

DETOUR THROUGH ACTS: TAKING GOD SERIOUSLY

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

“And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.” Acts 5:11

FAITH STORY:

Acts 5:1-11

FAITH FOCUS:

The church in Acts practices the voluntary selling of possessions and land to give to the apostles for use for the common good of the community. Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37) is an example of this practice. Ananias and Sapphira also sell a piece of property and place the money at the feet of the apostles. They pretend that they have given all the money they received from the sale, when in truth, they only give a part of the money. Peter senses this lie, and condemns them for it. Both Ananias and his wife fall dead at Peter's feet when they discover that Peter knows about their lie. The whole church is filled with fear when they hear what happened.

SESSION GOAL:

To persuade students to take God seriously and not lie to God.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Take a poll about how seriously they take God.
- Discuss the possible reasons why Ananias and Sapphira died and what sin they committed.
- Mold clay as part of their communication to God.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 The movie *Bruce Almighty*
- 3 Enough clay for each student to have some, and paper towels to place the clay on

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (10 minutes)

Prepare some popcorn for the youth and pass it around as they gather. Once everyone was arrived, turn on a clip from the movie, *Bruce Almighty*. Several chapters would be appropriate. You may want to choose the section where Bruce and God meet.

CONNECT: (7 minutes)

Ask this question: *How seriously should we take God?* Then take a poll from the group on these issues. *Would you?*

- Put your feet on a Bible?
- Purposefully skip church on Sunday?
- Dare God to punish you?
- Say you gave more in the offering than you did?
- Pretend to pray but really not pray?
- Other?

Ask, *How much is this just superstition and how much should we really not do?*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (11–14 minutes)

Assign parts for the story from Acts 5:1-11. Use these designations and read the story:

- Narrator: verses 1-2, and 7
- Peter: verses 3-4, 8a, and 9
- Ananias: verses 5a
- All: verse 5b and 11
- Young men (two guys) verse 6 and 9b
- Sapphira: verse 8b and 10a

Ask: *What is strange about his story? What bothers you about this story? What do you like about this story? How does Peter know that they lied?*

Do a continuum: *Was God too harsh or not?* Discuss why people placed themselves where they did.

Then ask: *Why do you think they died? Was it the money or something else?* Emphasize that God never insisted that the believers had to sell their property and give away all the money. (See verse 4) It was a voluntary act. But it was wrong to pretend to give the church 100% when really they didn't. It was the lie that was the sin.

APPLY: (10–12 minutes)

Hopefully your discussion in Explore the Bible has led to some serious reflection for the students. The life application to the Bible story may be all too painfully obvious. Most likely, the students need quiet time to be alone with their thoughts and God. This is not the time for hasty vows to God. Get out some clay and hand a portion to each student. Make sure there is plenty of table space for each one to find a quiet spot to work the clay and think.

Ask: *In what area of your life do you neglect to take God seriously? Is it good to be afraid of God? In what way, if at all?* Direct them to spend some time just working the clay, thinking and praying.

RESPOND: (7 minutes)

Gather the group back together. Talk to them about the tension of God's holiness and God's mercy. Both aspects of God need to be taken seriously. Reassure them of God's love, but also encourage them to ask forgiveness and to "fear" God in a good way. Close in prayer.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Up to this point in the book of Acts, the community of believers looks—almost perfect. They have one heart and soul; they spend time together fellowshiping in each other's homes and at the temple. They do mighty miracles in the name of Jesus. What's not to love? Writer Luke, however, wants to paint the whole picture. And so he now tells the heartbreaking story of Ananias and Sapphira. This is the first crisis to hit the young community.

Luke intentionally sets up this married couple in contrast to Barnabus, in Acts 4:36. This Levite from Cyprus sells a field (does he have more than one?) and then brings the money to the apostle's feet in an act of submission. In some ways, Ananias and Sapphira do exactly the same thing. They also sell a property and bring it to Peter. But unlike Barnabus who is commended (by implication), they are condemned. What happened?

At first glance, one may assume that, at least in the early church, all the believers have to give up all their earthly possessions. It is clear that many of them do give away their economic security. But verse 4 makes it clear that this giving is voluntary, not mandatory. Pewter says, "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal?" Many of us sigh with relief, for giving away everything seems like the ultimate commitment. We need to see, however, that probably Ananias and Sapphira give at least 75 to 80%, or the amount would have looked too suspicious. Most of us, the writer included, have never given that percentage away.

The problem is that this couple plan ahead of time to lie. They want to have some money to rely on if they need it. If this community of believers doesn't pan out, then they have back up. So in this sense, they are struggling to trust God completely. Yet they could have been honest about their reluctance to give all and given only a percentage of the full amount. But if they admit to this, then they lose the respect of the community. They want to look good, like Barnabus.

Spirit-filled Peter sees through the lie. And he names it. He announces to Ananias that he is lying to the Holy Spirit. This is a huge charge and one that we must take to heart in our current communities. Lying to others in the community is the same as lying to God. The community is so important that to endanger it is to sin against the Spirit.

Upon hearing these words, Ananias instantly drops dead. This is not some mean act from Peter that exploits his authority as an apostle. This is an act from God. And then, when Sapphira arrives three hours later, Peter gives her a chance to clear her name. She neglects to tell the truth, and she too drops dead. While this discipline from God may seem harsh, the lesson is clear and sobering. Deceit of one's self and deceit to the community of believers is a way that leads to death. If we don't confront deceit in our communities, it will be the death of our lives together.

This story gives us the first use of the word *ecclesia* that is the Greek word for church. It simply means gathering, like a town hall meeting or a public discussion group. Here it is used in the context of discipline. Great fear seizes the church (verse 11). Church means many things

to us; discipline and accountability are important parts of that meaning. God doesn't want the church to live in fear, but back then and now, we need to take seriously our relationship to other brothers and sisters in the Lord and to see those relationships as a reflection of our relationship to Jesus.

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