

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

Faking It

(Acts 4:332--5:11)

Study #7

Introduction: Mid-course corrections...

Imagine that you are a coach who has spent weeks getting your team ready for “the big game.” You have watched film and discussed strategy. You know your opponents’ weaknesses and strengths and have designed a game plan to attack those strengths and to exploit those weaknesses.

In the pre-game huddle, you remind your players of the set strategy. You break the huddle and the starting five takes the court.

Midway through the first half, your players are following your plays right down to the last detail, and they are getting run out of the gym! So, what do you do? You call a timeout.

And what will you tell your players? Will you send them back in with exactly the same instructions? Not likely.

If the opposing team successfully blocked your opening strategy, you’ll tell your players to try something different. You improvise. You adapt. You modify. You overcome. (Thanks, Marines) There are numerous ways to attack any opponent. If one way doesn’t work - try another.

Military leaders, successful coaches, and Satan all know that there is more than one way to skin a cat. And this morning, the enemy of the church changes his game tactics.

Having been foiled in his first attempt to destroy the church’s witness through overt persecution (Acts 4), he tries another tack and discovers that tempting Christians with hypocrisy works worlds better than a jail sentence.

We’ve seen (Acts 4) the attempts of the church’s enemies to cripple her through intimidation, threats, and humiliation - and we’ll see more and more of this strategy throughout the book of Acts!

But, the Christians successfully negotiated those ploys. They stood firm. And when Peter and John and the rest prayed that God would give them boldness to keep on speaking out for Jesus - regardless of the cost - God gave them that boldness, filling them with the Holy Spirit.

This morning, though, we see the church attacked from a different direction. This time, the temptation thrown at the church is not cowardice, but compromise.

We come to a passage that begins with the congregation enjoying “*one heart and soul*” community and ends with the whole city of Jerusalem knowing “*the fear of the Lord.*” But in between those high points we encounter a very sobering situation.

Before we get to the ugliness of the main story Luke fills us in on the general condition of the church. In a nutshell, things are going great!

The Genuine Article (4:32-37)

Genuine Unity (v. 32a)

[32] And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul

This “*congregation*” was a very large mega-church. We are not given a specific number, but we know that there were many thousands professing faith in Jesus.¹ And the church, as a whole, was enjoying unity.

¹ Acts 4:4 tells us that the men numbered around five thousand.

That doesn't mean, of course, that everybody knew everybody else. It is impossible to know even a fraction of that many people by name, much less intimately. But it is possible, no matter how large the group, to be united.

And the first church's unity revolved around Jesus. Everybody was united in their love FOR and commitment TO and trust IN Jesus! Their *individual* focus on Jesus was the key to their *corporate* unity.

Of course, the same holds for us. We here will experience the beauty of unity to the extent that we are each centered on Jesus. When your focus is on Him and my focus is on Him, we become the united community He died and rose again to create.²

And the unity of the first church ever was not a mushy sentimentalism. It was fleshed out in a tangible expression of love.

Genuine Generosity (vv. 32b, 34-35)

Their attitude (v. 32b)

[4:32b]...and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.

The possessions owned by the members of the church did not cease to be private property. The birth of the church did not do away with personal ownership of private property (as we will see, shortly).

What changed among the believers after the Day of Pentecost was their ATTITUDE toward their goods.

Unity expressed itself in the way they kept a loose hand on their possessions. What one person possessed was made available to help needy friends in Christ. It became common practice for people to place their private wealth at the disposal of the community.

² In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul speaks of the importance of unity when he says, "***make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.***" (Philippians 2:2)

Their actions (vv. 34-35)

[4:34] For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales³ [35] and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.⁴

This practice began spontaneously. It was loving. It was fueled by grace. It was effective.⁵ Needs were being met.⁶

As Luke's commentary on life in the first church ever continues, he affirms that this community continued to be a powered-by-God force in Jerusalem.

Genuine Power (vv. 33, 36-37)

Resurrection power! (v. 33)

[4:33] And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.⁷

³ The practice of a common fund, fueled by the proceeds of the sale of the wealthier members' land and possessions would necessarily eventually deplete the store of wealth, and had to be, by necessity, a temporary practice. Not because of this practice, but because of famine and persecution, by the time Paul was writing his own letters, the Jerusalem church had become a very poor church, needing financial assistance from Thessalonica, Rome, and elsewhere to survive.

