This morning we will tackle a difficult and often confusing story as we continue our journey through Acts. Please stand and let’s read Acts 4:34-5:11.

Before I begin, let us acknowledge the excellent work that Jeff Sparks presented last week on Acts 4:32-37. Jeff was faithful to the Holy Spirit’s leadership in his teaching and his proclamation of the gospel, and I am very grateful and encouraged. This morning I will pick up where he left off, so if you were away last Sunday, make sure to check out Jeff’s message on our website.

Now as we return to Acts 4, remember that Luke pauses the narrative to present a compelling, almost “over the top” picture of the early church in regards to their unity and their generosity. Jeff actually called it “the impossible church.” It is a picture of complete unity, mind-blowing generosity, and supernatural community.

We’re going to look at the picture again for a minute before moving on, but before we do, let me say with conviction that Luke most certainly employs the literary device of hyperbole here in these verses, and that is totally acceptable within the biblical text. Now, in case you are unfamiliar with the term “hyperbole,” let me briefly define it for you. Hyperbole is a natural exaggeration for the purpose of emphasis. Hyperbole is NOT lying or misleading, it is intentional, obvious exaggeration and generalization to make a point. For example: if I’m trying to emphasize how pathetic I am at golf, I may say something like, “I was the worse putter on the entire planet during the Colonial Men’s Golf Tournament a few weeks ago.” Now…that’s not a scientific statement, and if you press me on it, I would readily admit that there were likely worse putters on the planet that weekend…but that’s not the point of my statement. The point was that I really stink at golf, which is totally true, and my use of hyperbole was meant to emphasize the point. We all use hyperbole to tell the truth, but by using hyperbole, we willingly and brazenly exaggerate in order to make our point.

I think we can safely conclude that Luke is unapologetically using hyperbole when he writes, “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 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 and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

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Did you hear the hyperbole? There’s lots of it there, but the point is clear: the early church in Jerusalem was supernaturally, undeniably unified, generous, and committed to sacrificial care for the poor. Now I know some of you are upset that I’m calling this text hyperbole…that I’m telling you that Luke is using exaggeration to make a point, but read a bit further and you’ll see how I came to that conclusion. Look at the text that we read just moments ago. After Luke employs hyperbole to make a point in vss. 32-35, he then provides a positive example to support his statement and a negative example to balance his claim and in so doing reveals his prior use of hyperbole.

In vs. 36 Luke tells about Joseph, who is later called “Barnabas the Encourager,” who sells his property in Cyprus and lays the proceeds of the sale at the feet of the apostles. Barnabas serves as a practical, actual example of a powerful tendency that was taking place among the early church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Others, like Barnabas, were liquidating their assets to provide for the Christian community that was increasingly persecuted, ostracized, and likely suffering from a famine that took place in the years following the resurrection of Christ. Luke’s statement, although exaggerated by saying “the full number” and “no one” and “everything” and not even “a needy person among them” for emphasis, makes clear that this supernatural, mind-blowing reality of the early church in Jerusalem stuck out…it was not ordinary…it was extraordinary! The Christians were incredibly unified and generous, and people were behaving in a way that could only be explained by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

However, clearly not EVERYONE was on board and not EVERYONE was behaving out of pure motives. There were glaring and painful exceptions within the early church, and Luke is honest enough to tell one of those stories as well, thus making plain to the reader that his glowing description of the early church, though true, was also emphasized with hyperbole.

Now, we’re going to look at the painful exception story this morning, but again, for the skeptic out there, take note: If you’re going to write a myth or legend…if you’re penning a fairytale as our cultural commentators so often label the New Testament, you simply don’t include the story of Ananias and Sapphira. This story is self-critiquing, awkward, disturbing, and downright intimidating. It’s a story similar to Peter’s denial of Christ, or the apostles feuding over who is the greatest. If you’re fabricating a new religion for your own self-promotion, profit, or benefit…you just don’t include stories like these. The only reason you include this story is if you are reporting what actually happened, warts and all.

So here’s the sad but true account of a husband and wife within the early church, Ananias and Sapphira, who noted the awe and honor attributed to Barnabas for his generous donation to the community. So, they decide that they, too, would enjoy such honor and high esteem. Thus, they decide to sell a piece of property that they own and make a contribution to the church. However, they contrive a plan to mislead the church. They will make their donation, they will claim that
their donation is the full value of the property that they sold, but they will secretly keep a portion of the proceeds for themselves.

Now, before you jump to any conclusions, let’s be clear about something. There is nothing in the text that leads us to believe that everyone who owned property was required to sell off their property and give the proceeds to the church. That was not an expectation of the Apostles, it was not a requirement for joining the church, and we should not think that EVERYONE was called or instructed or pressured to liquidate all of their assets. That would be a very inaccurate reading of this text. Luke simply reports that A LOT of believers in Jerusalem were doing so at that time, and it’s clear that, in most instances, their generosity was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the means by which the poor were being cared for. We should assume that the act was purely voluntary, that it was greatly appreciated, but it was in no way EXPECTED or REQUIRED by the leaders of the church.

