

Christian Service—Without God

Acts 4:32 – 5:11

Halifax: 16 October 2011

Introduction

I know it sounds crazy, but did you know that there are a lot of people who live the Christian life without God?

- It's true. There are thousands of them.
 - Of course it's not *really* the Christian life, but as far as anyone can see it is.
 - They can be conservative—even very conservative—or liberal or anything in between, but God is not at all a part of what they do.
- They find acceptance in the church from the other members in the congregation, and this is what they live for.
 - Sometimes, they find that they can impress the other members by doing good works, or by humility, or by some other affected behaviour.
 - And they are so motivated to impress that sometimes they even outstrip those who are truly serving God.
 - They do all this service, but all the while they are in fact strangers to God.
 - They are so focused on what the other members think of them that they never stop to consider what God thinks.
 - They do their words to be seen by men, but their hearts are far from God. Jesus asked such persons this question:
 - **John 5:44 "How can you believe, who receive honour from one another, and do not seek the honour that comes from the only God?"**

Today in Acts 4:32 – 5:11, we come to a passage that shows us the beautiful Christian service that was going on in the New Testament Church...

- It was very beautiful and admirable—
 - We are shown a tremendous example of in the man that named Barnabas...
 - But then there is this couple—this hypocritical couple—
 - who want to be admired like Barnabas, but whose hearts are not with God.
 - They engage in Christian service without God!
 - And the LORD graciously exposes them for our sake so that we will be taught not to imitate them.
 - There are people today in the Church who are full of Christian service with out God... they do not know the Lord.
 - And even those of us who do know Him struggle with hypocrisy—we often are more concerned about what people think than what God thinks.
- So let's take a closer look that we may benefit from the Holy Spirit has to teach us.

I. First, behold here the beauty of Christian service *with* God.

A. You can see here that these are people who were living for Jesus.

1. The first thing it says about them is that they believed!

- This is how they are characterised in 4:32—
 - as **“the multitude of those who believed.”**

- That is where true religion begins...
 - You believe that God is and that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.
 - that He is not just a fiction, but a living God who made us, who is the judge of all and to whom we must answer, and who acts graciously to redeem His elect.
 - You accept this reality instead of denying it and suppressing it.
 - But of course the true God has now been revealed through His Son.
 - You can't truly know Him—you can't bear to let yourself know Him—unless you know His Son...

 - You believe in His amazing Son...
 - That He came into the world and bore the curse for us!
 - That He rose again on the third day and ascended to sit at God's right hand!
 - That He is living right now—right this minute—to make intercession for us.
 - That He raises sinners from the dead when they come to Him and pardons all their sins.
 - That He is coming again to judge the world and to restore all things for His glorious kingdom.
 - That He will glorify us so that we can serve God forever in a new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells.
 - That is what we believe!
 - A true disciple is one who believes on the Lord Jesus!
 - Do you?

2. You see secondly that it says they were **“of one heart and one soul!”**

- How could they not be when they truly believe in this beautiful Saviour?
 - As we have seen before, they are animated by one holy passion!
 - They share in one faith and one hope.
 - They want to make Him known to all the world as He has commanded them!

- They want to honour Him and to worship Him.
 - They want to help each other to do this—they are in this together!
 - They want to help each other to know Him and to make Him known and to bring His kingdom so that His will is done on earth as in heaven!
 - What about you?
 - Are you with your brothers and sisters in Christ?
 - Is He what makes your heart beat?
 - What wonderful love He exhibits for us!
 - What a beautiful Saviour He is who gave all for His sheep!
3. You see thirdly that it says they took care of each others needs.
- They were being persecuted.
 - Many of them would have lost their jobs because they had been baptised in the name of Jesus and were serving Him.
 - For this reason, many of them were poor and needy.
 - But those who had possessions saw these possessions as given to them in order that they might use them to help their brothers and sisters.
 - It says,
 - **Acts 4:32: neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.**
 - Their gracious Saviour had given so much for them—and it was so beautiful—
 - that they took pleasure in doing what they could for each other!
 - They could not bear the curse for each other,
 - (only Jesus could do that)
 - but they could certainly help each other out in time of need by giving what they had.
 - It goes on to say (in verse 34) that they were even selling their houses and lands so that they could use the proceeds to help each other out.
 - They were not forced to do this—
 - they were not doing this because they hated material things—
 - they were doing it because they wanted to help each other out in this time of need.
 - they were doing it because they valued each other more than they valued things.
 - they were doing it because they loved Jesus and wanted to be like Him.