⁴ At this early stage, the apostles supervised the distribution of relief funds, a practice that would become more and more burdensome as the church grew, and which will lead to a crisis that is recorded in Acts 6.

⁵ Having seen all of this happen with his own eyes, the apostle John wrote in his first letter, "***But whoever has the world's goods and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.***" (1 John 3:17-18)

⁶ While this is certainly radical action, it was not a new idea, but a command pulled from the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 15:4, Moses had instructed the people of Israel, "***There shall be no poor among you***" - demonstrating that God had (and has) a special place in His heart for the poor and the disadvantaged. The early disciples of Jesus did nothing more than take the word of God to heart, meeting people where they were, and striving to ensure that anyone who named the Name of Jesus would have his or her basic needs met.

When we read the word “power” in verse 33, the first thought that comes to our minds may be “signs and wonders” and “miracles” and “healings.”

And it could be that this is what Luke is referring to.

But notice. The mention of the powerful witness of the apostles to Jesus’ resurrection follows right after a comment about the church’s eagerness to share their material resources with those in need.

Given the context in which he uses this phrase, I think it makes sense to say that the *“testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus”* has as much to do with generosity and mercy and meeting needs in Jesus’ Name as it does with the performance of spectacular miracles.

I’ll even ask you: What greater witness to the resurrection of Jesus could we give than a crystal clear message backed up by putting our money where our mouths are, sacrificially sharing our material resources with each other when there is need!?

I’m not trying to argue my way around the miraculous. In fact, at this point in my life, I’m as open and eager for God to show up in miraculous ways as I’ve ever been. I’m just saying that there is evidence of a miracle-working God and of a risen Savior when:

- a stingy person starts being generous; or
- a group of people in stressful economic times (like the first church or like Northwest in 2010) starts giving out of their reserves to meet needs in Jesus’ Name.

Outrageous generosity is Kingdom of God-sized stuff! And knowing that a picture is worth a thousand words, Luke offers up the actions of a first century hero as “Exhibit A” of the church’s powerful testimony to the resurrection.

Inspirational generosity (vv. 36-37)

[4:36] Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), [37] and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

This Joseph (a descendant of the first Jewish priest, Levi) will become a major player later on in the story of the church. We’ll see him pop up here and there throughout the early parts of the book of Acts.⁸

But even here, so early in the story, his reputation had spread to such an extent that people had invented a nickname for him - *“the son of encouragement”* (or, in Hebrew, *“Barnabas”*).

While Barnabas was a Jew, he didn’t live in Israel. He hailed from the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. He had probably been one of those who had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover and Pentecost and had come to faith in Christ on or shortly after the day of Pentecost.

We don’t know where the field he owned was located (in Palestine? on the island of Cyprus?). But we are told what he did with it. He sold the property, and brought the money from the sale to the apostles⁹ for them to do with as they saw fit.

No one put Barnabas under compulsion or laid a guilt trip on him. Nobody suggested,

“Hey, Mr. Encouragement, it sure would be ENCOURAGING if you sold off some of your land holdings to meet the needs of the poor!”

No, the beauty of what Barnabas did was that he did it **spontaneously** and **voluntarily** and (note this) **publicly**.

⁷ *“Abundant grace was upon them all”* This phrase may (1). describe their wonderful generosity; (2). refer to the fact that they were held in high esteem; (3). be a more general statement that God’s grace was sustaining them.

⁸ Luke does what he does here in other situations, calling attention to someone in a minor way who will later be high profile. It is a literary technique called “foreshadowing.”

⁹ Laying the money at the feet of the apostles was a sign of his submission to their wisdom as to what to do with the money

That's right. Everybody knew **THAT** Barnabas had given and **WHAT** he had given.

Does it seem odd that we are reading about "who gave what" when we also know that Jesus said that when it came to giving we were not to let our left hand know what our right hand was doing? (Matthew 6:3)

Well, evidently, when the giver is not giving to get kudos from those around him or her and is wanting nothing more than to bring glory to God and meet needs, it is A-OK to let the word out about giving. It's just fine to know who gives what as long as the point of the giving is not to get the applause of men.

