

September 29, 2024

“Heroes & Villains: Ananias and Sapphira”

Acts 4:32-35

Intro:

The road to Hell, it is said, is paved with good intentions.

This morning as we continue our series on heroes and villains (and sometimes they are both!), we come to the arguably tragic tale of Ananias and Sapphira.

Their story is found in Acts 5:1-11, and this is the only place where they get any mention. We know very little about this couple other than what can be surmised from the brief narrative. They are converts to Christianity, most likely Jewish believers. Since the church has not yet been pushed to spread out from Jerusalem, it is also likely that they call that city home. They are probably somewhat wealthy, since they owned property that they were in a position to sell with the goal of donating the proceeds. I figure they had a good marriage and that Sapphira was treated as an equal partner in their business affairs, as she gets a vote on how the money from the sale of the land will be distributed.... But I am getting ahead of myself.

Generosity in the early church:

Their narrative really begins at the end of Acts chapter four, even though they aren't mentioned specifically in that section. Luke recounts that at this point in the life of the early church, there was a strong sense of generosity and sharing among the believers. They held to the idea that everything they had was given by God and belonged to Him, and so they shared everything with one another. This was unusual social behaviour, but it certainly allowed for appropriate care for those at the margins of society, such as widows, orphans, and the chronically ill. Luke mentions one particular person, Barnabas, who had sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles to disperse to those in need. Barnabas wasn't the only one sharing his wealth, but he gets special notice from Luke, probably because he features prominently in the early ministry of the apostle Paul

later on in Acts. Also, most likely his reputation and standing in the church, because of his generosity, warranted a special mention. While we wrap our minds around this level of generosity, it is worth noting that selling property to give to the ministry of the church to look after the less fortunate was not a requirement. It was simply a response to the generosity of grace given through Jesus, and part of the effort to follow His instructions to love one another and care for those less fortunate.

Ananias and Sapphira:

Ananias and Sapphira also decided that they could afford to be extra generous and sell some property. Their story, however, is vastly different than Barnabas' and those who get no specific mention. Things start out well enough when two of them make a plan to sell some property. But somewhere along the way, the thought is planted in their mind that they don't have to give all the proceeds of the sale to the needy. They could keep a portion back for themselves to enjoy. If the plot had stopped there, it would have been all right. But they take things further and decide to give only a portion of the sale, while claiming that it is the whole amount. Which is what they do.

Their intentions are good, or at least start out that way, but they allow something to get in the way and turn the good into something bad.

Ananias delivers the money, along with a fancy speech about that being the whole amount of the sale. Peter, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, although that isn't specifically mentioned, sees through the ruse and challenges Ananias to tell the truth. Ananias holds to the story and Peter casts judgement upon him for having lied to God. In this judgement, Peter doesn't care about the deception towards the apostles and the people of the church, but only about the fact that the lie was also pointed at God.

The consequence? Well, Ananias is struck down and dies on the spot. His body is quickly removed to be buried, and a little while later Sapphira comes onto the scene. She has no clue that anything has happened to her husband. She is

probably assuming that everything has gone off as planned and the future looks rosy for her and her husband. When pressed by Peter, she sticks to the story, after which Peter pronounces a judgement of death upon her as well. She dies just as the men who dealt with her husband's body return. They take her body out of the assembly as well.

This is a tragic tale, and one that honestly feels harsh. The property and the money from its sale rightfully belong to Ananias and Sapphira. They can give as much or as little as they like without anyone sticking their nose into it. There shouldn't have been a problem. And yet there was. A big problem.

Are they heroes or villains?

You might want to jump immediately into the villain camp. After all, only villains deserve the kind of punishment that they got. And you wouldn't necessarily be wrong. But what if they might also be heroes?

Heroes and Villains:

I suggest that they are indeed both heroes and villains. They start out as heroes, getting on board with the program of the rich helping the poor. That is generous. It is needed. It is effective. It is a good thing. It is possible that selling property like this will put them, as landowners, in a desperate situation of their own. But Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira, and the others who choose to give portions of their own land for the poor aren't worried about their own needs, just about caring for the needs of others. This is heroic.

So, yes, they are heroes.

But they are also villains. Villains, because they chose to mix deception into their charitable gift. The problem wasn't with the money or the land; it was with their lack of honesty and integrity. The problem was, I believe, a deep-seated desire to be noticed and treated as people who were important, and to whom much would be owed. Barnabas was getting public acknowledgement of the charitable work

he did. Why shouldn't they get the same? This was the lie that Satan was pushing into them – that they deserved credit for what they were doing – the same level of credit, if not more, that Barnabas was getting. And maybe, after selling the land and looking at their own financial situation, they realized they weren't in a position to give all that money to the church because they had their own financial needs.

Again, this in itself isn't a reason to label them villains. But the lie they bought into said that if they give only a portion, then everyone will know they could have given more and they might lose standing among the group. On the other hand, if they claim that the amount they give is the whole amount, then they will still be regarded as two of the more generous in the church, on a level with Barnabas. That is the point where the hero in them got eclipsed by the villain. The result was the sudden loss of their lives for trying to deceive the Holy Spirit.

That was Satan's game. He set them up to do just that.

Conclusion:

It is all too easy for us to get caught up in similar lies. The good deed we want to do gets confused by other issues, usually ones that have to do with how we think others will perceive us, or more accurately how we want them to perceive us. We like to be seen as heroes. Praise is a nice thing to receive.

Jesus tells us that praise and recognition aren't what we should seek, however. In the passage from Matthew 6 that we read earlier, Jesus warns against doing good deeds in order to get noticed. Are they still good deeds? Yes, but the motivation isn't. The money that Ananias and Sapphira gave was still helpful to those in greater need. But Jesus says, instead of looking for acknowledgement, do your good deeds in the background. Allow the deed to shine with God's blessing. He knows your effort. He sees the good thing you are doing or trying to do. He is pleased with that effort and desire. And when someone is blessed as a result, without knowing about your specific involvement, or the full extent of it, then

they will thank God, who is the provider of all things. This is good stewardship of the blessings that God gives us.

Let's pray.