

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Second Sunday after Easter, April 10, 2016

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 348, 438:2, 366:5-7, 442:1-2, 442:5.

Lessons: Proverbs 19:1-9, Ephesians 4:17-25, Matthew 15:1-10.

Sermon Text: Acts 4:32-5:11

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Today we jump from celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ to a time after the day of Pentecost. By the time of our sermon text, Jesus had ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit had appeared to the followers of Jesus Christ with tongues like as of fire resting on their heads and had given them the ability to speak in foreign languages which they had never learned. This was done so that the Gospel of Jesus Christ could be preached to foreigners. At the end of that day, we read *“Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”* Acts 2:41-47 (NIV)

Today we read, several chapters later, that *“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”*

Notice how they shared their earthly blessings. They had all things in common so that *“There were no needy persons among them.”* Please notice that this is not the economic and political system called “communism. That system demands “From each according to his ability – to each according to his need.” This was a genuine, voluntary, willing sharing of what they had been blessed with. There was an excitement about the Gospel, prompted by faith in and love toward their Lord which led them to take care of their neighbor's need with the same love and care as their own needs.

This spirit was kept alive and strengthened by the fact that the apostles gave powerful witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today we see that

BELIEVERS SHARED EARTHLY POSSESSIONS – BUT SIN STILL EXISTS

- 1. Many sold of their possessions and gave for the benefit of others.**
- 2. But Satan had power over two hypocrites, Ananias and Sapphira.**

In our text we are told about a husband and wife who posed as Christians, but lied to the Holy Spirit. They did not repent of their sin and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. As a result they suffered instant death. This was a warning to the early church and to us of the danger of honoring God with our lips while our hearts are far from God.

It was the spirit, the love, of the risen Christ that lived in the disciples and prompted them to give such evidence of genuine unselfish love. It was the result of their acceptance of the resurrected Lord by faith that brought great grace upon them all.

There was no need for any one of them to be in want, for the richer members, those who possessed lands or houses, freely and without any urging, sold them and brought the proceeds of the sale to the apostles, in order that distribution might be made to those who were in need. The congregation at this time voluntarily yielded to the teachers the right to take charge of the money and supervise its proper distribution.

One of the well-off, generous disciples is identified. This was a man named Joseph, whom the apostles had named Barnabas. He was a Jew and had been a Levite before his conversion to faith in Christ. He came from the island of Cyprus, where he had owned a field. Barnabas, filled with love for his needy brethren, sold his land and brought the money to the apostles, just as many of his fellow Christians did.

When we see such generosity in serving the Lord with such a fruit of faith, we rejoice. This way of caring for one another in the church worked for a while, but did not last for long. In our text we also see great deception on the part of others, which shows them to be hypocrites, pretenders, not real Christians.

We can be certain that believers appreciated the kindness and sharing. But it often happens that such real giving often prompts hypocrites to make a pretense and show of great love, so that they may be praised by others.

There was a certain man and woman, members of the congregation at Jerusalem, by the name of Ananias and his wife Sapphira. They owned some property, which must have had some value, Now Ananias and his wife obviously wanted some recognition when they sold their property and gave to the church. ***“With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.”***

They obviously claimed that they were bringing the entire amount of money. Their sin was not that they kept back part of the money for Peter pointed out that the property and money always were theirs. But in pretending to bring the entire amount to the church, they were lying, not just to the congregation, but to the Holy Spirit. The consequences show in a very dramatic way that even temporal death is the wages of sin.

What they did was prompted by Satan, the father of lies. They were not just deceiving the apostles and the other believers. It was a lie to the Holy Spirit, a lie to God. They were not required to sell their property and give away the proceeds. But, like all believers, they were required to be honest and truthful.

Greed as well as the desire to be praised by men filled their hearts. And the sin of offense, of leading and tempting others to follow their sinful example would place the whole church in great danger. For if others should learn of their deception, they would be tempted to practice the same hypocrisy and unrepented sin.

“Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.’”

