

I. Introduction

Good morning! Let's begin this morning with a question. If you were in the middle of an amazing move of God, how would you respond? If the Holy Spirit was filling the hearts of people all around you, would your heart also be open to the Spirit? As we read today's passage in Acts 4 and 5, imagine yourself there among the disciples. It was a time when God, through His Holy Spirit, was moving dramatically among the believers to launch His church. But Satan was also busy – the devil was quick to look for opportunities to cause trouble among the new believers. Let's read Acts 4:32-5:11.

II. Scripture Acts 4:32-5:11 (NIV 1984)

4:32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. 34 There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. 36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

5:1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. 3 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? 4 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 to men but to God." 5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. 6 Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. 7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." 9 Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." 10 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. 11 Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

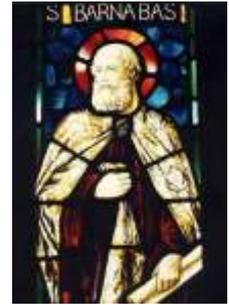
III. Teaching

This passage opens with a beautiful picture of joyous harmony among the believers. They are sharing everything they own and encouraging and supporting one another. Why is this unity and joy possible? The answer is in **Acts 4:31**, “**After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.**” Their harmony was possible because they were all filled with the Spirit and united in a common purpose, the preaching of the Good News of Jesus. Through His Holy Spirit working in the hearts of believers, God was moving in a dramatic and powerful way. Because of this, (**Acts 4:32**), “**All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.**” It is a beautiful picture, almost like a glimpse of heaven.

Imagine for a moment, if you were there among those disciples, how you would respond to this new community life? Would you joyfully join in? Or would you hesitate? We are told the stories of two men who were there, Barnabas and



Ananias. Their stories illustrate two contrasting responses to this dramatic move of the Holy Spirit. First we are told about Joseph, who is also called Barnabas. **(Acts 4:36-37), “Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.”** Out of a pure heart, Barnabas brings an offering to support the work of the Lord in establishing the infant church. The gift is generously given and graciously received. Barnabas responds to the leading of the Spirit with an open and obedient heart, trusting God. He does not hold anything back; he gives the full price of the land he sold as an offering. We will see more of Barnabas in Acts 9-13, as he grows in faith and ministers to others. Barnabas is an excellent example of a man who is fully committed to the Lord Jesus.



But Satan is always looking for a chance to foul things up. Whenever and wherever brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus are united in effective work for the Kingdom of God, you can be sure that Satan will be close by, looking for a chance to cause trouble, often by tempting some weak believer. In today's passage, Satan found his evil opportunity in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira. **Acts 5:1-2, “Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.”**

Ananias sees how the Spirit of God is moving in the church and he wants to belong to the group. I think Ananias and Sapphira probably started out with a sincere desire to do right by bringing a generous gift. They probably saw the example of Barnabas and wanted to do the same. Like Barnabas, they also decided to sell a piece of property to raise money for a special offering. But somewhere in their hearts there must have been a bit of doubt, a hesitation to fully trust the Lord. It was just enough to give Satan a chance.

We are not told exactly how Satan tripped them up. But I imagine it went something like this. Satan probably saw their hesitation and then whispered in their ears, *“This church thing looks good, but what if it doesn't work out?”* Starting with one, *“what if,”* Satan probably poured it on from there. *“What if the authorities kill the apostles and the miracles stop? What if so many poor people join the church that there isn't enough food to go around? What if someone doesn't like us and pushes us out of the group?”* etc. etc. A little bit of hesitation and some careful whispering from the devil probably brought Ananias and Sapphira to the thought, *“We had better keep some of the money for ourselves, just in case it doesn't work out.”*

That thought shows weak faith and a hesitation to fully trust God. But this is not why they were judged. The Lord does not condemn His followers for weak faith, even faith as small as a mustard seed is enough to move mountains. The serious sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not weak faith. It would have been okay for them to say, *“Here is part of the money; I am keeping some.”* But that would not have gotten them much praise from the brothers and sisters, and it seems that they really wanted the praise of others. So, another thought came, *“No one has to know that we kept some of the money, it can be our secret.”*

The temptation and trap of Satan had gone further than just convincing Ananias to keep some of the money; Ananias had also fallen for the temptation to lie about it and to try to keep the money and still get praised as if he had given it all. And his wife, Sapphira, also agreed to this plan. This is something far worse than weak faith; this is a sin of spiritual pride and hypocrisy. So Ananias gave part of the money as an offering, but he pretended it was the whole price of the land.

