

The Trouble with Lying

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Turning the World Upside Down / Dishonesty; Lie; Sin; Conscience; Church Discipline / Acts 5:1-11

Acts 5:1-11 teaches us about the trouble with lying.

Introduction

I asked ChatGPT the following question, “What is the trouble with lying?”

Here is the partial answer I received, which is pretty good:

The trouble with lying lies in its multiple negative consequences, both for the liar and those around them. Here are some key issues: (1) Erosion of Trust; (2) Reputational Damage; (3) Legal and Ethical Consequences; (4) Psychological Stress; (5) Societal Harm; and (6) Self-Deception. In essence, while lying might offer a short-term solution or escape from a situation, it often leads to more complex and severe long-term consequences.

Today, I want to examine a story in the Bible and learn about the trouble with lying.

Scripture

Let us read [Acts 5:1-11](#):

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.

Lesson

Much of today’s message is gleaned from commentator John Stott.

The story of the lying and consequent death of Ananias and Sapphira is important for several reasons.

It illustrates the honesty of Luke as a historian; he did not suppress this sordid episode.

It throws light on the inner life of the Spirit-filled community of the first century; it was not all perfect and righteous.

It is also a further example of the strategy of Satan.

Satan attacked that fledgling church community on three fronts.

Satan’s first and crudest attack was physical violence; he tried to crush the church by physical persecution ([Acts 4:1-22](#)).

Satan’s second and more cunning assault was moral corruption or compromise. Having failed to destroy the church from the outside, he attempted through Ananias and Sapphira to infuse evil into its inner life, and so ruin the church community and Christian fellowship ([Acts 5:1-11](#)).

Satan’s third and most subtle ploy was distraction. He sought to deflect the apostles from their priority responsibilities of prayer and preaching by preoccupying them with church administration, which was not their calling ([Acts](#)

[6:1-7](#)). If he had been successful in this, an untaught church would have been exposed to every wind of false doctrine.

So, these then were the weapons of Satan—physical (persecution), moral (subversion), and priorities (distraction).

It is extremely important to keep these three weapons constantly in mind to defend against them.

Why?

Because Satan’s strategy has not changed over the centuries.

A study of Satan’s attack on the church in the first century will help us know how to withstand his attack on the church in the twenty-first century.

So, today we shall study Satan’s attack upon the inner life of the church, an attack which is intended to subvert and undermine the moral fabric of the church.

[Acts 5:1-11](#) teaches us about the trouble with lying.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Story of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11)
2. The Lessons of Ananias and Sapphira

I. The Story of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11)

First, let’s look at the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

In verses 1-2, Luke tells us, “**But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 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.**”

In the previous chapter, in [Acts 4:37](#), we read that Barnabas “sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

To all appearances, Barnabas and Ananias did the same thing.

Both sold a piece of property.

Both brought the proceeds of the sale to the apostles.

Both committed it to the apostles for their disposal.

The difference, of course, was that Barnabas brought all the sale money, while Ananias brought only a part.

Thus, Ananias committed a double sin, a combination of *dishonesty* and *deceit*.

We must note, however, that there was nothing wrong with Ananias and Sapphira withholding part of the sale money, if they had wanted to do so.

As Peter said later (in verse 4), their property and money were their own both before and after the sale. So they were under no obligation to sell their property or, having sold it, to give away any—let alone all—of the proceeds.

But that is not the whole story. There is something else, something half-hidden.

Luke, in declaring that Ananias “**kept back**” part of the money for himself, chose the Greek verb *nosphizomai*, which means “to misappropriate” (*BAGD*). The same word is used in the Septuagint (i.e., the Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament) of Achan’s theft (in [Joshua 7:1](#)), and in its only other New Testament occurrence it means “to steal” (in [Titus 2:10](#)).

We have to assume, therefore, that before the sale Ananias and Sapphira had agreed to give the church the total amount raised.

However, when they brought only some instead of all, they were guilty of *embezzlement*.

It was not on this sin, however, that Peter concentrated, but rather on the sin of *lying*.

Peter’s complaint was not that they lacked *honesty* (by bringing only a part of the sale price) but that they lacked *integrity* (by bringing only a part, while pretending to bring the whole).

