

“Living as a Witness”

-OR-

“Dying to be Recognized.”

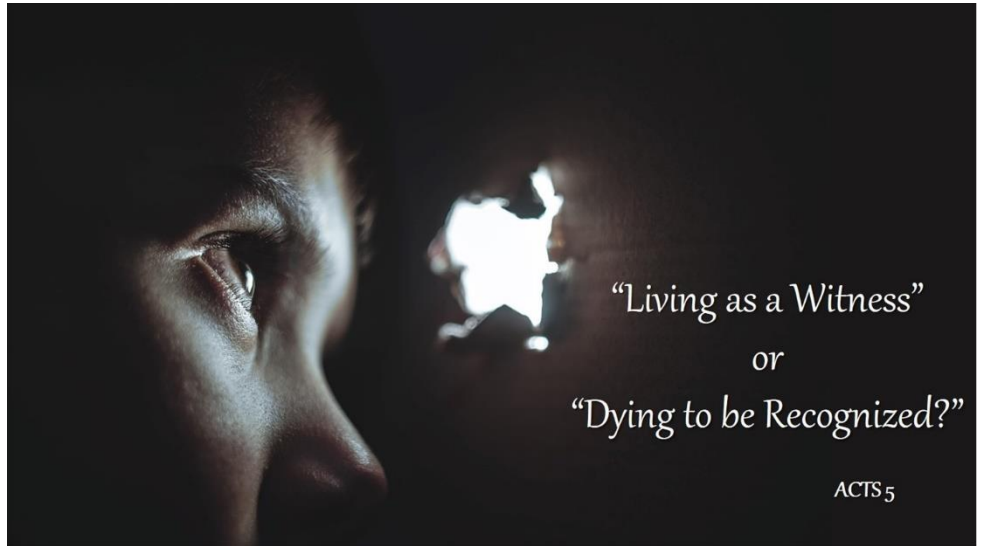
- Acts 5 -

by Pastor Tim Dodson
at JF Believers Church
in Menomonie, Wisc
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1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. 2 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. 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? 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." 5 Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. 6 And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him. 7 Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." 9 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." 10 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.

11 So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things. 12 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. 13 Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. 14 And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, 15 so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. 16 Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed. 17 Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, 18 and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. 19 But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life." 21 And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. 22 But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, 23 saying, "Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!" 24 Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. 25 So one came and told them, saying, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" 26 Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. 27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, 28 saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" 29 But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. 30 "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. 31 "Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 "And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him." 33 When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. 34 Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while. 35 And he said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. 36 "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. 37 "After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. 38 "And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; 39 "but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God." 40 And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. 42 And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.



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At the end of the last chapter, we saw an expression of unity and love within the early church. People understood and embraced the directive that Christ had given them: *to deny themselves, pick up their cross, and follow Jesus*. This was not some idyllic world of picturesque Christianity. It was a *real* church of believers, with all of its very *real* human flaws. No fellowship is perfect and this one wasn't then either. But that's not what this story is about...a "shortcoming" in a member of the body. If it had, the outcome would have been very different.

There are many reasons a person may participate on some level at a local church. Some folks are merely looking for nice people to keep company with. Some are looking for a spouse or a community club. Some are looking for some social work intervention...a food shelf, some material and financial help, some psychological counseling, maybe some assistance with their misbehaving kids. Some see church as a hedge against hell, a soothing balm against the road rash of life, and perhaps an "I-do-my-part-God-and-so-you-have-to-make-my-life-all-good" thinking. There are some also that are looking for power or position, a status amongst their peers, or to appear upright to the community at large. The list here is long and sordid.

One may find it hard to recognize such ulterior motives in those around them, but eventually, *every time*, the day will come when they will "show their hand." Of course it gets real messy in a hurry, but seldom is there any saving that situation for they are simply "speaking a whole other language" than you are. When you try to reason with them about church and community life they are simply on a whole other planet and cannot have a discourse with you about matters for which they do not care and never have. Many folks through this pandemic have shown their true colors on this matter. Its been a good "spring cleaning." The reality is, few people are actually in church for righteous reasons...to love and serve others (bodylife), to worship God and glorify His kingdom, to grow in spiritual maturity so as to complete my personal and corporate mission in this brief passing through this world.

