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# Signs of Life: Purity

*Acts 5:1-16*

May 9, 2026

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## CUSTOM

Mother's Day Due to Mother's Day, we will not have the 2nd Sunday Prayer and Worship tonight. To bless the moms of our church today, we will have... A letter-writing station in the lobby, if you would like to write a letter to your mom or a spiritual mom in your life, you look up to. Moms are welcome to enjoy one complimentary beverage from our coffee cart this morning.

## OPENING

Opening Today, we come to one of the most avoided passages in the book of Acts — and for understandable reasons. After all, God immediately judging two people in church with instant death is not something we like to tackle. But I've found that the Bible is full of "undesirable passages," at least as far as the human mind is concerned. I've also found comfort in the fact that it is not my job to defend God, as though He needed it, or to justify everything He does to fit into our finite and often self-centered paradigm. We will simply look at the realities of this story and take some sobering applications home with us. This morning's topic, as we look at the signs of life in the early church, is purity.

Have you ever looked at the negative actions of another and thought, "How could they do something like that?" Let's make it personal. Have you ever looked at your own negative actions, words, attitudes, or thoughts and asked yourself, "How could I do something like that? How could I think something like that?" It can be frightening when we take an honest inventory of what is in our hearts.

## SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 17:9 — The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?

And yet, when Jesus speaks of the heart, He brings a striking contrast.

## SCRIPTURE

Matthew 5:8 — Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

This might seem like a difficult conundrum to reconcile. If our hearts are naturally deceitful and wicked, how do we have a pure heart? What does it look like? Well, the more I study Scripture and read what Jesus teaches about the heart, the more I come to the conclusion that a pure heart has less to do with all that is in it and more to do with how one responds to what is in it.

## APPLICATION

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**PURE HEART:** A pure heart is not necessarily a heart that is free of all evil, for that would not be possible with humanity. Rather, it's a heart that demonstrates guardedness, brokenness, humility, and repentance when that evil is discovered. It's a heart that's honest before God. David prayed, "Create in me a clean heart of God... see if there is any wicked way in me." These are prayers of recognition that sometimes our hearts harbor filthy things that need to be cleansed by the Holy Spirit. The commands to "guard your heart" and "do not harden your heart" are repeated often in Scripture for this very reason. When my heart is not guarded or soft, I lose a level of spiritual purity.

Have you ever made a sandwich for lunch and then, the next day, gone into the kitchen to discover you'd left the bread open all night? Hardened, stale bread is never on anyone's list of desired foods. And this is what happens to our hearts when we don't tend and protect them. Even unknowingly, when we start to compromise small things, our hearts will become harder and harder — it is their nature.

## SCRIPTURE

Psalm 95:7-8 (NKJV) [7] For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand. Today, if you will hear His voice: [8] "Do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion, as in the day of trial in the wilderness,

Why is this so important? Because a deceitful, prideful, ill-intentioned heart will spread impurity and unholiness in the church. Unrepentant sin and embraced compromises will diminish a church's life and impact for the kingdom. Today, we see how God dealt with spiritual deception and impure motives in the church from the very beginning, sending a loud and clear message to every generation of believers to come.

As we go through our story today, let's look at five aspects:

The Scene The Sham The Sentence The Setup The Shock

## MAIN POINT Point 1

The Scene

## SCRIPTURE

Acts 4:32–37 — Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Up to this point, there have been some very exciting kingdom things happening. The Holy Spirit was working, salvation was spreading, signs and wonders were being accomplished, bodies healed, and souls saved... and joy and generosity were flowing from forgiven hearts. This wasn't a forced generosity, but genuine love and compassion being displayed. Many who were wealthier and owned properties and homes ended up selling their possessions and sharing the proceeds with those in the body who were in need.

One man who did this is mentioned here: Barnabas.

As we read, the name Barnabas means "Son of Encouragement." This was a nickname he earned in the church because of his acts of encouragement. In fact, every time we see Barnabas mentioned in the New Testament, he is giving, encouraging, or mentoring.

He was the one who defended Saul and brought him into fellowship. He was one of the first missionaries the church sent out, along with Paul. He mentored young Mark when no one else wanted anything to do with him.

Thank God for the Barnabases who possess the patience and humility to truly and selflessly bless the church. Was Barnabas perfect? Was he the sinless son of encouragement? Certainly not — but he had a pure heart. He was genuine, transparent, and sincere. His motives weren't hidden, his agenda was not secret... He was who he was. This is important because Barnabas displays the antithesis of the couple we are introduced to in chapter 5. Ananias and Sapphira come before the disciples and the church publicly and perform almost the same action as Barnabas, but unlike Barnabas, who earned a godly reputation and an awesome nickname, these two ended up being dragged out of the church dead. This is the first recorded spiritual sham, and God deals with it.

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## MAIN POINT Point 2

The Sham

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## SCRIPTURE

Acts 5:1–2 — But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Meaning of the names: Ananias — “The Lord is gracious” Sapphira — “Beautiful”

And yet we see a contradictory set of events. Ananias teaches us that the Lord is gracious, but He is also holy. Sapphira teaches us that outward beauty might fool men, but God is not deceived — He sees what is inside the heart.

