

ACTS 4:32-5:11

INTRODUCTION

- What do you make of that passage? Disconcerting? Harsh? Severe?
 - On one hand, I love that it's in the Bible.
 - Bible includes all sorts of stories we'd have left out if we wrote it.
 - That's one of the things that helps you know that it's true!
 - But on the other hand—what on earth are we meant to do with it?!
- Slightly different approach today.
 - 1) Work our way through the **text**, making some comments as we go.
 - 2) Then share a handful of **takeaways** at the end.

THE TEXT¹

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

- This is the setup to our story.
 - It shows us that the church at its best is a generous community.
 - That would be the main point if we were only looking at these verses.
- When great grace comes upon you, it makes you give greatly to others.
 - One pastor (J. D. Greear) says that the gospel loosens your grip on your stuff and tightens your grip on others.
 - Before Jesus, we say: "That's my house, my money, my stuff."
 - With Jesus, we say: "How can I use everything I have to serve others?"
 - God is a generous God—and he loves it when his children give.

[Transition]: Next, we're introduced to a contrast in characters. First...

³⁶ Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

- Joseph is a subtle hero in the book of Acts.
- He appears 6x, and each time he's doing something awesome—google him when you get home.
- No wonder they give him the nickname Barnabas—son of encouragement.
 - That's something to aspire to!
 - He's the picture of an outside person—someone who's living deeply with God.

[Transition]: In contrast, we then meet...

¹ a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

- Deception creeps into the church.
- But Peter isn't fooled.

³ Peter 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?"

- Three things stand out about this verse.
 - First: This is the first time Satan is mentioned after the cross.
 - Second: Note that Satan fills their hearts—this is in direct contrast to how we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
 - Third: Note how Peter interprets their lie—it's not just been told to him, it's been told to the Holy Spirit.
- With that in mind, Peter takes us to the heart of the issue:

⁴ While [the property] 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.

- The issue here isn't the money.
 - The property was theirs—they could do what they wanted with it.
 - And after it was sold, the money was theirs—they could do what they wanted with it.
- The problem is the lie—that they pretended to be better than they were.

⁵When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

- We'll talk about this more at the end.
- For now, notice that pretending to be better than you are results in death.
- The young men pick up his dead body and bury him in the ground.
 - Young men—following Jesus will involve doing things you never expect.
 - Ministry residents—be glad I've not asked you to do anything like this... yet...

⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

⁸And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much."

- Imagine the drama of this moment...
- They've just seen Ananias die for pretending to be better than he is—now Sapphira is asked the same thing.
 - Will she tell the truth? Will she come clean?
 - She takes a breath, as everyone holds theirs—and then answers...

"Yes, for so much." ⁹But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

- The young men get back from digging one grave—immediately go out to dig another.
- Husbands: Do not lead your wife into sin.
 - We are responsible for their welfare and flourishing.
 - Set the right tone, be the first to repent, die to yourself, and lead her well.
- Wives: Do not follow your husband into sin.
 - Have gospel courage to follow God rather than men—even if the man is your husband.
 - For all the wives who are here alone this morning—well done and keep going.
 - Hold the line, keep coming to church, keep reading your Bible and following Christ, keep discipling your kids and don't give up.
 - God sees you and your faithful obedience.
- Everyone: Isn't it striking that God sees? We may fool others for a time, but never him.

[Transition]: When the church realized that, it shook them to the core, which is why our final verse says:

¹¹And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

- This is the first time the church is called the church...
- And this first church responded with great fear...

[Transition]: What do we do with a **text** like this? Let's consider three **takeaways**.

THE TAKEAWAYS

1. Pretending will kill you.

- Remember, their sin wasn't about the money—it was about pretending to be better than they were.
 - We call this the sin behind the sin: Whenever you're struggling with surface sin—you have to dig deeper to see what's happening in your heart.
 - For them, it was the desire to *look* better than they were.
- It's striking to me that this was Satan's first tactic after the cross:
 - He tempts them to pretend—to be fake.
 - He's been using this tactic ever since—and he's doing a pretty good job.
 - Who among us doesn't pretend?
 - From the garden to today—we all have parts of ourselves we keep hidden away.
 - And we're tempted to put on a mask—to act like we're better than we are.
 - Our curated, social media age certainly hasn't helped.
- But God can't be fooled, and he won't be mocked: He sees the heart—and for their sin, he strikes A/S dead.

[Apply]: Will he do the same to us? I have good news and bad news.

- The **Good News**—not **immediately** like in this text.
 - How do we know that?
 - Bc what happens here is a sign.
 - Do you remember the concept of a sign?
 - It's where "God takes something that is true in the kingdom of God and puts in on physical display."²
 - We've already seen examples of this in Acts.
 - Peter healed a man who had never walked. WHY? Bc in the kingdom, the blind receive sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear.
 - Or think about how the apostles spoke in languages they'd never learned. WHY? Bc the kingdom belongs to every nation, tribe, people, and language.
 - The point isn't that we can do these things today—the point is to show us what life looks like in the kingdom.
 - That's what's happening in our text—this story is a sign:
 - In the kingdom of God—every sin will be accounted for.
 - Even the things that took place out of sight.
 - Don't forget that we want that:
 - Deep down, we want a world where evil is dealt with—where abuse, injustice, racism, and violence aren't ignored.
 - We want God to deal with it—and he will deal with it all.

- That's what the kingdom promises.
- Every wrong will be made right.
- But that's also what makes this passage sobering—the **bad news**:
 - What happened **immediately** to A/S, will happen **ultimately** to all who keep pretending.
 - Judgment will come—pretending will kill you.

[Transition]: Which takes us to our second takeaway...

