

Acts 5:1-6

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/acts/acts-5/acts-51-6/>

Two believers, Ananias and his wife Sapphira, sell property just as other believers have been doing. However, they plot to keep some of the money for themselves, and lie to the apostles that they are donating the full sale to the church. Peter confronts Ananias for lying to God. God strikes Ananias dead and he is buried.

The passage begins with the word *But*, contrasting with the passage that came before it at the end of Acts 5, where the church was acting in unity with God and one another. Here, Luke reports about a husband and wife, *Ananias* and *Sapphira*, who try to defraud the church (and the Holy Spirit Himself). They are the counter-example to Barnabas, who generously sold land and gave his money to the needy in the church:

“Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

(Acts 4:36-37)

There was no mandate in the church where everyone had to give up their possessions. The early church was doing it voluntarily. Luke provides us with the example of Barnabas, beginning with “Now Joseph...also called Barnabas...” sold his land and gave it to the apostles to distribute. *But a man named Ananias, with his Sapphira, sold a piece of property as well. The difference between this man and Barnabas was that Ananias kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles’ feet.*

The language is the same as it was with Barnabas’ gift, both parties *sold* land, and brought money and *laid it at the apostles’ feet*. However, Barnabas gave his entire earnings to the apostles. *Ananias* only brought a *portion* of his sale, but passed it off as though he were bringing the full *price*. He did this *with his wife’s full knowledge*, meaning that they concocted this lie together, while secretly they *kept back some of the price*. Again, there was no dictate from the apostles that all church members sell their possessions and bring the proceeds. In each instance that Luke reports charity, the believers are doing it of their own volition (Acts 2:44-45, Acts 4:34-37). There is no such thing as coerced generosity, and God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Peter sees through the lie right away. It seems that the *Holy Spirit* revealed the truth to him. After *Ananias* has brought a *portion* of his sale and *laid it at the apostles’ feet*, Peter confronts him immediately, asking *Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.*

Peter points out that there was no reason for *Ananias* to *lie*. The church did not compel him to sell his land. When the land still belonged to *Ananias*, when *it remained unsold*, it was still Ananias' possession with which he could do as he pleased. Neither God nor the church demanded he sell it. It was his *own* property. Even *after it was sold*, Peter rhetorically asks him *was it not under your control?* *Ananias* could have done whatever he wanted with the sale *price*. He could have kept it for himself, he could have given it to the temple, he could have used it to purchase another property. He could have given part and kept part.

Instead, he *conceived a deed* in his *heart* to deceive the apostles. With *his wife Sapphira's full knowledge*. Based on the previous passage, it seems the husband and *wife*'s motivation was to appear more generous than they were. They had just seen a fellow believer, Joseph, sell land and give all his earnings to the church elders. This was a man to whom the apostles gave a special name, Barnabas, Son of Encouragement. *Ananias and Sapphira* apparently took notice of the favor that this earned Barnabas (though he had done it solely from the Holy Spirit's leading, out of love for the needy in the church, like many other wealthy believers were doing). It appears that *Ananias and Sapphira* were motivated by pride, by the desire to have other people think well of them, while also being led by their desire to keep a certain percentage of the money.

Their sin was not that they withheld money, but that they lied about giving the full amount to look good to the apostles and other believers.

Peter attributes this idea to *Satan*, who *filled Ananias's heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land*. And that is why Ananias receives a sudden judgement from God, because, as Peter tells him, *You have not lied to men but to God*.

And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last. God struck him dead. It is a shocking moment that stands out from the rest of the New Testament. The result of *Ananias*'s abrupt death is that *great fear came over all who heard of it*. The believers who learned of what had happened became afraid. They were given a clear warning from God not to lie to Him by lying to the church. The true enemy of God and His church is *Satan*. The church is young and growing, and is already under siege from the Pharisees and Sadducees (Acts 4:18-21). It is being attacked from the outside, without effect so far. So now *Satan* seeks to hurt it from the inside. It seems there is a lesson here that self-seeking can pollute and mortally endanger the effectiveness of the church.

Perhaps God's severe discipline of *Ananias and Sapphira* was necessary to preserve the church and its effectiveness here at its founding. There is a parallel between *Ananias* and Achan, who disobeyed a command of God when Israel first entered the Promised Land (Joshua 7:10-26). When God initiates a new work, He seems to send clear and swift disciplinary lessons to the people, in order to teach them His ways (Hebrews 12:5). As time passes, God seems to allow a greater room for faith, and allows a longer lag time for His wrath to pour out on sin. As Paul states, God's wrath on sin is often to allow the natural consequences of sin to provide a negative feedback loop (Romans 1:18, 22, 24,26).

Here we see God put down this internal corruption swiftly and severely, so that this *great fear* would come *over all who heard of* what happened. God will judge us for all our deeds eventually

(2 Corinthians 5:10), but sometimes His judgement comes in this life. It can come through reaping the natural consequences of our sin. In this case, it came by His intervention, to steer other believers away from such sin. The Pharisees were already known to give only the runoff of their wealth (Matthew 23:23), and the Sadducees had turned the temple into a market place to profit (Matthew 21:13). The religious leaders were far afield from God's will due to many reasons, one of which was worldliness and greed. In the case of *Ananias and Sapphira*, God sends a clear message to the body of believers who follow His Messiah to be well advised not to fall into this destructive sin—lying motivated by greed and man-pleasing.

The young men there who were witness to this got up and covered Ananias up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. Ananias' wife was not with him, and at this point does not know her husband's fate.

Biblical Text

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. 6 The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.