

8. Image is NOT everything

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In 1990, Canon came up with an advertising campaign with Tennis Pro player Andre Agassi for their camera Canon Rebel EOS. It became one of the most successful ad campaigns ever by them. Their slogan was "Image is everything." This is not twenty some years old concept that no longer works.

According to a study done in 2008, American women spend approximately \$7 billion a year of beauty products and cosmetic surgeries. This averages out to each woman spending about \$100 a month of cosmetics and other products.

I don't expect that we all should look like unmade beds. But we should not think that our outward image is everything. But to some, it means so much that they are willing to deceive others to make themselves look good – physically, emotionally, and spiritually – and end up facing their horrible consequences.

What we are going to learn about a couple who lived in Jerusalem during the First Century period is not an isolated and unfortunate case. We should take a good long look at ourselves through this situation and this lesson must be applied to our spiritual lives clearly.

A. SHARING IN ALL THINGS

Acts 4:32-37 Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. 33 And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. 34 Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. 36 And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, 37 having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

One of my old time friends told me long ago, "Christians should live together in one area and pull our resources to help one another as it is mentioned in Acts chapter 4." I was very young in the Lord and didn't know how to answer. I nodded my head without realizing what I was agreeing with. But somehow in the back of my mind, I was thinking, "I don't know if that is what the Lord wants for us."

Now I agree with my friend that we Christians should love, care, and help one another. That is the simpler meaning of 'koinonia' in Greek – Christian fellowship or communion with God or with fellow Christians.

But you do not see the command from the Lord anywhere in the Bible that we should sell all of our properties and put everything in one place and sing "kumbaya" altogether and live like a bunch of hippies.

These Jerusalem Christians chose to do this because there were so many new converts who came from outside of Jerusalem and they didn't have places to go and didn't have means to meet their daily needs while they were living in Jerusalem and learning from the apostles.

This was "Commonism". Out of abundance of love and care for one another, they practiced this voluntarily. This is not the same as communism or socialism. Communism and socialism say, "What is yours is mine; I'll take it." But commonism says, "What is mine is yours, I'll share it."

Barnabas is introduced at this point for at least three reasons:

- 1) He was a very generous giver.
- 2) His noble act apparently became the object of the envy of Ananias and Sapphira so that they attempted to impress the church with their false giving and ended up being killed by God's wrath.
- 3) Barnabas had a very important ministry in the church and is mentioned at least 25 times in the Book of Acts and another 5 times in other epistles. In fact, it is Barnabas who encouraged Paul in his early service for the Lord according to Acts 9.

We all know a Barnabas – the one who always has an encouraging word. When you are down, that is the person you want to call, because you know he or she will encourage you and lift up your spirit with truth and love from the Lord.

You may not be called to preach and teach like apostle Peter or Paul did, but you can be an encourager like Barnabas was. You can do your part, because right now, you probably know someone who needs some encouragement – someone who has failed in life; someone who is hurting; or someone who is a brand-new believer. They need someone like you to stand in the gap. You don't have to know every verse in the Bible. You don't have to have the answer to every theological question. You just need to be a real Christian who can show them what it is like to live in the real world.

Thank God for the Barnabases of the world who help those in need – and all of us need it at one time or another. These are the unsung heroes who play an important part in the lives of great men and women of God.

At the same time, I need to speak to those who have a tendency to say the things that discourage others. You don't mean anything bad to them, but you say the things that are hurtful to them or love to point out other people's mistakes because you think that it is funny. I have 6 theological words for you: "Shut up and knock it off."

B. THE HYPOCRISY OF ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

Acts 5:1-6 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. 2 And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? 4 While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. 6 And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.

19th Century Scottish prolific author and pastor George MacDonald wrote, "Half of the misery in the world comes from trying to look, instead of trying to be, what one is not." How true!

This portion of the Scripture tells the story of Ananias and Sapphira, a husband and wife who lied to the Holy Spirit. By lying to the Holy Spirit, Ananias and Sapphira wanted others to think they were more devoted to God than they really were.