So, Luke makes a hero out of Barnabas, the Generous. He was obviously all about helping the poor. He was motivated by love. And the story of Barnabas' giving wraps up an altogether encouraging chapter.

Thousands more people have been saved through faith in Jesus. The disruption of apostles spending time in jail has been overcome by a bold witness and an earth-shaking prayer meeting. The whole thing resolves into a beautiful scene of loving, genuine community.

And the first word out of the gates in chapter five is "**But...**"

That word puts us on notice. Trouble is afoot in the church in Jerusalem.

And what follows is ugly. There is no more gut-wrenching story in Acts than the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Lying and deceit and theft and hypocrisy all show up here.

But before we even look at the story I at least want to point out the fact that the Bible presents the lives of its characters "just as they are."

It's been a long time since the saying, "*The camera doesn't lie*" has been true. Ever since the advent of the digital photograph, the camera lies a lot! Photoshop can make anybody look like a million bucks.

You could take a picture of someone, airbrush their wrinkles, straighten and whiten his teeth, fill in eyebrows, fix his nose - and, voila - the perfect man!

But the Bible doesn't airbrush its characters. It paints people just as they are, warts and wrinkles included.

The more familiar you become with the Bible the more impressed you will become that the Book doesn't hide the blemishes of its heroes.

Right on down the list - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon. We learn about their heroic sides and their dark sides. We learn how to walk with God from these guys and we learn what to avoid, too.

The Bible is an altogether honest book. It tells it like it is.

And this morning Luke shows himself to be a hopelessly objective historian by including even **THIS** story in his narrative about the church.

Hypocritical Counterfeits (5:1-10)

A Husband/Wife Team to Forget (vv. 1-2)

[5:1] But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, [2] and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.

I know.

At first glance it appears that this husband/wife team did much the same thing that Barnabas did. They both owned property. They both sold property. They both laid money at the feet of the apostles.

But when we look closely we see that there is a very important difference. You see the words "**kept back**" in verse 2.

In the ancient literature, the word we translate "**kept back**" has a very negative meaning.¹⁰ It can refer to an act of robbery or embezzlement. It is the word used to describe the misappropriation of funds.

¹⁰ Nosphizomai (νοσφιζομαι) - in Titus 2:10, Paul urges bondslaves to not "pilfer" from their masters, using this same word.

Apparently, Ananias and Sapphira told either the apostles or the congregation that they were going to do *exactly* what Barnabas had done.

This was likely stated in terms of a vow they took that they were going to give the entire proceeds of the sale. But when it came time to fork over the money, they gave only a portion of the proceeds of the sale.

Now, that would have been bad enough. That would have made them guilty of breaking a vow. But they compounded their sin by telling the apostles that the amount of money they were giving was actually the total amount.

So, on top of the sin of promise-breaking, they added deceit. And they were stingy. And they were thieves. And they were hypocrites.

Why hypocrites? Well, the heart and soul of hypocrisy is pretending that things are different than they actually are. It is to present a face that is not true to the real.

Ananias and Sapphira were out to make their gift appear greater than it actually was. They wanted the church to think of them as that lovely “barnabas couple.”

They wanted the prestige that came with sacrificial giving without the inconvenience of it. And their motive in giving was not to relieve the hardship of the poor, but to Photoshop their reputations.¹¹

So we enter the story right after Ananias had presented his money to the apostles. I picture him laying the money down and loitering so that he can hear the commendation he is certain is coming his way.

Imagine his shock when he hears Peter nail him with a penetrating series of accusing questions.

¹¹ In the fifth chapter of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon inserts a very powerful section in which he deals with worship. In that passage, he makes the remark that, given the exalted position of God (“*for God is in Heaven*”) in contrast to our lowly position (“*you are on the earth*”) we should let our words in prayer be well-chosen and few, AND we should pay whatever we vow to God. In fact, Solomon informs us that it would be better to not vow at all than to vow and not pay. In the verses that follow here in Acts, chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira discover just how seriously Solomon’s words should be taken.

Ananias’ Bitter Harvest (vv. 3-6)

*Peter deals with Ananias (v. 3-4)*¹²

[5:3] But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart¹³ to lie to the Holy Spirit¹⁴ and to keep back some of the price of the land? [4] While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.”

Let’s notice the salient points of Peter’s remarks.

