

# Awe and Admiration

## *March 19, 2023*

### Lesson Summary

#### ***Main Passages***

Acts 5:1-11

#### ***Session Outline***

1. Holding Back (Acts 5:1-2)
2. Honest Confrontation (Acts 5:3-6)
3. Hard Consequences (Acts 5:7-11)

---

#### ***Theological Theme***

People cannot fool God. God is holy and just, and we must remember that He cannot act contrary to His character. If we attempt to take advantage of His grace and mercy, there will be consequences.



## Leader Guide

# Awe and Admiration

### Introduction

Have you ever bought a purse, watch, or item of clothing that was a knockoff of a famous, more expensive brand? The streets of New York and other large cities are famous for these reproductions. Although an item might look the same on the outside, over time it usually becomes obvious that it is a cheap imitation.

The practice of passing off things as authentic but less expensive has been popular for ages and it also happens in the church. There are people who talk like believers and act like believers, yet there is something missing on the inside. People may try to pass off an imitation faith as real, but it will never fool the Lord, and He will bring the truth to light.

- ❓ When have you had an experience with buying a knock-off brand?
- ❓ What were some differences between the version you bought or saw and the real thing?

### Session Summary

In the time following the miracle at Pentecost, the early church gathered and worshiped together. In the previous chapter of Acts, Barnabas brought a generous offering that showed his devotion to the Lord. In Acts 5, a couple made the decision to follow Barnabas's example, but their true motivation became clear. Instead of being honest about their gift, they attempted to deceive those present as well as the Lord. They took part of the money they received for some land they sold as an offering, but they presented it as the entire amount instead of just a portion.

God calls believers to give from their hearts under the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We should always maintain awe and admiration for the Lord that motivates us to give but also reminds us of His holiness. The state of the giver's heart is what matters most. When Ananias and Sapphira tried to impress the Lord and others by lying about their offering, there were severe consequences. Lying to the Lord will never pay off.

## 1. Holding Back (Acts 5:1-2)

The early church believers were gathered for worship and prayer after the events of Pentecost. Just prior to today's passage of study, Barnabas sold some land and brought the money as a gift (Acts 4:36-37). This sincere act of generosity drew attention and impressed the others. Ananias and Sapphira decided to do something similar but with the wrong motivation—they were looking for personal recognition, not to honor the Lord.

The difference in how Ananias and Sapphira gave was they held back some of the proceeds from their sale for themselves. But it is important to note that keeping back part of the money was not what caused the issue. Rather it was that Ananias and Sapphira tried to lie about the situation and fool people into thinking that they gave all the money they received from the sale.



What are some ways people today might seek recognition in the same way Ananias and Sapphira did?


Scripture is clear that both Ananias and Sapphira participated in the attempted deception. They both wanted to be considered generous and impressive. People today often look for ways to create an impression that might gain them a level of respect without doing those things authentically. The Greek word for “kept back” means “misappropriation” (v. 2). Think about the different ways you might be guilty of keeping back something that needs to be given to the Lord. Any time we try to deceive God and hold onto things, whether money or other resources, it is a misappropriation and not pleasing to God.



When have you been guilty of misappropriation in some way when it comes to giving to the Lord? How have you overcome these deceptive practices?


We miss the point of this account if we are too focused on the specific amount given by the couple. With God, it is not about the amount of money. Whenever you read about people giving tithes or offerings in Scripture, you will always see that God honors those who give with the right heart and mindset. He cares more about what is happening inside than He does with the outward appearance.

Ironically, Ananias and Sapphira—though seeking to look respectful—showed their disrespect for God by their deception. If they really knew and believed that God is holy and worthy of all admiration and worship, then they would not have gotten their priorities so out of line. When they shifted from worshipping God to wanting to impress their fellow church members, they set themselves up for failure. Offerings given with that mindset are not true worship and lying and deception bring consequences of their own.


-  Application: Where might you be in danger of honoring God on the surface but not in your heart?

## 2. Honest Confrontation (Acts 5:3-4)

At times, a leader needs to confront ungodly behavior or attitudes. Peter is the one who called out the problem with Ananias and Sapphira. The Holy Spirit gave Peter the insight He needed to call out Ananias for his deception.