They were not so much thieves as they were liars.

Why did they lie?

They wanted credit for sacrificial generosity.

So, to gain a reputation to which they had no right, they told a brazen lie.

Their motive in giving was not to relieve the poor but to enhance their own reputation.

Interestingly, Peter saw behind Ananias' lying the subtle activity of Satan.

And so he confronted Ananias in verse 3, **“Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back [*nosphizomai*, again] for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?”**

Peter accused Ananias both of misappropriation and falsehood, both of stealing and of lying about it.

But there was no need for either sin.

As Peter went on to ask in verse 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.”**

By the way, note that Peter assumes the deity of the Holy Spirit since to lie to him (5:3) was to lie to God (5:4).

No reply from Ananias to Peter's indictment and questions is recorded.

Luke simply tells us in verse 5a, **“When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last.”**

In other words, God's immediate judgment fell upon him.

Understandably, **“great fear came upon all who heard of it”** (v. 5b). The people in that church trembled in the presence of a holy God who was acting in a clear, decisive, and unmistakable manner.

Luke then tells us in verse 6 that in keeping with the burial custom of that day, **“The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.”**

Shockingly, the incident repeated itself.

Sapphira was utterly ignorant of her husband's death. Luke tells us in verse 7, **“After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.”**

Peter gave her a chance to repent by asking her to state the price they had received for the land, but she merely agrees with Ananias' dishonesty and deceit. Peter asked, **"Tell me whether you sold the land for so much."** And she said, **"Yes, for so much"** (v. 8).

Peter noted that they had conspired **"to test the Spirit of the Lord,"** presuming to see whether they could get away with their lying, and informed her that those who had **"buried [her] husband"** would bury her too (v. 9).

Luke writes in verse 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."**

Once again, Luke noted the fear that came upon the church, as he wrote in verse 11, **"And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things."**

Well, so much for the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

II. The Lessons of Ananias and Sapphira

Second, let's look at the lessons of Ananias and Sapphira.

Many people are offended by the story of Ananias and Sapphira by what they regard as the severity of God's judgment.

Some even say that they "hope that Ananias and Sapphira are fictitious."

Or they try to exonerate God by attributing the death of Ananias and Sapphira instead to Peter who, they say, either laid a curse on them or put them under undue psychological pressure.

But, even if the anguish of a violated conscience contributed to their death on the human level, Luke clearly intends us to understand that it was a work of divine judgment.

Ananias and Sapphira died because they fell under the immediate judgment of a holy God.

Once this has been accepted, there are at least three valuable lessons to learn.

A. Sin Is Serious

First, sin is serious.

And lying, in particular, is serious.

Nothing is more foundational than the sin of lying. Lying is the first expression of depravity.

[Psalm 58:3](#) says, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies.”

A child is holding an open bottle of jam. His mother asks, “Did you eat any jam?”

“No,” says the little boy, even as his lips are covered in jam.

Lying is something that comes naturally to us. We are all born liars.

Paul speaks of depravity in general in [Romans 3:10–12](#), “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” When he becomes specific, the very first sin he mentions is lying in verse 13, “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.”

Lying is common to all human beings.

But it is particularly heinous in leaders. [Proverbs 17:7](#) states, “Fine speech is not becoming to a fool; still less is false speech to a prince.” To have a leader who is a liar is an extremely serious problem.

Brothers and sisters, Christians must not be part of the problem in our society.

If you are a Christian, you have a new nature. You have the nature of God in you. You are a new creation in Christ.

Therefore, you must be committed to truth.

You must tell the truth.

You must tell the truth in every situation and every circumstance, regardless of the consequences.

B. The Human Conscience Is Important

Second, the human conscience is important.

Before I go on, let me define conscience. A few weeks ago, a wonderful young person asked me, “What is ‘conscience’?”

The Lexham Bible Dictionary defines “conscience” as follows:

A capacity or faculty of moral intuition, consciousness, or reflection. A person’s internal awareness or sense of abiding by or transgressing moral standards. An internal witness to moral obligation based on intuition or self-assessment (Paul A. Hartog, “Conscience,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016]).

