

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 2nd August 2009 - 11:30am
Acts 4:32-5:14 'How God views Sin inside His Church'

Introduction

As I was preparing my two messages for today's services something struck me. I found a connection between them.

Tonight I am going to be preaching about the Woman at the Well in John ch.4. In that passage we see how Jesus, the Son of God, deals with an immoral woman. A woman, who we're told had five husbands, and the man she was now with, Jesus said, was not her husband. Call her what you will, but she was a serial adulterer, a polygamist, or at least a woman of questionable morals! So much so that when the disciples came back from buying food in the village, they were surprised to see Jesus talking with her. And yet not once in that story do we get the idea that Jesus was condemning her for her sin. In fact, quite the opposite - He was dealing with her in grace, gently laying his finger upon the sin in her life, and then bringing her to repentance and faith in himself. And the wonderful postscript to that story was that half of her Samaritan village came to believe in Jesus as a result of her testimony. That's how Jesus deals with sin in the life of someone outside the church; outside the people of God. He deals with them in grace, with mercy, gently leading them to the joy of forgiveness, and peace with God.

But then I thought of this passage before us this morning in Acts ch.5. Here we see God acting instantly in judgement on a married couple in the life of the early church because of sin in their lives. He doesn't act in grace - instead He acts in wrath and in judgement. Why the difference? Why can God in Christ on the one hand, forgive an immoral Samaritan woman in an instant and welcome her with open arms into the family of God, and yet on this occasion, deal so radically with sin in the lives of two believers who are supposedly already inside His church?

We hear a lot these days about 'Grace' in the Evangelical Church scene. It's almost 500 years ago that Martin Luther came to see that 'The Just shall live by faith' – and that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone - a realisation of Biblical truth that sparked off the Reformation.

But there has been a renewed emphasis on 'Grace' within the last 20 years or so, ever since Chuck Swindoll wrote his book, 'The Grace Awakening' in 1990 and Philip Yancey wrote 'What's so Amazing about Grace' in 1997. This renewed emphasis on grace has done wonders for the evangelical church scene, releasing us (by and large) from the cold legalism and the hard and unwelcoming image that evangelicals had in the past, to a more open, 'grace-filled' church that by and large we have in the present.

Some would say that we can never over-emphasise grace too much, and in a way I agree with that. Didn't Paul say in Romans 5:20, 'where sin increased, grace increased all the more.' So it doesn't matter how great someone's sin is, if you major on grace, it can always be forgiven, no matter how bad it is!

Having said that, I have often had a slight concern with all this new emphasis on grace. Because if we so preach this new understanding of Grace, as opposed to preaching the Word of God in all its fullness, there is the danger that passages like this one in Acts ch.5 just get brushed under the carpet and forgotten about, because it doesn't appear to fit the idea of a grace filled church. I believe that all of God's Word has been written for our learning. That's why I preach through the Bible, passage after passage, not missing anything out. And when I do, I have to deal with the difficult passages such as this one. And we have to ask, 'What's it here for?' 'Why did the Holy Spirit see fit to include this story in the Book of Acts?' 'What are we supposed to learn from this for our lives and for our church today?' So come with me as we try to do that this morning. **Q: How does God view Sin inside His Church?**

1. The Context (4 v.32-37)

Everything has been going so well up until this point in the early church:

- They have seen many people come to believe in Jesus.
- They have seen remarkable church growth in a short space of time.
- They have seen many people miraculously healed.
- They have had many signs that God was with them.
- They have known opposition and persecution from outside the church,
- But this has only served to unite God's people more and more.

So as we come to the end of ch.4, the Church of Jesus Christ looks rock-solid.

- (Read 4:32-37)** - This looks like a picture of the perfect church.
- But it almost sounds too good to be true, doesn't it?

All the believers - one in heart and mind.

No-one claiming that any of his possessions was his own.

They were sharing everything.

The Apostles were preaching well – with great power they were continually preaching about the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

And there we have it in v.33: ***'And much grace was upon them all'***

This was a grace-filled church. They were saved by God's grace, they were preaching salvation by God's grace, and they were displaying God's grace in their relationships with each other inside the church. They were full of grace! And God's grace had touched their pockets too – and their cheque books – and their property deals, so much so that...

'There were no needy persons among them.' (v.34).

That's quite a statement! They were under persecution from the Jewish authorities outside the church – maybe some of them were losing their jobs because they had become Christians, and yet none of them were in need, because their brothers and sisters in the family of God were looking out for them, and sharing their resources with them. This was a real blessing!