This is the first real sin to manifest itself in the church community, and it is a serious one. It was the sin of "keeping back." Sadly, we often tend to see sin as merely that of *commission*. Meaning a wrong we *commit*. An error we *act upon*. Sins of commission are those sinful actions that are proactively done. Lying or stealing are examples of sins of commission. But the Bible has much to say about sins of **omission**. James 4:17 (NLT) says "*Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.*" A sin of omission is a sin that takes place because of not doing something that is right. Examples could include not financially supporting your church community, not speaking up for what is right in a conversation, or not loving my brethren, or not fulfilling your promises. Often we eventually **DO** commit an overt sin trying to cover sins of omission!

What's important is our understanding that these peripheral issues...collusion, dishonesty, false motives, lying, broken promises, pretending, etc...these are serious matters to God. We tend to believe that because there is no obvious blood showing that it's all so "not a big deal." But it is to God! Ecc 5:4-6 says "*When you make a promise to God, don't delay in following through, for God takes no pleasure in fools. Keep all the promises you make to him. It is better to say nothing than to make a promise and not keep it. Don't let your mouth make you sin. And don't defend yourself by telling the Temple messenger that the promise you made was a mistake. That would make God angry, and he might wipe out everything you have achieved.*"

The most biblically famous of these pretenders is the duo Ananias and Sapphira. Whenever the subject of lying or cheating as a confessing Christian comes up, so do the names of Ananias and Sapphira. What a sad and timeless legacy to leave the world! It makes one wonder what each of *us* will leave behind!

These two have unwittingly brought forward for us all to consider, the issue of *holding back* from God. In this practice lies the cusp of this scriptural event. They kept back a portion of the sale of their land, which would have been just fine because, as Peter said, it was their land to do with as they wished. The issue was not that they kept part of the sale, but that they *feigned they had given it all*. They said one thing with their lips and their feigned actions, but ultimately lied to do another.

The *world at large* is of course no stranger to such behavior, but sadly we literally have generations of Ananias and Sapphira's *gracing the pews* of America also! The details of each situation vary, but the end result is the same: *so many people holding back from God*. It matters little as to what the issue is or the excuse we might offer up in our defense. It could be money or time or service, or something as basic as heart and love. But a back alley deal has apparently been attempted to give God not *all*, but rather a percentage of what we have and who we are. And the gas on the fire is that we feign to others that we are "all in" and they can count on us. After all, we wouldn't want anyone to think we are not Christians, right?

"Keeping back" is partial commitment and is therefore no **commitment** at all. And despite our modern revisionist version of Christianity, the Bible is quite clear that the only real Christianity is full surrender... everything 'on the table' ... "all the way in" faith. Keeping back is deceptive. Once again, the very word "deception" has no place in a Christian community or a Christians life. They tried to deceive the church, and all those they defrauded were their brothers and sisters in that fellowship. They wanted privilege and honor...as well as all the benefits of community participation without paying the price of loyalty and commitment.

Keeping back is allowing Satan to fill one's heart instead of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the person whom stirs us to deceive and lie. The Holy Spirit stirs love...love for God, our brothers, and for righteousness and holiness.

Keeping back is lying. To those who are to be your brothers and sisters, as well as to God and the Holy Spirit. Ironically, it is this pretender who often does more harm and damage to the name of Christ than the greatest sinner. How can that be? The pretender's life cries out to the world: "The power of God's Son is...

- not important enough for me to give up everything."
- not powerful enough to change me."
- not loving enough to demand my loyalty and priority."
- not beneficial enough to pull me out of the world."

Thus such a practice is very serious to God even if we want to minimize it. This sin cuts the heart of God. Yes, God loves every sinner ...the hypocrite, the deceiver, the liar. But that individuals heart must repent and respond to the gospel as God reaches out to him.

Ananias and Sapphira attempted to *fake their commitment*. They were attempting to *deceive the church*. This shows a fundamental lack of understanding of God and our relationship to Him. This is often the case! We fail to place this issue in the realm of real world viability and actual application to our lives. Whenever we attempt to hold onto part of the world, while grasping at a measure of spiritual standing, we fail to achieve the balance that we desire. We become lukewarm and useless in the spiritual realm, simply becoming God's "vomit" which He will ultimately expel from His "body." (Rev 3:16)

Whether we can humanly handle the extremity of this Biblical account, that is exactly what happened to both of these individuals in the story! In this case, the end result was literally death! Whether that death is bodily or spiritual for us, one cannot expect to steal from God and remain indefinitely in His good graces. God is not messing around on this matter and He obviously does not take such lightly. Once again, in the end, the lie was not unto man, but unto God and His Holy Spirit.

We would be amiss if we moved on from this story without mentioning this issue of *fear*. Ananias and Sapphira had premeditated their sin, which immediately places such into the realm of **transgression**: a *knowing sin*. The Word of God has much to say about the issue of transgression. The pages of the book of James are rich with examples on this subject.

