

ACTS
Power Gained and Power Lost
Acts 4:32-5:6

The greatest threat to the church is not external persecution from the unbelieving world but internal sin by disobedient saints. Persecution and martyrdom have never stopped the progress of the church. Criticism and slander from the non-Christian world has never seriously hindered the testimony of the church. The true church has never feared anything that is outward. The great fear is inward in that there would be a lack of spiritual life and enthusiasm because of personal sin. When sin and the world enter the church, there is always a loss of spiritual power because there is a compromising of Biblical convictions to please men.

The preacher, Joseph Parker said, "One cold heart in the house of God is more to be dreaded than all the devils in perdition."

Sin in the life of a Christian or a local church or a Christian organization can grieve and quench the Holy Spirit so as to cause a great loss of spiritual power. This principle is clearly taught to us in the Old Testament in the life of Achan. The story of Ananias and Sapphira is to the Book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the Book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of sin (deceit) interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God. You remember how the children of Israel, under the brilliant leadership of Joshua, were able to take the city of Jericho through the supernatural intervention of God. The Israelites were commanded by God to take no personal loot from Jericho but all the spoils of battle from the city of Jericho were to be put into the common treasury of Israel. One Israelite, Achan, disobeyed this command and kept some of the loot for himself and his sin brought a curse on all of Israel.

"But the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully in regard to the things under the ban, for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, took some of the things under the ban, therefore the anger of the LORD burned against the sons of Israel" (Joshua 7:1).

God's anger was not, only against Achan but against all Israel. Sin in the camp caused the children of Israel to lose spiritual power and God's blessing. The Israelites, then went up to take the city of Ai, a much smaller city, and they suffered defeat. Why? There was an Achan in the camp who was causing all Israel to suffer a loss of spiritual power. Achan confessed but Joshua, under command from God, took Achan and all of his family and his possessions and burned them, bringing physical death to Achan and his family. It is interesting that the word "took" in the Greek Old Testament in Joshua 7:1 is the same word as "kept back" in Acts 5:1. It is a word which actually means "to purloin" or "to steal". There is a direct parallel between Achan and Ananias and Sapphira. Achan, because of rebellion, caused all Israel to lose God's blessing and spiritual power and Ananias and Sapphira threatened to cause the local church in Jerusalem to lose its power because of rebellion to God. The application is obvious: one Christian in rebellion to God can cause a whole local church to lose God's blessing and spiritual power.

In Acts 4 and 5, there is a logical progression of thought: (1) the church in fellowship, experiencing great power; (2) then there is the entrance of sin in Ananias and Sapphira; (3) there, then, is a temporary removal of power; (4) God then brings divine discipline upon those in sin, and (5) the church once again is in fellowship and experiencing great power and blessing.

POWER GAINED Acts 4:32-37

United Purpose (4:32): "And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; -and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them." -- The church at Jerusalem was a dynamic church, experiencing great spiritual blessing and power. This was the ideal church and no local church since that time has ever experienced the same kind of power because there has been a progressive lack of purity and separation from that time to this, although there have been a few periodic bright spots

in the last 1977 years.

The church at Jerusalem had all things in common. The word “common” in the Greek is koinonia which means “community,” “commonness,” “communication,” “partakers,” “partners,” and “fellowship”. These early Christians were of one heart and soul. They were not talking about the theoretical possibility of sharing the life of Christ but they were actually experiencing the life of Christ together at the deepest spiritual level. They did not give mere intellectual assent to unity and oneness of spirit but they experienced it and lived it. This sharing of the life of Christ as the body of Christ gave them new attitudes so that they saw everything they possessed as belonging to God and to another brother and sister in Christ if there was a genuine need.

Most churches today, even evangelical churches, have lost the spirit of koinonia. It is possible to come to church, sit together in the pews, be united in physical presence with other Christians, to sing the same hymns, to listen to the same message, to relate to God individually but to have no sense of body life, no sense of belonging to one another. It is possible to come to church week after week, year after year and never know the people with whom we are worshipping. Why? There is no heart, no soul in our unity. The early church knew they belonged to God and they also knew they belonged to one another, and this is what is lacking in most churches today.

United Witness (4:33): "And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all." -- The church in Jerusalem was having a tremendous witness for Christ in the community and people were turning to Christ right and left. God was pouring out his sovereign grace upon the church and adding sinners to the body of Christ. God was moving in power in their midst. A local church practicing real body life will be a witnessing church to the world.

United Provision (4:34,35): "For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of lands or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need." -- One of the outward evidences of the moving of the Holy Spirit among these early Christians was that they shared their wealth so as to meet the needs of their brethren in Christ. We are not told that these Christians sold everything. In some cases, this might have happened, but more than likely they sold a portion of their possessions, and the total sum would make up the common treasury to meet the needs of the saints in Jerusalem. The money was brought to the Apostles and they had the undisputed and absolute control over how the money would be distributed. One Christian did not give to another Christian directly but indirectly through the common fund, and only the Apostles had the wisdom as to how the money should be distributed.

