

“Keeping Up Appearances...”

Acts 5:1-11

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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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.

The band REM's lead singer Michael Stipe's life...while commercially and publicly successful, has been marked by intense personal struggles, including debilitating anxiety, sexual confusion, a mid-80s nervous breakdown, bulimia, and profound grief from losing close friends Kurt Cobain and River Phoenix. He navigated extreme paranoia during the AIDS crisis...fraught with the thought that his sexual promiscuity would kill him. All the while, he struggled with and was overwhelmed by the pressures of fame.

I am reminded of the contradictory presentation of his stage presence...as he sang his hit song "Shiny Happy People"...

Shiny happy people laughing
Meet me in the crowd, people, people
Throw your love around, love me, love me
Take it into town, happy, happy
Put it in the ground where the flowers grow
Gold and silver shine
Shiny happy people holding hands
Shiny happy people holding hands
Shiny happy people laughing

A few years back, I shared a story about a llama at a farm out toward Boyceville. I passed that llama everyday as I drove home. I was convinced that that llama thought he was a cow. He lived with a bunch of cows...he only saw cows, and no other llamas. He didn't have a mirror...thus he never saw himself, only those around him. They were all cows. So he must therefore be a cow too.

All because he had never really seen himself for what he was.

Jesus spoke to such individuals in Matthew 23. While speaking to a group of “publicly and commercially successful religious folks”, He said to them:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” Matthew 23:25-28

These church-going folks of Jesus’ day were all about keeping up appearances, having the form of godliness by their outward actions and cleanliness, but, as Jesus said of them, they were “whitewashed tombs.” They were adorned on the outside, but inside they were dead.

Most often, when you go to the grocery store, packaged foods carry a list of ingredients that were used in the making of that particular manufactured item. The ingredients are generally listed in descending order – the ingredient that’s listed first is more than any of the other ingredients in that product.

Say, for example, that you’re shopping for orange juice. All the packages look inviting – pictures of bright, juicy oranges and tall glasses of orange juice with just the right amount of condensation. The packaging people have done their research. However, if you look closely at the ingredient lists on the package, you’ll find a very different story.

One package lists: “water, high fructose corn syrup and 2% or less of each of the following: concentrated juices (orange, tangerine, apple, lime, grapefruit), citric acid, ascorbic acid (vitamin C), Thiamin hydrochloride (vitamin B1), natural flavors, modified cornstarch, canola oil, sodium citrate, cellulose gum, xanthan gum, sodium hexametaphosphate, sodium benzoate to protect flavor, yellow #5, yellow #6.”

Um, but where’s the orange juice? Well, if you look closely, it’s listed third: “2% or less ... concentrated juices (orange...etc)”.

However, you can pick up another juice container and check its ingredients list: “100% pure squeezed pasteurized orange juice.” Wow! If you just looked at the pictures on the packaging, you wouldn’t be able to tell that one of the bottles of juice was the genuine quality product. Indeed, one is going to be much more expensive as well, but that’s the reality of something of quality and the truth behind why the first “juice” is even marketed: its inexpensive and it looks good, ...*even if it’s not.*

Anyway, one of those containers holds actual orange juice and the other is simply a chemical cocktail made to look and taste like orange juice, even though they can...at first glance...look the same.

If you wrote out the ingredients of your heart and mind listed on a label, what would you...*yes, what would others* ...learn about you by reading it? What would be the first ingredient listed? Would you be able to call

yourself Jesus-flavored or Jesus-filled? Would your packaging match your ingredients? Or would you be like the Pharisees, “whitewashed tombs ... full of dead men’s bones?”

Because the reality is that our world...yes, our *churches*... are full of those who appear...or at least seek to appear, as “shiny happy religious people”...or some version of such, but are in fact privately a very different person to be sure.

This brings us to our text this morning...the epic saga of Ananias and Sapphira, two such famous “publicly and commercially successful religious folks.” The story seems to call for a sad country music background with maybe some slow banjo music. For this infamous duo has gone down in history as the very embodiment of “keeping up appearances.”

