**Sermon:** ***"Lying to the Holy Spirit" The Chilling Story of Ananias & Sapphira*** **Series:** ***"Lessons from the First Church"***
**Dave Sattler NSAC February 25, 2024 Text: Acts 4:32-5:11**
**Sub-texts: Psalm 23:6, Acts 4:12, Romans 8:16, Hebrews 4:13, 1 Peter 1:3-4, 5:8, 2 Peter 3:9**
**Sources:** Bible Gateway & NIV Life Application Bible. Commentaries: Willie James Jennings, Richard Longenecker, & I. Howard Marshall. Books: *"Along the Road"* by Jack Beck (2018), *"New Testament Theology"* by Donald Guthrie (1981), *"The Writings of the New Testament"* by Luke Timothy Johnson (1998), *"The Dust Off Their Feet"* by Chris Seay (2006), *"The Good and Beautiful God"* by James Bryan Smith (2010), *"The New Testament and the People of God"* by N.T. Wright (1992). Online: *"Anti-Hero"* by Taylor Swift (2022), *Hesed*, John Bevere. Images: unsplash.com.

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## I. Introduction:

- Thanks, everyone, for taking the time to be with us—in person and online today. I'm Dave Sattler, one of the pastors here at NSAC.
- ***<Slide>*** Today we continue our Series: ***"Lessons from the First Church"*** our *trek* through the *thrilling* and, as we'll learn today, also *chilling* Bible Book of Acts.
- Acts recounts the story of how disciples of 1st Century Jesus of Nazareth, buoyed by the reality of His resurrection, under the power of the Holy Spirit, launch a *revolution*, that, in spite of great opposition, miraculously spreads throughout the then Roman-dominated world!
- The Book of Acts gives vital instructions on how we can participate in the mission of Jesus; it offers valuable insights on how to relate to one another in Christian community; and, ***Acts provides 'boots-on-the-ground' teaching on how to grow and live in relationship with Jesus.*** I believe there's much to learn, *here,* from the example of the First Church.

- ***<Slide> So where are we at in the story of Acts?***
- Well, after Jesus ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit comes as promised at Pentecost, and Peter gets up and preaches and three thousand are saved and baptized. And the Church of Christ is born!
- Next, Peter & John are involved in healing a crippled beggar (Megan preached on this last week). After the healing miracle, Peter preaches and, again, many more put their faith in Jesus for salvation.
- Meanwhile, opposition begins to mount.
- Not appreciating the kerfuffle this is causing in the city, and perhaps a little jealous, local Jerusalem religious authorities arrest Peter & John and chuck them in jail.

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- This garners the attention of the top temple leaders, including the high priest, before whom Peter stands up and proclaims: *"Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."* —Acts 4:12
- Upon their release, Peter & John return and give a report to their fellow Christ-followers, and, while they are praying, the place begins to shake, they are all filled with the Holy Spirit, and further emboldened to share the good news.
- To warm us up for *today's* message, let's start with a little **Straw-Poll.**
- ***<Slide>*** Vote by show of hands. Please tally your answers in your head or on your paper. There'll be a diagnostic at the end.
- **1) What storyline do you think makes for a better drama?**
- A) Dark *conspiracies* and hidden *secrets* exposed or …
- B) A rags to riches *underdog* story.
- ***<Slide>*** **2) Which vision do you prefer?**
- A) A *utopian* (idealistic) vision of Church or a …
- B) A *realistic* (somewhat messy) vision of Church.
- ***<Slide>*** **3) When trying to make a favourable impression, do you tend to?**
- A) Talk yourself *up* (embellish) or …
- B) Talk yourself *down* (underplay).
- [Neither tactic is a good one, by the way.]
- ***<Slide>*** **4) Name the artist who sings: "*Did you hear my covert narcissism disguised as altruism?*"** Was it?…
- A) Bob Dylan or … B) Taylor Swift.
- If you answered A-B-A-B, this message is for you!
- ***<Slide>*** Before we hit the first eleven verses of Acts 5, and the *chilling* story of Ananias & Sapphira, we'll start today at the end of Acts 4.
- Here Luke pens *another* four-verse summary paragraph, a tactic he's employed previously at the end of Chapter 2, at another key transition point in the story, post-Pentecost.

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- And, Dr Luke's bird's-eye view gives us another extraordinary *snapshot* of the magnanimous and magnetic (almost utopian) community of the First Church.

