

Accountable
July 7, 2024
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Acts 4:36-5:11

Opening: Have you heard about the social networking app called “BeReal?” You get a notification and have two minutes to take a picture of yourself so your selected friends can see you no matter where you are, how you look, or what you are doing. It takes two pictures using both front and back cameras. No filters or editing. The goal is “to promote authenticity by encouraging users to share unfiltered glimpses of their daily lives.”ⁱ It’s the opposite of nicely staged posts on Facebook and Instagram. Would you sign up?

Marketers have learned that millennials and Gen Z’ers place high value on authenticity. My experience in life tells me that unsaved people who are observing the church are also looking for authenticity. They wonder if Christ-followers are “real” or fake.

In today’s text we read about a husband and wife in the newly established Christian church who struggled with being “real.” They desired admiration and honor in the church for their generosity but they allowed Satan to fill their hearts with greed and deceit. Their punishment from God was shocking then and still is today.

The point: Lying to people is wrong; lying to God and living a lie about our service for Him is foolish and could be fatal. At the very least, fatal to our witness (reputation) as followers of Christ.

In Acts chapter four we read that the church was growing as the Holy Spirit empowered the Apostles to boldly share the good news of Jesus and His resurrection. As the chapter ends, these new Christ-followers were “of one heart and soul” and shared their possessions with those in need. Some gave sacrificially to eliminate poverty.

36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, **37** sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. **1** But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, **2** 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. **3** 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? **4** 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.” **5** When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. **6** The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. **7** After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. **8** And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” **9** 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.” **10** 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. **11** And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

- What a shocking outcome! It is no wonder everyone felt “great fear.”
- So, they fudged on their pledge amount to the church; what’s the big deal?
- Apparently, when it comes to our relationship with God, being real IS a big deal!
- Let’s unpack their behavior that led to this dramatic display of God’s judgment.
- A Christ-follower is given the privilege of being a child of God (Rom.8, Gal.4).
- Privilege comes with responsibility and responsibility comes with accountability.
- Any good parent teaches this to their children and God is the ultimate parent.
- He holds Christ-followers accountable for our actions, thoughts, and motivesⁱⁱ in every part of our life including generosity with the resources He has given us.
- Scripture teaches that Christian’s should give “cheerfully, regularly, systematically, proportionally, and liberally”ⁱⁱⁱ as the Lord leads us. (Acts 2:44-47; Phil. 4:10-19) We’re also taught to give with the right motives.
- Jesus said in **Matthew 6:1–4 (ESV)** — **1** “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. **2** “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. **3** But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **4** so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
- Barnabas “laid his gift at the feed of the Apostles.” The same was true for Ananias and Sapphira. Why do you think these gifts were made public? How did this NOT violate Jesus’ warning in Matthew 6?
- What motivated Ananias and Sapphira to give the gift in the first place?
- What motivated them to lie about their donation?
- Verse 3: Who put this idea in their hearts? Note the significant word, “fill.”
- Verse 4: Why was their offense totally unnecessary? To whom did they lie?
- When Peter said lying to the Holy Spirit was the same as lying to God, he was declaring the deity of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit IS God living in us.
- God has a fool-proof “lie detecting” and “sin prevention” system if we use it:
 - **His word - Hebrews 4:12–13 (ESV)** — **12** For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. **13** And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.
 - **His Spirit** living in us - **John 16:8 (ESV)** — **8** And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment **John 14:26 (ESV)** — **26** But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

