

“A Church’s Sin and God’s Amazing Grace” // Acts 4:34–5:14 // SENT #8

Announcement:

For the past several months we've been **talking about what it means to live sent**. Well, now it's application time for some of us.

- As you may know, we are currently preparing to plant **4 new churches in 3 cities**: 1 in Wilmington, 1 in Washington DC, and 2 right here in Durham (who are going to be targeting a specific section of Durham than we are not as effective at reaching).

It makes me nervous to say this, but we're praying that **75 of YOU will be sent out from the Summit** to help plant these churches.

- We're not just looking for seminary students, but ordinary people who are willing to follow Jesus in order to take the gospel to a new city or a new community.
 - We need **college students**.
 - We need **families**.
 - We need **young professionals. Nurses. Teachers. Business people**.
- Some of you are called to be a part of this church, to bless this city—RDU is strategic. Others of you, there's something in you that is moving to be a part of one of these teams, or maybe your job is taking you naturally to one of these areas.

On Sunday, November 10 we're hosting interest meetings (and free lunch!) for each of these. **DETAILS in WG**. Whether you're exploring going or just want to find out what this church planting thing is all about, we want you to come. Find out where each of these meetings are taking place in your worship guide today and RSVP.

Introduction:

The growth of the early church was incredible... and defied any and all explanation:

- A small group of **unqualified people** with no money, no power, and no influence turned the world upside down and changed the course of history.
- **They had only two weapons in their arsenal**: they were completely devoted to the message of the gospel, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

I don't want to be overly dramatic, but I believe what our church has experienced in recent days bears the marks of a movement...

- Our service at the **ballpark** had 11,500 in attendance and we baptized 500 people in one day! It was the largest non-sporting public event in Durham's history.
- Since then, God has been **“adding to our number daily** those that are being saved.” I hear enough stories—it's amazing.
- A couple of weeks ago nearly **3000 of you** got involved over the space of a couple of days, loving and serving our community.
- And we have a **dizzying amount** of people going out from our church, constantly, to **plant churches, start new Bible studies, or take their business overseas** for the Great Commission. *For every 1 story we show you, there's 3 that we can't.*

Which makes these things that we are reading in Acts that much more applicable to us. I believe that God is counseling us and guiding us through these first chapters of Acts, and we've got to heed these things as if our lives depended on them.

(This is what I've always wanted church to be, btw...

- Told you before that church is supposed to be a lot like the **huddle of a football game...** I call the play, and you guys go out and run it.

- (Most churches act like the huddle is the main event (*act out*)... and you want to say, “Guys, run the play! The point is not calling the play; the point is running the play.”)
- Church is a lot more fun when you guys are running the play and this is just a huddle. And that’s what I feel like.)

Today you’re going to see a moment of failure and tragedy in the early church, and I believe **God is** warning some of us directly in it.

Acts 4:34–5:14

Let’s start at the end of Acts 4, because that is the *SETUP*:

[34] 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 [35] and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

These people were the most generous people on earth. Nobody was like, “Hey, that’s my car. That’s my house.” Everything was common—their **properties**; their **possessions**; their **toothbrushes**... (JK, it probably had limits). **I HEAR ABOUT THIS A LOT...**

Listen to this: The gospel had **loosened their grip** on their stuff and **tightened their grip** on each other.

- That’s **always what happens** when the gospel gets ahold of someone. Your hold on your stuff loosens and your hold onto other people tightens.
- (THAT’S WHAT JESUS DID FOR US...
 - THOUGH HE WAS IN THE FORM OF GOD...
 - THOUGH HE WAS RICH
- I’ve heard that some people, when it comes to generosity, are like a **rock** (for God to get anything out of them he has to hammer and even then he only gets chips and sparks. Some are like a **sponge** (you can get something out of them, but in order for God to do it

he has to squeeze). Some, however, are like a **honeycomb** (sweetness just drips off of them.)

- The gospel takes **people whose hearts are made of stone and turns them into honeycombs**.
- – minus the bees, of course
- Which one are you like?

[36] Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, [37] sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Barnabas: One of the coolest figures in Acts. He makes 6 appearances in Acts.