First, (and if you’re a conspiracy theorist, you’re going to love this), this sinful action is the result of teamwork between Ananias and Sapphira and the devil.

The devil found a weakness in these folks’ souls, a chink in their armor, and he exploited it. Ananias and Sapphira were attacked by the enemy.

But they were not unwilling dupes. They were active participants in the sin. They knew exactly what they were doing. The act was diabolical, but both Satan and the couple can claim initiative.

Second, Peter affirms that Ananias had full authority over his own possessions. There was never any compulsion for him to sell the property or to give away the money from the sale. He would not have been rebuked had he kept it all for himself.

¹² If you are wondering how Peter knew that Ananias had given less than he had received for the land, it is certainly possible that he spoke prophetically, having received special knowledge from the Lord. But, it is also possible that Peter simply had heard through the grapevine what the true purchase price had been, and saw the discrepancy in Ananias’ gift.

¹³ Most New Testament references to Satan’s activity relate to believers rather than to his impact on the unbelieving world. This is not to say that Satan or his demons can fully “possess” or “inhabit” a believer as they do those without Christ. But, the thrust of the New Testament teaching is that believers can certainly open themselves up to satanic influence through a variety of sins - greed, rebellion, unresolved anger, lack of forgiveness among them.

¹⁴ Ananias’ sin of lying to the Holy Spirit should not be equated with the unpardonable sin of Matthew 12.

However, having promised to give it all, he should have given it all. And if he had NOT given it all, he should have said out loud, “*I’m only giving a portion.*”

Third, Peter accused Ananias of “*lying to the Holy Spirit*” and “*lying to God.*”

Now, there are two ways of looking at that comment.

One way is to say that yes, Ananias lied to the church. But, since our sins are always ultimately against God, what was worse than lying to brothers and sisters was that he lied to the Holy Spirit.

But, Luke might be saying something else.

He might be saying that in making the promise to the church, Ananias was making the promise to the Holy Spirit (who indwelt every member of the church), and in breaking his word to the congregation of believers, he had also broken his word to the Spirit of God.

No matter how you slice it, what Ananias has done is a major spiritual felony.

And his was not a victimless crime. This hypocritical action did genuine harm. The poorer believers did not receive the full amount they had been promised. People suffered because of his deceit.

And now, having been dressed down by Peter, Ananias is dealt with by the Lord Himself.

The Lord deals with Ananias (vv. 5-6)

[5:5] And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. [6] The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.

Let’s not attribute Ananias’ death to either the force of Peter’s personality, the content of his charges, or the shock to Ananias’ system when he recognized his guilt. He was judged by God - and he died.

It might not be considered very sophisticated or even “correct” to think that God would strike someone dead. But that is clearly what happened here.

And the story is not yet over. There were two people acting in collusion in this deceitful hypocrisy. His wife, Sapphira, was in on the deal.

But Sapphira had not been there when Ananias presented the money to the apostles, and she didn’t have a clue as to what had happened to her husband when she showed up on the scene a few hours later.

Sapphira’s Sin Reaps Death (vv. 7-10)

Late to arrive (vv. 7-8a)

[5:7] Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

Imagine what that three hours was like for Peter and for others who had watched Ananias fall. That’s a long time. There would have been plenty of opportunity for reflection, for thought, for prayer, for wondering about Sapphira’s role.

When she showed up, Peter asked the world’s most recent widow a question (she didn’t know that she was a widow!). It was a question designed to give her the opportunity to come clean.

[5:8a] And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?”

Sadly, she lied, just as her husband had done.

Quick to lie (v. 8b)

[5:8b] And she said, “Yes, that was the price.”

Two lies; two funerals (vv. 9-10)

Peter accused Sapphira of, together with her husband, putting ***[5:9a] the Spirit of the Lord to the test.***

This couple acted like children who aren't convinced that Mom and Dad really mean it when they say, "NO!"

Any child might put his big not-yet-hairy-toe over the line to see what will happen when he disobeys. Ananias and Sapphira weren't convinced that they needed to take God all that seriously. So they lied, deceived, played a part - and paid the price.

Maybe they did what they did unthinkingly. Maybe they just never took God into their reckoning. They just wanted to see how far they could go without getting caught, or if caught, how far they could go without getting punished!

Well, Ananias gambled and lost. So did Sapphira. After informing her that she was a widow, she followed Ananias to an early grave.

