

# The Dangers of Looking Good

## Devotional

A 12-year-old boy was waiting for his first orthodontist appointment and was a bit nervous. Apparently he wanted to impress the dentist. On the patient questionnaire, in the space marked “Hobbies,” he had written, “Swimming and flossing” (Reader’s Digest [8/94], p. 112).

That’s a humorous example of how we’re all prone to hypocrisy. But spiritual hypocrisy is not humorous; it’s a dangerous and deadly sin. The hypocrisy of professing Christians has served as an excuse for many to disregard the claims of Christ, saying, “The church is full of hypocrites.” The hypocrisy of Christian leaders has caused many believers to stumble. While Jesus was tender with many notorious sinners, He used scathing language to denounce those guilty of religious hypocrisy.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira warns us of the danger of the sin of hypocrisy. It was literally deadly for this couple. Someone has said that if God dealt with all hypocrites in the church as He dealt with this couple, our churches would become morgues!

We are not told whether or not Ananias and Sapphira were true believers in Jesus Christ. Some argue that they were, some that they were not. Perhaps we are not told, because if we knew that they were not true Christians, we would shrug their story off as not applying to us. If we knew that they were true Christians, we might say, “Thank God that this was just a one-time occurrence!” We would not pause and ask ourselves, “Is my faith in Christ genuine? Do I need to deal with the sin of hypocrisy?” We do know that Ananias and Sapphira were a part of the early church. Their story applies to us all!

In Acts 4, we saw the enemy attacking the church from without. The Jewish leaders persecuted the apostles and threatened them with more severe measures if they continued to preach in the name of Jesus. But in spite of (or perhaps because of) their threats, the church continued to grow dramatically. There was a spirit of unity, love, and unusual generosity among the believers (4:32–35). In this context, we are given a positive example of a godly man, Joseph, better known as Barnabas (4:36–37). Then we are given the example of this couple, who put on the mask of hypocrisy and were struck dead by God (5:1–11). This threat of seduction from within is much more subtle and dangerous than opposition from without. It is especially a danger when a church is experiencing God’s blessing and power. The lesson is this:

**Because we are all prone to the deadly sin of hypocrisy, we should diligently pursue godly character.<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-14-deadly-sin-hypocrisy-acts-436-511>

# Open it

1. What type of clothing do you most enjoy wearing (formal, casual, athletic)? Why?

# Read it

Acts 4:32-5:11

# Explore it

2. How does Luke describe the relationship between the Christians in Acts 4?

3. Why were there no needy people in the church?

4. What was Ananias and Sapphira's sin? What happened to them?

5. What was the response of the others?

# Apply it

**The Bible is brutally honest in its recording of redemptive history. It records the blemishes and faults of God's people as well as their strengths.** Moses' righteous defiance of Pharaoh appears but so does his unrighteous defiance of God that barred him from entering the Promised Land. David's glorious victories grace the pages of Scripture. But along with them, the Bible tells of his abject cowardice before the Philistine king of Gath. The Psalms reveal David the saint; in 2 Samuel 12 Nathan the prophet confronts David the adulterer and murderer. Proverbs records the heights of Solomon's wisdom; Ecclesiastes the depths of his folly. **The inspired record never glosses over the truth, though it may be painful and ugly.**

**So far in Acts, Luke's portrayal of the church has been totally positive.** From its dramatic birth on the Day of Pentecost to its joyous, dynamic fellowship and explosive growth, the faithful writer has portrayed the church in all its pristine beauty, freshness, and vitality. Even Satan's attempt to thwart the church through the external pressure applied to its leaders was a failure. Such a picture is not complete, however.

**No church is perfect, since all are made up of sinners, and the early church was no exception.** This section of Acts chronicles a negative milestone in the church's history: the first recorded instance of sin. **Of all the firsts in Acts, this is certainly the saddest.**<sup>2</sup>

6. Why is it important for the Scriptures to show both good and bad examples? What would happen if we saw only one or the other (all good or all bad)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Our passage speaks about the marked unity of the church in the beginning and then a dark and heinous sin at the end. When does the sin of one person affect the entire congregation? Discuss as a group how much sin a church can have before it becomes unhealthy.

How many people comprise "the entire group"? Probably more than ten thousand. In verse 4 Luke mentioned five thousand men. Surely most of them were married. How is it possible for ten thousand people to be unified? **It's simple. They "believed" the gospel. Faith in Jesus united them.**

In verse 33 we read that the apostles kept preaching this message, and the people were in harmony around this most powerful unifier. They had the same mind in that they understood what mattered. They were utterly

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<sup>2</sup> MacArthur, John. *Acts 1-12 MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series)* (Kindle Locations 2775-2785). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

committed to the same gospel of the risen Christ. They were one in heart, meaning that a great spirit of love permeated the church.

Therefore, we don't create unity. God establishes it. **We maintain it, but we don't create it.** God is redeeming a people. God's gospel brings people together in mind and heart. The presence of such unity in Acts 4 is astonishing when you consider the backgrounds of these people. In Acts 2:1–13 people from "every nation under heaven" were present. People from diverse lands and cultures believed in the risen Christ, and they enjoyed this God-established unity. **This scene is a great reminder that unity doesn't mean uniformity. Diverse individuals were united in gospel belief.**

**Our strongest source of unity, then, isn't our common affinities; it's our gospel identity.** And the further we drift away from this ultimate unifier, the further we get away from the kind of countercultural, world-impacting, Christ-exalting unity Luke highlights.<sup>3</sup>

8. What things made it possible for such a large number of people to be unified? What things can hinder a large group from having unity?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. Luke tells us that the preaching of the resurrection helped to maintain the unity of the church. What about the resurrection helps to bring unity to the church?

### SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all* (vv. 32–33).

**"Much grace" here is literally "mega-grace."** Grace—the gifts and favor God pours upon the undeserving. Christ came to an empty people and poured His grace upon them. We are saved by grace, healed by grace, nurtured by grace. **There is no appropriate response to grace except thanksgiving.** The believers' hearts were like that of Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, whom King David chose to graciously care for after Jonathan's death, promising that his land would be restored to him and that he would always have a place at the king's table. In response, *"Mephibosheth bowed down and said, 'What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?'"* The hearts of the Christians in the early church were full of God's grace, and it overflowed to those around them! **When the church is great, there is abounding grace.**<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 1782-1789). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *Acts: The Church Afire (Preaching the Word)* (Kindle Locations 1206-1210). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

10. In what ways do all people experience God's common grace? What might mega-grace look like in our church today?

11. How does experiencing God's grace move the believer to be more open to sharing generously with others?

Barnabas, like the others, didn't have to sell a field and bring the proceeds to the apostles, but he chose to do just that. This act of generosity demonstrated how he loved Jesus and people more than stuff. The fact that he "laid it at the apostles' feet" displays submission, humility, and trust. He trusted the apostles to distribute it. He didn't want credit for how it was used. He wasn't interested in self-glorification but in God's glory. Luke introduces him here because he stands in stark contrast to Ananias and Sapphira. In doing this, Luke is saying, "Be like Barnabas, not like Ananias and wife."<sup>5</sup>

12. In what ways have you seen others practice generosity in your congregation? What keeps people from being radically generous?

13. What are some best practices that can help the church corporately and Christians individually become more generous with their stuff?

### **THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IS NOT PERFECT**

In the midst of this generous spirit there were those who sought to use the community of the faithful to advance their own cause. Ananias and Sapphira were a part of the church community. They participated in all that had taken place. They may have been genuine in their conversion. But the faith they professed was not the faith they actually possessed.

The biggest criticism you hear about the church is that it is full of hypocrites. Let's admit the church is not perfect. Every church has its problems. The church is made of people who are in the process of growth. We

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<sup>5</sup> Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 1877-1881). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

still have areas of weakness, we still rub each other the wrong way on occasion, we still think impure thoughts, and we still sometimes try to manipulate the system.

Someone told Charles Spurgeon once that they were leaving his church because it had so many flawed people. Spurgeon who had a way of being direct said, "I wish you well in your search for the perfect church. If you find it, please do not join with that congregation because it won't be perfect anymore."

14. How would you respond to the charge that the church is full of hypocrites? How can we keep the sin of hypocrisy at bay?

### **WHY DID THEY DO IT?**

Unlike Barnabas, however, Ananias kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge. **They saw an opportunity to make a double profit: They would gain spiritual prestige and still make some money on the side.** Withholding part of the money for their own use was not a sin, as Peter clearly states in verse 4. Nowhere were the believers commanded to give everything. Their giving, like all New Testament giving, was voluntary (cf. 2 Corinthians 9:7). The overt sin was lying, by publicly pretending to have given all the proceeds of the sale of their property. That sin was but the outward manifestation, however. The deeper, more devastating sin was hypocrisy based on a desire for spiritual status. **They desired the approval of men for their sacrificial act and to be thought of as members of those most spiritually noble.**<sup>6</sup>

15. Why is the applause of men so important to us? What are some attributes or characteristics of a person who seeks the applause of God?

16. Was it proper for Peter to confront Ananias and Sapphira publicly? When is it right to call out someone's sin in front of others?

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<sup>6</sup> MacArthur, John. Acts 1-12 MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (Kindle Locations 2939-2945). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

## **WAS GOD TOO HARD ON ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA?**

Many of us reading this story tend to think what this hapless couple did was not that big a deal—a petty sin. I mean, who hasn't pretended to be more "Christian" or "honest" than they really are? Doesn't this incident make God look like an impatient, unreasonable tyrant? Where's the love? Where's the grace?<sup>7</sup>

17. Was God too harsh in putting this couple to death? What does this act of God tell us about Him and our sin?

18. Does God still deal with sin in this way? What things does a church that is serious about sin do to protect their people from God's judgment?

Charles Colson said:

We need to know the fear of the Lord—the overwhelming, compelling awe and reverence of a holy God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: It provides the right perspective on God's sovereign rule over all creation.... For the church in the West to come alive, it needs to resolve its identity crisis, to stand on truth, to renew its vision... and, more than anything else, it needs to recover the fear of the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

19. How do you view your sin and the sins of others? How does your church see sin? What things might help us see our disobedience through God's eyes instead of our own?

20. How do you balance "the mega-grace of God" and the judgment of God? In what ways can you practice the fear of the Lord on a daily basis?

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<sup>7</sup> Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 1273-1276). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Note: This study guide was compiled and questions written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. [www.villagebible.org/smallgroups](http://www.villagebible.org/smallgroups)