So where was all this money coming from to meet all these needs within the church? Well we're told in vs.34-35.

'From time to time' (i.e. not all the time) – so this wasn't just a form of primitive communism, where everyone involved, sold all they had and gave the proceeds into a common pool or fund. This wasn't communism.

But from time to time, whenever God laid it on their hearts, those who owned land or houses sold them, and then they brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet. In other words they handed it over to the apostles, the leaders of the church, and it was entirely at their disposal to do with that money whatever they thought best for the welfare of all the people in the church. But it was done publicly. The other believers saw what was laid at the apostles' feet, and therefore they expected it to be given to where the need was greatest, not to be squandered, or for the apostles to line their own pockets with it. So in v.35 we're told that the apostles distributed it to anyone as they saw need in the fellowship.

And then we have an example of this in vs.36-37. Someone called Joseph, who originally came from a Jewish background on the island of Cyprus, sold a field. Maybe that field was back in Cyprus? Maybe he had now decided to come and live in Jerusalem since Pentecost, since he had come to faith in Christ. Maybe he wanted to be at the heart of the action in this new Church that was getting off the ground. So instead of buying a house for himself in Jerusalem from the proceeds of the sale of his own land, he brings the money to the apostles and entrusts it to them to do what they think is best with it. This would have been a great encouragement to the Apostles, as they saw people like this, whose hearts and lives God had touched by his grace, now being so generous, and giving their all to God's work.

In fact he was such an encouragement to them, that they gave him a nickname – Barnabas – meaning *Son of Encouragement*. This is the first time we meet Barnabas in the New Testament, but he'll crop up again, because he became Paul's travelling companion on his first missionary journey. But he first of all submitted his money and his possessions to the lordship of Christ, before eventually submitting his whole life to the lordship of Christ later.

Now just before we move on into Chapter 5 and see the problem that arose, let's just pause and allow ourselves to be challenged by this example of grace and generosity in the early church. Many of us today, have far more than

Barnabas ever had in terms of land and money and possessions. But have our pockets, our bank accounts, our property dealings yet been touched by the grace of God? Someone has said that it is often a man's wallet which is the last thing to be sanctified – the last thing to be touched or affected by the grace of God. But it should be among the first, just as it was with Barnabas.

I am not for one moment asking us to set up a little communist community here in Armagh. Not for one moment am I asking you to sell all you have and come and give it to the church here, for us as elders to distribute as we see fit, but I do want to draw your attention to some verses in James 5:1-9

(vs.1a & 3b) – We '*rich people*' (and we are all very rich by world standards) – '*have hoarded wealth in the last days!*' But what has happened to it? (vs.2-3) '*Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver have corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire.*' – Now if that doesn't in some way describe what has happened in the credit crunch of the past 12 months, I don't know what does!

As God's people we should be storing up our treasures in heaven, but instead we're investing it in the property markets down here, or in stocks and shares, or saving so we can have an extravagant retirement, when all the while God's Work around the world is strapped for cash!

So I'm not advocating Christian Communism at all this morning, but I am saying that each one of us should make sure that our finances have been brought under the lordship of Christ, and that what we are doing with what he has entrusted to us, is what He would want us to do with it. I was struck by Don Carson's summary of the parable of the talents on the Sunday night at New Horizon. He finished by challenging us to '**Go and increase our Master's assets.**' That's a challenge, because so often all we are doing in this world, is seeking simply to increase the balances in our own bank accounts.

So having seen the Context this morning and the good example of Barnabas, let's move on now into chapter 5 and see, secondly,

2. The Controversy (5 v.1-10)

Here in ch.5, for the first time, the Early Church is hit by a problem from within. They had survived the first wave of persecution – opposition from without. But how will they handle this first challenge from within their own ranks. How will they deal with Sin inside the Church? More importantly, How will God deal with Sin inside His Church?

Chapter 5 begins with a married couple called Ananias & Sapphira selling a piece of property – we're not told whether it was land or a building in this case,

and then Ananias decides to keep back part of the proceeds of the sale for himself. His wife is fully aware of this (v.2). Then they bring the rest of the money and lay it at the apostles' feet, without saying a word about it, obviously hoping that the apostles will assume that this is the full amount they got for it.

Peter's response, as leader of the apostles, at first seems a bit harsh (v.3ff): *'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have **lied to the Holy Spirit** and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?'*

So Peter is accusing Ananias of being led by Satan to lie against the Holy Spirit. That is the sin as Peter identifies it in this case – lying against God!