This was not Christian communism. This giving was strictly voluntary without any compulsion by man. Furthermore the distribution was not done equally for some Christians received more aid because they had a greater need. The Bible teaches the right of private property, and no where does it teach that a person must abolish all his wealth to be a Christian. The Bible does teach, however, the wise stewardship of our wealth in the furtherance of the gospel. God expects His people to give liberally as He has prospered them, and promises them more prosperity if they will give liberally in obedience to His command.

The local church must always be ready to help a fellow Christian with a genuine financial need. If the church does not do this, it is a clear evidence that the life of Christ is not fully manifested in its midst, "But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (I Jn. 3:17).

These early Christians had their values straight. Material possessions were secondary to them and the dominating force was the life of Christ flowing through them to others. They were unselfish when there was a genuine need. They had the attitude that all that they had was from God and nothing was exclusively theirs. Therefore, they did not hold on to earthly possessions but shared them for God and with others.

Unique Person (4:36,37): “And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means, Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.” -- Dr. Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, picks out one individual who probably more than anyone else displayed an unselfish spirit in sharing his wealth with other Christians in need.

This man was Joseph, but he was no “common Joe“. He was "Barnabas" by nickname who had a tremendous spiritual gift of exhortation. We read of Barnabas in other portions of Acts and he is always encouraging, or consoling or stirring up the saints. God called Barnabas, a wealthy man, into full-time Christian service and he became one of the great evangelists and teachers of the early church. Barnabas, perhaps feeling the call to the ministry and certainly knowing his responsibility to meet the needs of his fellow believers, sold whatever property he had and gave it to the common treasury. He gave everything because he wanted to, not because he had to, and this was a great act of faith, so great that it was recorded by the Holy Spirit in the pages of scripture. Barnabas in doing this act was storing up treasure in heaven and not on earth. He was making a spiritual investment which would pay great eternal dividends. Barnabas drew dividends as long as he lived from this act, and also after he died because his name is found in the pages of the Bible.

Barnabas, knowing his call to the ministry, sold everything and trusted God through Christians to meet his needs. The principle here is that men in the ministry ought not to possess all kinds of wealth (even though this is all right for the average Christian). A preacher ought not to be entangled in the affairs of this world too deeply. He ought not to be in business as a preacher, where business becomes this man's main thrust and preaching becomes a hobby. No man should enter the ministry unless he is sure that he has been called of God and unless he is willing to surrender all that he has to God. A preacher of the gospel, of all people, should be dependent upon God to meet his needs through the people to whom he ministers and his needs should be met adequately so he can minister effectively.

Most people today look at real estate and call it "real-estate", but it is not real in that it is not permanent. The only real estate a man can have is the estate he has in heaven. All the property a person owns someday will not be his. Death will wipe away all of his ownership and possessions. The only real estate that is real-estate is to have a plot in heaven and that comes by receiving Christ as Savior and Lord, which assures a man or woman of eternity with Christ.

POWER LOST Acts 5:1-6

Description (5:1): “But a certain man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property.” -- The "but" connects this incident up with what preceded. Barnabas, although he did not want it, undoubtedly received a lot of praise from his fellow Christians. They probably said, “That Barney is a terrific Christian. He really sacrificed everything for Christ!” This praise on Barnabas probably affected Ananias and he wanted to get in on a piece of the action. The name Ananias means “to whom the Lord has been gracious.” The Lord had been gracious to Ananias but Ananias wanted the praise of men more than he wanted the praise of God. His wife's name was Sapphira which means “Beautiful.“ Barnabas probably went home one night all excited about the church giving and the praise given to Barnabas and he said, "Look, Beautiful, I think we ought to do something like Barnabas." So they sold a piece of land and received a handsome price for it. I think, at this point, they may have promised to give all of this money to the common treasury as did Barnabas and the others. But as they looked at that big pile of silver, they said, "That is a little too much money to give, don't you think? After all, we must think about the future and how about our retirement? So why don't we just hold back 20% for ourselves and give the rest to God and the common treasury. After all, who will ever know?" They were caught up in the excitement of giving and probably (although we are not told so specifically), promised to give the total amount to God. Their zeal for giving was blunted when a testing came from Satan. They were unwilling to carry through with their own commitment to God.

How often have we as Christians said we were going to do something for the Lord and then we did it halfway or not at all? Think of the Christians who have promised God a life of purity and separation and then backed out only to live a carnal kind of existence. Think of the multitudes of professing Christians who have sung, “I'll go where you want me to go and do what you want me to do” in the church and then gone out into the world to do what they wanted to do and go where they wanted to go. They are guilty, of course, of the same sin of hypocrisy as was Ananias and Sapphira.