At the end of chapter 4 of the book of Acts, we saw an awesome expression of unity and love within that early church. There was a pouring out of the spirit of God. People understood and embraced the directive that Christ had given them as true disciples: to deny themselves, pick up their cross, and follow Him. Yet at the same time, this was not some picturesque prima donna world of Christianity. It was a *real* church of believers, with all of its very real human flaws. And with that being the case, it did not take long for the pretenders to surface.

Two of the most famous of these pretenders is our duo Ananias and Sapphira. Whenever the subject of lying, cheating, short-sheeting God, withholding truth, and attention seeking comes up in the church world, so do the names of Ananias and Sapphira. What a sad and timeless legacy to leave behind! It certainly makes one wonder what each of us will leave behind!

That question raises an issue for us all to consider: which is the greater matter in this practice of “holding back from God?” Ananias and Sapphira kept back a portion of the money gained on 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. They may have said no to the compelling voice of God to give of themselves and their material resources, and that may have indeed been a sin for them. But the “nail in the coffin” came, not because they kept part of the sale money, but rather *because they feigned they had given it all*. They pretended to be something they were not. They lied. And they *died*.

In Proverbs 6 there is a list of things God hates. Yes, *hates*. Things like pride, murder, causing division in the church, and our “running to evil.” These we would likely all agree are reasonable and understandable: of course He would “hate” *those* things! But then this list goes on to include...twice really...the sin of lying. Of all the evil things he could have included, it was actually “lying” that made the list of the things that our perfect God “hates.”

Sadly today, we literally have generations of Ananias and Sapphira’s gracing the pews of America. The details of each situation are different, but the end result is the same: so many people holding back from God...so many people pretending that they have given everything. It could be money, time, marriage, family or service, or something as basic as heart and love. But it is ultimately an attempt to avoid giving all to God, but rather give some percentage of what we have and who we are. And the penalty in this stark example was not a slap on the wrist or a firm talking-to. No, the result was death.

How many of us live our faith in the realm of: **I will be a Christian, but I must have...** (*fill in the blank*). We don’t *ask* Him, we demand it. In fact, we *force* it. We demand a slice of the world as a desert after our spiritual meal.

The sad irony of this is that setting aside the extreme and false “prosperity doctrine,” we have to understand that God does indeed long to bless us on so many different levels. By holding back anything from our God...He who not only *owns* everything, but *made* everything...is not only foolish, but ultimately self-defeating! The end result is actually contrary to what we are trying to accomplish by holding back in the first place. (Note Mark 8:35-36)

And to add to that, is the irony that their action...*often not even overt sin, but rather a seemingly benign issue that we refused to actually ask God about but rather was embraced as my human right...* was not nearly as wicked as the accompanying sins of obstinance, selfishness, collusion and the premediated lying to cover up the motivations behind our actions. Like Ananias and Sapphira, we move in such a way as to look good to the people around us...to our church mates, while our hearts are often a million miles from that perception.

Ananias and Sapphira attempted to fake their commitment. They were attempting to deceive the church, God, and the world at large. This shows a fundamental lack of understanding of God as well as our relationship with Him. This is often the case! We therefore fail to situate this issue within the realm of real-world viability and practical application in our lives.

Whenever we attempt to hold onto part of this world while still grasping at a measure of spiritual standing, ...*or at least the perception of spiritual standing*, we fail to achieve the balance that we desire. Instead we merely become lukewarm and useless in the spiritual realm. We simply become “God’s vomit” which He will ultimately expel from His “body.” (Rev 3:16) We may have problems with the extreme nature of this story, but what happens to both of these individuals in the story is a fact and included in the scriptures as a warning...as an **example**. In this case, the end result of their attempts to “keep up appearances” was literally death! Whether that death is bodily or spiritual for us, the point is the same: one cannot expect to steal from God and remain indefinitely in His good graces. You see, in the end, the lie was not unto man, but unto God and His Holy Spirit.