Ironically, the name Ananias means "God is gracious," but Ananias also found out that God is holy. Sapphira means "beautiful," but she found out how ugly sin can be.

There are three important points we must notice:

1) Hypocrisy that comes from pride

Their troubling issue here was not about giving or not giving, rather the issue was hypocrisy – saying they did one thing when they really did another.

This is what Jesus warned about:

Matthew 6:1-4 "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 3 But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly."

And Jesus reserved the harshest rebuke for those who pretended to be godly when they were not.

Once the greed takes possession of a person, there is no evil that he or she cannot or will not do. You see, Satan cannot make us sin. But if we let him, he can fill our hearts with greed and pride to sin against the Lord as happened to Ananias and Sapphira.

Their sin is imitated in many ways today. We can create or allow the impression that we are people of Bible reading or prayer or we have it all together when we are not. We can exaggerate our spiritual accomplishments or effectiveness to appear something we do not. It is too easy to be happy with the false image of spirituality without the reality of spiritual life.

Their great sin was rooted in pride. Pride corrupts the church more quickly than anything else. Spiritual pride is the most insidious and arrogant of all kinds of pride.

I read this from "Mere Christianity" by C.S. Lewis:

"As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you."

2) Is the punishment too harsh?

Since Ananias' sin was lusting after public praise for his generosity, it was appropriate that the sin be exposed publicly. Peter was probably more surprised than anyone else when Ananias fell down dead. The death of Ananias was the act of God.

Did God overreact on this? No. This was a critical juncture for the early church and such impurity, sin, scandal and satanic infiltration could have corrupted the entire church at its root. The Church has never been harmed or hindered by persecution

from outside; but it has been perpetually harmed and hindered by corruptions from inside. So, the Lord had to set the example for all of these Christians and us to take heed.

Actually, it should be a greater wonder that God delays His righteous judgment against all humans including Ananias and Sapphira.

The shock of being exposed was too much for Ananias. For many Christians in compromise, their greatest fear is not in sinning itself, but in being found out. We presume greatly on God when we assume that there is always time to repent, time to get right with God, time to get honest with Him. Any such time given by God is an undeserved gift that He owes no one; we should never assume it will always be there.

Many Christians long to have the same miracles that happened in the First Century church – 8000 new converts, a lame man becoming whole, and other sick people getting healed, etc. Do you know what the third miracle that was recorded in the Book of Acts is? Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead on the spot by the wrath of God. If the same miracles happen today, we might have many dead people at the end of some services and we should have a mortician on staff. It is a good thing that we have Green Valley Mortuary next door just in case.

3) The Holy Spirit is a person and God

Apostle Peter points out to us that the Holy Spirit is a Person, because one can only lie to a person. He also believed the Holy Spirit is God. According to Jehovah's Witness, the Holy Spirit is impersonal and the Holy Spirit is not God. Rather it is an invisible, active force from Jehovah." In the meanwhile the mormons teach that the Holy Spirit is not God, but is an influence or electricity-like emanation from God

C. THE PARTNER-IN-CRIME

Acts 5:7-11 Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." 9 Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. 11 So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

Sapphira knew exactly what was going on when they decided together before they came to the church. She was a willing partner-in-crime. So she received the same punishment as her husband.

This is not about church discipline, rather it is an example of God's personal judgment.

Hebrews 10:30b-31 And again, "The LORD will judge His people." 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Had they judged their own sin, the Lord would not have judged them.

We must keep in mind that their sin was not in robbing God of money but in lying to Him and robbing Him of glory. Their lust for recognition conceived sin in their hearts, and that sin eventually produced death.

The result was a wave of godly fear that swept over the church and over all those who heard the story. We have moved from "great power" and "great grace" to "great fear," and all of these ought to be present in the church.

Hebrews 12:28-29 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Be an encourager to those who are around you.

You never know how the Lord is going to use you to lift other people's spirits.

2) We don't need to be someone who are not ourselves. Because God sees us through.

It is perfectly OK to say, "I don't know," or "I cannot do that," or "I am sorry," or "Please forgive me." Actually they become great starts of true friendship and healing process.