

Acts 5 (1-11) – The Power of Pretending

Intro: Holocaust and Nazi perfidy. There is an evil power that Satan is always trying to put into the minds, hearts, and lives of Christian people. It has worked for so long, so often, on so many, and we must always be on the lookout for it, in ourselves, our families and our churches. The truth is that it has affected every person at some point or another, and it is something we must be battling against and trying to eradicate as much as we can. It is persistent and pervasive, and it is poisonous. But we can overcome this power if we will do what this text teaches us.

The Jerusalem church originally had all things in common; they sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. One reason they did this was that they were under heavy persecution and would be losing all their possessions anyway. Their property was plundered, and many were put into prison. There was also a famine in the land. However, this “redistribution of wealth” was voluntary and not a requirement for membership. This was exemplified in a man named Joseph, whom the apostles renamed “son of encouragement” or Barnabas. As chapter 4 closes, Barnabas sold a field that he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet. Yet chapter 5 begins with the word “but.” The believers had all things in common, are encouraging one another, and helping with the needs of others. “But”...this passage seems so shocking, scary, and sad. Yet it can give us real hope if we will see it.

The Practice of Pretending (vs.1-2) – It doesn’t seem like much of a sin for the punishment to be so severe, does it? Ananias and Sapphira were baptized believers. God was making a point to the church with, His commands were to be taken seriously. He doesn’t like pretense.

The problem wasn’t that they held back something; the problem was that they wanted to make an appearance as if they had not (vs.8). They didn’t have to give it all to be right, but they were wrong for trying to present themselves as more than they were. This is the great evil power that Satan uses; the power of pretending, or pretense. There are so many ways it manifests. We put up a front, so we have to run and hide when the walls come tumbling down. For Ananias and Sapphira, they wanted glory, or we could say fame, power, position, and prestige, whatever it is they felt they could get by appearing to have given all they had. They thought they ought to be respected, admired, and thought of highly, but they also wanted to be selfish.

How many have this entitlement mentality today, they want the recognition without the reality. When we try to do things our way, we are glorifying ourselves. They wanted the believers to be impressed that they would give all of the proceeds from the land they sold. This may have become an effort to “one-up” Barnabas so that people would look at them. The temptation had been placed for self-exaltation. They wanted the glory of the people. We want other people to recognize us, to know what we have done for others, so that people can be impressed with our spirituality. But Christianity is not about us being satisfied; it’s about God being glorified.

The reason they lied is because they wanted to pretend. Their wonderful act of charity was condemned because their motive was personal glory (Matthew 6:1-4). You can’t do wrong to get a chance to do right. Now we are supposed to practice our righteousness before others (Matthew 5:16 / Philippians 2:15), but not so as to receive praise from men, but to give glory to God.

The Purpose of Pretending (vs.3-4) – The root of pretense is pride. The prince of pretense is Satan (angel of light, but roaring lion), who creates wolves in sheep's clothing, like the Pharisees. Fear can be pride, fear of what others may think. This is one of the great areas of attack, pride that leads to pretense. Satan enflamed the hearts of the religious leaders because they were in danger of losing their power, so they persecuted the followers of Jesus. That only made them stronger, so Satan used the power of pretending within the assembly itself.

This has always been a major weapon of the Devil. He was using it when Jesus was alive, as the leaders feared for their positions, as the disciples were wondering who was greatest. When Peter boasting that he would never deny Jesus, and later wondering why John didn't have to die a martyr's death like he would have to. It goes on and on in the Bible, all the way back to the Garden of Eden, pride, entitlement, embarrassment, and it spread with Cain and Abel (am I my brother's keeper, as if God didn't know). This is the lie of the Devil, the prince of pretense.

However, this is not a case of "the devil made me do it". They just allowed the darts of the devil to enflame what was already in their hearts; they allowed Satan to fill them with this poison. If a temptation can gain full control over a believer, that person loses all sense of moral bearing. The believer's discernment gets dark. White becomes black. Evil becomes good. And who is going to be hurt doesn't become part of the picture. In fact in a temptation of this sort, Satan paints a picture of everyone ending up happy. So while Ananias was thinking about how to get honor from the apostles, the idea of death and destruction, or the idea of actually lying to God didn't enter the picture. They justified their pretense under the guise of giving.