What happened? **Acts 5:3-4, “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 to men but to God.””**

Peter makes it clear that it would have been okay to give a partial offering, or even no offering at all. But to give part of the money while pretending it was the whole price was a lie. And because it was an offering to God, this deception was the same as lying to God. But it is impossible to lie to God; God is all-knowing and all-seeing. And in this case, God revealed the lie to His servant, Peter, and judgment came swiftly.

Some people think the judgment was too severe. But the Lord knows what is best and we need to trust in Him. Perhaps immediate judgment was necessary to demonstrate that it is impossible to lie to God and to extinguish this first sin of pride and hypocrisy in the infant church. Perhaps immediate judgment was the best thing for Ananias and Sapphira, because it prevented them from committing any additional sins. And although they were severely rebuked, the Lord may have still seen some faith in their hearts and may yet have welcomed them into heaven. We cannot fully see their hearts, but the Lord sees all things and does what is right and just.

By the way, while we have these verses up on the screen, I want to mention one more thing. In these verses, lying to the Holy Spirit and lying to God are parallel statements with the same meaning. This shows that the Holy Spirit is fully recognized as God. It also reveals that the Holy Spirit is a person, because it is impossible to lie to an abstract power or force. So this is a passage which strongly supports the doctrine of the Trinity, one God in three persons - God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, three person, but in perfect unity and of one essence so that it is right to say there is only One God. If you want to learn more about the Trinity, there is a simple pamphlet on the new information rack next to the usher's area.

But let's get back to today's passage. The conclusion of today's passage is **Acts 5:11, "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."** The Bible teaches us that God is love, but the Bible also teaches us that it is wise to fear God. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that we have done wrong on many occasions. In other words, we are sinners. So, when we are faced with God's infinite power and righteous judgment, it is normal that we should feel fear. The disciples in the infant church were very close to God and they were filled with the Holy Spirit; they probably knew and felt the infinite love and mercy of God more than we do. But when they saw the judgment that had come on Ananias and Sapphira, they felt the fear of God.



When we study the Bible, we would do well to embrace all of Scripture, even those parts that are difficult or hard to understand. For many people, the Bible's teaching concerning the fear of the Lord is one of the more difficult things to accept. But it is in the Bible and it is very important. **Matthew 10:28**, for example, is probably not your favorite verse, "**Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.**" It may not be our favorite verse, but it is the word of our Lord Jesus, and we should strive to understand and accept it. We do not need to fear earthly enemies - they can kill the body, but after that they cannot do any more. But God is the Judge of all the earth and He has both the power and authority to decide our eternal destiny.

Psalm 111:10 teaches us, "**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.**" God is holy and righteous and He is the Judge of all, so it is right for us to have a holy fear of the Lord. But if we look at this verse, we see that the fear of the Lord is not the end; it is the beginning of wisdom. And we also see that we should praise God for this. Praise the Lord for giving us a holy fear, a reverent awe of Him! Does that sound strange to you? It really shouldn't. The fear of the Lord helps us to avoid sin and to do what is right. If we want to learn to do right, the fear of the Lord is a great aid to us. And there are many people whose first steps on the road to learn about the love of God were steps motivated by the fear of God's judgment for their sins.

Let's look at Jesus' words in **Matthew 11:16-17**. "**To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'**" From the context, we realize that the flute represents the ministry of Jesus, and the ministry of John the Baptist is represented by the funeral dirge. Jesus focused mostly on revealing the love of God in His ministry, but John the Baptist stirred up the fear of God with stern warnings that the people must repent of their sins. John the Baptist preceded Jesus in order to prepare the people to receive the love of God by first preaching the fear of God. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, the love of God is its completion. But those whose hearts were so hard that they responded to neither fear nor love were in great danger of judgment.

