

Acts 5:1-11

Outward Church: Holiness

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Today we're going **back to our series in Acts**. I actually wrote this sermon before the Coronavirus landed. Today I want us to start to get back into a **rhythm**. So today I'm preaching the story of **Ananias and Sapphira** and how their story tells us about the **holiness of God**.

When you think of **holiness**, **what** do you think of? Maybe you think of a **big beautiful cathedral**. There's something sacred and awe-inspiring about a beautiful church or cathedral. When you think of holiness, maybe you think of a **cemetery**. There's a **sign** outside the cemetery by our house that **prohibits running**. There's something sacred about the **life of a person**—that we treat with **reverence**. When you think of holiness, maybe you think of a **monument**, something that **celebrates** our **history**.

I agree that all these things are **special** and **worth remembering**, but the Bible presents us with a **different understanding** of holiness. Holiness looks more like this sign, “[Out of state visitors] are urged to self-quarantine for 14 days.”¹ I saw a sign just like this hanging over **Route 3. Governor Baker** is urging anyone coming from another state to not go out shopping or near anyone for **two weeks**. He doesn't want someone who is **sick** to start **spreading** the **disease**. This is a **picture** of **what it means to be holy**.

To **be holy** means to be **set apart**, to be **distinct, separate**. In the **Old Testament**, we see holiness **visibly demonstrated** in some of the laws where women and men would have to **physically separate** themselves from the **camp** for things like **skin disease** to become **clean again** (Lev 13). To be holy was to be **pure** and **untainted** by the **world's sickness** or **sin**.

It's like there is a **massive sign hanging** over the **highway to heaven** that reads, “**Perfect spiritual health required. All others self-quarantine for all eternity.**” That's right. To get into heaven you have to be **perfectly holy**. You can't have any **spiritual sickness** or **disease**. You can't have **sin** on your **record**.

If you were to **encounter God** in all his holiness right now, it would **dismay** and **overwhelm** you. The **prophet Isaiah** saw God in all his holiness. He had a **vision** where he saw God set apart on a **throne** over the temple (Isa 6:1). God is surrounded by **Seraphim**, a type of angel. Even though these angels are **pure beings**, much **better than us**, they **cover** their **faces** so they don't see God's holiness and their **feet**, possibly representing a place typical of unholiness and dirt (Exod 3:5; Isa 6:2; John 13:10). They call out:

Isaiah 6:3b-5

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

Do you remember when I **preached Acts 4:23-31**? When the believers in the early church pray, the **place** where they are meeting **shakes** and they are **filled with the Holy Spirit**. In Isaiah's vision he sees the **temple shake**. **God's temple** is a **holy place set apart for him**, and in the New Testament, God's people become his temple. We become holy through the Holy Spirit. But see how **Isaiah reacts** to God's holiness...

5 “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” (NIV)

How does **God's holiness** affect you? Do you feel like you're **good enough**? You're a good person. You've **self-quarantined** and **donated money** to the **Red Cross**. God will let you **pass into heaven**. You're **wrong**, but there's **hope** for you. Or maybe you're on the **other end**. You know God could **never accept you**. You're **too dirty**, too filthy for God to love you. You're **also wrong** and there's **hope** for you too. Ananias and Sapphira help us understand **God's holiness** the **right way**.

We underestimate God's holiness. (Acts 5:1-6)

Ananias and Sapphira don't take **God's holiness** seriously. We are supposed to **worship** him with **reverence**, **awe** and **respect**, because he is **holy** and **set apart** and on a **throne**. That's the **exact opposite** of what Ananias and Sapphira do. In their **worship** they **lie** and **test** God. They **underestimate** God's holiness and **God judges** them worthy of death.

Their **punishment** doesn't seem to **match the crime** unless we remember the **context of Acts** so far:

- **Acts 1** - Jesus ascends into heaven to rule over the church and its mission. (Eph 1:20)
- **Acts 2** - Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to fill and empower the church.
- **Acts 3-4** - We see evidences of the Spirits' power in Peter, John, and the church.