Deception (5:2): "And kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet." -- Ananias had a right to give what he pleased to the common fund; he was really under no obligation to give anything if he did not want to, but instead of giving everything to the Lord as he had promised, he held back a portion of it for himself. He and Sapphira had broken their pledge to God. He was robbing God of what he originally promised to give. Notice carefully this was not a sin committed on the spur of the

moment because Ananias and Sapphira had talked it over before they committed this act of fraud.

Ananias came to lay the money before the Apostles and stood back to receive the plaudits of men and he probably received them. The members of the church at Jerusalem thought that amount of money was a great sacrifice for Ananias and Sapphira, for after all, they were church members who loved Christ. Outwardly they gave the appearance of being very spiritual but inwardly they were filled with the bones of dead men. Their sin was not a failure to contribute but it was the sin of pretending they had given all when they had not. Their sin was the sin of hypocrisy. They created an impression that what they had given was all but in reality it was only part. God hates hypocrisy in every form in the life of the individual Christian and the life of the local church corporately. Ananias and Sapphira were Christians but they were phonies and only God knew of their hypocrisy and He alone would judge it.

From the very beginning there have been hypocrites in the church. Admittedly, there are many more today than there were in the first century. God is the one who judges and disciplines all of a professing Christian's hypocritical actions because He knows the motives of the human heart. The local church is not a society of perfect people. The goal of every local church should be to keep as much hypocrisy out of the church as possible. However, it is an impossible task to keep all hypocrisy out of the church. While we cannot keep it all out, God will judge all hypocrites and no one ever gets away with playing the game of church if he or she is a true Christian.

Sapphira should have challenged Ananias about his hypocrisy as a good wife, but instead of being a helpmate, she became a cell mate in this act of sin.

Detection (5:3,4): "But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God.' -- Ananias who was not filled with the Holy Spirit opened himself up to a direct attack from Satan who filled his heart to lie, for Satan is the father of lies. Ananias could have done whatever he wanted with the money, but he was judged for lying to the Holy Spirit about the whole matter.

We are not told where Peter received this information about Ananias lying but perhaps he had the gift of discernment or God told him directly. Whatever, Peter rebuked Ananias and he was probably the most surprised person of all when Ananias was struck by God. However, notice carefully that God used Peter, an Apostle, as an instrument to rebuke His child. Today God uses elders to rebuke His children when they go astray from the Faith.

Notice also that Peter did not approach Ananias and say, "Ananias, I know you were weak and we realize that you have always had a problem with money and wanting the praise of men. Ananias, your sin is not too serious and we are ready to forgive you as soon as you say, 'I'm sorry.' After all, you only committed a human mistake and fell victim to the flesh. A little lie really isn't that bad a sin." No, Peter said, "You lied to God!"

Remember, Ananias was on the church roll, gave evidence of being a converted man, listened to the Word with intensity, partook of the Lord's Table and fellowshiped with the saints, yet he lied to God. Every Christian has the potential in him or her to do this very same thing! How many times have we sung, "My Jesus I love you; I know Thou art mine; For Thee all the follies of sin I resign" and turned right around and done just the opposite? Only the grace of God keeps God from striking down many true believers for their hypocrisy. God hates a sham, a phony, a pretender, a hypocrite!

Destruction (5:5): "And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came upon all who heard of it." -- God, in His holiness, could not stand the hypocrisy of Ananias. His sin was affecting the purity and the power of the church in Jerusalem, so, in His sovereignty He struck Ananias dead. His death was sudden, severe and supernatural. God killed Ananias for his inward rebellion to the clear revelation of God. Ananias was a Christian but God would not tolerate his sins of lying to God and man, hypocrisy and selfishness. God killed him and took him home to heaven because his testimony was finished here on earth. He went to heaven but with little or no reward.

Ananias experienced “the sin unto death” for a Christian who rebels against clear light and revelation.

“If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin and there is a sin not leading to death” (I Jn. 5:16,17).

What brings the sin unto death? When a Christian displays wanton, presumptuous rebellion in the face of clear knowledge that something is wrong. It is persistence in a determined course of action when a believer knows that God has forbidden it.

Someone has said, "If it were not for God's grace, we would have to have a morgue in our churches today because of the sin of so many professing Christians. Why don't thousands drop dead in their tracks today? There are a few possible answers. First, the early church was a pure church and the Holy Spirit was working more mightily than He now is because the church as a whole today has become corrupt. Second, many people who we think are carnal or nominal Christians may not be Christians at all, and they are in line for eternal death not just physical death, because they have never bowed their wills to a sovereign Christ. Third, God is longsuffering with His children and puts up with a lot before He brings ultimate discipline of physical death. Fourth, there may be many cases of sin unto death upon believers but we do not always recognize it as such. Fifth, physical death as discipline is the result of certain knowable, rebellious acts of sin against a clear revelation from God rather than the result of a state of sin.

