

TESTING THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD

Acts 5:1–16

Key Verse: 5:9a

“But Peter said to her, ‘How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?’”

Have you ever joined a group that you didn’t know and that didn’t know you? Maybe it was a new school, or a sports team, or some kind of club. When we think people don’t know us, we might behave differently. But joining a church is so different, because it’s a spiritual body. Admittance is through personal faith in Jesus and through following the Bible’s teachings. As we’ve seen in Acts, so many people have newly joined the fellowship of believers. But today’s passage is a disturbing one. It involves a couple, money, and the believing community. It’s a sharp contrast to the united, grace-filled, loving fellowship Luke has just described. Things are so intense, both husband and wife get struck down dead. In many ways this event makes us wonder. But if we listen to Peter’s words, we get the point. How does God want us to regard our Christian community? On the basis of this, what should we do, and how should we live? May God speak to us through his word.

In the previous passage, Luke described the fellowship of the early Christians. Because of the apostles’ message of forgiveness through the Risen Jesus, they were filled with great grace. They were eager to show love to one another, especially to any needy people among them. Someone named Joseph even sold a field he owned, brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. What Joseph did was so admired, the apostles gave him a new name, “Barnabas,” which means “Son of Encouragement.”

But now we see a couple that’s so different from him. Look at verses 1–2. “But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife’s full knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” It’s unclear which of them wants to keep back some of the proceeds: is it Ananias, or Sapphira, or both of

them? In any case, they're not helping each other spiritually. Ananias is not being the spiritual leader of his home. And Sapphira is not helping her husband well. They're being sneaky. We wonder what their motives are. The verses don't exactly say. The fact is, they're wealthy enough to own a piece of property they can sell, so they can't be *that* desperate to survive. But the way they make this offering is a warning to all of us of what we should **not** do. We should understand their sin in several ways.

First, they're seeking personal glory. Most likely, this couple wants to be recognized and praised by the other believers, like Barnabas was. They just don't want the full commitment and sacrifice Barnabas has. Their point in making this offering is to enhance themselves in the eyes of others in the community. The Bible warns us about loving glory from people more than glory from God.¹ Such a motive tarnishes even the good deeds we think we're doing.

Second, they're coveting material things. Look at verses 2–3 again. Here Luke repeats the words "kept back." It's a unique word that literally means "set apart." In financial matters it means "skimming," "pilfering," or "embezzling." Even in the secular world, that's a crime. In this beautiful Christian community, Ananias and Sapphira surely have heard the word of God. But as our Lord Jesus warned us, there are those who hear the word, "...but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word..." (Mark 4:19). When the desire for material things rules our hearts, we can contrive to do many unhealthy things. So our Lord Jesus warned us, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Coveting material things is another reason Ananias and Sapphira keep back some of the money for themselves.

Third, they're being deceptive. When Ananias came and put the money at Peter's feet, what did Peter say? "Oh, thank you so much!" No. He 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 man but to God" (3–4). There was no rule that to join this community, people had to sell all

¹ Cf. John 5:41,44; 7:18; 8:50,54; 12:43.

their possessions and offer everything. As Peter says here, the property was rightfully their own, to do with it whatever they wanted, before and after the sale. The problem is, they're trying to give the impression that they've offered it all. That's deception. Honestly, we can be easily blinded by wealth. We're so happy receiving money, we don't care about the methods or motives of those who have it or give it. Money can tempt individuals, a church, and leaders who receive it. But Peter is clear about money.

How could Peter know all this? Being filled with the Spirit, he had deep prophetic insight. In the same way, the Holy Spirit can help us see all things. With the Holy Spirit's discernment, we can look beyond appearances to see what's really going on. Our Lord Jesus said the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of truth" who guides us into all the truth.² Like Ananias and Sapphira, we may think we're clever. But a servant of God with the Holy Spirit can see through even the most clever behavior. Peter could see that Satan had filled the heart of Ananias. Jesus called Satan "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44b). Satan is still trying in many ways to deceive us (Rev.12:9) and fill our hearts until we're ready to deceive others. Deception is bad. But what's worse about it is lying not to people, but, as Peter says, to the Holy Spirit. Lying to believers and church leaders is actually lying to the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, they're testing the Spirit of the Lord. Look at verse 5a. After Peter's rebuke, Ananias falls down and breathes his last. In God's sovereign will, he doesn't even have a chance to repent. He may have gotten so scared he had a heart attack. In any case, God takes his life; it's an act of God's judgment. It tells us that no one can outsmart God.

Look at verse 5b. "And great fear came upon all who heard of it." It's not a panic or terror, but a healthy awe and reverence for God. We see such godly fear throughout the Bible. After taking a spiritual vacation for 13 years, when Abraham encountered God Almighty, he fell face down in reverence (Gen.17:1–3a). When Jacob, as a young man, first experienced God's presence at Bethel, he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place!" (Gen.28:16–17). When Moses, and later Joshua, encountered God's presence, they both heard the words, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Ex.3:5; Josh.5:15). When Isaiah had a vision of the holy God in his

² John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13.

temple, he cried, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips...” (Isa.6:5). When the community of new believers first received the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, they too experienced this awe (2:43). Now, through the death of Ananias, they experience it again. Apostle Paul writes: “For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’” (2 Cor.6:16).