The story of Barnabas is an example to us and the story of Ananias and Sapphira is a warning. I want

to be like Barnabas, but I can see Ananias in my heart when, all too often, I hesitate to trust fully in the Lord. I pray that God will protect me from Satan's attacks in those times. I know that I am weak; I cannot see or defeat Satan's sneaky attacks by my own wisdom or in my own strength. I am desperately in need of God's mercy and grace every hour of every day. But I take encouragement in God's promises in His Word. The words of **Philippians 1:6** are especially precious to me. **"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."**

Whether through fear or through love, if God has begun a good work in your heart, I am confident that He will bring it to completion. We are more comfortable with the message of God's love and grace, but we should not despise the discipline of the Lord and we should not resent the teaching that tells us to fear the Lord. Let me explain this in Missouri farm language. We are as stubborn as mules and we need both the carrot and the stick to keep us moving forward on the road to holiness.



IV. Conclusion

As we travel on our journey of faith, the stick, that is the fear of the Lord, sometimes keeps us moving when the carrot does not. But as we saw a few minutes ago, the fear of the Lord is not the end; it is the beginning of wisdom. When we arrive at the destination, the goal of our faith, will there still be fear? I don't think so. I think when the loving work of the Lord is complete, we will find that all fear is gone. John wrote of this in **1 John 4:18**, **"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."** When a child is small, sometimes the fear of discipline is the only thing that will restrain the child. But the child who has learned obedience and is fully grown no longer needs to be disciplined. When we are fully mature in Christ, all fear will be gone, because it will no longer be needed, but until that time, it serves a good purpose.

A loving father provides both discipline and encouragement to his sons and daughters. And God is the most wonderful Father of all. We are encouraged and filled with joy and hope by the sure promises of forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation for all who trust in Jesus and His finished work on the cross. And we are disciplined and motivated by the fear of the Lord which brings us to our knees in repentance when we have done wrong. And both the discipline and the promises come from the same loving heart of our heavenly Father, because **(1 Corinthians 11: 32)**, **"When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world."**

There is a Japanese saying which speaks of the fear of four things, earthquake, thunder, fire, and father. But the Bible teaches us that we should fear only the Lord God Almighty, for He alone is the judge of all the earth. Fear and love may sound like very different things, but actually they fit together perfectly, as shown in **Psalm 147:11**, **"but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love."**

If you were there when the Holy Spirit moved with wonderful power during those first days of the church, would your response have been more like Barnabas? or more like Ananias? The Lord is still at work today and in many places the Holy Spirit is moving with amazing power over individuals and whole churches. Would you like to see that here at OIC as well? If your answer is, "yes," then I want to urge you to pray. Pray for a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And, pray also that, through the fear of the Lord and the love of Jesus, all of us would fully trust in the Lord and that none of us would be lost.

We are all weak, but if we cling to the Lord and trust in His grace He will carry us home to heaven. Let's close with the wise words of **Proverbs 3:5-6**, **"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."**

Let's pray.

V. Prayer

Dear heavenly Father,

You are the One Creator God and You are Lord and Judge over all of creation. We praise Your Holy Name and we give thanks for the wonders of Your love and grace. Lord, teach us to love You even as You have first loved us. Lord, give us also a holy fear that helps us to walk in Your ways and that teaches us to respect and honor You in all things. We confess that all too often we make light of Your holiness and we fail to give You the honor You so richly deserve. In the Name of Jesus and by His finished work on the cross, we ask You to forgive us our sins and restore us once again to right relationship with You. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit so that we might learn to boldly proclaim Your love and grace. Set us apart and make us a holy people that brings glory to Your Name. Be glorified in our lives, our homes, in our church and throughout this land. In Jesus' precious Name I pray, amen.