- They were so quick to do this that it says that nobody was in need...
 - **Acts 4:34-35: Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.**
 - When it says that they laid their gifts at the Apostles' feet,
 - it may very likely be showing that the Apostles held these gifts as trustees—they did not put their gifts in the hands of Peter or John,
 - but they put them at their feet into the public treasury of the church which was, at this time, administered by the apostles.
 - It was a beautiful thing—no one was needy—even in these difficult times!
 - It was the ideal spoken about in Deuteronomy 15:4 that if they did God's will, there would be no poor among them...
 - These people were alive in Jesus Christ!
 - They were beautiful!
 - They believed on Him, they loved Him, and they served one another for His sake!

- 4. But there is also a fourth thing that characterises them described in verse 33...
 - It says:
 - **Acts 4:33: And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all.**
 - We have seen that they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine.
 - Everyone did not preach, but as they lived out the gospel by the power of the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead,
 - it made the Apostles' preaching all the more powerful!
 - The living Jesus was the only explanation for this beautiful community!
 - It was all about Him!
 - He was preached and all men everywhere were commanded to repent and believe on Him, confessing Him as Lord and Saviour.
 - The Apostles preached that Jesus was risen, and people could see clearly that these church members were indeed raised up with Him to walk in new life!
 - The living power of Jesus was evident.
 - Preaching is most effective when there is a community that is living the life before the world as the salt and light of the earth.

- Everyone could see that what the Apostles were saying was not just theory—it was real!
 - God was real!
 - He was at work among these disciples.
 - The message was true.
 - Jesus was risen and there was new life in Him for all.
 - Pray that His life would be evident in us

TRANS> What a beautiful community—

- What a beautiful fellowship with Jesus at the centre of it all!
- What a powerful witness to the living Christ!
- And now Luke mentions a particular man who was exemplary.

B. Barnabas is presented to us as an outstanding individual example of this beautiful community of believers.

1. His real name was Joses,

- but he was such a shining example of Christian service that the apostles had given him a new name—Barnabas, which means, “son of encouragement.”
 - It is the same word (παρακλησις par-ak’-lay-sis) that Jesus used to speak of the Holy Spirit in John’s gospel when He told His disciples that the comforter (*paraklete*) would come.
 - That’s pretty special to be called the Son of the *paraklete*—the Holy Spirit of God who comes to help His people!
 - A *paraklete* is one who comes alongside to do whatever needs to be done—
 - He is a helper, an encourager, an exhorter, a comforter, an admonisher—
 - all of these words are used to translate the word *paraklete*.
 - The translators of the English Bible have a hard time knowing which one to use.
- So Joses was named Barnabas because He was one who always came alongside to help.
 - We see this of Barnabas all through the New Testament...
 - He was the one who came alongside Paul to help him to be accepted by the Jews in Jerusalem after Paul’s conversion.
 - He was the one who stood beside John Mark to restore him to usefulness after he had backed out in the middle of a mission.

TRANS> And now you see what this Son of Help—this Son of Encouragement—this Son of Paraklesis, is said to have done in these early days of the church...

2. Barnabas sold his land and laid it at the Apostles feet.
 - He put it in the public treasury.
 - Apparently others were doing this too, but Barnabas is especially mentioned because of his exemplary service.
 - He was always there to help
 - He was a leader among the beautiful ones in the early Christian community!
 - Oh that we might all be Sons of Encouragement!
 - Ready to give of what we have for others!
 - Ready to lay down our life for our brothers and sisters!
 - This is beautiful living!
 - This is Christian service with God!

TRANS> What a beautiful community!

- The church was starting out right
 - It is an example to us of what we ought to be and of what we can be by God's grace and what we will be in the New heavens and new earth.
 - But now something else comes into the community—
 - something of a different spirit—
 - something corrupt and perverse...

II. See here in chapter 5, Christian service *without* God is presented to us.

A. Ananias and Sapphira engage in sacrificial Christian service, but not for God.

1. They want to get the same attention that Barnabas got.
 - What Barnabas had done truly was a beautiful thing.
 - He was admired for it.
 - He was given a new name because of all that he had done.
 - And no doubt Ananias and Sapphira saw all of this and wanted to be admired too.
 - That was the wrong way to look at Barnabas...
 - They should have seen his deep love for Jesus Christ and have wanted to have the same love...
 - but apparently their eyes were on the admiration of the people.
 - They wanted to be admired too (don't we all)
 - and sacrificial service was the way to get admired in this community of Christ's disciples!
 - They were willing to pay a price that they might be admired like Barnabas.