-  Why is a loving confrontation a good thing? Why is it often difficult?

Think about how vastly different that day turned out than Ananias expected. What he orchestrated to bring himself accolades and favorable attention turned into a dramatic lesson of what not to do. Peter called him out publicly. Instead of being lifted up and praised by his fellow church members, he was called out for his wrong thinking and acting in front of those he was trying to impress. There are times leaders need to lovingly confront people either in private or in public. In this circumstance, Peter called Ananias out publicly because he sought to publicly deceive all those present that day.

-  Why did Peter accuse Ananias of lying to the Holy Spirit and not merely to people?

Notice that Peter accused Ananias of lying to the Holy Spirit. That is the heart of the matter. We may think we will get away with something if we can deceive another person but whether the truth comes out in that moment or not, God always knows the truth and He is never deceived. This is also a reminder that whenever a person chooses to lie or sin in any way, that sin is ultimately against God. Ananias overlooked this truth and got caught up in his own greed and self-interests. Once he focused on attention for himself, he lost sight of his true purpose to worship and live for the Lord.


Peter also made it clear that the money for the field was Ananias's to handle. The sin was not in keeping some of the money back. The sin was in seeking recognition for extravagant generosity by saying they gave all they received from the sale. This couple was free to use their money in whatever way they deemed best. They could have donated half to the church and been fine. The problem came when they sought to elevate themselves through an act of deception. This sin that led to their downfall was totally unnecessary.

Peter's accusation to Ananias is interesting and gives food for thought for all believers in relation to the role of Satan in our sin. The enemy is real,

### Lying to the Holy Spirit

Ananias and Sapphira assumed they were merely lying to men (the apostles), but in reality they had lied to the Holy Spirit who is ever-present in the church. Peter's wording indicates that the Holy Spirit is God. Peter's question (wasn't it at your disposal?) implies that Ananias and Sapphira would have been justified to sell the land and give only a portion to the church. Their sin lay in their deception and their desire to win praise.


and he attempts to lead us astray just as he did Ananias. Although Satan can influence believers to make wrong choices, he cannot make us sin. Any time a Christian sins, it is a personal choice. We do not get to blame the devil and claim that he “made us” do things. We have the choice daily of whether we will live under the power of the Holy Spirit or our own flesh. Any time we live by the flesh we will be more vulnerable to the influence of the enemy and more likely to face consequences as Ananias and Sapphira did.

 Application: What practices do you do to help you stay focused on practicing living under the power of the Holy Spirit?


### 3. Hard Consequences (Acts 5:5-11)

Sin always has consequences. When Peter confronted Ananias for his sin and deception, he did not strike him dead. That was a consequence from the Lord. Though some might consider it to be a harsh punishment, this is an important reminder that God always takes sin seriously. This sin was insulting to the Lord and hurtful to the body of Christ. God deserves our respect, love, and admiration. Our focus needs to be on Him and living for Him daily, not on lifting ourselves up or seeking to impress others.

Scripture tells us that Ananias fell and breathed his last. While these consequences might surprise us, instead of thinking God is harsh in His punishment, we should consider how much grace He consistently gives by holding back His judgment on a world reveling in sin.

 How has God given you grace when you deserved punishment for your sin?

It is important to note the critical timeline of the church in that day. It was a young church without deep roots. The people were seeking to figure out the difference in living by faith in Christ instead of living by the law. They needed protection from corruption and false teaching. It was crucial for certain parameters to be established in what was acceptable and not acceptable. When the people saw what happened to Ananias, they were filled with fear. We should never overlook the reverence due God.


 What inspires your awe toward the Lord? How is this stirred in you through His mighty works and through His grace?

Just a while after Ananias died, his wife came in. Peter questioned her to determine what role she played in the lying and deception. It became evident that she was an active and willing participant. God’s judgment fell on her just as it did on her husband. It didn’t matter who thought of the

- Consider gender-based groups of 3-5. This environment allows for more open and honest conversation.
- Consider attending Men In Training (MIT), Wednesdays at 6:15pm and Thursdays at 6:45am OR Brentwood Women Midweek, Wednesdays at 6pm

plan or maybe even pressured the other into going along. They both chose to lie and sin against God. The consequence for Sapphira was the same as for Ananias. God is full of mercy and grace, but He is fully righteous and holy too.