Degradation (5:6): "And the young men arose and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him." -- God killed Ananias because of his sin. There is no mention of a funeral or Peter saying a few last remarks about this man who was a believer, even though he was rebellious. Absolutely nothing positive is said about Ananias. His demise leaves us with an empty feeling, a sense of shame and nothingness. His life was cut short and rendered useless to God. His testimony for Christ was so badly tarnished that God took his life in order to maintain the purity and power of the church at Jerusalem.

One lesson that Ananias and Sapphira teach us is that blessing and power come from purity. Campbell Morgan said, "The church pure is the church powerful." This is why a local church must always try to maintain a high level of spirituality among its members, for there must be consecration and separation unto God or there is no supernatural power. One Achan in the camp, one Ananias in the assembly, one Sapphira in the church can cause the whole local church to lose its power for God. Are you an Achan? Are you an Ananias? Are you a Sapphira?

Another lesson from this section is that the church, corporately and individually, cannot escape the disciplinary judgment of God. Ananias and Sapphira received the most severe judgment of God - physical death. However, God disciplines His children in many less severe ways in order to bring them to commitment to holiness of life. Are you under discipline today because of sin or sins you are committing as a Christian?

Still another lesson we can learn from the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira is that the greatest danger to the church is not external persecution from the unsaved world, but internal corruption of the saints because of sin. Christ told the church at Ephesus that to grow cold to Christ and lose their first love for Him is devastating to spiritual life.

“But I have this against you, that you have lost your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place unless you repent” (Rev. 2:4,5).

For losing their first love to Christ, the Lord said He would remove their lampstand, which speaks of a loss of testimony to the world. Beloved, if our hearts should grow cold, if we should become indifferent, if the Word of God should not really mean much to us, beware, for we are in grave danger and stand in line for God's loving discipline.

The sin unto death is not a myth or a legend or a fundamentalist scare tactic. It is a fact and can and does happen today. When we think about “the sin unto death“, it ought to put real fear into our hearts as it did to the early church, for we read in Acts 5: 5, “And great fear came upon all who heard of it.”

I know the “sin unto death” is real because I have had first hand experience with three Christians God has killed. All three were personal friends and all three were at one time committed to the full-time ministry.

Norman was a fellow seminary student who left seminary after his second year. He began fooling around with the women and lived a life of sexual debauchery. He became a successful lawyer, lived a very materialistic life and married an unsaved woman. I warned Norman on more than one occasion that God may kill him if he did not repent. He laughed and said that the sin unto death would never happen to him. He loved airplanes and was a very proficient stunt pilot. One day he did a loop in the plane and it crashed to the ground. Norman's rebellion lasted over a period of about five years but God killed him, because God always has the last word.

Philip was a Presbyterian minister and a good friend. While in the pastorate he began to drink socially and this developed into heavy drinking in time. He could hold liquor better than anyone I have ever known but he was drinking a fifth a day. I warned Philip that God may kill him. He laughed at me and called me a narrow minded legalist for my views on drinking. One day he got drunk, crawled up in the attic of the church, wrote a suicide note and shot himself to death. They found his body ten days later. God killed Philip for his rebellion to the clear teaching of the Bible about drunkenness.

Bob was a Campus Crusade for Christ worker who left the staff for personal reasons. He began to drink and beat his wife. He came to me for counsel and I told him to repent of his sin, to stop drinking and beating his wife and to build his life around Christ again. I warned him that God may kill him if he did not do so. He thought I was too hard a counselor and so rejected me and my counsel. About five months later, I heard that he died. He had fallen asleep drunk in a chair with a cigarette in his mouth. He burned to death. God killed Bob for his rebellion.

CONCLUSION

This section in Acts tells us that God often deals very seriously with true Christians in order that they might walk a godly life. He may even kill some and take them home to heaven because they have lost their testimony before men on earth. Yet, this is a loving judgment of God upon His own people who have received Christ as personal Lord and Savior. But what about the unbeliever, the non-Christian, the unsaved man, the one who has never received Christ as Lord and Savior?

The Apostle Peter answers this question very clearly in his first epistle.

“For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (I Pet. 4:17).

Ananias, a believer, lost his earthly life, but an unbeliever shall lose eternal life. God’s judgment is much greater upon the unsaved. The non-Christian's judgment will be the eternal damnation of his soul.

Are you a non-Christian? Are you a rejecter of Christ? I must warn you of your judgment in eternity if you persist in your rebellion to the Lord Jesus. Judgment is certain unless you repent. You should not draw another breath without saying, “Thank you, Lord Jesus, for dying for me; I receive you into my life as Lord and want you to rule me and make me the person You want me to be.” Do not put off this decision, “For if judgment must begin with the household of God, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”