2. So you see what Ananias and Sapphira do...
 - a. They also sell a piece of land...
 - In Acts 5:1, it says:
 - **Acts 5:1: But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession.**
 - Good so far...
 - b. But then in verse 2, we are told that they kept back part of the proceeds for themselves.
 - It says:
 - **Acts 5:2: And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet.**
- 1) On the face of it, this is still a wonderful, admirable work!
 - They sold their land and they brought a good chunk of it and gave it to the treasury of the church to be used for the poor!
 - It is a fine Christian work, except for one thing.
 - It says that they **“kept back part of the proceeds.”**
 - And the word translated **“kept back”** is one that speaks of embezzlement...
 - of keeping back what is not yours to keep!
 - The word is fairly rare.
 - It is used twice in this passage and the only other time it is used in the New Testament is in Titus 2:10 where servants are instructed not to **pilpher** what belongs to their masters.
 - It is also used in the Greek version of the Old Testament—most significantly—in Joshua 7...
 - where Achan **keeps back** for himself what was dedicated to the Lord.
 - 2) The problem was in that Ananias and Sapphira had dedicated this land to the Lord's treasury...
 - They had promised it to Him, but then they had kept part of it back.
 - They had kept back what was dedicated to the Lord!
 - And they did all this secretly,
 - wanting to gain the credit in the eyes of their fellow church members, of having given all...
 - just like Barnabas had done!
 - They did it to impress with hearts that were far from God—with hearts that could stand before Him and tell a bold lie!

3. This is one ugly deed in the midst of a beautiful community.
 - a. But there is only one person who is able to see the ugliness...
 - well—three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!
 - These are the most important persons!
 - These are the persons that all of this is supposed to be about!
 - It is not just about having a nice loving church...
 - It is about serving the Lord who gave Himself for us.
 - And Ananias and Sapphira were apparently so concerned about pleasing the community that they didn't even think about God!
 - That's why I have referred to it as Christian service with out God!
 - If they did think of Him, it is even worse because they stood before Him with a deliberate lie!

TRANS> God was the only one who could see what that had done...

- And what an ugly, vile thing it was!
- b. There were so many sins wrapped up in this ugly deed.
 - 1) There was contempt of God—they did not fear Him—they knew that He could see their lying, but they went on with it anyway!
 - 2) There was the defrauding of God—taking what had been dedicated—a thing that is always highly displeasing to the Lord.
 - 3) There was the vanity and ambition involved in wanting to show off before the community without any concern about God's judgement.
 - 4) There was the absence of faith—they did not believe God or they never could have gone on with such a thing.
 - 5) There was the corruption of the beauty and order of the church.
 - 6) And there was the hypocrisy itself—outwardly serving when their heart was far away. Pretending to love God when they did not love Him.
 - c. You see their problem here...
 - This community was beautiful for God because of Jesus,
 - but Ananias and Sapphira did not want to be beautiful for God.
 - They simply wanted to be **known** as beautiful.
 - They were happy to be vile wretched deceivers before His face as long as everyone **thought** they were beautiful!
 - Of course no one really admits that even to himself.
 - But it was true.
 - They didn't mind being ugly before God—
 - All that mattered was what other people thought.

B. Sadly, this is a very common problem in the church.

1. Yes, I will admit it—the church is full of hypocrites.

a. The world is right about that.

- They are wrong to use that as an excuse to turn against God and to reject the church that is His body...
- It makes no sense to reject because hypocrites reject Him.
 - If the hypocrites are wrong in rejecting Him, then their critics ought to be serving Him—not rejecting Him in their own way.
 - It is just an excuse!
 - If they were really concerned about it, they would come and serve God sincerely.

b. But anyway, it is very sad because there are so many hypocrites.

- The Bible tells us that there are.
- We can't see who they are, but God sees them—and sometimes they do become evident over time.
 - But unless they are exposed, they are there in the church, serving and worshipping, without God.
 - They enjoy being among God's people in a way, but they avoid God the whole time.
 - They never really face their sin.
 - They never really call upon the Lord.
 - They never really live before His face.

TRANS> It has been a problem from the beginning that men draw near to God with their lips when their hearts are far from Him.

- All of us are tainted by this sin to some extent.

2. The fact is, there is too much hypocrisy in all of us.

- Do a little examination of yourself.
 - Do you have regard for God, or only for man?
 - Are you conscious of the fact that you are always under His eye?
 - Sure, you know that as a fact of theology—
 - but do you consciously live as under His eye as the one who sees the very thoughts and intents of your heart?
 - Are you more concerned about His eye, or the eye of other people?
- I am sure that if you are honest, you would have to admit that the opinion of others carries far too much weight with you—
 - And that God's opinion of you carries far too little weight.
- Just in case you are not ready to admit that, just answer these questions:

- Would you be embarrassed if other people knew about the covetousness and envy that is in your heart?
 - If they saw those times when you find it hard to rejoice in their prosperity because you are envious and think they don't deserve it?
 - If you would be embarrassed if they knew, how is it that you can have those attitudes before God without being embarrassed?