- If we stay in God's word and allow His Spirit to bring it to mind, we will be less likely to give in to Satan's temptation to sin. BTW: How did Peter know they lied?
- Note, in verse eight, Peter gave Sapphira a chance to come clean, but she stuck with the lie. Her death was because of her own unconfessed sin.
- Why do you think God dealt with their deception in such a dramatic way?
- Wiersbe: *"It is worth noting that the Lord judges sin severely at the beginning of a new period in salvation history. Just after the tabernacle was erected, God killed Nadab and Abihu for trying to present "false fire" to the Lord (Lev. 10). He also had Achan killed for disobeying orders after Israel had entered the Promised Land (Josh. 7). While God was certainly not responsible for their sins, He did use these judgments as warnings to the people, and even to us (1 Cor. 10:11–12)."*^v
- Tom Constable writes, *"Lying to the Holy Spirit is a sin that Christians commit frequently today. When Christians act hypocritically by pretending a devotion that is not there or a surrender of life that they have not really made, they lie to the Holy Spirit. If God worked today as he did in the early Jerusalem church, undertakers would have much work."* (Constable, 39).^v
- Was this kind of punishment limited to Old and New Testament times?
- 1 John 5:16 references a "sin unto death." The interpretation is much debated.
- One commentator writes about that verse: *"Sometimes a Christian may sin so seriously that God judges that sin with swift physical death: "a sin that leads to death." Ananias and Sapphira are cases in point."*^{vi}
- This references physical death but not loss of salvation if someone is saved. More info here. <https://www.gotquestions.org/sin-unto-death.html>
- I believe God's dramatic judgment came because their conduct was a threat to the integrity of the early church. Their deception might have been the first public scandal in the church causing outsiders to be cynical about Christ-followers.
- This also happens today. When church members and leaders try to cover up sin and that sin is exposed it causes cynicism and harms the cause of Christ.
- *"See, church people are crooks and frauds no better than me! Who needs it?"*
- Their cynicism pushes them away from the message of the gospel.
- This lesson is about greed and deception, but it would apply to any hidden sinful behavior a Christ-follower tries to cover up.
- Ananias and Sapphira's sin of lying was motivated by greed, but those sins grew in the soil of pride. They wanted honor and admiration in the eyes of people.
- Pride caused them to erect a façade to hide their sin and protect their image.
- C.S. Lewis: *"Pride is the mother hen under which all other sins are hatched..."*^{vii}
- Often pride among church people is manifested in sanctimonious behavior. (Remember the "Church Lady" played by Dana Carvey on SNL?)
- Instead of being real, this kind of person is self-righteous and holier-than-thou.
- In the New Testament the Pharisees were the stereotype for this behavior. We could point to many characteristics of "Pharisaical behavior" in religious people: Self-righteousness, judgmental, legalistic, pride, arrogance, lack of compassion, ostentatious religiosity, looking down on those considered less spiritual.

- Perhaps the greatest pharisaical flaw is “*Hypocrisy: Projecting an outward appearance of righteousness while inwardly harboring sin or failing to live up to one's own standards.*”^{viii}
- Pharisaical behavior is the opposite of what Jesus taught in scripture.
- If we strive to be more Christ-like we will avoid being like the Pharisees.
- Other thoughts?

So, What's the Takeaway?

- There is a lesson here for the church: Don't cover up sin in the congregation and especially among leadership. The old saying: “*The bigger they are the harder they fall.*” In this context: The more hypocritical they are the louder the thud!
- There is also a lesson for us as individuals.
- This text might cause us as Christ-followers to think: “*Wait! We all sin. How can I learn from the warning in this cautionary tale of Ananias and Sapphira?*”
- They didn't just lie to others, they tried to lie to God Himself and others about their relationship with Him. In their pride they wanted to look like super-saints when they were dishonest, greedy, sanctimonious frauds. Their behavior was such a threat to the young church that God took them out in dramatic fashion.
- Because of God's grace we don't have to live behind a false front; we can BE REAL! What does that look like?
 - Stay in His word daily so it can reveal where we fall short.
 - Actively ask His Spirit to reveal sin in both thoughts and actions.
 - Confess that sin and change that behavior in His power.
 - Ask God to keep us humble and authentic instead of prideful.
 - If Satan tempts us to live behind a false façade of sanctimony, we need to remember Jesus words about the Pharisees in John 12:43: “they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”^{ix}
 - If we think we can keep sinning and cover it up we need to remember that Numbers 32:23 says, “*...be sure your sin will find you out.*”
- Because of Christ's sacrifice we don't have to live behind a false front as sanctimonious frauds, we can BE REAL! Just sinners saved by grace.

ⁱ <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/bereal-your-friends-for-real/id1459645446>
<https://www.zdnet.com/article/what-is-bereal-everything-to-know-about-this-unfiltered-social-media-app/>

ⁱⁱ **Romans 14:12 (ESV) — 12** So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

ⁱⁱⁱ Explore the Bible Leader's Guide – Lifeway 2024

^{iv} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [The Bible exposition commentary](#) (Vol. 1, p. 422). Victor Books.

^v Gangel, Kenneth. Holman New Testament Commentary - Acts . B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} Walvoord, J. F., & Zuck, R. B., Dallas Theological Seminary. (1985). [The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures](#) (Vol. 2, p. 902). Victor Books.

^{vii} Lee Strobel, The Case for Grace: A Journalist Explores the Evidence of Transformed Lives

viii <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/who-are-the-pharisees.html>

ix [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Jn 12:43). (2016). Crossway Bibles.