1. He’s the **lead giver**.
2. He was the first one to embrace Paul **after he had been converted**, everyone was nervous. Barnabas was 1st guy to stick up for him Acts 9:27)
3. Acts 11: he led the Antioch church in diversification—he’s the one pastoring all the Gentile converts (11:25–26)
4. He’s put in charge of taking **relief money** to Jerusalem when it is hit with a famine (kind of their SERVE Jerusalem project leader).
5. He **goes with Paul** on his first missionary journey.
6. When **John Mark, another guy who joined their team**, fails Paul. Comes back. Paul says, “Nope. Fool me once...” Barnabas says, “I’ll go with him. I’ll see if he’s restored.”

Here’s how I’d summarize Barnabas: he **lays money down** and picks people up. His hold on his **stuff was loose**, but his hold on others was tight.

- He’s a picture of the **gospel-transformed man**.

[5:1] But a man named Ananias (whose name means “God is merciful;” I think that is important, btw; I’ll tell you why in a second), **with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, [2] and with his wife:**

knowledge (together) he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

[3] But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit (Who is behind this? Satan. It may interest you to know that this is the first post-cross appearance of Satan. Before the cross Satan's strategy was to kill Jesus; now it is to destroy Jesus' church from within. "Filled" here, btw, is in contrast to "filled" with the Holy Spirit which had just occurred in the previous chapter) and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? [4] While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God."

- What was wrong with what they did? Was it that they kept part of the money? Not at all. Peter directly says that.
- The problem was that Ananias presented the gift as if it was the full amount.

[5] When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. [6] The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

- These were the interns. They always get jobs like this. I use this with ours. "Don't complain about anything we have you do here until you do that..."

[7] After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. [8] And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much."

- This had to have been a tense moment.
- **Ladies, what is she supposed to do?** *Is she supposed to be a good wife and submit to her husband?*
- Ladies, ask yourself: **what would you have done?** You and your husband agree together to misrepresent yourself, and then you are asked publicly...
 - **Submission never means following your husband into sin.**

- (Submission **can mean following your husband into a mistake.** He thinks you should move and take a new job and you don't.
- But submission never means following him into sin.)
- **Here's why I make a big deal out of this.** It seems that when some ladies get married they relinquish all responsibility for their lives, just go along with their husbands.
 - But there's a **day coming, ma'am, when you stand before God**, like Sapphira did here, and you will have to answer for yourself.
 - **Don't ever substitute** your husband for the Holy Spirit.
 - You have to answer to God for your **lifestyle choices**; your generosity; **your involvement in church**; your salvation; whether or not your **kids** are in church.
- GUYS: You're sin never affects just you!

And she said, "Yes, for so much." [9] 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."

[10] 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.

[11] And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Let me ask a few questions of this text:

Why did Ananias and Sapphira do what they did?

- **Their lies were symptomatic of a much deeper problem.**
 - **They love money and they love the praise of people**, and they want the praise of people, but don't want to give away all their money, so they tell a lie so they can keep their money and get the praise of people

- They are kind of like the **opposite of Barnabas**. Barnabas was filled with the Spirit and **gave away his stuff** to bless people; **they were filled with the love of money and the love of praise** so they lied about their generosity to gather praise from people.
- **Sins like lying always come from somewhere. These lies** went all the way down to the deepest parts of the heart.
 - I've told you before: **jealousy; lying; cheating; not being generous** are all like **smoke from a fire** that leads back to the fires at which you are worshipping. **Problem is not the smoke**, but the fire that created that smoke
 - **For me:** In high school **I craved the attention of people** – led me to make some really bad decisions.
 - **I finally matured** out of those decisions, but never dealt with the root issue: loving the praise of people.
 - **As an adult** that manifested itself by **always being concerned** with what others thought about me; **overworking** to obtain their approval; being willing to lie to make myself look better so others would approve of me.
 - **That void in my heart drove me**, and that void was created by the absence of the love of God.
 - **When I was filled with the Spirit**—filled with the love of God, I quit needing to use people so much.
- **What you need is not to just quit lying; you need to be filled with the love of God.**
 - You need **not just to fan away the smoke**; you need to put out the fire!
 - You're one of two things: filled with the Spirit, which leads to satisfaction and joy; or Satan is filling your heart with the love of money and the praise of people, and you are characterized by dissatisfaction, jealousy, and lies.

Why did God strike them dead?