- Would you be embarrassed if other people knew how concerned you about what other people think of you?
 - whether or not they really appreciate you and accept you?
 - How you often feel put upon or unrecognised?
 - God sees all of this too.

- How would you like it if all your lustful thoughts or your vain thoughts or your bitter thoughts were to be revealed?
 - Would people be shocked if it was all put on a big screen?
 - But all of these thoughts are not hid from God.

- Perhaps you would say—"yes, but I can trust God with these thoughts because He is merciful."
 - "Other people wouldn't be so merciful.
 - I know that the Lord has accepted me despite my sin, through Jesus Christ my saviour!"
 - Indeed—that is a wonderful thing!
 - It is all very true!
 - You are very blessed and happy if you know that.
 - What joy and freedom are yours!
 - But let me ask you something.
 - Do you honestly live before the face of God?
 - Or is it not often the case that you live under the delusion that the Lord does not see...or care...
 - that your thoughts and intents are hidden from Him?
 - Really, brothers and sisters, who do you aim to please the most?
 - Is it really the Lord, or is it other people?

TRANS> We need help with our hypocrisy!

- And help is right here in Acts 5.
 - God did something here at the beginning of the church with Ananias and Sapphira that He does not usually do.
 - He exposed their blatant hypocrisy to help us shatter the fantasy that God is far away.

III. See how the Lord shatters the fantasy that He does not see or care what we do.

A. First, He shows that He sees everything.

1. Ananias comes in first and immediately Peter, speaking what was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, confronts him:
 - **Acts 5:3-4: But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."**
 - You have been walking before the face of God with this lie!
 - And you didn't even have to give all the money—or even to sell the land!
 - It was yours to do with as you pleased.
 - But you chose to lie—as if God doesn't see that!
 - As if God is dead and as if only people matter!
 - You are only pretending that you are serving God.
 - Peter tells him that he is not filled with the Holy Spirit, but with the Devil!
 - This shows the depth of the problem.
 - This man is not a believer.
 - He is like Judas whose heart was also filled by Satan.
 - Satan tells lies as if God does not see it and will not judge it, and that is what Ananias is doing.
 - He is living a lie, all for the sake of his reputation before men without regard for the Lord.
 - Think of it...
 - You would be hesitant to stand before the face of another human being who knew the truth and tell lies...
 - how is that you can stand before the face of God and tell lies?
 - You can only do that if you have pushed God far from your thoughts.
 - Please! Repent of your lies!
 - Wake up—God knows it all! God sees it all!
 - Wake up!
 2. The reality of God's omniscience (that He knows all) is also shown upon Sapphira.

- She comes in later, and Peter asks her directly how much she sold the land for and she lies...
 - It was her chance to repent, but she does not wake up—instead she lies!
 - **Acts 5:7-9: Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?**
- God is tested when we do something before Him—like telling a boldfaced lie—daring Him to reveal it!
 - We put Him in a place where we dare Him to act, supposing that He will not act.
 - And many times He delays our judgement until the last day...
 - But here, He acts and He exposes Sapphira's lie.

TRANS> But God not only shows us here that He knows all about hypocrisy and takes notice of it...

B. The Lord also shows us in a memorable way how much He hates hypocrisy.

- He hates Christian service that ignores Him—the one for whom the service is to be done in the first place!
- 1. First, you see what happens to Ananias in verses 5-6 as soon as he learns that his sin has certainly been noticed by the Lord.
 - **Acts 5:5-6: Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.**
 - This man is struck down right there on the spot by God's hand of judgement.
 - That this is the hand of God is evident for a several reasons.
 - First, in that he is buried immediately without the customary mourning rituals—like Nadab and Abihu, no tears are to be shed for him.
 - He is removed from the holy city, cut off from the land of the living because of his sin.
 - Secondly, in that God frequently judges sin with death—it is not foreign to Him.
 - This is a hard passage for us to accept in this soft age...
 - But it is the judgement of God, regardless of what means God used to kill this man—he killed Him.
 - The Bible speaks about the reality of God doing this in both the Old and New Testaments.
 - At Corinth, Paul says that some there have died because of their conduct at the Lord's Table.

