

The Reality of Opposition Within

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Date: 31 May 2017

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good afternoon. It's a lovely afternoon. Welcome to the Tron Church for our lunchtime service this Wednesday. It's very good indeed to see you. My name is Paul Brennan. I'm one of the staff team here at the church. Good. Well, we're finishing our little series for the moment in the book of Acts. So, do turn with me to Acts chapter 4, and that's page 912, Acts chapter 4, and we're reading from verse 32. So, remember last week we were in the first half of chapter 4. Peter and John, after the healing of the layman, were dragged before the council, and they were told to be quiet, to silence themselves. But the work of the gospel goes on unhindered, as we saw last time. So, there's opposition from without the church, and then this afternoon we see opposition within. So, verse 32 of chapter 4.

Now, the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them. For as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus, Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. 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.

But Peter said, When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose and wrapped him up, and carried him out, and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, Tell me whether you sold the land for so much. And she said, Yes, for so much. 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. 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. And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things. Amen. Well, may the Lord bless to us his word. Well, a word of prayer now, before we come to this together, let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, as we have gathered here this afternoon, would you help us to remember that you alone are able to order our wayward wills, and change the affections of our sinful hearts. Would you help us to love the things that you have commanded, and desire what you have promised, so that in the midst of life's ups and downs, our hearts may be surely fixed upon what you have said, upon what you have promised, where true joys are to be found. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this is a passage that rattles us, or at least it ought to rattle us. It begins with the real meaningful unity of God's people.

We read there in chapter 4 from verse 32 that the early church were of one heart and soul, and that looked like, on the ground, sharing of material possessions and great generosity.

[5 : 06] Some of those in the church were selling their property and giving all the proceeds to the church. Hugely encouraging seeing the growth of the gospel in those early days, not just numerically, but in depth, as these young Christians sought to serve and love one another. It's all going very well indeed. As we saw last week, there is real and hard opposition from outside the church. We saw that last week, but it did not hinder the progress of the gospel. Look at the end of the passage we looked at last time, verse 31. They prayed, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with all boldness. Despite that opposition, the progress of the gospel went forward.

Things are going well. Things are going well. Until that is, chapter 5, verse 1. A chapter which begins with a but. A but that stops us in our tracks. These verses are uncomfortable reading, aren't they?

It's uncomfortable because it shows us that the opposition to the gospel wasn't just out there somewhere. But also, hostility to the gospel was there in the midst of the church. Satan's tactics don't stop at the front door of the church. He will infiltrate. He will seek to destroy from within.

And that is exactly what we see in evidence in our passage today. Look at what Peter says there in chapter 5, verse 3. He sees the root of Ananias' deception. The source. Well, it's Satan himself.

John Stott puts it this way. If the devil's first tactic was to destroy the church by force from without, his second was to destroy it by falsehood from within. And that's what we see at play last week and today. His tactics from outside the church, but also from within. Now, if you and I had been writing, if we had been in Luke's shoes and we were writing this account, I think we might just have been tempted to exclude this little story. It's embarrassing. It shows deceit, weakness at the very heart of the early Christian church. It's not really the sort of thing you want to draw attention to, is it?

[7 : 44] But Luke does include it. And he wants those who read his accounts, and that includes you and I here today, he wants us to be clear about the reality of gospel opposition within the church.

Satan's plans consist of hostility from outside and deception from within. And Luke wants us to be realistic about that. He also wants us to be clear about the seriousness of deceitful sin within the church too. It's very serious indeed. God will not be fooled. He will not be deceived.

And so, we are to watch and guard our own hearts, lest we fall for the devil's schemes and be used by him in his attempts to disrupt the progress of the gospel. So then, two points this afternoon as we look at this together. Firstly, we see here in this chapter the shocking reality of opposition within.

The final paragraph of chapter 4, which I read at the start, that sets the scene for what is to follow. And we see there that last paragraph of chapter 4, we see that it was common practice in the church at that time for folk to sell off property, to sell their possessions, and to bring the proceeds to the feet of the apostles. We see that there in verse 34 and 35. There was great sharing of possessions, great care shown to one another in the church. Now, let's be clear, this is not a manifesto for socialism. This was not obligatory practice, and Luke is not including this here so that we would go and do exactly the same. The application of this passage is not, go out and sell all your possessions and bring the proceeds to my feet. Although I'm sure many of us do need to review our giving and reflect upon the generosity of the early church. And such generosity and care is surely a sign of Christian maturity, isn't it? But that's not the key point here. Luke is filling us in on the background and the practice of those particular believers so that when we see what happens next, it makes sense.

