

Acts 5.1–11

Faithfulness

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Lent 2017: How to Bear Fruit

Intro

How is a sermon like a woman's skirt? It should be long enough to cover the essentials, but short enough to keep you interested.

Did you hear about the young man who called his mother and excitedly announced that he had met the woman of his dreams?

His mother suggested, 'Why don't you send her flowers and invite her to your apartment for a home-cooked meal?'

The day after the big date, his mother called to see how things had gone. 'Mum, the evening was a complete disaster,' he replied, 'It was horrible!'

'Why, didn't she come over?' his mother asked.

'Yes, she came over. But she refused to cook!'

Those jokes have nothing to do with my sermon, I just like them!

The ‘death passage’

The reading from Acts 5 is one of those ‘death passages’ in the Bible that people often don’t like or find difficult to read or hear. Sometimes people dismiss them as made-up, sometimes people simply choose to lump them together as ‘the difficult bits’.

But that won’t do.¹ To get a better idea of what’s going on, we need to have a look a bit earlier in Acts, at 4.32:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

Luke 4.32-37 (NIV)

The early church sounds pretty good, doesn't it? **The believers were one in heart and mind**, and they **shared everything** (4.32). There were plenty of powerful miracles (4.33), and everyone's generosity meant **there was no needy person among them** (4.34-35). Barnabas himself is held up as an example of that generosity (4.36-37). What a wonderful community to be part of!

Sometimes Luke is accused of painting a rather rosy picture of the early church – especially in passages like the end of Acts 4. But Acts 5 shows that Luke included the less good bits too; the early church had its problems, like the church has ever since.

Ananias and Sapphira no doubt knew what Barnabas had done, and how everyone was impressed with his selfless generosity. A field was not simply a possession, it was a livelihood, where you could grow crops and farm animals. So selling it and giving all the money away was not simply generous, it was an extreme act of faith; Barnabas trusted that God would provide all he needed.

Ananias and Sapphira saw that, they saw Barnabas and others being held up as examples, and they wanted a bit of that. Luke tells us they had **a piece of property** too (1). They decided to sell it, but **kept back part of the money**, bringing the rest as a donation to the church (2).

But Peter knew – how, Luke doesn't tell us. But he did – and he challenged Ananias straight up:

‘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?’

Acts 5.3 (NIV)

The issue was *not* that they didn't give all the money. As Peter said, it was theirs to do with as they wanted (4). They could have given half of it, or none of it.

The issue was that they **lied**. They had promised the whole value to the church, and then tried to get away with only giving part of it. The word Luke uses is a word for financial fraud – something like stealing or embezzlement.

Faithfulness

Why would they do this? Someone put it like this: the **desire for human praise [was] more important to them than being faithful to God.**² I'd like to pause there for a moment, because this gets to the heart of why many of us struggle to be faithful to God. *Repeat.*

We want people to like us – of course we do. But the thing is, it's easy to get hooked on **human praise**. It makes us feel good about ourselves when people say nice things to us. And so it should: it's called encouragement, another thing that Barnabas was good at.

But when we get hooked on it, we're in trouble. It is seductive, it fills our brain with nice chemicals, and we want more of it – and more – and more – and *more*. Our focus shifts away from being a faithful disciple, and we start to seek after bigger and bigger highs of human praise.

So we need to ask ourselves the serious question: do I want people to like me, *more* than I want to be faithful to God? Do I want people to praise me as a good and generous person, without paying the (sometimes costly) price of being faithful to God?

This passage is a warning – but not that we might drop down dead if we lie in church. This is a unique event in the Bible, where the judgement follows the sin almost immediately.

Luke's point is *not* that this might be repeated *so watch it* – the point is to say that God will not be mocked. He knows the secrets of our hearts, and sees through our lies, however elaborate they are.

That's the warning – and to be honest, **great fear** (5, 11) is the correct response. God is powerful, holy and just – he is always right, and so often we get it wrong.

Now, fearing God is not quite the same thing as being afraid of God – we don't need to quake in our boots as if we were standing before some evil dictator.

No: fearing God means recognising *who he is*, acknowledging that he is God, that he is holy and we are not – and then responding to him with faithful and whole-hearted service. That's why I have put 1 Samuel 12.24 on the screen:

‘Fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart.’

1 Samuel 12.24 (NIV)

Ananias and Sapphira did neither of those things. They lied to Peter, they lied to their church family – they lied before God. And they received a right and just punishment for their lies, no matter how hard it is for our enlightened 21st century ears to hear.

If we continue to abuse God's wonderful gift of life, one day he *will* take it away from us.

Their sin was big and obvious – but far more often *we* are very good at hiding our sin. But if we want to bear the fruit of faithfulness, if we want to **serve God faithfully**, we need to be honest about what *stops* us being faithful, and deal with it.

Ananias and Sapphira could have come clean, said sorry to God, and he would have forgiven them, taken their sin and removed it so far away from them, words don't even make sense. Although they made a pretty big mistake, no mistake is too big for God to forgive, if we come to him and say sorry.

Confession

So we are going to do that now. I don't know what goes on in the secrecy of your hearts, but God does. He knows – and he loves you still. He wants you to say sorry, to turn away from all that rubbish, to turn back to him, and receive his forgiveness and peace.

Do you want that? I know I do.

So, for our time of confession this morning, you have a blank piece of paper and a pen. I invite you to write or draw something that you would like to say sorry to God for, something that gets in the way of you being a faithful disciple.

It may be a relationship. It may be an attitude. It may be a temptation or a compromising situation that you struggle with. Whatever it is – spend a few moments thinking about it. Write it down if you want, draw it – whatever you want. Don't worry, you won't have to read it out loud, or give it to me or anyone else to read. This is between you and God.

Some of you won't like doing this – I recognise that. But please, give it a go. Think: what stops me being a faithful disciple? And if you want to say sorry to God for it, write it down.

Pause while people use the piece of paper.

Now, hopefully you all have something on your piece of paper. The next part has two stages to it.

1. Scrunch it up as tightly as you can.
2. Throw it as far away from yourself as you can.

Pause while people do that.

Let us pray.

As far as the east is from the west,
so far has [God] removed our transgressions from us.

Psalm 103.12 (NIV)

Father, thank you that whenever we come to you and say sorry, you forgive us, and remove our sin. Please help us to be faithful disciples. Please help us to follow you with all our hearts. Amen.

¹ As well as being a difficult ‘death passage’, Acts 5 is also an example of why the chapters in our Bibles are not always helpful. The chapters we use today actually come from Stephen Langton, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury in the early 13th century. The verses were added even later, in the 16th century. The reason I say that is that reading the end of Acts 4 is a really important first step in trying to make sense of this rather gory and unpleasant story of judgement.

² Bock, *Acts (BECNT)*, 223.