## II. <u>Scripture Reading: Acts 4:32-5:11</u>

***<Slide>*** 32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who 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.

***<Slide>*** 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 just to human beings 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 some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

***<Slide>*** 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 conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! 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.

<Pray> *"Lord, thank You for Your Word. Please move <u>me</u> out of the way. Come speak to us by Your Spirit. We're hungry to hear from you."*

## III. <u>Biblical Teaching: Acts 4:32-5:11</u>

### 1. <*Slide*> The first believers practiced the <u>redistribution</u> of wealth. (4:32-35)

- United in "heart and mind," the group of Christ-followers, that had now grown to over five thousand, refused to see possessions as solely belonging to the individual. Their conviction? "My stuff is not my own."
- This practice was motivated by the fundamental Christian belief that: *Everything* we have is God's and we are only stewarding, or sharing, what rightfully belongs to *Him*.
- The strategy? When a need arises, be willing to sell your land or property, bring the money from the sale to the apostles, and allow them to distribute the funds to anyone in need.
- Note: Unlike communism, or, Marxism which are political ideologies, this practice of the sharing of possessions was *need*-driven, supervised by the *prompting* of the Holy Spirit, and, completely *voluntary*.

### 2. <*Slide*> Exhibit A: Barnabas <u>sells</u> his field. (4:36-37)

- Luke's first case study introduces us to a man who will soon become a key figure in the story. Nicknamed "Son of Encouragement" (I love this nickname!), Barnabas brings the money from the sale of his property and *generously* lays it "at the apostles' feet."
- Here we see a beautiful real-life example of how the power of Jesus' resurrection and the presence of the Holy Spirit *transforms* people.
- God was moving in and among the early church community freeing people both from their *attachment to things* and from *material need*.
- Why it says: ***"God's grace was so powerfully at work … that there were no <u>needy</u> persons among them."*** (4:33-34) Amazing.

### 3. <*Slide*> Exhibit B: Ananias & Sapphira <u>pretend</u> to be more <u>generous</u> than they actually were. (5:1-11)

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- To launch the next chapter, one filled with church growth, but also serious conflict from inside and out, Luke offers a second case study that is anything but beautiful.
- Ananias & Sapphira had *also* sold some land but *kept back* for themselves some of the profit, which would have been fine had they been upfront about it. Instead, the couple *conspired* to keep it a hidden secret.
- ILL—Now, I can't believe I'm saying this in church, but it's here where modern philosopher Taylor Swift gets it right in her song "Anti-Hero": *"Did you hear my covert narcissism disguised as altruism?"* She sings.
- Pretty sure "Tay-Tay's" lyric was inspired by her reading of Acts 5!
- Contrast with Barnabas intended, the sin of Ananias & Sapphira is not their *stinginess*, but their lying to *appear* more generous than they actually were: covert narcissism *disguised* as altruism—spiritual 'show-boating'…
- **<*Slide*>** ILL—Which, sadly, leads to my own story. Thirty years ago, when I was a young pastor, I was rigorously studying for my ordination.
- In addition to front-line ministry work, back then, ordination involved two plus years of reading, paper-writing, and doctrinal work.
- This all culminated in an interview where you were placed in a room around a big boardroom table with twelve veteran pastors, who, for an hour and a half, grilled you with personal and theological questions.
- Well, I passed the interview, but in the days that followed, I fell under the *deep conviction* of the Holy Spirit: I knew I had *embellished*, lied, on one of the questions about my spiritual life—made myself *appear more spiritual* than I really was. And this gnawed away at my heart …
- To find out what happened next, you'll have to *wait* till the end of the sermon.

## 4. <*Slide*> Ananias & Sapphira didn't just <u>lie</u> to humans but to <u>God</u>. (5:3-4)

- To Ananias, Peter declares, "*You have not lied just to human beings but to God."* The real sin is that Ananias & Sapphira believe in *their own sovereignty*, above God. In this way, they follow the strain of *all* human sin … from Adam & Eve to Abraham & Sarah to David to Peter … all the way to you and me today. Arrogantly attempting an 'end-run' around God *never* works out well for *any* of us.

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- So, what drives *your* actions? Too often, for me at least, I am more concerned about what *other people* think rather than what *God* thinks.
- When the heat is on, when I'm caught, when I need to make a good impression, my actions are driven more by keeping up appearances, or trying to please *other* people over God.
- And I wonder: Does sinning against God mean *anything* to us anymore?
- Truthfully, I find my worry about my *reputation* with others is greater than my desire to please, or, not offend God.
- And Peter issues this much-needed reminder to Ananias when he's caught in sin that his first offence is *against* God. So too for us.