Let’s look again at the text, and you’ll see the point I’m making and why that is important. In 5:1 we pick up the story: “But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, so said a piece of property, and with his wife’s knowledge, he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet. But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? 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 men, but to God.”

So what was the sin of Ananias? Was it giving only a portion of the proceeds to the church? No…not at all. In fact, Peter makes it clear that it would have been completely acceptable for Ananias to keep the property, or to sell the property and keep all of the proceeds for himself, or to even to give some of the proceeds and keep the rest for himself. The sin was not about the sale of land or the amount that he gave to the church…the sin was lying to the apostles, and so also lying to the Holy Spirit. And what was the lie?

1) Practically speaking, the lie was that they had sold the property and now he was presenting the full proceeds to the church, when in fact, he was presenting only a portion of the proceeds.

2) More insidious than the deception regarding the proceeds and the gift to the church was the couple’s intention to publicly portray a level of virtue and generosity to the church that was completely disingenuous. They strategically planned a façade of righteousness at the very same time that they were privately and intentionally being deceptive.

A modern example of this behavior would be a pastor chastising the church for immorality while secretly sleeping with the church organist. It would be the Christian CEO who makes a

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large donation to the church capital campaign while at the same time cheating on his income taxes and treating his employees like dirt. It’s telling people you tithe when you don’t; it’s telling you will pray and you won’t; it’s feigning concern for the poor when you really don’t give a rip. Church…can we find ourselves in the text this morning? Can anyone relate with what Ananias is trying to pull off in this story? Has anyone here ever presented themselves as more generous, more caring, more devoted than they actually are…has anyone contrived to present yourself as something that you’re not?

Yes…this story is all too familiar, and many of us…many of us are guilty of this most egregious sin.

So does God care that we lie about our devotion in the church? Does God care if we fib just a bit to make ourselves look a bit more generous, a bit more holy than we actually are? Apparently, based upon our text…God cares a lot. Things do not end well for this Christian couple.

In vs. 5 we read, “When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last.” That’s a nice way to say, “God took him out.” Make no mistake: Ananias does not die from natural causes. We know this because three hours later Sapphira shows up, tells the same lie they had agreed upon, and she too drops dead. That’s not natural causes…that’s supernatural causes. God renders swift and immediate judgment upon a couple within the church, and they’re pushing up daisies by the end of the day.

Anybody feeling a bit awkward at the moment? Anyone ever hear Joel Osteen preach on this text? No? Shocker.

Listen, this is not the God we like to think about. This is not “prosperity Gospel” material. We want a God who is our buddy and doesn’t get upset when we tell our lies and craft our deceptions. We want to believe that once we’re good Christian people, God won’t care much if we play loose with our giving and our living, just as long as we’re not as bad or as violent or as offensive as “those” people who are not Christians. Church: take note. God cares. God cares how we represent Him to the world. God cares when we lie to the Holy Spirit and feign our devotion to Him.

Why does God strike this couple down? Surely there have been worse sins…not even Judas was struck down on the spot, and he betrayed Jesus. So why this powerful, disturbing, judgment and execution? We can’t say for sure, but it would appear to me that God was making a clear statement to the early church before things got too far out of hand, and that statement was heard loud and clear. Look at the text again with me. In vs. 5 we read, “And great fear came upon all who heard of it,” and again in vs. 11, “And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.”

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Listen: here’s the point. As believers, we need to care a whole lot more about what God thinks of us than what other people think of us. We need to fear God and nothing else. That means we need to be honest with God, and honest with each other. God can handle our doubts, our mess, and even our honest mistakes. But God has no tolerance for us lying to Him, and thus deceiving the world in His name. Why? You know why. Hypocrites in the church derail God’s soul-saving mission. Hypocrisy in the church misrepresents the hope of the Gospel, and lost souls are so hurt and disillusioned that they run away from the Lord at the very moment they should be running into His arms.

This story helps us to understand what Jesus meant in Luke 8:17 when he said that “all that is hidden will be revealed.” There is no hiding from God…our deception will be revealed, and to the degree that we intentionally deceived people under the guise of the church, we will be accountable.

Now, theologically, if Ananias and Sapphira were Christians, did their lie to God and the church condemn them to hell? Did they lose their salvation? No. If lying to God and others as believers in an attempt to make ourselves look more devout than we are disqualifies us from heaven, ain’t none of us gonna make it! However, we should not take lightly how swiftly and severely God removes this couple from infecting the Body of Christ with their hypocrisy. Listen: if you are a Christian leader, or even if you’re not, do not mock God with your disingenuous spirituality. That doesn’t end well, and church history is full of those sad stories. A lifetime of hard work and faithful service can be undone very quickly when church leaders allow Satan to fill them with lies that lead to intentional deception. If you know that God is speaking to you this morning about your situation as a Christian leader…and you know that you have been lying, seek a counselor or a pastor or a trusted friend and come clean today…as in today.