See, now **Jesus** is **ruling** and **reigning** through his **people**, the **church**. God's **Holy Spirit** has **filled** the church. This means **God himself** has filled the body of believers. Remember how the **building shook** in **Acts 4** like the **temple** in **Isaiah 6**? God is there! Sometimes when the **heat kicks on** at **Cornerstone** you hear the **ventilation shaking**. The ventilation shakes because there's something else there. The temple and building where the **believers gathered** shook because **God was there**.

Right at the end of chapter four, right before today's text, people are **selling their possessions** for each other and taking care of the **needy** among them (Acts 4:32-35). One person in particular, a man the apostles call **Barnabas** is being especially encouraging.

Acts 4:36-37 (NIV) 36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Barnabas had a **heart changed by God** so that he loved others like Christ did. For his act of generosity he received **some recognition**, a nickname that means "son of encouragement." But where are **Ananias** and **Sapphira** in all of this? They're watching and they're growing **jealous**.

Acts 5:1-2 (NIV) 1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

They **hatch a plan**. We'll sell some property and give a portion of the money to the apostles, those in charge of the church. They'll look **great** and have **money left over**. It's like they are **donating** one of those really **extra-large checks to charity**. Is it really about the charity or the **donor**?

Acts 5:3-4 (NIV) 3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

It wasn't wrong for Ananias to keep some of the money. It was wrong for him to **lie** about giving it all. This is a **symptom** of a **deeper problem**. Ananias is a part of the **church community** where **God's holiness** is **supposed to reside**, but Peter says **Satan** has **instead filled his heart**. Do you know what this means? It means Ananias has brought the **presence of Satan** into the **temple of God**. It's like he has **intentionally** brought **covid** into a **nursing home**, but **God won't have any of it**. God will protect his people, his **temple**.

The **people of the church** are the **new temple** of God. That's what happened in **Acts 2** at **Pentecost** when the Holy Spirit descended and came to rest on the believers as **tongues of fire** (Acts 2:1-4). In Ephesians **Paul describes the church body** as the temple of the living God.

Ephesians 2:20-22 (NIV) 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Ananias was unwittingly **acting** as an **agent** of the **enemy of God**. Have you ever seen a **spy movie**? Ananias is like that **double agent** who gets **found out** at the end. It's **not clear** to me whether or not Ananias and Sapphira were true **Christians** who lost their way. Some **commentators** think they were because they were a **part** of the **church community**.

If they were **true Christians**, it should give us to **pause**. Just because **I believe** in Jesus doesn't mean Satan can't **use me** to do **his bidding**. That's why we pray **God** would **fill** us with his **Holy Spirit** and **direct** our paths. I often see our **neighbor** walking his **dog**. Can you **imagine** if he was out walking a dog and a **stranger** came up to his dog and put a **second leash** on him and **tried to walk** him? **Two leashes on one dog**? That dog would be **very confused**. But that's what happens to believers when we **allow sin** to **direct us** **instead** of the **Holy Spirit**. Sin **leads** us in a **different direction** than God intends for us to go.

Ananias' sin isn't just a **little white lie**. He **lies to God**. One of the ways we know the **Holy Spirit** is **God** is found right here in Acts 5. To lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God. This sin threatens to **introduce systemic sin** like **pride** and **mistrust** into the whole church body. What does God do?

Acts 5:5-6 (NIV) 5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. 6 Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

If we think God's judgment is **too harsh**, then we **underestimate the holiness of God**. **Where** are you underestimating God's holiness in your life? In the words you **speak**? In the things you **look at**? In the things you **do**? In **how** you **worship**? How many of us, if we were honest with ourselves, would need a **really long quarantine** to **get right with God**? And even if we **quarantined** for a **million years**, we still wouldn't be good enough. *We underestimate God's holiness and...*

We overestimate our goodness. (Acts 5:7-10)

We overestimate our own **spiritual immune system**. We go through life **coughing** and **sneezing** and **not washing our hands** or wearing a **face mask**. *We think we're spiritually healthier than we are but really we're sick and spreading the disease*. Sapphira overestimated her own goodness.

