God to issue a death sentence to a believer for their sin - it's just not usually so immediate and dramatic as it was for Ananias and Sapphira

Ananias means "God is gracious" and Sapphira means "beautiful" and in Scripture we see how names often reveal the character of the person so I would venture to say that these were not outwardly evil people

I believe they were normal, everyday believers and that makes the issue all the more sobering
Anyone can fall prey to sin if they aren't vigilant against it and Satan is always on the prowl seeking whom he may devour

Remember, there was no obligation upon them to sell their property and no obligation to give all or any of the proceeds once they had sold the property

I believe that had they gone forward with their gift and in all honesty said that it wasn't the full amount all would have gone well for them

They might not have been as acclaimed as Barnabas but neither would God have struck them dead

Conclusion

The account of Ananias and Sapphira is a difficult one because we don't like to face its implications. We have a hard time understanding just why God acted as he did and how we should apply the lessons to our own lives.

I for one am thankful that God isn't as swift to judge sin today as he has been in the past.

One commentator that I read made the statement that if God were this strict we would have to set up a mortuary in the church basement and put a mortician on the pastoral staff but that in reality there wouldn't be a pastoral staff left either - and I fear he might be right.

When we understand that Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of deceit and embellishment of their actions we are forced to look to our own lives to see if we might be guilty of doing the same – although perhaps in completely different circumstances.

It's likely that none of us has ever done precisely the same thing as Ananias and Sapphira so how do we apply the lessons we see here to our lives?

Let's look at some possible parallels.

Who has ever been telling a story and suddenly realized they were **exaggerating** the details to make the story more special?

Who has ever told a story and **eliminated or changed** some of the details to make themselves look better?

Who has ever made a promise to God while in a jam only to find reasons to not fulfill the promise once out of the jam and therefore **broken the vow**?

Who has ever **tested the Spirit** to see if God is really serious about one of his standards or another?

Who has ever said or implied things that would **make another see them as more spiritual** than they really are – or allowed someone to continue to think of them as more spiritual once the error was known?

Has anyone ever **embellished the amount of time they spend in Bible study or prayer** simply to save themselves the embarrassment that might come if the truth were known?

In a very real sense, that's what Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of – causing others to think more highly of them than they deserved.

While I'm glad God's justice isn't always immediate I believe the delay between action and punishment often makes us think we've gotten away with something or that God really didn't mean what he said.

Some sins are public and many more are private but God sees and judges them all.

Jesus taught his disciples in **Luke 12:2-3**

Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.

Our tendency is to look at this account and think that what Ananias and Sapphira did was really not that big a deal in the grand scheme of things but God takes the integrity of his church very seriously even if he doesn't strike violators dead where they stand.

Each member of the body must function with integrity or the whole body becomes sick.

I'm reminded by that thought of a situation I found myself in last year
I woke up one night and my head just didn't feel right
I looked at the clock on my nightstand and I couldn't focus on it - the numbers were jumping back and forth and there was no way I could stop their movement no matter how forcefully I tried
I was dizzy and disoriented and I have to say a little bit frightened because I couldn't imagine what was going on in my head

It turns out I was experiencing vertigo that was caused by a malfunction in my inner ear
Believe it or not, your pastor has rocks in his head - that's what the doctor told me anyway
Everyone has fluid inside their inner ears that moves about and signals the brain as to the orientation of their head and whether the head is moving and in what direction and speed
The brain takes the inner ear information and combines it with the information received from our eyes and does some remarkable calculations that keep us balanced
Well, some people develop little calcifications in their inner ear that can block the movement of the fluid and when that happens the ear gets stuck telling the brain that the head is moving and the difference in the information from the eyes and from the ears causes disorientation and dizziness and that is called vertigo

All members of the body have to be operating with integrity for the body to be healthy
And when a member or members are "sick" then the whole body is sick

When the sickness is an intentional lack of integrity then the church is labeled as a bunch of hypocrites and we lose our effectiveness in reaching others for Christ

That's why we must take matters of integrity very seriously
First in ourselves as we look to our own lives and ferret out any hint of deceitfulness
And then in the church through coming alongside and help one another to see what we might have missed in our personal inspections
Finally, if necessary we must judge hypocrisy in the church and deal with it through church discipline
God is serious about our integrity so we must also be serious

And next week as we look at **the remainder of chapter 5** we will see that far from being harmed by the actions of Ananias and Sapphira, the church actually grew in esteem because they early believers began to act with integrity and the church continued to grow in spite of persecution

Let's pray