- Does everyone who lies like this get struck dead?

- A couple of reasons... (1) these people have been **really close to the activity of God**. *Whenever you are close to the activity of God, the seriousness of sin increases.*
 - Think of it like **the TEMPLE, every blemish is magnified**.¹
 - These people had seen the mighty **work of the Holy Spirit**
 - That's why I told you the **meaning of Ananias' name** was significant: *"God is merciful."* He has seen and experienced the grace of God.
 - They have been witness to the cross itself!
- **MORE IMPORTANTLY (2): Do you remember the concept of sign?** God takes something that is true in the kingdom of God and puts it on physical display.
 - **With healing...**
- We're in a stage in church history where **everything is magnified**.
 - Jump down to vs. 12–16... you see that the glimpse of Peter's shadow heals (12–16). I'm a church leader, but that doesn't mean when I walk down the beach people with ailments spring up..
 - In the same way, God doesn't do this with everyone who lies to the Holy Spirit today.
- **But that should not cover up the fact that what you see happen to Ananias and Sapphira is a picture of how he feels about it**, and is an glimpse of what the future judgment hold for everyone with the heart of Ananias and Sapphira.

That leads me to a 3rd question...

What is God teaching us through this sign?

1. In the church, there are two kinds of people, and it's nearly impossible to distinguish them from the outside

- **On the outside, Ananias and Sapphira look just like Barnabas** They were active in church. They were generous. But deep in

¹ N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 79.

their heart was a love of money and a love of people's praise they'd never repented of.

- I've been reading *The Letters of John Newton* recently... We are great imitators; mimicking the motions, words, but often from a heart that has not been converted because we've never repented of our idolatry to money and praise.
- If you look close, there's always lies...
 - Achan. In his tent.
 - What's hidden in your life?
 - You say "Jesus is Lord..."

2. We cannot hide from God.

- The Holy Spirit knows your thoughts as if they were being **played through a loudspeaker** or being displayed on a screen.
 - **J. David's** photo.
- A day when every secret will be proclaimed from the housetops. Every hidden thing exposed.
- **In all seriousness, are you ready for this?**
- **Ananias and Sapphira** knew this... they had just forgotten it. They were so consumed with the praise of people they forgot that the only one whose opinion matters is God...
- A **lot of church people are deceived**, so consumed by their appearance on the outside that they neglect ever dealing with their heart before God.
- **I can't see inside of your tent;** or your heart...

3. The closer we are to grace, the greater the offense of sin.

- **Summit:** As God moves in our church; in your family, sin becomes magnified. Do not take holy things lightly!

4. Fear is a part of worship

- This might be an unusual idea for you, but notice **how much fear** permeates this passage...

- Vs. 5, "...and great fear came upon all who heard of it."
- Vs. 11, "And great fear came upon the whole church and all who heard these things."
- **THE RESULT:** "More and more people believed in the Lord..." (v. 14)
- "Well, I thought God was a big cosmic Teddy Bear that exuded warm, serene feelings of peace." **God is infinite in love, yes**, but you can only know that love **as you know the magnificence of his glory and the might of God's power.**
 - John Piper uses a great analogy in his book *The Pleasures of God*: (SUMMARIZE, but use **HIMALAYAS**: *Suppose you were exploring an unknown Greenland glacier in the dead of winter. Just as you reach a sheer cliff with a spectacular view of miles of jagged ice and mountains of snow, a terrible storm breaks in. The wind is so strong that the fear rises in your heart that it might blow you over the cliff. But in the midst of the storm you discover a cleft in the ice where you can hide. Here you feel secure. But, even though secure, the awesome might of the storm rages on, and you watch it with a kind of trembling pleasure as it surges out across the distant glaciers.*) Not everything we call fear vanishes from your heart, only the life-threatening part. There remains the trembling, the awe, the wonder, the feeling that you would never want to tangle with such a storm or be the adversary of such a power. And so it is with God. The fear of God is what is left of the storm when you have a safe place to watch right in the middle of it. Hope turns fear into a trembling and peaceful wonder, and fear takes everything trivial out of hope and makes it earnest and profound. The terrors of God make the pleasures of his people intense. The fireside fellowship is all the sweeter when the storm is howling outside the cottage.

