

## **ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA WITHHOLDING OUR RESOURCES FROM GOD**

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The story of Ananias and Sapphira is unquestionably one of the strangest stories in the New Testament, and sounds something like the story of Achan and the story of Gehazai in the Old Testament. The theme is sin and immediate retribution and judgment of that sin. And the judgment of that sin is not the judgment of 'outsiders' but of the people blessed to be 'insiders' and inheritors of the promised blessings of God. For that reason it is a somewhat scary story for Christians who read it; and so we skip past the story in Acts 5 hoping that we will not commit the same sin and be judged in the same way. But when we sin as Christians the story and the idea of judgment is not far from us.

William Barclay, the great New Testament scholar, says that this story could have been left out of the Bible, but it shows the 'stubborn honesty' of the Bible. He goes on to add that it showed that even in the early church there were very imperfect Christians. He adds the story of Oliver Cromwell who was afflicted with many warts on his face. An artist commissioned to paint his portrait left out the warts to please Cromwell. When Cromwell saw the painting he had it destroyed and said to the artist, "Paint me warts and all." So according to Barclay the Bible paints 'warts and all.'

As you know the story is that the couple sold their possessions, as many in the early Christian community had done. There was one difference, however. The others laid down all their money at the Apostles' feet. Ananias laid down part of the price he had gotten from the sale, but not all. He withheld a portion. He was wanting it both ways--praise that he had given all his possessions to God, and money that he and his wife could use. Peter pointed out to him that his real sin was that of lying to God, and told him that he could have kept it all if he had so desired. But, said Peter, 'you have lied to God.' Ananias immediately died. Three hours later his wife, Sapphira, came in and Peter asked her if it had been sold for a certain amount. She and her husband had rehearsed their lie, and so Peter told her that the feet of them that had buried her husband would bury her as well, and so she died and was buried.

I agree with Peter that their lying to the Church, the body of Christ, was a lie to Christ and to God Himself. But their initial sin was the sin of withholding their resources from the Christian community, the Body of Christ, and hence from God Himself in His work in the world. The sin of 'withholding God's resources' is a common sin in the church, and God could just as easily bring judgment upon many of us for that, as He did Ananias and Sapphira. Obviously He was demonstrating to the early Christian community that He was God, that He was Holy, and that He could come in judgment toward sinful man at any time if He so willed. He was reminding us of the Seriousness of the Kingdom, and the need for perfect honesty in our relationship to It and to Himself.

Regarding Ananias and Sapphira, the first thing that they withheld from God was no doubt their FELLOWSHIP. We find these words in Genesis: <sup>Gen 1:26</sup> Then God said,

“Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” <sup>Gen 1:27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God created the human race that He might have fellowship with us. That is the very nature of Agape Love, to seek those to love. <sup>1 Jn. 4:8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because **God is love.** <sup>9</sup> This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. Then in <sup>1 Jn. 4:16</sup> And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. **God is love.** Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

In the beginning of creation God had a plan for the creation of a superior race of creatures who could have within them a part of God Himself. They would be like Him, have His likeness. They would bear the spiritual resemblance of their Creator, would be created ‘in His Image.’ They would have within themselves the creative nature of their God. They would have within themselves the logical and reasoning nature of their God. They would have within themselves that rare ability to experience the beautiful, to understand height and depth and perspective, and to have a knowledge of good and bad, right and wrong, and of superior and inferior choices. Moreover, they would know within themselves that a Divine Creator was real and seeking their fellowship. All these things and more made them ‘like’ God, or godlike. But the story of Genesis 3 tells us what happened to those created in God’s image. They made a choice that smashed the Image of God within them. They made a choice to go their own way and to reject their Creator’s way. Soon men lost that joy of fellowship. Then later in Genesis ‘men began to call upon God in prayer.’ They lost His immediate presence, but they were saved by that fellowship of prayer.

The lostness of mankind necessitated the next thing that happened. Even in the fall of man, God had a plan. <sup>1 Jn. 4:9</sup> This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. God’s Love for us caused Him to create a way to bring us back to Himself, i.e., through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But Ananias and Sapphira were not in full fellowship with God. They had withheld fellowship from God. How did it happen? We are not told, but I suppose their covetous spirits led them away from prayer and from service to their fellow Christians. This is just what the Bible says in <sup>1 Jn. 4:11, 12:11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

The loss of fellowship with the Almighty causes us to lose our fellowship with other human beings. The road downward starts with the failure to look upward. When

we cease meditating upon God, the mind is led into the abyss and the desert places of lust and sin and selfishness. The landscape is crowded with preachers who have fallen victim to lust, of good church members who are exposed for doing bad things, and of people who once loved God now in love with some undesirable vice which they cannot control. No doubt Ananias and Sapphira forgot that they were made for fellowship with God, and that their lives were meaningless without that fellowship. So they had committed the sin of withholding fellowship from God.

Let me ask you, how is your spiritual life? That is, are you in daily fellowship with God? And how is your fellowship with your fellow Christian? For as John said, “Since God loved us we ought to love one another.” Listen to a further word from John: <sup>1Jn 1:5</sup> This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”

Ananias and Sapphira were walking in the darkness of withholding fellowship from God and from the members of the Early Christian Community.