Another irony to add to the list, is the fact that despite their belief that they could pull off this ruse, Peter saw through it. Maybe this “light” came to him supernaturally, or maybe such attempts are just that transparent. People just don’t realize that there really is no hiding. I know that I’m no prophet and I am factually seldom surprised. Listen...you need to know this: **we see you**. As the old saying goes “*you can fool some of the people, some of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.*”

We would be amiss if we moved on from this story without mentioning this issue of fear as we read in verse 11. 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 never actually been reborn and instead still remain firmly in the realm of the natural man...no matter how much or how long we go to church. Indeed, we should naturally have a fear of our Creator, God! Yet such is never the basis of the relationship He longs to have with us. Rather, He desires to have a loving parental participation in our lives, one that is based on trust and honesty.

It is so important to clearly understand that we cannot play games with God and get away with it. He knows all and sees all, and furthermore He expects us to hold to the agreement we made with Him. 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. I have essentially “died” and have been “reborn.” In doing so, I now belong to Him. **All of me**.

When I attempt to circumnavigate this design I falsify my salvation, and I ultimately fall into a fear relationship with God. (2 Peter 2:21 NLB)

There are many reasons a person may participate on some level in 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.

If 35 plus years of ministry has taught me anything, it is that eventually, every time, the day will come when a person will “show their hand.” When that happens, it gets real messy in a hurry, and seldom is there any saving the situation, for they are simply “speaking a whole different language” than you are. When you try to reason with them about church, community life, and the reality of “other people,” they are simply on a whole different planet and cannot have a discourse with you about matters for which they do not care about and never have. History reflects the fact that few people are actually in church for righteous reasons...to love and serve others (body-life), to worship God and glorify His kingdom, to hear from God and their pastor on matters of life and living, to grow in spiritual maturity so as to complete my personal and corporate mission in this brief passing through this world.

This was...*and is*, the sin of “keeping back.” Sadly, we often see sin as merely that of “commission.” Meaning a wrong we **commit**. An error we act out. 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 holding out on God financially, not speaking up for what is right in a conversation, or not loving my brethren, or not fulfilling your promises. Eventually we actually effect a “**commission** sin” in our efforts to cover sins of **omission**! The truth always eventually comes home to roost.

What’s important is our understanding that these perceived “peripheral issues”...collusion, dishonesty, false motives, lying, broken promises, pretending, etc...these are actually 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.*”

How many of us are attempting back-alley deals to give God not all, but rather a “percentage” of what we have and who we are? And through it all, 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 fine upstanding Christians, right? What would people say?

The Bible is quite clear that the only real Christianity is a full surrender... everything ‘on the table’ ...“all the way in” faith. Keeping back is deceptive. Feigning to **be**...to **do**...to **give**...to **live** in one manner and to live the opposite, **is all simply lying**. And God hates lying. We do it with our marriages, our finances, our children, our relationships, our spiritual lives. Why? Why would anyone do this? It could be shame, embarrassment, community competition, pride or something as childlike as the desire for privilege and honor. We tend to want the benefits of community participation without paying the price of loyalty and commitment. We want real orange juice but at the price of the facsimile.

Why would God “hate” such behavior? Because the pretender often does more harm and damage to the name of Christ than the greatest sinner. How can that be? The pretender’s life tends to cry 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."

In closing, I am compelled to say this: *you don't have to be perfect to go to this church...to participate in this church...to lead in this church.* The fact is none of us are. David was a murderer and guilty of sexual crimes, but God said he was a "man after my own heart." No one here is perfect. We are all unfinished projects. Repent and seek forgiveness. Be honest with God and with your brothers and sisters. For as Ananias and Sapphira found out, the lie, the cover-up...the "ruse"...in word and action, can be very very expensive. There *was* no and *is* no place to hide in the church. That's why many folks in the throws of public discovery make a run for the hills. Remember...authentic 100% fresh squeezed juice? ...that stuff is going to cost you. But it's the real thing. The *only* real thing...