So Ananias sees Barnabas and others perform these selfless acts, and no doubt observes that these acts draw praise, acclamation, and honor from the church and the apostles. Barnabas wasn't seeking honor, but those who often receive honor from the Lord are those who aren't looking for it.

Ananias, in collusion with his wife, devises a plan. Maybe there is a way to be somewhere in the middle — to appear truly spiritual and sacrificial and receive praise from the church, while at the same time keeping a little nest egg for their future and deceptively hold on.

The issue here is very subtle, and the context really matters. As we will see in Peter's response, the issue wasn't the money, the land, or the amount they offered. It was the spiritual deception and manipulation that was in their hearts.

They wanted to appear to the church to be more than they really were. It was pride, it was lust for power, it was deception — it was everything that would have been cancerous and detrimental to the early church, and not just the early church but the church today.

## QUOTE

— Kent Hughes

“Ananias and Sapphira's ruse was not a mere miscalculation in their checkbook but premeditated deception. This was pious pretense — religious sham — simulated holiness — Christian fraud.”

Spiritual deception dishonors God. It represents everything that God is not. When we intentionally, with impure motives, display ourselves as being more spiritual than we really are in order to gain the praise of men, we are in a place of deeply offending the heart of God. The reality: whenever you or I do something of a spiritual nature with the goal of human recognition and admiration, we have ceased doing it for the Lord. Period.

## SCRIPTURE

Matthew 6:1–7 — "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly. And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words."

This is the height of hypocrisy — trumpeting and parading spirituality not for the good of the people or the glory of God, but for self-gratification and to inflate one's ego.

## ILLUSTRATION

This sin resembles the Old Testament account of Achan's sin in Joshua 7. You might remember: the Israelites enter the Promised Land and God delivers Jericho into their hands. His one condition? No spoils from the city were to be collected. Achan couldn't resist his greed and took and buried some of the spoils from the city. As a result of his disobedience, deception, and unrepentant heart, the entire nation suffered loss, and his family suffered the most. We see the same thing happen here, but before Ananias's sin could affect the entire church, God deals with it.

## SCRIPTURE

Acts 5:3 — But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?"

Peter's spiritual discernment and perceptiveness should be noted. Whether word came through back channels that this had happened, or the Holy Spirit gave Peter the spiritual gift of discernment at that moment, you could imagine Ananias's utter fear and horror upon hearing Peter's words.

## APPLICATION

While it's not my intention to scare us, it should be noted that nothing is hidden from the Holy Spirit, and He can cover it or expose it any time and through any channel He wants... and while God is incredibly gracious, He will also do what it takes to deal with sin before it has its fullest range of effects.

Notice Who Ananias was really lying to. He thought he was lying to Peter and the rest of the church, but Peter points out that a lie to the church is a lie directly to the Holy Spirit — the third person of the Trinity.

## QUOTE

— *Pastor Josh*

"When you publicly declare that something belongs to God and you are secretly keeping it for yourself, you are committing spiritual fraud and lying to God."

Next, Peter continues to build his case by identifying the true source of Ananias's deception — his heart.

## SCRIPTURE

Acts 5:4 — "While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

## SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 17:20 — He who has a deceitful heart finds no good.

No doubt about it — this was a premeditated, pretentious act of deception.

## QUOTE

— *John Stott*

"Ananias shows not simply a lack of honesty in bringing only a part of the sale price but also a lack of integrity — bringing only a part while pretending to bring the whole."

## MAIN POINT Point 3

The Sentence

## SCRIPTURE

Acts 5:5–6 — Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.

God's judgment in this matter is decisive and final. The Greek words for "fell down and breathed his last" imply more than just a sudden natural death — they imply a death by the judgment of God.

Old Testament example — Leviticus 10:1–3:

## SCRIPTURE

Leviticus 10:1-3 (NKJV) [1] Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. [2] So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. [3] And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.'" So Aaron held his peace.

Ananias, knowingly or unknowingly, by attempting to deceive the church, was mocking the holiness of God and testing the Holy Spirit. In the beginning, it was essential for God to take this decisive action to protect the church's integrity and send a clear message regarding how much the church's purity and honesty matter. Result: Great fear came upon all. Yeah, I would think so!

So what — does God want to rule His church by fear? No, not in the way we think of tyranny. But it is beneficial for all of us to maintain an awareness of how holy God is, how much He hates sin, and the lengths He will go to protect His church.

Many ask, "Were Ananias and his wife really saved? Would God do this to His own children?"

I honestly don't know the answer to that question, but I do know that God was completely just in His decision. If they were believers, the good news is that God simply took them home to prevent them from infecting the church. They would simply open their eyes in heaven, completely forgiven — and maybe a little embarrassed. There is also a possibility that these were not true believers at all. Perhaps they were a con artist couple — scammers who saw an opportunity in the early church to gain a place of prominence and popularity in this newfound community.

