

May 7th, 2017 Scripture: Acts 5:1-11

Title: Growth: What the Church Must Guard Against

Introduction

- Coming into this year, up to this point we have been basically studying in our Sunday worship about Christian growth, based on how the early Christians and the early Church grew, focusing on the initial section of the “Acts of the Apostles” in the New Testament.
 1. In Chapter 2, before the theme of growth, we learned first of being born as Christians (verses 40-41).
 2. Next, centering on verse 42 in the same chapter, we took a number of sessions to learn about the 4 basic principles for Christian growth (the teaching of the apostles, or the Bible; fellowship; the breaking of bread, or Holy Communion; and the prayers).
 3. In Chapter 3 is written how a miracle occurred where a man lame from birth who could only live by begging was wonderfully healed by God. Looking at the figures of Peter and John who were used at that time by God, we learned about the nature of believers who are filled with the Holy Spirit and growing in the Lord.
 4. Last week, from Chapter 4, we observed what kind of prayers the early Christians offered in the midst of those adverse situations or difficulties known as persecution, as Christians who had grown.
- Now today, in addition, we want to learn, through the accounts found from the end of Chapter 4 of Acts (from which we learned last week) and on into Chapter 5, how God was working in the early Christians, the early Church, to have them grow in a healthy manner.

Main Text

I. First, I would like to gather and set in order the events that occurred in the text.

A. Starting from the background: 4:32-37

1. 4:32-35 Here is described the overall nature of what you might call the members or participants of the church at that time, the Christians of the early Church.
 - (1) Here it seems very much that we have an image we might want to call a communist society where personal property is totally abandoned. Indeed, some people say that the prototypical pattern for communism is born out of the Bible.
 - (2) However, looking at Christians as they are depicted here, we do not see the abandonment of individual property. Much less is this something political or involving legal force. These were voluntary acts all based on love and faith.
 - (3) What we have here, put simply, is everyone carrying out the paradoxical Christian attitude on possessions, that everything I now have is mine, but not simply mine. That is, the Christian thinks biblically in the following way about the possession of things:
 - Including our bodily life and our daily life, we are not the owners of all those things we have.
 - The owner of all of these is God Himself. Therefore, the words we often hear from young people that *”This is my life. So nobody can say anything to me.”* are wrong.
 - Then what is the relationship between us and the things that we have? To us is given from God a responsibility as managers, to protect, develop and make good use of all these things for God and for man.
 - In that sense, these things are nobody else’s; they are given over to me, entrusted to me.
 - (4) The early Christians put this into practice.
 - They did these things in a church which had only started its journey, an unstable body whose basis was not fully developed, and
 - probably with a group of believers where many would seem to be widows or other people who were not economically well-off, struggling with being poor.

- They took those things entrusted to each of them by God and brought them together, shared in them, sold them, redistributed from them, and supported each other, offering mutual assistance.
2. 4:36-37 : In this passage is written how, as a practical example of this, Barnabas, a personage well known in the church at that time, sold his own land, and gave the whole amount from it to the church.
- (1) He was probably a personage highly respected by the apostles and other believers, both in terms of his character and his faith.
- For this reason, he was given the nickname Son of Encouragement from the Apostles.
 - Surely one can say that Paul, who was to be the church's greatest leader, was born from the effect of Barnabas' character as a son of encouragement and from Barnabas' actions.
 - When Paul, who had been the persecutor of the church, converted, most of the people of the church had doubts as to the truth of his conversion, and out of caution would not accept him. However, Barnabas believed in Paul, encouraged him, became his guarantor and his bridge to the church (9:27).
 - In addition, Barnabas went out of his way to find Paul, who had shut himself off for a short time in his own hometown of Tarsus, and brought him to the city of Antioch, one of the major centers for the Christian world of the day, where God's work was going forward. This became a starting point for Paul's being mightily used.
- (2) In this way, Barnabas, who was quite genial, also had real capacity and magnanimity and power to act, and also was probably a man of means.
- Thus, he was probably a focus for people's respect and admiration as an ideal type of person.
 - So it was this kind of person who sold his land and gave the whole proceeds before the eyes of Ananias and Sapphira, who appear next in this tale.

These circumstances formed the background and trigger for the couple Ananias and Sapphira giving the same kind of offering as Barnabas. However, this event became a major incident.

II. As our second point, we want to learn what God desires from us regarding growth for Christians and the church in terms of this incident.

A. A brief review of the incident of Ananias and Sapphira:

1. These two, consulting with each other, sold some possession in the same way as Barnabas (probably, just as with Barnabas, some real estate such as a field or some land), and made a donation to the church, holding some of the money back. If this were all that was involved, there probably would have been no problem.
2. However, the problem was that the two, while holding back part of the proceeds from the sale, donated the money telling the lie that they had given the whole amount.
3. Peter for some reason saw through the scheme, and asked each one of them the truth of the matter, but the two both persisted in their lie, and so fell down dead on the spot.
4. Due to this result, we are told that great awe toward God spread inside and outside the church. (5:11)

What do we learn from this?

B. First, what is the reason that God would not simply accept the sacrifice from Ananias and Sapphira as He did from Barnabas? First, let us touch on what **was not the reason.**

1. Many people are apt to believe that this happened because Ananias and Sapphira did not give the whole amount, as Barnabas did.

2. However, this is a major error in thinking. The reason that God grieved over what Ananias and Sapphira did and showed his fierce anger was not because their donation was only part of the proceeds, or was too little.