How can we get fixed when we won't confess we are broken? You have to deny yourself. You may not get to look like a hero, and people might think you're a zero. God may cause you to look broken and lose that image you are trying to project and protect. Being conformed to the image of Christ may mean you have to carry your cross in front of other people.

Don't pretend to act righteous, but don't pretend to act repentant. Now it is not hypocritical when you are confessing, repenting, and having faith. It is hypocritical when you are not. It is okay to put on your best face for church; we know we are struggling but we aren't avoiding it, we are admitting it. We are saying we need to be here. The hypocrisy is when we avoid contact with others, we avoid being exposed, and we won't let God's people be the church to us. We avoid it in the name of not being a hypocrite, but when we are struggling we need to be available and vulnerable and hopeful, it is pride that thinks it can't be a hypocrite. To hide is to be exposed.

Pretending to be something you are not, when you are in a struggle, to stay home or basically keep away from people is to pretend you are ok or that the church is of no help to you. You think it is humility, but it is actually hypocrisy. You think "I can't claim holiness right now; I am not practicing righteousness in that area right now". Well, then, don't be hypocritical, don't pretend, but confess, repent, have faith that God loves you and He wants you near His people, don't hide, that's pride, that's what pretending is. When we come to church we are admitting we need it, that we are sinners in need of a savior, we believe in God so we believe in each other. You don't go around telling everybody everything, but those who know the situation are there to help you and give you hope and this is what brings healing.

The Penalty for Pretending (vs.5-10) – Very often we as believers are unable to conceive of God bringing such an awesome judgment upon anyone. We are so used to preaching love and grace. But keep in mind that where Jesus is working, Satan is sure to be there also. And in this case it was crucial that such a serious offense be dealt with quickly. And this judgment would ultimately serve to advance the gospel.

Galatians 6:7-8 – The penalties may not look the same but the perils are just as real. We can lose out on blessings in this life and rewards in the next. We suffer a loss of usefulness, a lack of fruitfulness, a loss of fellowship. The fact is that because God does love us so much, He will bring about a correction where it is needed. The apostle Paul lays this out in 1 Corinthians 11:30-32. We should judge ourselves so we would not be judged. If we will discipline ourselves, the Lord will not need to do it with His hand of correction. Our goal must be to judge the sin in our own lives before God has to expose it. We must humble ourselves, and pray prayers such as those in Psalm 19:12-14 and 139:23-24. However, even when we are judged (Gr. *krino*) by the Lord, we will not be judged (condemned) (Gr. *katakrino*) along with the world (cf. Hebrews 12:6-8). God wants us to respond with repentance, yet we can get to the point of Him having to take us home to avoid further failure. This is parallel with 1 Corinthians 10:1-13.

The Power over Pretending (vs.5b, 11) – Our joy in Jesus is for right now (Romans 15:13), but situations and circumstances place us into conflicts and struggles. Yet that doesn't mean we have to fake everything like we have no hope. We feel like we have to, to keep up our appearance. But we should aim to be honest with God; He knows your heart better than you do (Acts 15:8-9).

This is a message of hope, we don't have to pretend. The answer is the fear of the Lord. This is the attitude of holiness we must bring before God. The fear of the Lord refers to an awesome respect and love for our heavenly Father, and for His truths. It is a healthy fear (Proverbs 28:13-14). We don't want to displease Him, because we are devoted to Him.

We do that in everyday life. We say, look, I can't do this or that, because I'm afraid it will upset my father, my mother, my pastor, my teacher, my friend, my coach, my God. It is out of deep respect. We don't want anything to upset them, because we love them, respect them, admire them, and in the case of God, worship Him. We don't want to get in trouble; we want to keep the relationship going strong. Perhaps if you think of fear this way it may help you.

Confess, repent, have faith, stop pretending. If we are struggling, let's admit it, but let's also admit that God is greater than any struggle we have, and we are on the way to the place that has no pretending. You may not be able to do all the things some people do, you may not be able to say things as good as other people can say them, your life may not be as right as you know it ought to be. But you don't have to pretend, you can trust in God who loved you even when you didn't love Him.

We may not look so good to others, even our brothers and sisters in Christ, but we don't have to pretend, because we win in the end. We can be real, because the most real thing in the universe is Jesus, who was, who is, and who is to come. Where in your life do you need to replace the fear of men with the fear of the Lord? That's how to have power over the power of pretending.