Because the devil is the author of every sin and transgression, so here he also put the idea of wickedness and deceit into their hearts. Their sin was not just a sin against the Christians in Jerusalem, but against God, as all sins really are, as we confess with the Psalmist: ***“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”*** Psalm 51:4(NIV) God knows exactly what is in our hearts. And God had obviously informed Peter of what had happened.

Peter very properly reminded Ananias that the property had been his to keep, if he had so chosen. Even if he had chosen to sell his property and to keep all the money, it was entirely his free choice. The iniquity of their sin was lying to the Holy Spirit.

Neither these hypocrites nor anyone else can blame only Satan. The fact that Ananias had yielded to the devil's temptation put the blame squarely upon him. The same holds true of every sinner in every sin which he or she commits, especially if it is done with such deliberate intent as in this case.

The sin of Ananias was immediately condemned and punished. In this we see a warning for all times. No sooner had Peter finished his admonition than Ananias died at once, struck down by the wrath of the Holy

Ghost. We then read that ***“great fear seized all who heard what had happened.”*** The execution was so obviously an act of God that a great fear fell upon all those who saw the punishment and heard of this event.

“Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.” The young men of the congregation, not a special group of men, carried him out and buried him promptly. There was no time for lamentation or for an elaborate funeral ceremony. There was no weeping or delay. Such is the end of those who abuse the grace of the Lord. ***“Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”*** Galatians 6:7 (KJV)

Here we see the typical Jewish burial custom that people were buried on the same day they died, and in this case, immediately. The Jews did not normally embalm the body as the pagan Egyptians did. Jewish burials even today are often done the same day, and even sometimes without caskets. As a matter of fact, we see such burials in the news yet today.

Ananias and Sapphira were trying to see how far they could go to test the goodness of God. Tragically, they learned that God will not be deceived and will not let his grace be abused.

However, we are not always immediately punished for our sins, and so the temptation is to think ‘well, I got away with it, so I can probably continue to sin and get away with it.’ Such thinking can be eternally damning.

“About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, ‘Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?’ ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘that is the price.’ Peter said to her, ‘How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.’ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.”

Sapphira did not know that God had struck down her husband just hours earlier and she was fully prepared to keep her agreement with her husband about the money. So when Peter asked her about the price for the land, she immediately answered ***“Yes, ... that is the price.”*** Peter’s question had been a last appeal to her conscience, a last admonition to tell the truth and give all glory to God. But she continued in her sin, and in the lie with her husband and persisted in her hypocrisy. As a result, God also struck her dead and she was immediately buried. In this way God declared to the church of all times that the hypocrites are an abomination in his sight. The same God who sat in judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira will, in his own way and at the time appointed by him, definitely visit the sins upon those who follow the example of these two hypocrites.

Peter’s evaluation of their action as a lie to the Holy Spirit and as testing the Spirit of the Lord was really God’s judgment on the action and the motive. God gave Peter the knowledge of what they had done.

Believers and unbelievers too heard about these deaths and the events which led up to them. The great fear which seized them was the proper emotion. There was no natural cause for the death of the couple. It could only be God’s judgment on their hypocrisy.

Every believing child of God confesses that despite the good he desires to do, he sins. The wages of sin is death. The Lord does not wish to have the sinner die, but to repent of his sin, believing that in Jesus he has forgiveness. Outward deeds don’t define your faith, but what is in your heart does.

God, the Holy Spirit, gives us the power to be truthful in our dealings with one another.

May we daily examine our hearts so that we do not fall into sins of self-deception or hypocrisy or unbelief. Lip service to God is a mockery of him. Being a Christian means that the Holy Spirit has given us a heart that repents of sins and trusts in Jesus for forgiveness. Such a heart will ask the Holy Spirit to cause us to follow our Good Shepherd, faithfully listening to his voice.

Although we are still in our weak flesh, in a world of unbelieving peers, and subject to Satan who constantly seeks to devour us, we are to resist by clinging to our Savior in child-like faith, and to grow in our relationship with Jesus by using God’s word as “our trusty shield and weapon.” Amen.