(1) This is clear from the words Peter spoke to Ananias. Peter said, “they (the proceeds from the land) were originally yours, and even after you sold them, were they not at your disposal (within your rights to use)?” (5:4)

(2) So this means, “Ananias, before you sold that land, and after you sold it, it was yours to deal with, however you might deal with it, and that was within our rights as entrusted to you, so you are not accused on that account.”

(3) Putting it simply, this means that one is free to offer a little amount or a large amount.

3. Thus, when we ask what was not the reason that Ananias was accused, the answer is,

(1) it is not because they kept part of the monies from the real estate for themselves, and did not give the whole amount,

(2) nor is it because the amount was low.

4. Somehow we always look at the amount of sacrifice, or giving, or work, saying, “more is good, less is bad.” However, God by no means looks simply at the amount.

C. So then, what does God look upon? What was the issue with Ananias and Sapphira? What was wrong in what they did? To jump to the conclusion, it was the hypocrisy.

1. What is “hypocrisy?” Its essence is lying: it is to fool someone else.

2. Peter said the following about what Ananias and Sapphira did.

● “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.” (verse 3)

● Additionally, he says, “You have not lied to men, but to God.” (verse 4)

3. Thus, as is clear from these words, the issue with Ananias and Sapphira is that they tried to fool God and man, that they lied.

4. What is more, when this lying takes place in the form of a “good deed,” a holy action which is the exact opposite of lying, this is what we call hypocrisy.

5. What Ananias and Sapphira did involved precisely this sin of hypocrisy.

● While taking the form on the outside of the good deed of donating money, appearing just like what Barnabas did, gaining praise from both God and man,

● at the heart, its content was completely different from Barnabas’ case

● That is, Ananias and Sapphira imitated the outer form of a good deed or good person, and tried to put out that its inner content was the same as well. This is hypocrisy.

6. Here I would like to consider the seriousness of the sin of hypocrisy in the Christian faith.

(1) The sin of hypocrisy is the sin which Jesus during his days on earth found quintessentially in the Pharisees, and was the sin that Jesus hated the most and vehemently denounced. That is, the sin of hypocrisy to Jesus’ eyes was something serious that could not be left to fester.

(2) Based on this, in reading the Bible we have the strong tendency to have Pharisee be the same as hypocrite and hypocrisy the same as the sin of the Pharisees.

(3) The following is the great trap and risk that many Christians fall into.

● “As a sinner, I tend to be more the ‘sinner’/tax collector/prostitute type rather than the Pharisee type.”

● It’s easy for us to assume that hypocrisy is the quintessential sin of the Pharisees and not the sin of the ‘sinner’/tax collector/prostitute, so it doesn’t have much to do with us.

(4) However, here is the problem: hypocrisy is an issue for all people, no matter whether they’re of the Pharisee type or the ‘sinner’/tax collector/prostitute type.

(5) In particular, all Christians in a sense have a major possibility of falling into this kind of hypocrisy, becoming the “good people”, the religious types doing good deeds, becoming the modern Pharisees.

(6) I believe that this hypocrisy which filters into and gets into Christians hinders and blocks Christian witness and growth in a striking way.

(7) This is precisely, I believe, why God allowed such a harsh fate to come upon Ananias and Sapphira.

(8) The sin of hypocrisy is that serious a matter to God.

D. Finally, let’s look at the spiritual cause for Ananias and Sapphira’s falling into hypocrisy.

1. The reason is that the motives for their faith were impure, that something was off track.

(1) Both Barnabas and Ananias were the same, or at least similar in their outer actions of selling assets and giving a large donation.

(2) However, the motives in their hearts were very different.

- Barnabas loved God and the Church, and gave towards its blessing. However,
- the motive for Ananias and Sapphira was love of self, for their own satisfaction and renown.
- What about us?

(3) In our faith lives, there is something more important than what we do, or what we have done. It is the reason for why we did what we did. That is, our motives.

(4) Men are all imperfect. For that reason, it is impossible to be perfect in our outer actions. Of course, we are also far from perfect in our motives.

(5) But even in the midst of this, what allows people to be happy is a heart that can say, even when a mistake is made, “that wasn’t my intent.”

(6) Between husbands and wives, or parents and children, if the motives are pure, even if you fail in what you do, if the results are not good, you can’t simply get angry or disregard what was done. Rather, you would be saying “thank you.”

(7) It’s the same with God. What God wants is not money or things. He rejoices in how our hearts love Him.

- Therefore, however small your giving, or incomplete your service, if it comes from a true heart, God will rejoice in it more than large donations or truly painstaking, perfect service.
- Conversely, if there is some kind of impure motive in the mix, no matter how costly the sacrifice may be, or how skillful and high the praise from men, God will not be pleased.

(8) Thus, Paul says: “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (II Cor 9:7)

Conclusion

- What today’s Christians and Church need is not necessarily good works or more works.
- What we must first, and always and forever focus upon is the purity in the faith of our motives, having no lies.
- John Wesley, the founder of the British Methodist movement, who had such an effect on the lives of people all over Britain that he made the historians say “he changed 18th century Britain,” had as one of the pillars of his religious movement “perfection of motives” in faith.
- That is to say, to have a heart that loves God purely, this is the essential goal of our faith. To search in our daily walk for this perfection always, and experience some of it, while also to deepen this perfection forever in eternity is the way of the Christian and of our very life.
- Therefore, David prays in this way
“Blessed is the man... in whose spirit there is no deceit.” (Psalm 32:2)

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”(Psalm 51:10-12)