2. Fear is good.

- That might seem strange to our ears, especially if you're new to Xnty.
- But celebrate this—when you come to God:
 - You don't come to some senile, grandfather in the sky...
 - You come to the most glorious, robust, substantive being there is—someone that is worth giving your life to.
 - He is the embodiment of love.
 - And he is enthroned in glory, splendor, and might.
- The word that's used here—for fear—is the same word that was used back in chp 2 to describe awe.
 - God is beautiful, but he is also powerful.
 - So, when you see him as he really is—it's right to fear.
- John Piper has a great illustration for this:³
 - “Suppose you were exploring an unknown Greenland glacier in the dead of winter. Just as you reach a sheer cliff with a spectacular view of miles of jagged ice and mountains of snow, a terrible storm breaks in. The wind is so strong that the fear rises in your heart that it might blow you over the cliff. But in the midst of the storm you discover a cleft in the ice where you can hide. Here you feel secure, but even though secure, the awesome might of the storm rages on and you watch it with a kind of trembling pleasure as it surges out across the distant glaciers.
 - Not everything we call fear vanishes from your heart, only the life-threatening part. There remains the trembling, the awe, the wonder, the feeling that you would never want to tangle with such a storm or be the adversary of such power. And so it is with God.”
- We don't take God lightly.
 - You wouldn't stick a fork in an electric socket—and you shouldn't play games with God.
 - He is the power that gives life itself—fear of him is good.

[Transition]: So where's the hope?

- If pretending will kill you and God is to be feared—where do we turn?
- To our final takeaway—Pretending will kill you, fear is good, but...

3. Jesus is more than enough.

- God strikes A/S dead—but there's an alternative...
 - Not self-improvement—that only leads to more pretending!
 - But Jesus...
- His gospel is the antidote to pretending. WHY? Bc the gospel frees us to be honest.
 - We come as we are—naming our brokenness and sin—and receive full forgiveness in return.
 - In response to confession of sin, there is always assurance of pardon.
- We're ushered into the upside-down world of the gospel:
 - If you say you can't save yourself—he'll save you.
 - If you say you don't deserve forgiveness—he'll forgive you.
 - If you say you could never earn his love—he'll love you as you are.

You don't need to impress him—Jesus is enough.

You don't need to hide from him—Jesus is enough.

You don't need to pretend before him—Jesus is enough.

[Unbeliever]: I hope there's something compelling about this passage.

- If you don't like religious hypocrites, oof—God agrees.
- What he wants is for us to be honest—about our strengths and gifts, but also about our sin and brokenness.
 - That's what it means to become a Xn.
 - Not pretending—but coming clean before a God who already knows!
- Here's my question: Will you do that, too?
 - We can't throw darts at the hypocrisy of others, if we're not honest about ourselves...
 - Will you be honest about yourself this morning?
 - God will not save some pretend version of you.
 - But he will save you as you are.

[Believer]: I hope we'll see that the honesty we have in our vertical relationship with God frees us to live differently in our horizontal relationships with others.

- We can be a counter-cultural witness.
 - Where we come out of hiding.
 - Where we live without pretending.
- [Illustrate]
 - When I was writing this section of this sermon, I was sitting on my deck.
 - I'd been to counseling that morning—not an impressive start.
 - Then I'd gone to the gym—so my hair was a mess.
 - When I got home, I'd put my sweats on—which, as my wife likes to remind me, are full of holes.
 - And I was smoking a cigar.
 - Then, unplanned, my family arrived home.

- One of my beloved sons said, “Look at this disheveled man.”
 - In this moment, my outward appearance mirrored my heart within.
 - Fortunately, I’ve got people in my life who know all about it.
- What about you? How’s your heart? What are you hiding? Where are you pretending?
 - Maybe you haven’t been generous.
 - Maybe you have some other secret sin.
 - Maybe things at home are tense and hard.
 - Maybe you haven’t opened your Bible in years.
 - Maybe you’re angry or lonely or scared.
- Or what would it look like to live a little more authentically?
 - To stop living by the expectations other people put on you—money, success, beauty, weight—that have nothing to do with following Jesus.
 - To care a little less about what people think—about your house, parenting, or social media account.
 - To be an outside person who lives deeply with Jesus—in other words, to be yourself.
- This prospect of a wildly honest life can be terrifying, and yet—it’s also everything we want life to be.
 - It breaks my heart to think of a church where we allow pretending to be a cap on our love.
 - Where we all rub shoulders, being honest about 80%
 - But keep other things hidden, unseen, unloved.
 - How amazing would it be for us to be an honest community?
 - Where we live in the light.
 - Where we find hope and healing for 100% of our hearts.
 - Talk to a friend about how you’re really doing.
 - Let people see, not just the polish but the mess.
 - Learn to say, “I don’t know,” “I’m not okay,” or “I need help.”
 - Jesus loves to show up in broken spaces—it’s where he does his best work.
- And that’s the kind of community he died to create—a people honest about their sin, healed by his grace, and unafraid to live in the light.
- And we can live that way—bc Jesus is enough.

CONCLUSION

- Pretending will kill you. Fear is good. Jesus is more than enough.

The church at its best lives without pretending.

RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*.
- Ray Cortese, *The Mission: Clarified, Mobilized, Empowered*.
- Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption*.
- Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts*.
- Alan Thompson, *Acts: A Commentary*.

¹ I owe many of the observations in this section to other sources: John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*; Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts*; and especially J. D. Greear, *A Church's Sin and God's Amazing Grace*, which was particularly formative in the preparation of this sermon.

² J. D. Greear, *A Church's Sin and God's Amazing Grace*.

³ I came across this illustration in J. D. Greear, *A Church's Sin and God's Amazing Grace*. It is taken from John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*.