You don't get the example of Barnabas, verse 36, who sold a field and brought the proceeds to the apostles' feet. So this was the known practice amongst the believers at the time. They sold property and they brought all the proceeds to the apostles. And Barnabas there at the end is an example of that.

[10 : 33] But then, chapter 5, the mood turns very sour indeed. We read about this couple, Ananias. And his wife Sapphira. And they, like many others, had sold some property. So far, so good.

But we read on. With his wife's knowledge, he kept some of the proceeds back for himself and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Now, in a sense, they were perfectly entitled to do that. The apostle says as much in verse 4. Look at what he says. While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?

And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? In other words, you weren't under any obligation to sell the land in the first place, nor were you under obligation to give all the proceeds to the church.

But the issue was this. There was a practice in the church at the time, as we just read, of people selling property and giving all the proceeds.

[11 : 42] Ananias was being deliberately misleading, wasn't he? To all those observing them as they watched him bring this money, it would have looked like Ananias was giving all the proceeds of the sale, as everyone else had done. But he was being deceitful. He kept back some of the proceeds without telling anyone, apart from, of course, his wife. The problem was not how much he gave.

He could have given half the amount and clearly declared it. But the thing is, he lied. He lied about what he was giving. And Peter puts his finger on the issue there in verse 3.

Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back for yourself some of the proceeds of the land? Look on to the end of verse 4. You have not lied to men, but to God.

And the deceit is confirmed hours later as the fire is challenged by Peter. Peter says to her, tell me whether you sold the land for so much? And she says, yes. And Peter says to her, how is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?

It's shocking, isn't it? On face value, this looks innocuous enough, doesn't it? Just another couple in the church generously giving some of their possessions. But the reality of what's really going on is shocking and serious. They lie not just to men, but to God. It was a deliberate, premeditated effort to deceive those around them in the church. They presume they won't be found out.

[13 : 28] And in an effort to build their reputation, they make a grand, but fundamentally fraudulent gesture. Why do they do it? Well, two reasons, I think. Firstly, and fundamentally, this is an outworking of the evil one and his schemes. Peter gets to the heart of the diagnosis there in verse 3. Why has Satan filled your heart to lie? Behind their actions, behind all opposition and hostility to the gospel is Satan. He is the father of lies. He is restless and unceasing in his opposition, his attacks on Christ and his people. And you and I need to be alert to that. We need to be alert to the reality of his influence, alert to the lies he whispers in our ears, the desires he stirs up in our hearts, desires for reputation, desires to acquire. But we also need to realize that he can only go so far. We know in light of Christ's work that Satan does not win in the end.

So that's the first reason. That's the first reason for their actions. Satan lies behind it. But secondly, why did they do this? Well, more simply and straightforwardly, it was greed. It was pride.

They were greedy. They kept back some of the proceeds. But more significantly, they were prideful. They wanted to be well thought of. They wanted people to think that they were more generous and spiritual than they actually were. Ananias and Sapphira had spiritual ambitions. They perhaps saw the accolades and the praise going Barnabas's way. They wanted some of the same. But they wanted it at a cut price. For Ananias and Sapphira, to be thought saintly was more important than actually being saintly.

Now, perhaps we might think as we read this, what's the big deal? So they lied a bit about how much they were giving. It's not that big a deal. Well, let's see and notice the second big thing we see in this passage. And it's this. We see the sober revelation of God's judgment. The demise of Ananias and Sapphira is devastatingly brisk and deadly, isn't it? Verse 5. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And then on verse 9. Behold, says Peter, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out. Immediately, she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. God was not fooled by their hypocrisy and deception. His fierce judgment reveals the sobering reality of their hypocrisy. God will not be fooled. And that is the great warning here, isn't it?

We may fool men with our hypocrisy for a time, maybe even for a lifetime. But in the end, we aren't able to fool the one whose opinion really matters.

[16 : 54] The Lord Jesus, as recorded in Luke chapter 12, says that nothing is covered up that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be known. Therefore, whatever you've said in the dark shall be heard in the light. And whatever you've whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the rooftops.