One of my favorite Christian thinkers, Dr. Kent Hughes, says that our response to this story should be that of the early church…it should strike a healthy fear into our hearts to the degree that we will 1) examine ourselves; 2) repent; and 3) covenant that we will refrain from lying and that we will repent each and every time that we fail in this area.

First, let us examine ourselves. Let’s listen carefully to the words that come out of our mouths…let’s take stock of our “image management” program, and let’s get a clear picture of just how often and how pathetically we attempt to present ourselves as more devoted, more spiritual, more generous, and more compassionate than we actually are. Let me give you a few examples: 1) do you tell people you will pray for them knowing full well that you won’t? 2) do you pretend to have concern for people you detest? 3) do you lie about how much you give to the Lord out of your income? 4) do you pretend to believe the claims of Christianity so as not to

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upset your family? 5) do you say that you’ve read books that you haven’t read so you can look smarter than you actually are? 6) do you feign humility when you are actually quite arrogant? 7) Do you pretend to be an all together parent when in reality you scream at your kids every day?

Listen: I’m not suggesting you should be living a sinless life if you are a believer. On the contrary, I know you are not living a sinless life as a believer, and so does God and everyone else for that matter! My question is: are you intentionally trying to sell the image to the world that you are more devoted than you actually are? Can we identify those “habits” of deception, because that’s how it works. Every time we lie, it makes the next lie a little bit easier. If we’ve been living the lie long enough, it becomes a habit and it doesn’t even feel like a lie anymore. Ask your spouse, ask a close friend…get some help wherever you can, but let’s examine ourselves and be honest about our dishonesty.

Secondly, let’s present our dishonesty to God in a true and contrite confession, and then let us repent and ask God to remove those habits from our lives. Remember, true repentance includes a heart’s desire to change and a determination to turn away from the direction we’ve been going. It will also mean that, in the short term, we are willing to accept the consequences for our dishonesty so that we might walk in the light and be restored to authentic Christian community. Listen: we can’t do this on our own. If we’re in the habit of pretending and deceiving, it will take a supernatural intervention to change that behavior and those attitudes of the heart. But God can do it. God can replace our fear of being discovered with the fear of KNOWING we’ve been discovered by the only One who truly matters: Our King! Pray that you might fear God…for His opinion of you matters a great deal more than how others perceive your devotion. Proverbs 9:10 states that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”…and that fear should lead us to repent.

Third, covenant to ruthlessly eradicate dishonesty and deception from your life. Make a covenant with God, and invite others to hold you accountable to that covenant. We will all fail in this category from time to time, but the cost of failure for Christian leaders in particular is great, so each failure must lead us to sincere repentance and a renewal of our commitment to be honest with God and honest with others.

Now…before you curl up in a ball and resolve to find a new church next Sunday, hear the hope of the Gospel. Our acceptability before God is not based upon our performance or the perception of our performance in the eyes of others. Our acceptability before God is not influenced one iota by our giving, our devotion, our prayers, our compassion, our generosity, our testimony, or even our theology. Our acceptability before God is dependent upon one thing and one thing only: the finished work of Jesus on the cross…period. As believers, when we repent and call upon Jesus for salvation, we are made acceptable before God. In other words, once we are covered by the blood of Christ, every time God looks upon us, He sees His perfect Son. That means when He
looks upon our account…our debt…our messed up, banged up, hung up, shot up soul has a big sign attached to it that says, “PAID IN FULL.”

You see, if we ever got to where we believed the gospel with our whole heart and being, we would stop lying to God and to each other. If we could ever be truly convinced that we are absolutely loved, forgiven, and acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, we would know the peace that passes understanding, and we would be free to simply be who we are as those who have been saved, are being saved, and will be saved.

If we could ever rest in our total acceptance before God in Christ, we would be honest about our shortcomings, our failures, and our lack of devotion…which then allows us and everyone else to celebrate the change that is coming when the Holy Spirit begins to sanctify our hearts and ever so slowly changes us into the likeness of Christ.

Let me be as clear as I know how to be about what I just said. If you are a Christian here today, but you are still selfish and generally self-absorbed and a bit of a jerk, please join my club…you’ll fit right in. By the way, I’m the president of that club, and don’t even think you’re going to be president one day because that title belongs to ME…jerk.

Seriously, Christians are not holy because they accept Jesus…Christians are MADE holy because they accept Jesus, and that process is slow, painful, and depending on where we were when Jesus found us, the progress and results will vary from person to person. So be honest about where you are on the journey with Jesus, and be honest about where you are not. But please, please, please…be honest. Anything short of honesty does not end well for any of us.

And remember…In Jesus, we are fully, 100% acceptable to God. It’s OK that we’re still a mess…that’s the beauty of the Gospel, and that’s part of our testimony. I’m not who I should be, but I’m not who I was…right? So let’s covenant together that we will not hide, we will not deceive, but we will BELIEVE the gospel, and we will be truthful. Amen?

Let’s pray.