When Sapphira also dropped dead and was carried out, great fear came on all who heard about it. There is great benefit in healthy fear. It can keep us from danger. It can motivate us to make godly choices. Healthy fear also inspires awe in us. Seeing the supernatural and miraculous reminds us just how great and powerful God is. Ananias and Sapphira served as a reminder of this in their day.

 Application: Unlike Ananias and Sapphira, how can you persuade your friends and neighbors in a positive way?


## Conclusion

Ananias and Sapphira tried to appear like they were doing more than they were. They sought to be thought of as impressive and generous. The problem was they got so focused on the wrong things that they mistakenly thought they could lie to God. In a world where pretense happens quite regularly, it is valuable to be reminded that even if you can fool people, you can never fool God. He knows our every motivation and the truth behind what we do. Instead of trying to elevate ourselves and lying to impress, we need to focus on knowing God and worshiping Him in Spirit and truth.

The early church was filled with fear when they saw how Ananias and Sapphira both dropped dead from their attempt at deceiving the Lord. God is all powerful and awe-inspiring. We need to stay focused on Him and who He is so that we continually live in awe and wonder of Him. Many people try to take advantage of the grace and mercy of God instead of recognizing that there are consequences to our sin. Ananias and Sapphira stand as a reminder of this reality.

 When was a time you were guilty of holding back something from the Lord? What is God saying to you about being authentic and living without pretense now?

 How do people take advantage of God's grace, gifts and mercy?

 Who can you have a gospel conversation with regarding God's grace but also His holiness?

## Prayer of Response

*Thank God for being just, holy, and full of grace. Confess any ways that you tend to hold back with the Lord.*

## Additional Resources

- *Acts by R. Kent Hughes*
- *Acts Chapters 1-14 by J. Vernon McGee*
- *Acts by Patrick Schreiner*

## Disciples Multiplying Disciples



### DxD This Week

#### ***Call to Action***

Challenge your group to never take for granted the grace and mercy of the Lord. Challenge them to meet by gender in groups of 3-5 weekly/biweekly or consider attending MIT or Brentwood Women Midweek.

#### **Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion**

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

\*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC



# For Next Week

## Session Title

- Serve

## Main Passages

- Acts 6:1-7; 1 Corinthians 12:12-20

## Session Outline

1. The Need for Deacons (Acts 6:1-4)
2. The Selection of Deacons (Acts 6:5-7)
3. The Gifts of the Body (1 Corinthians 12:12-20)

## Memorize

*“Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup> Wasn’t it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn’t it at your disposal? Why is it that you planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to people but to God.” - Acts 5:3-4*

# Historical Context of Acts

## Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

## Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

## Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

## Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

## Extended Commentary

5:1–2. Like Paul, Luke is ever the master of contrast. Immediately following the brief testimony of Barnabas, he tells us about two other Christians who sold property so they could participate in the church’s communal care program. The name Ananias means “God is gracious,” and Sapphira means “beautiful.” This was a joint effort even if the cultural patterns of the time put Ananias first. Luke tells us he kept back part of the money, using the verb *nospizo* which means “to put aside for oneself.” Already this narrative reminds us of Achan in Joshua 7:1–26.

This couple wanted acclaim without sacrifice and comfort without commitment. They caused the first demonstration of defeat within the ranks since the betrayal of Judas and denial by Peter. The outward act seemed so appropriate. Notice the identical wording in 4:37 and 5:2: Put it at the apostles’ feet. What appeared to be public generosity was actually family conspiracy, but God was looking.

5:3–4. Apparently, the Holy Spirit revealed this deception to Peter. The Spirit had created unity in the church and was now offended at its rupture. We are amazed to discover that Satan can fill the heart of a Christian, especially since Luke uses a verb for fill which also appears in Ephesians 5:18.

Peter faced up to the responsibility much in the way he did in chapter 1 when explaining the Judas suicide. We see immediately that the sin lay not in failing to give all the money, but rather in pretending to do so. The basic issue here was lying, not only to the church but to the Spirit. Above all, the church had to maintain integrity in its alien surroundings, and this behavior could quickly erode the shields of that credibility. Integrity describes those standards of moral and intellectual honesty on which we base our conduct and from which we cannot swerve without cheapening ourselves.