When we transgress God's directions, we stand in the very real possibility that we have not truly been reborn and still remain firmly planted in the realm of the natural man. We should naturally have a *fear* of our Creator in such

scenarios! However, this is not the relationship He longs to have with us. Rather, He desires to have loving parental participation in our lives that is based on trust and honesty.

We must acknowledge that we cannot play games with God. He knows all and sees all, and furthermore expects us to hold to our promises, and lying does not sit well with him. In fact, it is one of the 7 things God hates in Proverbs 6! In salvation, I repent or turn away from my old path and agree to walk in obedience to the Lord who has bought me out of my slavery. When I attempt to circumnavigate that design I falsify my salvation, and I naturally fall into a fear relationship with God, *or at least it should!* (2 Peter 2:21 NLB)

In verse 12-16 we see more of the miraculous exercised at the hands of the apostles. Today, we live in an age where the church seeks after “signs and wonders.” Our desire for such is most often for the wrong reasons! Today, such desire is for the titillating of flesh, and not for glorifying God. It is more of a thirst for the sensational than a thirst for the hand of the Lord!

Signs and wonders occurred in order to speak in real terms of the power and legitimacy of the apostles’ ministry. They also appear to manifest God’s sovereignty over all things, even disease and the natural world. However segments of the greater church today have elevated these manifests to a point in which they supersede the very Word of God. The miraculous has in many cases become the mandatory “proof of life” that God is working in a given situation. Thus God seems to distance Himself from such activities because it is man ultimately attempting to dictate how, when, and where, He acts. Its not “*thy* will be done” but rather “*my* will be done!”

However, the result of the miraculous at the hands of the apostles was *a true presentation of God, His power, and a life in His direct presence and control*. Note that because of such a true authentic display of God’s power, some people actually did *not* join them. That is, on the surface, a negative aspect. However, the alternative is simply more Ananias and Sapphira! It is better to know what we are getting into and the truth of the Christian walk, than to lull people into a decision that they do not fully understand and appreciate. Lack of care in this area can seem to be a “bait and switch” and will only eventually one day rise up to bite the hand that was feeding them.

However, the miraculous hand of God *did* continue to be manifested through the apostles. There were no TV cameras or collection plates to pass. They were just doing the ministry of God, and doing it for His glory, and God chose to reveal Himself in a mighty way. Certainly signs and wonders are great things to behold! We love to witness God healing the sick, rolling out the miraculous, or moving a mountain. But what about the quiet power of a “still, small voice?” The hushed but awesome transformation in the life of one single individual? The reserved move of the Spirit in a little Midwest church? Are any of these things any less of a sign of His presence or wonder of His power? Signs and wonders are still happening, but the question is, are we seeing them?

The scriptural record herein of people seeking the shadow of Peter to pass over them may seem “out there” in our estimate, however it was in fact (still is in some places) a very oriental custom. There was/is the belief that a person’s qualities, good or bad, are so far reaching as to inhabit one’s very shadow! This record speaks of the renown Peter had and the high esteem given to him by the people. No record is given that anyone was healed directly through Peter’s shadow, but it does lend a historic credibility to Peter’s ministry.

In the latter half of this chapter we see again the “powers that be” rise up in jealous rivalry and envy, vividly proving that one will see only what he is prepared to see! Despite these miraculous healings, the casting out of demons, and the very freeing of these people’s lives, these pious religious leaders were indignant.

They were more concerned about their own personal community position than in the transformation of lives through the power of God. It was more important for them to be *popular* than to be *righteous* and *holy*! Their social status was a matter of power, influence, and position, and not compassion and mercy. Essentially they were no different than Ananias and Sapphira by such a measurement!

These religious leaders obviously felt threatened by the success and popularity of the apostles, so they simply had them put in jail. In times like this, one could easily wonder how our loving God could allow such an uncomfortable and even painful state to come upon those who love Him. While God does indeed love us, we need to understand that such is a “perfect love!” A love that reaches more than just *today*, more than just comfort, and to more than just *you!* God sees and operates via the big picture, and via the whole body of Christ. To be a child of God is to take our place in that body of Christ, and to fulfill our role in the furthering of the Kingdom. That may or may not be a place of comfort and longevity!

Verse 19 reminds us that no prison doors or walls are too much for God! We read the declarations of God’s creative and redemptive power. We see the heavens with stars, the oceans filled with life, the miraculous creation of a flower, a giant Redwood, or a new born baby! Yet ironically we flinch when the comparatively simple issues of our lives arise, and we often then go to seek out a “professional” to handle our needs!

