

The Church Is Purged

Lesson Scope: Acts 4:32-5:16

Lesson Focus

The church was growing rapidly. On the day of Pentecost, three thousand souls were baptized (Acts 2:41). Soon after, following the healing of the lame man, five thousand men believed (Acts 4:4). Unrecorded numbers were added daily (Acts 2:47), and the church soon became a great multitude.

Satan opposed this divinely energized growth. First he worked through the persecution instigated by the powerful Sadducees (Acts 4:1). The threat of persecution is often viewed as a means of purifying the church. But in this lesson, as the church overcame persecution by Holy Ghost power, Satan moved to trouble the church from within by planting covetousness and hypocrisy in Ananias's and Sapphires' hearts.

This lesson is sobering. It is not so much about dealing with outward sin as about dealing with sin hidden in the heart. Yet we cannot see the heart except by outward actions. This lesson is, first of all, a call to search our own hearts diligently. Second, it is a call to address wrong actions as a heart condition rather than simply outward mistakes.

Sin destroys the testimony of the church. Sin destroys the pure and spotless character Christ desires in His bride.

God, who knows all hearts, hates sin and moves to expose it in the church. Sin must be removed from the church so that she can continue to be the pure bride of Christ.

Lesson Aim: To see principles for dealing with sin in the church.

Theme Verses: 1 Corinthians 5:6-7. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.

Lesson Text:

The Church Unified

Acts 4:32-37 ³² And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any *of them* that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. ³³ And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, ³⁵ And laid *them* down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. ³⁶ And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, *and* of the country of Cyprus, ³⁷ Having land, sold *it*, and brought the money, and laid *it* at the apostles' feet.

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Acts 5:1-11 ¹ But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, ² And kept back *part* of the price, his wife also being privy *to it*, and brought a certain part, and laid *it* at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back *part* of the price of the land? ⁴ Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. ⁵ And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. ⁶ And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried *him* out, and buried *him*. ⁷ And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. ⁸ And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. ⁹ Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband *are* at the door, and shall carry thee out. ¹⁰ Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying *her* forth, buried *her* by her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.

The Church Multiplied

Acts 5:12-16 ¹² And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. ¹³ And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them. ¹⁴ And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.) ¹⁵ Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid *them* on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them. ¹⁶ There came also a multitude *out* of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them which were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed every one.

Questions for Study

The Church Unified

1. How did spiritual unity and power prepare the early church to deal with sin?
2. Why must we remain on guard against sin, even in a spiritually vibrant group?

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3. Why did God deal so severely with Ananias and Sapphira?
4. From this passage, what lessons should we learn about dealing with sin in the church?
5. Explain the source and course of sin.
6. Why is all sin ultimately against God?

The Church Multiplied

7. Explain the contrasting responses in Acts 5:13-14.
8. What will be the results in a church that is kept holy?

Analyzing the Passage

At key points in God's work among His people, He has displayed His anger against sin. He smote Miriam with leprosy for speaking against Moses (Numbers 12). Achan's hidden sin at Jericho resulted in Israel's defeat at Ai (Joshua 7). The Lord exposed David's secret sin by sending Nathan the prophet with the words, "Thou art the man" (2 Samuel 12:7).

Does God judge sin less severely in the New Testament Era? His punishment on Ananias and Sapphira answers a resounding no. Sin in a church brings spiritual death and the removal of the candlestick of that church (Revelation 2:5).

But (Acts 5:1) marks a change from the total unselfishness and sacrifice of Barnabas and others (Acts 4:32-37) to the self-love and dishonest scheming of Ananias and Sapphira.

Privy (Acts 5:2) means that Sapphira was fully aware of the plan. They "agreed together" (Acts 5:9); this act was premeditated and planned with full knowledge of them both.

Peter's words in Acts 5:4 emphasize the New Testament principle that giving is a voluntary matter (see 2 Corinthians 8).

God's judgment on this occasion instilled a fear that separated believers from the insincere (Acts 5:13-14).

Principles and Applications

The Church Unified

I. Only a spiritually unified body can deal effectively with sin (Acts 4:32). Disunity hinders the Spirit. Unity and commitment foster an atmosphere in which the Spirit can work. In a holy church, consciences are activated to confess sin. When carnal persons are well accepted in a church brotherhood, the definition of sin becomes blurred. Pride may then be excused as good taste or covetousness as good stewardship.

2. Spiritual power is essential for dealing with sin in the church (Acts 4:33). Jesus said, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). Those who are called to discipline the sinner will have their own integrity tested. Their real or imagined inconsistencies will be sought out and exploited in an effort to discount their authority. Only Scriptural truth confirmed by a holy life will be able to silence the gainsayers (Titus 1:9).

3. Temptation to sin can arise amid spiritual prosperity (Acts 4:32-37).

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Group vitality does not prevent individual failure. Each person must watch and pray for his own spiritual safety, even while being zealous for the Lord's cause. "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

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4. Sinners in the church try to appear righteous (Acts 5:1-2). They delight in appearing to excel in some sacrifice or the exercise of some gift. Our relationships and service in the church can so easily become flavored by pride and selfish motives. We might pretend to be giving sacrificially when we really have not sacrificed at all. Our good deeds might be motivated by

a secret desire for honor. Our expression of concern about a brother's soul may actually be an effort to make self appear better. Satan's deceptive tactics are very subtle and very real.

