

When God Takes Sin Seriously: The Sobering Story of Ananias and Sapphira

In a world that often celebrates authenticity, we still struggle with the temptation to present ourselves as something we're not. The early church faced this same challenge, and Acts 5 gives us a stark reminder of how seriously God views hypocrisy in His people.

What Is Hypocrisy?

Hypocrisy comes from the Greek word "hypokrisis," which means to play a part or act out a role. In ancient times, it described actors on stage who portrayed characters different from their true selves. Today, we might say someone is "two-faced" or "talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk."

In the church, hypocrisy isn't just disappointing—it's dangerous. It destroys character, ruins our witness, and can even destroy life itself. The goal should be simple: live authentically before the Lord, be real with God and others, repent of sin, and pursue holiness.

The Context: A Church Under Attack

At the end of Acts 4, the early church was experiencing incredible unity, clarity of purpose, and charity toward one another. They were of one heart and soul, boldly sharing the gospel, and generously caring for each other's needs. God was moving powerfully.

But whenever God moves in power, the enemy looks for ways to counter that work. When external persecution failed to destroy the church, Satan tried a different approach: attacking from within through hypocrisy.

The Deception of Ananias and Sapphira

Their Plan

Ananias and Sapphira, a married couple in the Jerusalem church, sold a piece of property. However, they kept back part of the proceeds while claiming they had given the entire amount to the church. This wasn't about the money—it was about the lie.

Their Motivation

Why did they attempt this deception? Two reasons drove their actions:

People's Reaction to Giving: They saw how the community praised and appreciated generous givers like Barnabas, who had sold land and given generously to the church.

Personal Attraction: They wanted the attention, affirmation, and praise that came with being seen as sacrificial givers.

Self always wants the praise, promotion, and attention. But giving should never be about what we can get out of it or how people will react. It must be for God's glory alone.

Four Key Traits of Hypocrisy

1. Hypocrisy Always Carries a Lie

The lie goes two directions—toward other people and toward God. When we live one way on Sunday but completely differently Monday through Saturday, we're deceiving ourselves into thinking God doesn't care about integrity and purity.

2. Hypocrisy Presents Greater Devotion Than Actually Possessed

We can go through religious motions without having a heart that's right with God. We can sing "I Surrender All" while holding back areas of our lives. We can pray "Lord, I'm all yours" while maintaining secret reservations.

The church should be a hospital, not a country club. We don't come to impress others but to be authentic and real before the Lord.

3. Hypocrisy Masks Selfish Motives in Religious Actions

Like Judas, who criticized the woman's expensive gift to Jesus while claiming concern for the poor (when he really wanted to steal from the money bag), we can perform religious acts with purely selfish motivations.

4. Hypocrisy Kills the Life God Intended

This is why God hates hypocrisy so much. It destroys the newness of life, integrity, and sweet fellowship with God and others that He intends for us.

God's Response: Swift and Severe

Peter's Confrontation

Through the gift of discernment, Peter confronted Ananias directly: "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" He made it clear that their sin wasn't about the amount they gave—giving was voluntary. The problem was their deception.

Peter emphasized that they hadn't just lied to people but to God Himself, equating the Holy Spirit with God and supporting the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Consequence

Both Ananias and Sapphira died immediately after being confronted with their sin. This wasn't Peter's doing—God struck them dead. When Sapphira arrived three hours later, Peter gave her an opportunity to confess, but she chose to continue the lie and met the same fate.

Why Such Severe Judgment?

Setting a Standard

God wanted the early church to understand from the beginning that holiness matters to Him. Sin is offensive to God and cost Jesus His life. It's never "no big deal."

God's Heart for Confession

Even in judgment, we see God's mercy. He gave Sapphira an opportunity to confess. As Isaiah 1:18-19 shows, God's heart is always: "Come now, let us reason together... Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow."

God provides opportunities for confession and repentance, but if we refuse and rebel, we face the consequences of our choices.

Can God Take a Believer's Life for Sin?

Yes, Scripture shows us multiple examples:

- The Israelites in the wilderness (except Caleb and Joshua)
- 3,000 who died during the golden calf incident
- 23,000 who died for sexual immorality and idolatry
- Believers in Corinth who died for taking communion irreverently (1 Corinthians 11:30-31)

It's only by God's grace, mercy, and patience that any of us are still alive. His kindness leads us to repentance, not presumption.

Two Essential Lessons

Falsehood Ruins Fellowship

Hypocrisy destroys our fellowship with others and with God. It's ugly on everyone. But the beauty is found in 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Take Sin Seriously Because God Does

This couple were believers who made a tragic blunder. God used their story as an example for all of us. We must confess our sins when God convicts us and pursue holiness because it reflects His character.

Life Application

This week, commit to living with complete authenticity before God. Ask yourself: Are there areas where I'm presenting a false image to others or to God? Am I holding onto sins that I need to confess? What religious activities am I doing with selfish motives rather than for God's glory?

Take time for honest self-examination using the words of Psalm 139:23-24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxious thoughts. And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Questions for Reflection:

- Where in my life am I tempted to present myself as more spiritual than I actually am?
- What sins am I holding onto instead of confessing them to God?
- How can I pursue authenticity in my relationships and my walk with God this week?
- Am I taking God's holiness and my sin seriously enough?

Remember, confession is good for the soul, and God's mercy is new every morning. Don't let pride keep you from the freedom that comes through honest repentance and authentic living.