[5:9b] "Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." [10] And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last,¹⁵ and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

Verse 11 tells us, not surprisingly that the day's events had a profound impact on those who were aware of what had gone on.

The Church Moves Forward (v. 11, 12-16)

[5:11] And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things...

Following the cleansing brought about by the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, the church entered another season of health, an experience of the power of God, and explosive growth.

God has proved Himself faithful once again to use anything - even the ugliness of hypocrisy - for His people's good (Romans 8:28), and the church moved forward.

¹⁵ Some commentators give some credit for Sapphira's death to the gravity of the news she heard about her husband's death. I don't.

But a story like the one we have seen this morning almost begs for a serious and sober time of reflection. For us, that time of reflection will revolve around two questions.

Conclusion:

First, let's ask what might have been going on in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira that prompted them to do what they did?

What are the conditions that led to the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?

Regardless of what we might think about the punishment they received (a death sentence!) we will all readily agree that they should not have done what they did.

It was wrong to lie about how much money they gave, to have defrauded the poor, and to have put the Holy Spirit to the test. But, I wonder why they did it in the first place?

Well, try this on for size.

Ananias and Sapphira were tempted to sin because of their preoccupation with reputation. They cared more about what people thought about them than they cared for either the praise of God or the welfare of the poor.

We read the account in Acts 5, and may or may not feel the burn of conviction if we are just thinking about whether or not we have ever promised to give a certain amount of money and then didn't do it.

But the application of this incident transcends economics. Let's each of us ask ourselves:

- Do I sometimes allow my interest in a good reputation to prompt me to put a good "spin" on my actions when telling a story?
- Am I so enamored with having a reputation for godliness that I am willing to alter the facts to make myself appear godly?
- Am I at times more concerned to come out smelling like a rose than with meeting legitimate human need?

Any one of us might fall into the same kinds of sin into which Ananias and Sapphira fell.

And, to the extent that the Spirit of God shines His flashlight on those dark areas of your heart and mine, we must repent of that self-centeredness, and ask God to fashion us into the genuine article - people who have a passion to please only God, people who are hungry to serve others, people who lead lives of integrity. In short, real, live Barnabases.

Second, let's ask why there was such a severe punishment inflicted on this couple for lying.

Why such a severe punishment?

I've read a lot of attempts to explain why God did what He did, and why He seemingly doesn't do the same thing today.

One answer people give, when answering the question about God's severity here, is that God was "*making a point*" at the beginning of the church age. God was teaching His people, at the very outset of the church's history, that sin among the saints is no light matter, and that there will be grave consequences for disobedience.

Much as he dealt severely with a man named Achan, in the seventh chapter of Joshua (at the beginning of Israel's life in the land of Canaan), after Achan had stolen for himself some of the booty from the defeat of Jericho, so God dealt severely with Ananias and Sapphira.¹⁶

The way this is usually understood, then, is that we are to realize what MIGHT happen if we sin as they did.¹⁷ And if true, that theory does help to explain why more Christians aren't falling over dead today!

However, as attractive as this explanation is it's not the way I see it. I see what happened in Acts 5 as a living illustration of the truth of

¹⁶ Interestingly enough, the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) has the same word for Achan's sin as the one Luke used to describe Ananias' action of "keeping back" the money for himself. Achan's sin also involved financial scandal, and was an act of deceit interrupting the victorious progress of the people of God.

¹⁷ Or even that what happened to them WILL happen to us at a future date (the Judgment Seat of Christ).

Romans 3:23, "*The wages of sin is death.*" The wages of sin is STILL and ALWAYS death!

Whenever and wherever there is sin, there is death.

And what DIES when you and I -

- pretend to be what we are not;
- try to put a better spin on our actions than we should;
- seek to impress others with our spirituality; or
- act more out of concern for our reputation than for the needs of others -

is a vibrant sense of community, or, as Luke puts in Acts 4:32, the reality of being "*of one heart and soul.*"

Something precious dies every time you or I violate integrity and love. The closeness and intimacy of a walk with God dies. Community dies. What a terrible price to pay!

If you have been pretending (as Ananias and Sapphira were), can you see now that you are following a path that leads to death? Jesus invites you to choose life!

Choose openness and transparency. Choose a life without secret closets - and watch God transform you AND use you.