- God has not changed.
 - He is just as holy as ever and He does not tolerate hypocrisy.
 - Thirdly, it is evident that this is God's hand of judgement because...
2. The same thing befalls Sapphira as well.
- Picking up at the beginning of verse 9, it says:
 - **Acts 5:9-10: Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband.**
 - The message is clear...
 - The Lord not only sees hypocrisy, He also judges it.
 - Wake up if you are pretending that God is not real and that He will not judge!
 - Do not tempt the Lord your God by living as if He is not a righteous and holy Judge who sees everything.

TRANS> The Lord ordinarily does not judge us immediately but defers our judgement to the last day...

- But it is His pattern to reveal His judgement in each new phase of redemptive history...
 - so that we will not forget Him and draw near with our lips when our heart is far away...

C. Consider how often God has given us a picture that He is the all seeing judge when He was establishing something new...

1. He did it when He first established the priesthood.
 - He dealt severely with Aaron's sons, striking them dead for offering strange fire on His altar.
 - He was impressing upon all priests that should come after them that He would be regarded as holy—
 - that they were not to do things their own way in His service of worship but strictly according to His commandments.
2. Again, He did it when the people are first going in to the promised land—
 - We read about this today in Joshua 7.
 - God had told them not to destroy all the inhabitants of Canaan as an act of His judgement.

- He had told them to burn everything that could be burned and to put the gold and silver into the treasury...
 - But Achan thought God could be trifled with.
 - So to show everyone that He sees and that He will not be trifled with,
 - The Lord exposed Achan and had him executed and burned along with his whole family.
 - God is holy and He will not be trifled with.
3. Again, when under David, when the brought up to Jerusalem...
- A new age had come!
 - The kingdom years!
 - The temple was soon to be built at Jerusalem.
 - But David and the Levites did not consult the proper order about bringing the ark up.
 - They had those who were not Levites playing instruments!
 - They had the ark on a cart instead of carrying it as prescribed!
 - So God struck Uzza down when the oxen stumbled and he reached out to steady the ark.
 - It was a new age, and the Lord was showing that he will not be trifled with.
 - That He would be regarded as holy.
4. And so it is that here, at the beginning of the church, the Lord gives us a lesson that is to leave an indelible impression upon us.
- There have been millions of hypocrites since Ananias and Sapphira,
 - and they were not struck down for their hypocrisy like Ananias Sapphira were.
 - They were not all struck down because God only needed to reveal that He surely knows about hypocrites and that He hates them one time.
 - He revealed it at the beginning and then He expects us—you and me—to remember what He has revealed.
 - Don't go around with lies before the face of God!
 - He knows, He sees, and He will judge!
 - Do not tempt the Lord your God.

D. But now I want you to see the marvellous outcome of this terrible episode.

1. God did it this for the sake of His people—to teach them what He had been teaching them through all the ages
- That He is to be feared.
 - And verse 11 tells us that what He did was successful in bringing that about:
 - **Acts 5:11: So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.**

2. We are supposed to fear God!
 - We are supposed to believe that He is real—that He sees our lies and that He will surely judge!
 - You see that the entire church (as well as outsiders who heard what happened) were greatly afraid.
 - We need to have the same response.
 - We need to fear God too.
 - This revelation is for us whom God loves.
 - Don't try to avoid it.
 - Don't push God away and exchange His revealed truth for a lie.
 - We always go astray when we rely on our own heart to decide what God is like—what we want Him to be like.
 - We have to bow humbly to His word.
 - You see, nobody made Him up.
 - He is like what He is like—a holy God who judges sin.
3. But how can you possibly live with such a God?
 - You can live with Him by knowing that there is forgiveness with Him.
 - Not the kind of forgiveness that so many people idolatrously imagine—
 - that God just doesn't care or notice of us or judge us...
 - But forgiveness through Jesus Christ the Mediator who really did have to bear the curse to save His people from their sins.
 - This is not just a story.
 - Jesus really did take our place and receive our judgement in full.
 - He paid it all so that we could be forgiven who have fled to Him for refuge.
 - You see, that is the problem if you do not accept the truth about God.
 - You never really flee to Christ for mercy because you haven't accepted the fact that you are a sinner who needs mercy.
 - God—the true God—is not real to you.
 - But why don't you believe Him!
 - This account about Ananias and Sapphira and all the other similar accounts in the scripture are written to teach you about Him so that you will stop playing games with church and with God.
 - So that you will come to Him, not just to live in the church and impress the other church members,
 - but to be reconciled to Him and to start living for Him!
 - To be reconciled through faith in Jesus and to live in His kingdom forever.

Conclusion

Thanks be to God for giving us this account to wake us up to His reality that we may enter into Christian service with God instead of without Him.