**5. <*Slide*> In the aftermath, great <u>fear</u> breaks out. (5:11)**

- Interesting this is the first time Luke uses the term, "church": "the whole church," he says, 'was "seized" with reverent fear.'
- Now, the deaths of Ananias & Sapphira ought never to be celebrated.
- Their example should not be employed flippantly by church leaders to guilt, or, coerce people into godly behaviour. This is not the intent here.
- At a time of tremendous momentum for the church, instead, the story of Ananias & Sapphira gives a clarion warning on the destructiveness of sin, and, more importantly, it reminds us that God is God and *we* humans are not. In our day, it feels to me like we've lost some of this holy sense of *reverence* for God.

**6. <*Slide*> This story raises so many <u>questions</u> …**

- And I'll make a quick attempt to tackle a few. **1) *Why are Ananias & Sapphira given no opportunity to <u>repent</u>?***
- I don't know. Most often, "God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." —2 Peter 3:9
- So, let me just say, this *not* how God typically works. Still, we *do* know that lying, or, deceit violates trust at the deepest level—and must always be treated as *serious business* by the people of God.

- ***<Slide> 2) How come God's <u>judgment</u> here is so harsh?***
- While this verdict is certainly the exception rather than the norm, this story depicts a 'distant' world in which sin is taken very seriously.
- "Ananias and Sapphira were severely dealt with," one scholars says, "because the way [they] attempted to reach their goals was so

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diametrically opposed to the whole thrust of the gospel that to allow it to go unchallenged would have set the entire mission of the church off course." —Longenecker, p314

- Later in Acts, there is one other account of quick divine judgment.
- Seems Herod fancied himself as God, or *a* god, which results in *his* sudden death in Acts 12. Interesting, it's Herod's *arrogance,* too, that draws the acute ire of God.

- ***<Slide> 3) What happened to the <u>beautiful</u> church?***
- Short answer: Whenever you get *people* together, this side of eternity, it's always somewhat messy.
- Acts is not an attempt to sanitize the early church, or, polish it up for show. Prior to this, just about everything in the first church community had come up roses and rainbows!
- Yet, to camp only on the *beauty* does a disservice to history *and* sets a bar that's easily dismissible when it comes to any takeaways for Christ-followers today. To expose the *messiness* of church life simply makes it *real*—and more *relatable* to us.

## IV. <u>Life Applications</u>

- Now it's time to "land the plane" on some application points.
- I offer *three* takeaways for us today …

### A. *<Slide> We mustn't be led astray by Satan's <u>half-truths</u>.*

- Ananias & Sapphira are lured in by Satan's shiny bait: *'Selling your possessions and giving the proceeds away is good,'* the enemy says. *'Why not even keep a little for yourself? No one'll find out. There's a way for you to pocket some cash, and, still look good—to God, and, your fellow church-goers.'*
- 1 Peter 5:8 warns: "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."
- Why Peter asks Ananias this probing question, *"How has Satan so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?"*
- Though he is a defeated enemy, between now and his pending ultimate defeat when Jesus comes back again, Satan still attempts to trip us up.
- However, our enemy is *not* all-powerful, or, all-knowing.

- ILL—To use a hockey analogy, Satan is not on the ice. He's in the penalty box with a misconduct, clamouring for our attention, talking tough, trying to plant seeds of fear, doubt, and confusion in our heads.
- ***<Slide>*** And it's important we remain "alert" … for Satan loves to sell us, too, on his subtle-yet-phoney half-truths. Consider some examples:
- *'God gave you desires so <u>every</u> desire you have <u>must</u> be good.'*
- Yes, God gives us *desires*. However, our sin *skews* those desires—so not every desire we feel *is* good. We need *God's help* to navigate our natural desires—which ones are bad, which ones are good. And, we need God to shape and form *His* godly desires in us.
- *'You're a guilty sinner and you should be ashamed of yourself'* is another phoney half-truth Satan uses to attack our identity.
- True, we all are guilty sinners. But shame is *never* a tactic employed by God. No! God freely offers His forgiveness to everyone who is willing to receive it so we *never* have to sink in shame.
- Another subtle half-truth: *'God blesses me when I'm good and curses me when I'm bad.'*
- Life on our planet is not nearly this *simple,* or, straightforward. The God of the Christian Story is far more than a mere 'Cosmic Scorekeeper.'
- Yes, God appreciates it when we do good, but, by our behaviour, we *cannot* make God love us more, or cause God to love us any less.
- Here's the point: It's at the cross of Jesus where we are grounded in the full and beautiful truth that ***we are all sinners in need of a Saviour and God loves us more than we could ever imagine.***
- This is God's full and beautiful truth.