Not only were they guilty of Withholding their Fellowship from God, they were guilty of WITHHOLDING THEIR FAITH IN GOD. Prior to this story of Ananias and Sapphira we find these golden words of Scripture: <sup>Acts 4:34</sup> 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 <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

<sup>Acts 4:36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Was Anaias trying to upstage Barnabas? Why did he even sale his land? Or, did he sale the land and then fear that he had played the fool by giving his possessions to the “followers of the Way” as these early Christians were called? Perhaps like other Christians down through the centuries he became really enthused by what was happening and decided to give everything from the sale of certain land to God. But then he and Sapphira started using their ‘common sense’ and saying to one another, “Wait a minute. We are being a bit too hasty? We need to provide for ourselves after all.” Then they made that crazy pact that they would keep a good portion of the money for themselves, for their future, and give the remainder to the Christian community.

Their fear kept them from complete faith and complete faithfulness. Because of their fear they withheld their faith in God. <sup>1Tim 1:7</sup> For God did not give us a **spirit of timidity**, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. We must never allow the fear and timidity that we so often feel to cause us to give up on the Power of God and the Promises of God. <sup>Heb. 11:6</sup> And without faith it is impossible to **please God**, because

anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

To those aboard the ship who cried out in fear, Jesus rebuked them with the words, "O ye of little faith." God loves to see our faith, just as Jesus did when on one occasion a Centurian said to Him, "Just say the word and it will be done." Jesus was amazed and said, "I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel." Again, how astounded He was when Mary emptied her expensive perfume upon His sinless head and He rebuked Judas, whose common sense betrayed the fact that he was a thief and a robber, and complimented Mary that she alone had anointed Him while living for His burial. You cannot please God when you withhold your faith.

Nor can you please God when you WITHHOLD YOUR FINANCES AND YOUR TALENTS. I believe that we should give abundantly to God's Kingdom. Surely to Ananias and Sapphira, the gift of half of their sale price, or one fourth of their sale price seemed like it was abundant, no doubt. But God counts giving differently than do we. I'm pretty sure that the couple had more than just the land they sold. We are told that Barnabas sold a parcel of land that he owned. Further, not everybody sold their land. But the point is that God who gives abundantly wants us to give abundantly. What I give may not be what you give.

The man who can afford to give a million dollars for the kingdom of God is withholding his finances from God if he gives but \$500,000.00 However the widow who gives her last mite to the Kingdom of God gives more than the man who can give a million dollars even if he gives every last cent of that million dollars.

I do not believe in tithing as a legalistic concept. However, I do believe that that amount should be the bottom level that most of us should give--and I believe it should be given to the church, for the church is the body of Christ, not some evangelist, or some individual ministry about which we know very little. But I do believe that if someone can only give a little because they only have very little, they will be blessed for their faithfulness in their giving.

Paul is quite clear on this subject: <sup>2Cor 9:6</sup> Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. <sup>7</sup> Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a **cheerful giver**. <sup>8</sup> And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. <sup>9</sup> As it is written:

"He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor;  
his righteousness endures forever."

<sup>2Cor 9:10</sup> Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. <sup>11</sup> You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and

through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Giving should be done cheerfully. Giving should be done generously. Giving should be done freely. Giving should be done hopefully. The final reward of our giving is in the hands of God, who will reward us abundantly as He always does.

The giving that you do should not be limited to finances, although the Kingdom of God cannot go forward as God would have it go in this world without Christian faithfulness in giving. Missions could not be done, Christian charities would fail, and programs would falter without the help of people like Barnabas. We need more Barnabas Christians--people who will sell perishable things to promote an Imperishable Kingdom.

We Southern Baptists have laid down a doctrine of tithing ten percent. I think it should be more. But we have literally hundreds of thousands of people who never tithe their talents. Many Christians never tithe their time. If we're going to preach tithing, however much we make it (I realize the word means a tenth), let us also teach that such resources as time and talents need to be added to the mix. Let us also add to that 'witnessing to others the story of the death, burial, resurrection, second coming, and Lordship of Jesus Christ, i.e., the Gospel.

Ananias and Sapphira gave, but they failed the test of Paul in 2 Cor. 9, and they also lied to God by their withholding of fellowship, faith and finances. Trying to preserve their futures, they lost their future. Their lives were ended by the only one who has the right to end life, God Himself.

My friend Bob Jackson and I were discussing this story one day and he told me this story, a true story. In his first church in Alabama there was a need for money to pay for something the church badly needed. A deacon of that church promised the church that if he could sell a house he owned he would himself pay for the project. The church prayed that he would sell it. In a few days he sold the property. He continued to come to church and never mentioned his promise to help with the needed money. Bob said that it soon became apparent that he would not help.

As suddenly as the house was sold, just as suddenly the man fell ill. He went to every specialist he could find, and he continually got worse. No one could find anything wrong with him. Within a year of his promise he was dead and buried. He made a promise to the Church, hence to God, and reneged on his promise. He lied to God, like Ananias, hoping to secure his future, and the God who governs all futures, as he did to Ananias and Sapphira, took his future from him.

Beware of withholding your fellowship, your faith, or your finances from God. Money is useless to a dead man.