- My favorite definition of **Biblical fear**: “Awe mixed with intimacy.”
- SUMMIT... *You know my personality.* I enjoy joking and lightness and having a good time... but when we come together **we come into the presence** of a holy God, a **God so holy** that one sin in his presence would be like butterfly trying landing on the surface of the sun. He has made us safe through Christ, praise God, but we come before him trembling...
- **As the fear of God increases**, so does the sense of his love—TIS GRACE THAT TAUGHT MY HEART TO FEAR.
- **FEAR is a part of worship.**
- “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied.” **Acts 9:31**
- *Which leads me to #5...*

5. Sin is a deadly serious matter to God

- **Let's be honest.** Many of us find God's actions here offensive.
- Listen: *“If we are offended by the swift judgment of God described here, it reveals our ignorance of God's holiness, our sinfulness, and the seriousness of our sin in relation to his holiness.”*²
 - We shouldn't ask the question, ‘Why did they die?’ We should wonder, ‘Why do we remain alive?’
- *“God is indeed long-suffering, patient, and slow to anger. In fact, he is so slow to anger that when his anger does erupt, we are shocked and offended by it. We forget rather quickly that God's patience is designed to lead us to repentance, to give us time to be redeemed. Instead of taking advantage of this patience by coming humbly to him for forgiveness, we use this grace as opportunity to*

become bolder in our sin. We delude ourselves into thinking that either God doesn't care about it, or that he is powerless to punish us. The supreme folly is that we think we will get away with our revolt.” **R. C. Sproul, The Holiness of God**

- If **Jesus really went through** what he went through to save us (nails; pulled out his beard; if Roman guards spit in his face and lacerated his body with whips), and **we neglect it** or don't take it seriously, or put it off, what's it going to be like to stand before God?
- **Hebrews says**, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”

Are you lying to the Holy Spirit?

- Are you **pretending to be more spiritual than you are**?
- Are you a **hypocrite**?
 - **I know in here you would say**, “Jesus is Lord,” but what does your life the rest of the week say?
 - **Jim Elliot** applied this to the thousands of Christians who sing “I Surrender All” but have given an unyielding “no” to God about giving their lives and sons and daughters to go to the **mission field**.
 - “Christians don't tell lies; they sing them.”
 - **What areas will you not surrender to God?** What you see in Ananias and Sapphira are the two biggest areas: our finances and our reputation. Want to find out how strong your commitment to Christ is, look at those areas:
 - You willing to obey Jesus with your money?
 - You willing to stand up for Jesus, and share Jesus with others, regardless of what they say about you?

ARE YOU TREATING HIM FLIPPANTLY?

² C. J. Mahaney, message on this passage, *Covenant Life Church*

- **Are you a person who feels like** you have accepted Jesus as your Savior, and now you have this heavenly Visa card to sin with impunity?
 - You can see from this story that God is not mocked. And when you take his Spirit and use it as a license for sin, you can see how he feels.
- **ARE YOU SOMEONE who walks through church thinking more about your glory than God's?**
 - This one gets me. Ananias and Sapphira had taken over the church to promote themselves... and I think about how much I do that.
 - **Bride and best man** illustration. God takes this seriously.
- **What's underneath? I know how you look on the outside...**

Conclusion:

Feelings of Despair? *How can we... who among us has a pure heart?*

- 1 John 1:9. Chris Green: Peter called them Satan. Jesus called Peter Satan. But Peter repented.
- The sin is not fatal. It's the refusal to be honest about the sin and seek forgiveness of it is that is fatal.
- **MUSIC** 1 John 1:9.
- The irony: If you own your sin, he'll release you from it; if you hide it, you'll be held accountable.
- **FAV** definitions of the gospel: **KNOWN AND LOVED.** You are more wicked in God's sight than you've ever realized, yet more loved and accepted than you've ever dreamed.

After the service: talk to one of our prayer team. **COUNSELOR:** You're **only as healthy as your secrets.** Open it up and receive God's power into it.

Last thing: Even after this sin, **God's Spirit kept moving—the gospel kept multiplying and people kept getting saved.** Their sin was bad, but God's grace was amazing.