This passage also offers an important New Testament text on the deity of the Holy Spirit. Peter tells Ananias that he lied to the Holy Spirit and follows by saying, You have not lied to men but to God. Notice the emphasis on the voluntary nature of participation in communal property. Some see Communism at the end of chapter 4, but Peter makes it clear that Ananias was under no obligation to participate. Once he did, however, he betrayed the unity and community of the congregation. Tom Constable writes,

Lying to the Holy Spirit is a sin that Christians commit frequently today. When Christians act hypocritically by pretending a devotion that is not there or a surrender of life that they have not really made, they lie to the Holy Spirit. If God worked today as he did in the early Jerusalem church, undertakers would have much work (Constable, Thomas L. “Notes on Acts.” Dallas, Tex.: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1991, 39).

5:5–6. We are stunned to read the results of Ananias’ lie—God killed him. The word for died is *ekpsycho*, “to breathe one’s last,” used of General Sisera in the Septuagint of Judges 4:21 (cf. Acts 5:10; 12:23). Here we should not obscure the clarity of the text. We can explain what happened. We must still remember God is the ultimate cause. One psychological explanation

of what happened suggests that Ananias died from the shock of discovery. As one commentator puts it, “The fear of exposure was so drastic, their nervous systems could not take it” (Ogilvie, Lloyd J. *Acts: The Communicator’s Commentary*. Edited by Lloyd J. Ogilvie. Vol. 5. Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1983, 120). To be sure, death from seemingly natural causes could have its origin in a supernatural act (as in the case of Herod at the end of Acts 12), but it is no less God ordained. Here we have the ultimate discipline in the church. God can remove a spiritual cancer by surgery and may very well choose to do so on some occasions (1 Cor. 11:30–32).

In this case the death resulted from sin, but the Bible reminds us that immediate death does not always occur. In the early verses of John 9, the disciples concluded that the blind man must be suffering because of his sin or that of his parents. Jesus reminds them that neither is the case, “But this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life” (John 9:3). God sees what happens in our hearts; and when hidden sin threatens to thwart the church’s ministry, he may choose to deal with it severely.

5:7–10. The young attendants had buried Ananias and returned in three hours, quite possibly a record for first-century Jewish funerals. Amazingly, Sapphira came in with the same story, and it was *deja vu* all over again. Sapphira’s narrative offers nothing new. In neither case did Peter pronounce a curse of any kind. Peter explained the sin, but God took care of the judgment.

5:11. The death of Ananias and Sapphira brought two results: fear in the church and fear in the city. This is the first appearance in Acts of the Greek word for church (*ekklesia*). Perhaps Peter remembered this incident when he wrote: “It is time for judgment to begin with the family of God” (1 Pet. 4:17). Fear in the city centered on the power of God and perhaps the ugliness of sin.

As tempted as we might be to push this story into some dark corner of early church history, that would be a tragic mistake. It deals with money, greed, and deceit—all very popular problems in today’s church. Deceit, disunity, and duplicity always undermine the Holy Spirit’s work and always erode the effectiveness of the Christian community.<sup>1</sup>

## References

1. Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, vol. 5, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 74–76.

## Author Bio

### **R. Kent Hughes (Acts)**

R. Kent Hughes (DMin, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is senior pastor emeritus of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, and former professor of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Hughes is also a founder of the Charles Simeon Trust, which conducts expository preaching conferences throughout North America and worldwide. He serves as the series editor for the Preaching the Word commentary series and is the author or coauthor of many books. He and his wife, Barbara, live in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, and have four children and an ever-increasing number of grandchildren.

### **J. Vernon McGee (Acts Chapters 1-14)**

Dr. J. Vernon McGee (1904-1988) spent more than 50 years teaching the Bible on his “Thru the Bible” radio broadcast. He pastored for more than 40 years and has authored many best-selling books, including *Doctrine for Difficult Days*.

### **Patrick Schreiner (Acts)**

Patrick Schreiner (PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is associate professor of New Testament and biblical theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. He is the author of *The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross*; *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe*; *The Ascension of Christ*; and *The Visual Word*.