## APPLICATION

Regardless, one point is sure: if your heart is intent on deceiving the church for personal gain, and you are willing to lie, cheat, and manipulate to draw attention and praise to yourself, you should fear. God might not strike you down, but He will not allow the deception to continue. What about today? I think it's safe to say that, at least on a large scale, God isn't operating in this way today — not to say that He hasn't or doesn't remove people from the equation when they are becoming destructive to the church. But I think we all need to be aware that God sees and knows what is going on in our hearts, and that it matters to Him just as much now as it did then. He still purifies His church today through a winnowing process in which, at times, He removes people who might hinder what He is desiring to accomplish — and none of us are above His discipline.

“If God acted in the same way today that He did in the fifth chapter of Acts, you'd have to have a morgue in the basement of every church and a mortician on the pastoral staff.”

The young men carried him out — talk about a really interesting church internship program for the young guys! Imagine the shock. Peter, of all people, was probably shocked the most. After all, Peter had lied — three times he denied Jesus. Surely if Ananias deserved death, so did he. And yet the Holy Spirit knew Peter's heart was pure. He knew that though Peter was not perfect, Peter was never scheming in his heart on ways to manipulate the church for his own gain.

As the story moves on, we see that Ananias's accomplice — his wife — is given an opportunity to repent. Alas, she forfeits this opportunity, assuming that no one knows anyway.

### SCRIPTURE

Acts 5:7–10 — Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband.

Many might see Sapphira as the innocent victim, caught in the middle of her manipulative husband's scheme. But God shows us it was more than that. Her obedience to God was eclipsed by her loyalty to her husband. Yes, her husband was the one who hatched the scheme and planned it all out — but instead of taking the opportunity to repent and be truthful when given the chance, she sided with his deception, knowing that, in doing so, she was disobeying God.

### APPLICATION

This is where we must be careful when it comes to loyalty. Loyalty is good and important for building trust and relationships. But loyalty cannot come at the expense of truth. When it does, it just makes you part of the guilty party.

### ILLUSTRATION

The young men — these poor guys! Two graces in one day. Perhaps this is where churches got the idea of having the graveyard behind the sanctuary!

### MAIN POINT Point 4

The Shock

This event sent a shockwave through the entire community — believers and non-believers alike.

## SCRIPTURE

Acts 5:11–12 — So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things. And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch.

How do you honestly invite people to church after an event like that? "Hey, come with me to church. You'll love it — people are really dying to get in there." Fear — they trembled. There was no question in anyone's mind that God was real, that Jesus was alive, and that the Holy Spirit was present.

The reality is that among the 5,000-plus people in the first church in Jerusalem, I doubt Ananias and Sapphira were the only two who were pretending to be something they weren't. If God were setting a precedent that anyone who lied was going to drop dead when entering the church, many more people would have died.

## SCRIPTURE

Psalms 130:3-4 (NKJV) [3] If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? [4] But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.

God in His sovereignty chose that judgment for these two, but in reality, it always ought to remind us that it very well could have been us at some point in our Christian life. Perhaps this was God's mercy to everyone else to remind them about the importance of repentance, trusting in Christ's sacrifice, and pursuing holiness by His grace.

## Closing

There are a few things I can gather from this story that are important to God regarding the church:

A. The church should be a place of honesty:

## SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 4:25 — Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another.

Now, if we are honest, we have all lied. We have all, at some point, deceived, intentionally or unintentionally. Thank God for the grace He gives as we humble ourselves before Him. Thank God for the grace other Christians give as we humble ourselves before them. We need to be honest with ourselves. We need to be honest with God. We need to be honest with each other.

B. The church should be a place of integrity:

Purity in the body matters to God, and it should matter to us. We need to do the hard work of pursuing holiness and allowing the Spirit to sanctify us.

C. The church should be a place of transparency:

Have you ever gone to a place, maybe a foreign country, where you are always looking over your shoulder because you don't know if you can trust the people around you? If your answer is, "Yeah, last time I came to church," then there is a problem! We shouldn't have to be constantly paranoid about everyone's motives, assuming the worst about why people do what they do. We should all strive to be the kind of people that others can trust.

What's sad is that in many ways, we've created a church atmosphere where pretentiousness flourishes. You must perform or be ostracized. You must look spiritual, or people won't respect you. In many ways, we've created our own worst enemy. People no longer feel like they can be honest about their sins and struggles. But it is better to be honest and say, "I don't want to give it all," than to pretend and deceive in order to protect one's own reputation. I'm not saying we should be a place that condones sin, but we should be a place of grace — a place where someone can be humble without the fear of being forever looked down upon or shunned.

## SCRIPTURE

James 5:16 — Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

It's not that sin and lies don't have their unavoidable consequences — they do. But how awesome to be part of a family where the walls of fear have been torn down. How awesome to know that there is a brother or sister in the church with whom you can talk honestly about your struggles without fear of judgment. How awesome to walk into a men's group knowing you can lay it all on the table and the guys are going to pray with you, give you godly counsel, and even rebuke you in love. Between the examples we saw today, let's strive to be like Barnabas and like Peter. Let's search our hearts and be honest with the Lord and with one another.