- You see, sometimes we're tempted to think about the early church like it was perfect and so, of course, that's why they had such success." No, they had moments of weakness—they had members that lied, were hypocritical, and inconsistent.
- When we lionize the early church that way, we start to think that what they experienced is out of reach for us because we're not like this. No. God didn't need it to be perfect to bless them; and we can look for the same kind of blessing they experienced.
- And that's good news for us. God can use us, as a church, even though we, and this pastor, are filled with areas of sin. As long as we'll stay close and quick in confession.

PRAYER:

Bullpen:

The gospel is that you are known and loved

- Known in all your ugliness and loved completely.
 -
 - They covered and clung to self-righteousness.
 - Saying Jesus is Lord with our mouths but refusing him control with our lives.
 -
 - That was God's purpose. When fear grew, so did their effectiveness.
-
- **Which is truer of you?** Do you use people to get money and power, or do use money and power to serve people?

When I care more about what you think about me than I do what you think about God.

6. God's grace was grater than the church's failings

- **Even though the early church had this failure, God's Spirit kept moving—the gospel keeps multiplying.**
- We're tempted to think about the early church sometimes like it was perfect and so, of course, that's why they had such success." No, they had moments of weakness—they had members that lied, were hypocritical, and inconsistent.
- When we lionize the early church that way, we start to think that what they experienced is out of reach for us because we're not like this. No. God didn't need it to be perfect to bless them; and we can look for the same kind of blessing they experience.

7. We should fearfully analyze ourselves for areas of hypocrisy

- "It's a fearful thing to walk around in the church giving good impressions when inside you are carrying on a tryst with the world." *Spiritual posturing is an abomination to God!*
-

- God's purpose in this was producing fear in the church, an awareness of how holy and awesome the God was in their midst.
 -
- Even though we are a little removed from it, it should produce that same fear in us.
- **Let me tell you something: Self-righteousness and the praise of others is the greatest substitute for true religion.**
 - "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" (John 5:44)
 - I've been reading *The Letters of John Newton* recently... We are great imitators; mimicking the motions, words, but often from a heart that has not been converted because we've never repented of our idolatry to money and praise.
 - **Satan uses that to trick you**, to keep you from every coming clean with God and being honest with the Holy Spirit.

And the other thing I want you to see is that **even though the early church had this failure, God's Spirit kept moving—the gospel keeps multiplying.**

- We're tempted to think about the early church sometimes like it was perfect and so, of course, that's why they had such success." No, they had moments of weakness—they had members that lied were hypocritical, and inconsistent.
- When we lionize the early church that way, we start to think that what they experienced is out of reach for us because we're not like this. No. God didn't need it to be perfect to bless them; and we can look for the same kind of blessing they experience.

Don't give up on church! God blessed church despite Ananias. What would have happened had they given up? Satan fills the heart of the hypocrite; Satan fills your heart to give up on the church because of it.

- But these things are true of God regardless of whether you see the temporal sign or not.
- Sign that points to how God feels. ~~Sin that is not addressed, confessed and forsaken spreads. God established his thoughts on this at the beginning.~~
- Don't give up on the church!
- What a rough guy these guys are having. I'm sure they were interns. Interns always get jobs like this. "What's your job at the church"? I carry out people who have been struck dead by the wrath of God.
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- , so lying and selfishness and hypocrisy were part of the process. In the words of John Stott, *"the early church was not all romance and righteousness."* We lionize...
- ~~And you're going to see how God dealt with that... and God is going to say some powerful, sobering things to about your own heart in this movement, to ask you to look within, and consider how you treat sin in your own life.~~

~~And then we're going to see how even this setback did not stop the forward progress of the gospel.~~

Treating church like a consumer

- ***"Deliberate deception for self-exaltation."***

The early church began as a movement—a movement of people radically committed to a message; not as an institution providing religious services to people or a spiritual hangout club.

The movement was incredibly contagious.

Most commonly used name for believers in the Bible is *saints*.

Movement

- Question: How many years did the events in the book of Acts span?

- Answer: About 30 years
- Question: So what would it feel like to live in that kind of movement of God?
- Answer: Maybe a lot like the last 10 years at Summit -- some great moments (God brought 11,500 people to the ballpark and 500 were added to their number), some ordinary (over the course of a decade I engaged many of my peers about the gospel and regularly people believed), churches planting and the story moving (Baltimore, Greensboro, Denver, etc), and many hardships that didn't feel anything like the hand of God but were used powerfully