5. All sin is against God (Acts 5:3-4). Sin is defined as an offense against God's law. Man's feelings about his wrongdoing are not the measure of its sinfulness. An offense against our brother, for example, is a sin against the second commandment of our holy, righteous, all-powerful God—"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

6. Godly men understand and expose the nature of sin (Acts 5:3-4). They do so to prevent others from falling into the snares of sin. They help others to fear lest Satan enter their lives as well. They warn others so that the seeds of sin do not germinate in their hearts.

7. Godly men confront the sinner (Acts 5:3-4). Church leaders need to address all carnality, casualness, and worldliness as rebellion against God. Nothing good can be truthfully said about sin.

Parents, you need to keep order in your home. If the car or the girlfriend that your son wants is wrong, you will need to tell him so and require obedience. Do not defend your child.

Teachers, if your students mock a conscientious classmate, you will need to deal with the matter promptly and thoroughly.

8. God, who knows the hearts of all men, reveals and judges sin (Acts 5:3-5). "Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops" (Luke 12:1-3).

9. Those who share in the sin must also share in the judgment upon it (Acts 5:5-10). To know of hidden sin and not reveal it is to be guilty by association. "Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure" (1 Timothy 5:22).

10. Properly dealing with sin instills godly fear (Acts 5:11). The fear of God is a powerful deterrent against sin. It develops by observing divine judgment in action or by considering God's Word on the matter. "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear" (1 Timothy 5:20).

The Church Multiplied

11. The church grows when sin is removed (Acts 5:12-16). It grows by attracting those who long for the deep things of God. It is the brotherhood of those who are born of God; they desire to do the work of the Father. It is

the fellowship and fulfillment of believers who by faith are come (present tense) to Mount Zion. The true church is not a growing collection of persons on some vague "spiritual journey."

12. In a pure church, the power of God is present to heal (Acts 5:15-16). See Luke 5:17. "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray.... Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him" (James 5:13-16). Paul prescribed a spiritual purging as a healing cure for the Corinthians' spiritual lethargy (1 Corinthians 11:30-32).

Important Teachings

1. Only a spiritually unified body can deal effectively with sin (Acts 4:32).
2. Spiritual power is essential for dealing with sin in the church (Acts 4:33).
3. Temptation to sin can arise amid spiritual prosperity (Acts 4:32-37).
4. Sinners in the church try to appear righteous (Acts 5:1-2).
5. All sin is against God (Acts 5:3-4).
6. Godly men understand and expose the nature of sin (Acts 5:3-4).
7. Godly men confront the sinner (Acts 5:3-4).
8. God, who knows the hearts of all men, reveals and judges sin (Acts 5:3-5).
9. Those who share in the sin must also share in the judgment upon it (Acts 5:5-10).
10. Properly dealing with sin instills godly fear (Acts 5:11).
11. The church grows when sin is removed (Acts 5:12-16).
12. In a pure church, the power of God is present to heal (Acts 5:15-16).
13. Church membership is only for sincere believers (Acts 5:13-14).

Answers to Questions

1. How did spiritual unity and power prepare the early church to deal with sin?

Disunity hinders the Spirit. The work of the Spirit includes reproof of the world of sin (John 16:8). The church cannot deal with sin by relying on human strength. Jesus said, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). In a divided church, sin is not clearly defined. The Corinthian church (a divided church) had become a haven for sinners (see 1 Corinthians 1-6).

Only a church that does "all things without murmurings and disputings" can "[hold] forth the word of life" (see Philippians 2:14-16).

2. Why must we remain on guard against sin, even in a spiritually vibrant group?

As long as we are in the flesh, we face the possibility of temptation. No one is exempt. Jesus Himself needed to "watch and pray" (Matthew 26:36-44). He commanded us to do likewise. The flesh is weak. Those who are making inroads in Satan's kingdom become special targets of his attacks.

3. Why did God deal so severely with Ananias and Sapphira?

This sin was premeditated and planned. Peter called it lying to the Holy Ghost. What happened to Ananias and Sapphira warned others that sin in the church will not escape judgment.

4. From this passage, what lessons should we learn about dealing with sin in the church?

Sin and the sinner must be confronted. We must not evade the issue or call sin by better-sounding names. Outright disobedience and secret violations of home, school, or church authority may not be discounted as "weakness" or a "need to grow." Sin and the process of sin must be clearly explained so that the young or the weak may be warned. The more promptly we deal with sin, the less damage will be done.

5. Explain the source and course of sin.

Satan appeals to the lusts of man's fallen nature, enticing him to evil. The wrong suggested to our mind becomes sin when our mind assents to it and is united with it. At that point, sin is conceived (James 1:14, 15). Sin grows in the heart and issues into unholy words and actions.

6. Why is all sin ultimately against God?

Sin affects men and may violate the laws of men. God, however, is the source of all moral absolutes. Sin is determined by the standard of God's own holiness.

7. Explain the contrasting responses in Acts 5:13-14.

The insincere kept their distance lest their true condition would be exposed. Multitudes were favorably impressed. Those who committed themselves to the church in full faith and obedience found a haven of rest.

8. What will be the results in a church that is kept holy?

God will bless the practice of anointing with oil. The Gospel will accomplish its purpose as Jesus taught in Luke 4:17-19: "And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is

upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord."

Summarizing the Lesson

The apostle Paul placed high priority on the purity of the church. "For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2). Do we share that vision? Are we carefully guarding our own lives and those of our brethren?

Research Guide

1. Study God's previous dealing with sin among His people: Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-7); Miriam (Numbers 12); Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16); Achan (Joshua 7); David (2 Samuel 12); and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28:10-17).
2. Study what 1 Corinthians teaches about the issue and effect of sin in the church.
3. Study the messages to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3.