Frankly, that is a mouthful. Simply, I would say that “conscience” is one’s inner moral compass. It is that inner voice that guides us.

The late R. C. Sproul helpfully said:

We see in the New Testament that the conscience is not the final ethical authority for human conduct because the conscience is capable of change. Whereas God’s principles don’t change, our consciences vacillate and develop (R. C. Sproul, *How Can I Develop a Christian Conscience?*, First edition., The Crucial Questions Series [Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2013], 5).

Luke later recorded Paul’s claim before Felix that he “always takes pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man” ([Acts 24:16](#)).

This seems to be what the apostle John meant by “walking in the light.” To walk in the light is to live a transparent life before God without guile or deceit.

Christians in East Africa lay great stress on the importance of a clear conscience. They illustrate it, somewhat amusingly, by expressing their desire “to live in a house without ceiling or walls.” That is, to permit nothing to come between them and either God or other people.

It was this openness that Ananias and Sapphira failed to maintain.

By the way, let me note what lying is not. I don’t want you to have a seared conscience by not knowing what a lie is.

Lying is not kidding.

Lying is not teasing.

Lying is not joking.

Lying is not making a mistake. If you say something that later turns out to be untrue, it is not a lie. It is a mistake.

Lying is not fiction. Our Lord told fictitious stories.

Nor is lying using figurative language.

So, what is lying? A comprehensive definition of lying can be found in our *Westminster Standards*, especially the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q/A 143-145).

Let me suggest just a few things that tell us what lying is.

Lying is a direct untruth.

Lying is a half-truth.

Lying is perjury.

Lying is an exaggeration.

Lying is boasting.

C. Church Discipline Is Necessary

And third, church discipline is necessary.

Although physical death may have continued in some situations as a penalty for those that “despise the church of God” (see [1 Corinthians 11:22, 30](#)), the penalty for sin eventually came to be associated with excommunication (see [1 Corinthians 5:5](#); [1 Timothy 1:20](#)).

Over the centuries the church has tended to oscillate in this area between *extreme severity* (disciplining members for the most trivial offenses) and *extreme laxity* (exercising no discipline at all, even for serious offenses).

It is a good general rule that secret sins should be dealt with secretly, private sins privately, and only public sins publicly.

Churches are always wise if they follow Jesus’ prescription for church discipline as outlined in [Matthew 18:15ff](#).

Many times, the offender will be brought to repentance before the final stage of excommunication is reached.

But offenses that are serious in themselves, which have become a public scandal, must be judged.

Church discipline can be avoided if we each take responsibility for our own actions.

Always seek to be obedient to the word of God.

Don't allow little indiscretions to come into your life.

Moms and Dads, be sure to teach your children the importance of obedience. Our children have a duty not only to obey us but, primarily, to obey God. And God has called us to shepherd their hearts in this regard.

Perhaps the most significant sin that our children struggle with is the sin of lying.

All of us sin in many ways. If we are prone to lying, then it is very difficult to establish truth in all areas of life and behavior.

But if we are prone to telling the truth, we cannot easily cover up sin, because we are committed to the truth.

Pastor John MacArthur says that he punished his children ten times more severely for lying than for any other sin. If a child tells lies and develops a pattern of lying, that child is likely to sin in other ways too.

If he is suspected of some infraction, lying will often get him out of trouble.

Lying makes children vulnerable to all kinds of temptation.

But telling the truth, on the other hand, will cause a child to be less likely to cover up his sin.

Parents, of all the areas of character development to work on with your children, work on getting your children to tell the truth.

So, the three lessons to learn from this passage are these:

1. Sin is serious.
2. The human conscience is important.

3. And, church discipline is necessary.

Conclusion

Satan's first tactic is to destroy the church by force from without.

His second tactic is to destroy it by lying (or any sin) from within.

Satan has not given up the attempt, whether by the hypocrisy of those who profess but do not practice or by the stubbornness of those who sin but do not repent.

The church must be vigilant and guard against all the attacks of Satan, whether they come from without or from within.

May God help the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church to be on guard and resist the attacks of Satan on this church.

Let each one of us commit ourselves to telling the truth—always, no matter what the consequences. Amen.