Acts 5:7-10 (NIV) 7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

9 Peter said to her, “How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”

10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

Peter tells Ananias “You **lied** to God” but to Sapphira he says “You **tested** God.” We test God when we think we’re **better** than God; when we think **we know what’s best** and he doesn’t. The Bible tells us not to test God by making him **prove himself** (Deut 6:16). That’s what they’re doing, isn’t it? They’re testing the Holy Spirit to see if this **new community** of believers **really is the temple** of God where **God’s holy presence dwells**. They are testing God to see if **he’s watching and listening**, to see if they can **get away with sin**.

The **town** I grew up in had a **pool** and there was a **walkway** you could **swim under separating the deep end** from the **shallow** section. By swimming underneath we “tested” the **life guards** to see if they would notice. But by doing this we **risked our own**. When we test God, we risk our own lives. There are other times in the Bible when people tested God like Ananias and Sapphira, and it didn’t go well:

- **Nadab and Abihu** (Lev 10:1-5): When Aaron’s sons **Nadab** and **Abihu** offered “unauthorized fire” before the Lord at the tabernacle, he consumed them with fire.

God was doing a new thing in the life of his people. He’d just given the **tabernacle** with all the **regulations** for **how to worship**. Nadab and Abihu do it their way and **not God’s** way, underestimating God’s holiness and overestimating their goodness, and they die for it. Moses instructs **two young men to carry their bodies** out of the camp **just like Peter does** with Ananias and Sapphira (v4-5). How about...?

- **Uzzah and the Ark** (2 Sam 6:1-7): When King David brings the ark of the covenant back to Jerusalem on a cart led by oxen they stumble and **Uzzah** reaches out his hand to **steady the ark** and God strikes him dead.

The **ark of the covenant** was a **golden chest**, with **two angelic** beings called **cherubim** on the top. It was **holy** because God **resided** there. **R.C. Sproul said**, “Uzzah presumed his hands were cleaner than the dirt. God said no.” Mud doesn’t sin. People do. *He overestimated his goodness.*

For my **Birthday** my **grandmother-in-law** gave me *The Amazing Book of Useless Information* as a joke gift. **Jokes** on her because I’m using it for a **sermon illustration**. Apparently there’s a whole *Useless Information Society* if you want to join. Did you know?

Queen Elizabeth I regarded herself as a paragon (a perfect example) of cleanliness. She declared that she bathed once every three months, whether she needed it or not.

In her entire lifetime, Queen Isabella of Spain bathed twice. (p. 78)

How about this virus, **Covid-19**, the **Coronavirus**? If you catch it, it usually takes about **five days** before **symptoms** appear. You can be **sick** and not even know it. Isn’t that an **illustration** for **sin**? We’ve all **caught it** but most of us **don’t even realize it**. The symptoms are there! **Selfishness, greed, lust, jealousy, pride**, but we just ignore them. Sin is **much more deadly** than **any virus**.

Romans 6:23 (NIV) For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is **why we need a savior**. We need **Jesus Christ** to come and **pay the penalty** for our **sins** on the cross. We need him to live a **holy life** and then **offer his life** as **payment for our own**. And praise be to God that’s exactly what Jesus did. *Jesus is the original Barnabas*. He sold everything he had, his **prestige in heaven**

his **very life**, and he **laid it all down** at the **cross** before his **Heavenly Father**. He **held nothing back** and did it all for **our good** and **it was enough**. He knows we can be **just as bad** as Ananias and Sapphira; and yet he gave it all for us. *We underestimate God's holiness. We overestimate our goodness. And...*

So we worship and ask for grace. (Acts 5:7-10)

Look at the response of the entire church body to these events.