He sees right through the hearts of men and women. He saw right through Ananias and Sapphira. And he sees right through my heart and through yours.

Now, this isn't a passage which is a general warning all about all sorts of sin. Of course, the Bible teaches that sin is serious, that we're all sinners, that we all fall short of the glory of God. But the sin here is specific. The sin which we're to particularly guard on our own hearts is the deliberate greed and hypocrisy within the professing church with the intent to deceive others and so gain plaudits for ourselves. It's a specific thing that's going on here.

It's the deliberate greed and hypocrisy within the professing church with that intent to deceive others so that we gain plaudits. And one day everything will be exposed and it's God who will do the exposing.

And that is the truth. And no matter how successfully we might hide from others, we will in the end be exposed by our judge on the last day. But we do need to feel the warning for today.

[18 : 36] This sort of hypocrisy is hugely damaging in the professing church. It is one of Satan's most effective tactics to see greed and hypocrisy as the driving motivations for what people do in the church. He wants to see that.

And how damaging that is for Christ's church, for the mission of Christ's church. Because his mission calls for real sacrifice, real service of others.

But this sort of hypocrisy totally undermines that. And so perhaps you and I need to search our own hearts.

Perhaps there are things we need to repent of, things of this nature. But perhaps it's even more specific than that. Note the timing of this event.

These were the early days of the church. And the virus of sin could not have been allowed to exist in the early days of the church's life. It would have corrupted. It would have paralyzed the apostolic testimony.

[19 : 48] It would have withered and died in its infancy. God was jealous of the early church's life and health. Hence the severity of his dealings here.

He would not countenance anything that would threaten the growth of the gospel. And so it was not merely the sin of hypocrisy and deceit. But hypocrisy and deceit at such a time that made it just so serious.

At crucial moments in the church's growth, the devil will seek a foothold. But the Lord will not tolerate it.

And we must be aware and alert to the seedlings of hypocrisy in our own hearts. At crucial moments in the church's growth. I think of this moment in the life of the Tron church.

As you'll know, in the last year or so, we've developed from having two services on a Sunday here. To having four services over three locations.

[20 : 52] A crucial moment in the life of the church. And as a church, we need to be alert to the devil's schemes. Opportunities for self-advancement will rise.

Opportunities to deceive others will rise. And so we must pray. And watch our own hearts. We need to heed the warning of this passage.

And be rightly fearful, don't we? That's the intended response. Isn't it? Twice. Luke draws our attention to the response of the church. To the demise of first Ananias and then Sapphira.

Look down at verse 5. And we see their response to the death of Ananias. Great fear. Came upon all who heard of it. And then again after the death of Sapphira.

Verse 11. And great fear. Came upon the whole church. And upon all. Who heard of these things. That is the right response, isn't it?

[21 : 59] To what has happened. God is. A fearsome God. He will not. Tolerate sin. He takes it very seriously indeed.

And so we are to rightly fear him. To revere him. To take him seriously. And to realize.

The absolute futility of trying to fool him. He will not be deceived. He won't be fooled. He will not be deceived. He will not be deceived. And so.

Our attitude as his people. Ought to be one of right fear. And so will you pray that. The sort of hypocrisy that was in evidence here.

Would not be found. In our own hearts. In our churches. In our churches. And so will you watch your heart. And pray. That you will be kept from this sort of thing.

[22 : 56] That's my prayer. I know how easy these things rise in my own heart. Satan is the great deceiver. And how we need the Lord's help.

To stand against his evil ways. This passage. It's full of realism. It's full. Of warning.

So let's pray now shall we. For our father's help. In these things. Our father we thank you.

For your word. Which. Does not hold back. It. Shows us the reality. Of the human heart. It shows us the reality.

Of the evil one's work. Not just. Outside these doors. But within the church. And. These things we read of.

[24 : 00] Do. Cause us to fear. In a right way. Because you are so holy. You are all knowing. And you see right into our hearts. So please.

Would you help us. By your spirit. Help us to guard. Our own hearts. Our own. Dreams and desires. That. Our focus.

Might be. The work. The work. Of mission. The work. Of testifying. To the Lord Jesus. To the end of the earth. May that be our focus.

May we give ourselves in that. And to each other. Wholeheartedly. And not holding back. So guard our hearts. We pray.

Help us. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.