The living and holy God dwells among believers through the presence of his Spirit. The Holy Spirit is invisible but he’s really there. His dwelling among us is powerful and graceful. It’s his dwelling among us that makes us holy. But it’s not easy for us to see the community of believers this way. It’s easy to just see people. Because in Jesus we all are still a work in progress, we have obvious weaknesses, sins and flaws. It’s easy to look down on Christian brothers and sisters with our worldly standards and ways of thinking. It’s easy to think we’re better. But this ruins real community and brings jealousy and strife (1 Cor.3:3). Paul wrote the believers in Corinth, who had many divisions among them: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Cor.3:16–17). It’s indeed serious how we see fellow believers. Do we have godly fear for the Holy Spirit among us?

To have such godly fear, our spiritual eyes need to be opened. If we’re looking at people only with our human eyes, we can’t see God. We also can’t see spiritual realities. We can’t see God’s servants, who are in Christ. We can’t see the devil working, and the spiritual conflicts he’s causing. And we can’t see the work of the Holy Spirit.

There’s a famous Bible story about such spiritual blindness. Once, a young man came to the prophet Elisha early in the morning, worried that they were now surrounded by an army of horses and chariots. Elisha prayed and said, “O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:15–17). Wow! There’s always a spiritual reality of God’s presence and protection all around us. Instead of focusing on problems with a godless mindset, we need to open our spiritual eyes to the awesome presence of God. We also need insight to see the devil working

all around us. Apostle Paul wrote: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph.6:12). This struggle is invisible, but real.

Verses 7–10 is Peter’s encounter with Ananias’ wife Sapphira. It’s three hours later. She has no idea what’s happened to her husband. She boldly, shamelessly lies, right to Peter’s face. Peter asks, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?” (9a) What does he mean by “test the Spirit of the Lord”? The Bible tells us to test the Spirits (1 John 4) to see whether they are from God. But in this case, it has a negative meaning. In this context, it means to try to get away with deception. It means not believing that the Spirit of the Lord already knows everything, all our secrets, even all our inmost thoughts and desires. So in a sense, to test the Spirit means to pretend, to put on an act. It means to try to mislead his servants for our own gain. To test the Spirit can also literally mean to “tempt.” Will the holy God condone sin in his people? Will he allow people to get away with manipulative sin in his holy community? Perhaps, for the time being, he may. But the living God will always eventually deal with sin drastically, because sin is so serious. Right at the beginning of the Christian movement, God deals with sin in the community with decisive swiftness. It’s a vivid warning to us all. We should not test the Spirit, but trust the Spirit.

Filled with the Spirit, Peter predicts Sapphira’s death as well. In the cases of both deaths, it happens immediately as Peter speaks, confirming that Peter truly is a servant of the living God. God uses Peter to give an uncompromising rebuke to those trying to deceive. It’s not out of anger or vengeance, but to protect God’s work. In even this most severe rebuke, Peter is being a shepherd of the flock.

Read verse 11. “And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.” “Great fear” is repeated in verses 5 and 11. And it’s the first time the word “church” appears. This word is actually used 19 times in Acts. The spread of the church of Jesus through the Holy Spirit is one of Acts’ major themes. Everywhere a local church is born, it’s called to be a place where the Holy Spirit of Jesus dwells. In Acts 20 Paul urges the Ephesian elders, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has

made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (20:28). When he says "the church," he's talking not about buildings but about people, "all the flock." He's still telling us that with great fear of God, we need to care for all the people in our church, every single one.

Verses 12–16 describe, after this dramatic event, the ongoing ministry of the apostles. By their hands, God is doing many signs and wonders regularly among the people. It says they are "together" in Solomon's Portico, the only place in Jerusalem large enough to hold them all. And "together" is that same word Luke has been using to describe this community, meaning "with one mind and heart, one accord" (1:14; 2:46; 4:24). Outsiders are much more sober about joining, though they hold the believers in high esteem for their spiritual integrity. Nonetheless, more than ever, multitudes of men and women are accepting Jesus and belonging to him (13–14).

How do the apostles use the power the Holy Spirit has given them? Read verses 15–16. "...so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed." Peter uses his spiritual power not to curse and crush, but to heal the sick and afflicted. It's possible from within a community united in the Holy Spirit and purified by genuine faith in Jesus.

Let's read our key verse, verse 9a again. "But Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?'" In this study we learned that the Spirit of the Lord is dwelling among his people. We all need to repent and open our eyes to live in the fear of God and see spiritual realities. May God help us repent of any wrong motives we may have, and any kind of deception, open our blinded eyes, and help us truly experience the Holy Spirit's presence among us. May we grow as a holy, godly community where many spiritually sick people can be healed.