“Go to the temple and give the people this message of life!” (vs 20) As in *our* salvation, these men had not been rescued so they might run and hide in a cave somewhere where they could have relative physical safety! The apostles weren’t survivalists. They were players. Certainly risk-takers! They were saved so that they might get out there! No less is expected as a result of *our* salvation! **“Go and speak to the people all the words of this life.”** Not a creed, or a doctrine, or a mere belief. No, this was their new *life!*

There is no record of argument, debate or even discussion on the matter. They simply did as they were instructed. It was not because they understood everything God was doing or even *knew* what He had in mind. But they knew God loved them and that He was personally involved in their endeavor. That was all that mattered. There *was* always, and *is* always those who are out there plotting our downfall. One might call that paranoia, but it was *very real* for these apostles! They did not fight back. Instead, they merely went about the business of the Kingdom, and left the defense to the Master!

The freed apostles promptly and obediently went to the temple and began to teach again. Such boldness! This is what sets apart the servant of the King: *one who refuses to be stopped, not by fear or intimidation...*

“That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.” **Luke 1:74-75**

“...not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.” **Zech 4:6**

Let us forever remember that God is never bound by man’s attempts to stop His work! Locked doors are hardly an issue for the Creator of all. One can’t miss the humorous words of the high priests as they wonder, rather incredulously, how all of this was going to end! God was working over these guys and they didn’t have a clue...

People often claim that they would believe if only they were witnesses to the miraculous hand of this God we claim exists. Yet that has been disproved time and time again. Even though God had done a fantastic miracle right before them, they refused to relent and turn from their path of persecution. In fact, such only made them angry and emboldened. That’s been pretty much the same response out there to 30 years of God’s manifest in this church!

So with the greatest of audacity, the apostles promptly returned to the temple and began teaching again. Now the people were coming around to what the apostles were saying and the “tide” was beginning to turn against the priests. The apostles were winning the favor of the “people on the street.” Those who opposed the apostles would have to deal with them a little more carefully or the people would turn against *them...*

“...you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine...” Wow! What a blessed compliment! What was meant to be a curse against this group of Jesus’ followers, was, in truth, the greatest of praise! If only such a ‘criticism’ would be leveled at the members of this church!

These priests followed up this declaration with a feeble attempt to wash their hands of the blame of the death of Christ. This is ironic considering in the gospel accounts we heard these men... along with the people, say...as they clamored for His crucifixion, “*His blood be on us, and on our children.*”

What happened there in that room was epic. The apostles laid it down thick, and they did so without flinching. What elegant words from a bunch of uneducated fishermen and blue-collar working men! They covered it all really. The gospel in a nutshell, the foundation of the Christian faith, man’s guilt, the death of Christ, His resurrection, and the call to *respond* to His saving grace!

This Pharisee Gamaliel was a fairly wise individual. Despite no evidence that he was any kind of a believer, he was used by God to protect His own. God uses who He wants, when He wants. Redeemed follower or pagan, God controls the board fully. Gamaliel was a renowned teacher who even taught Saul of Tarsus, who later became Paul the apostle.

Gamaliel’s philosophical comments in verse 35 onward was essentially correct: everything that is not of God is doomed. But his observation had *one flaw*. Evil ideas, demonic works, deceivers and self-seekers...they are not necessarily destroyed in the short run. They *are eventually*, but not necessarily quickly. Evil is sometimes allowed to work in order to wake up mankind to their need for God and His deliverance.

Certainly these religious leaders were plotting to kill these proclaimers of the faith, and it was not just idle talk. After all, they killed Jesus and would soon do the same to Stephen. The cost of following Jesus has always been great; but *that* day they would continue to live, and they most certainly would continue to press the name of Jesus! What a difference between these disciples out of that early church, and Ananias and Sapphira!

These religious leaders knew something very powerful was in the air. There was enough evidence out there to cause even the staunchest foe of the faith to flinch. The apostles left this event rejoicing. “*Rejoicing?*” How could they rejoice at persecution and pain? Because it was not in those things that they rejoiced. It was in the fact that by receiving the same treatment that Jesus received, and therefore they walked a little closer to Him. They shared in His life, *all* of His life. There were blessings of *good*, and blessings of the *difficult and painful*. For the apostles, *every aspect* of the walk of the believer was a blessing. It was not a *doctrine*, it was more than a *creed*; it was a *life!*

“Go ...and speak to the people all the words of this life...” Acts 5:20. They did and they changed the world.
Witnesses of God...