**B. *<Slide> We must see the <u>wider</u> <u>scope</u> of God's character.***

- Hands down, this is one of the most difficult stories in the entire Bible.
- Yet, we commit biblical malpractice when we take an isolated story like this one, that troubles us, and don't look at the bigger picture.
- The *dominant* narrative of the Bible is the story of God's lovingkindness, His incredible mercy, and His amazing grace poured out for all creation.
- Take for example the Hebrew word, *hesed* which means ***"God's <u>steadfast</u> <u>love</u> that endures forever."*** This word is attached to God alone and mentioned 147 times … *just* in the Book of Psalms! *—Hesed*

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- Psalm 23 famously concludes: "Surely Your goodness and love/mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (v6)
- And here, the word translated "love" or "mercy" is *hesed*—God's steadfast love that endures forever. Appears 146 more times in the psalms!
- Then, in the New Testament, God the Son Jesus is presented as the ultimate loyal and loving human.
- 1 Peter 1:3-4 describes it: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade."
- Simply put, God does this because this is just Who God is: generous, loving, and eternally loyal to His promises and His people.

- ***<Slide>*** APP—We all have ideas about Who God is and how God works.
- Some thoughts are ingrained in us by negative life experiences that have led us to wrongly conclude things like: '*God is distant and doesn't care about me.*'
- Perhaps other dark narratives stem from our church upbringing, or, hard-line fundamentalist teachings we've received that've lead us to fixate on thoughts like: '*God is angry and out to get me.*'
- These days, much of our thinking about God and His character is perpetuated by cultural narratives all around us that we subtly buy into, like: '*I need to try harder to earn God's favour.*'
- People of NSAC, may God open our eyes and hearts to see the fuller picture of God's character. Romans 8:16 says: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."
- Do you know that one of the main tasks of the Holy Spirit is to remind Christ-followers of our identity? That we are dearly loved children of our Heavenly Father?!! It's easy to lose sight of God's love for us.
- Holy Spirit, I invite You to come now and minister the love of the Father to each of us here. God, may we see, and experience, the whole scope—the fullness of Your character, including Your eternal, beautiful lovingkindness poured out on us today.

## C. <*Slide*> *Be certain and grateful we know the <u>Judge</u>.*

- Hard I know, but we mustn't write *judgment* out of the script.

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- God's coming judgment forms part of the backdrop of the Book of Acts.
- And, the case of Ananias & Sapphira stands as a stark reminder that there will one day be an *accounting* for all.
- Like Hebrews 4:13 says: "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."
- ILL—Which takes us back to my story …
- With the Spirit's prompting, I eventually found the courage to call up the District Superintendent to confess I had lied in my Ordination Interview.
- Surprised, he heard my confession, and told me he'd get back to me soon with a verdict. Of course, every time my phone rang thereafter, I braced myself for the judgment. [Graciously, God didn't strike me dead.]
- Then finally, weeks later, the District Superintendent called back.
- He informed me that my willingness to confess and repent only further supported the committee's decision to recommend me for ordination.
- 'Thank You, God.' You can imagine my relief.
- ***<Slide>*** ILL—Years ago, on our trip to Israel, our guide and professor, Jack Beck, stopped us half-way, on our trek down the Mt of Olives east of Jerusalem. From there, one can peer down into the Kidron Valley, the place where many believe Jesus will one day return to take up His position as Judge.
- In his book "Along the Road," Jack writes: "To be sure, Jesus is the Judge who will determine where we spend eternity. To be sure, we are guilty as charged. But this Jesus, the one who is my Judge, is also my defence attorney. Even more than that, He is my Saviour who suffered and died in my place, absorbing the punishment for my sin." —Jack Beck, p131
- APP—People of NSAC, do you know the Judge?
- To open your heart and life to Jesus is *the* most important decision one could ever make. Instead of fear, great comfort is ours when we truly come to know and trust Jesus, our loving Saviour and Judge. Amen.

*<Invitation for Prayer Ministry: Clive & Debbie (b) / Isobel & Gary //Lise & Joy (b) / Charlotte & Lin>*

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