Acts 5:11 (NIV) Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

When we **really understand** who God is, it should put **fear** in our **hearts**. If you've **gone through life** thinking you're **good enough** and that **God will accept you because** you're **kind** and **caring**, this passage helps us **realize it's not enough**. **God isn't impressed** with **good deeds**, especially ones done to **impress others**. Or if you've gone through life **condemning yourself** for the **things** you've **done wrong**, this passage helps us realize that what God **first wants our hearts**. God wants our hearts so that he can **turn** Ananias and Sapphira **kind of people** into Barnabas kind of people. This story is supposed to **move us to ask God for grace**. We're suppose to **walk away** asking God to **change our hearts** and **keep us from a similar fate**.

When Isaiah saw the Lord seated on his throne he **screamed** "**Woe to me!**... For I am a man of unclean lips." He **confesses** his **unholiness**. He **repents**. He lays his **heart bare**. And you know what God does?

Isaiah 6:6-7 (NIV) Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

God shows **mercy**. An angels takes a **coal** from the **altar** and **touches Isaiah's mouth** with it, cleansing him of sin (Isa 6:6-7). The **altar** is a place of **sacrifice**. The altar **points forward to Christ's coming sacrifice**; By Christ's **blood** on the **altar of the cross** Isaiah's sin and our sin is **atoned for**. *If you want Christ's sacrifice to cover you, worship and ask for grace.*

We underestimate God's holiness; we overestimate our goodness; and so we worship and ask for grace.

Jesus' blood makes possible our entrance into a relationship with a holy God. We become **set apart**, holy, **through Jesus**, the one who **set apart his life for us**. *We underestimated God's holiness; we overestimate our goodness; and so we worship and ask for grace.* Let's pray.

*Lord, would you so fill us with your **Holy Spirit** that we never do what **Ananias and Sapphira** did... so that we don't **lie** to you, or **test** you, or act one way to get **others' praise**. Lord, when we fail, would you **forgive us**? Would the **blood of Jesus** and his **perfect life** cover all our sins? Would you make us to be more like Barnabas, someone whose heart was changed by God? Would you give us **eternal life** with Jesus? Would you remind us of your **holiness** and give us a **healthy fear** of you? We **love and respect** you **Lord**. In Jesus' name, amen.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does holiness matter?

2. Why does it matter that Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit? What or who is the Holy Spirit? Does the answer to that question help explain the consequences?
3. Read Ephesians 2:20-22 and 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. What does it mean for Jesus and believers to be the temple of God? If the people of the church are the temple of God, how does that shape our understanding of Ananias and Sapphira's sin?
4. What was the nature of Ananias' sin and Sapphira's? Was it wrong for them to keep some of the money from the sale of their property?
5. What ways do you underestimate God's holiness in your own life? If you had a clear understanding of God's holiness, how do you think it would change your everyday interactions?
6. How do we overestimate our own goodness? How does the answer to this question give us humility?
7. How do the stories of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-5) and Uzzah and the ark (2 Samuel 6:1-7) give us an Old Testament context for what happens with Ananias and Sapphira? How about the story of Achan in Joshua 7?
8. Do we ever underestimate the presence of sin in our own lives? What are the wages of sin? See Romans 6:23. What is the gospel's answer to the problem of sin?
9. When Ananias and Sapphira died, it caused fear in the church. Is that a bad thing? What type of fear did they experience? How does it shape the way we approach God through worship?
10. What sin do you need to confess in order to approach God in his holiness in forgiveness and grace? If nothing comes to mind, how can you humble yourself as you worship God?
11. What else resonated with you from the story of Ananias and Sapphira?

Take time to pray and ask God for his grace to not commit the same sin. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill your church in a special way to truly worship and follow Christ in all things.

¹ <https://bangordailynews.com/2020/03/31/politics/janet-mills-says-she-will-order-out-of-staters-to-quarantine-for-2-weeks-while-visiting-maine/>