Peter goes on to explain:

'Didn't it belong to you before it was sold?' – answer yes.

'And after it was sold wasn't the money at your disposal?' – answer yes.

'What made you think of doing such a thing?' – The Devil, yes, but was it also a desire to look good in the eyes of his fellow believers, forgetting that God sees everything, and knew what was in his heart all along. He might look good in the eyes of men, but it's more important how we stand in the eyes of God.

So Peter levels the accusation against Ananias:

'You have not lied to men but to God.' - That was his sin.

And at that moment, Ananias is struck down, not by Peter, but by God, and he dies instantly! What a quick judgement. Remember James 5:9 – *'The Judge is standing at the door.'* We can hide nothing from God – certainly not in church life. *'Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.'* (Hebrews 4:13).

Then the young men of the church came in, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. A quick judgement was followed by a quick burial.

Just last week I heard of a lady who died on Sunday, being buried on Monday; the very next day. That's very quick in our culture. It's more usual for 2 or 3 days to pass before a funeral can be arranged and the burial take place. But in Eastern culture, under the hot sun, it is normal for burial to take place on the same day, before the body begins to smell or decay under the hot conditions.

So just three hours later (v.7) Sapphira comes in – she's the wife of Ananias, but she doesn't know yet that she is actually now his widow! She hasn't heard what has happened to him. She was back at home, when Ananias had gone to lay the money from their property sale at the apostles' feet.

So Peter asks her a searching question: *'Tell me,'* he says in v.8, *'Sapphira, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?'* This is where the lie becomes so blatant: ***'Yes' she said, 'that is the price.'*** (v.8).

This is how we know what the sin was on that occasion. This married couple had agreed beforehand to sell a piece of their property, keep back some of the proceeds for themselves, but to go to church and hand over the rest of the money, giving the impression that they were donating the total price they had got for their property. It was that decision to scheme and to lie, and to put on a front that would glorify them in the eyes of their fellow-believers, to be hypocritical about it, to lie to God and to themselves, in order to look good. That was why God struck them both down dead – because they had lied against God, they had hatched a plan whereby they could put the Lord their God to the test, and they thought they could get away with it.

Peter then tells her that the feet of the men who had just buried her husband were at the door, and they were coming to carry her out for burial also!

(v.10) 'At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. The young men came in, found her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.'

And so we have the first two recorded funerals of the early church! This was far from being a happy occasion. This wasn't a triumphant funeral, rejoicing in the grace of God in the lives of this Christian couple. This was a shameful, sad end, to two of the earliest believers.

Does this seem harsh to us today in the 21st Century?

Is this how a God of Grace treats his servants?

It's a story like this, contained in the earliest chapters of the history of the church that makes me question the statement in Phillip Yancey's book, 'What's so amazing about grace?' when he says on page 70:

"I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. Grace means there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less."

I'm sorry, but I don't find that in God's Word. No matter how good it sounds, and how lovely a thought it is, I don't find it in God's Word. And by the way, when I Googled it the other day, it came up with over 34 million entries!!

Last week, the theme at New Horizon was all about 'Enjoying God.'

It was based on the answer to the first question in the Shorter Catechism:

Question 1: 'What is man's chief end?'

Answer: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.'

As I listened to Ray Ortlund each morning, I was concerned as he seemed to say so much, but root it so little in the text of God's Word. It was meant to be a Bible Reading, and yet he didn't take a passage of Scripture like we have done this morning and go through it verse by verse to bring out what was in it.

Instead he came with his theme of 'Enjoying God' and he reversed into the Psalms, occasionally finding a few phrases that backed up his theme. That's not exegesis; that is eisegesis. That's not bringing out what is in God's Word; instead that is reading into God's Word what I want to see there – and that is very dangerous.

Yes of course, we want to enjoy God while we are here on earth. We want to commune with him, and to know him as a living reality in our lives day by day. But I just wonder about that answer to the first question of the Catechism.

'Man's Chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.'

Could it be that statement is saying two things rather than one?

Could it be that our main purpose (man's chief end) *in this life* is to glorify God, and *in the life that is still to come* it will be to enjoy Him forever. N.B. *'You will fill me with joy in your presence. At your right hand are pleasures forevermore.'* (Psalm 16:11). The enjoyment seems to be in the future...

Maybe the full enjoyment is not now; maybe we are called to suffer for Christ in this world, and the real enjoyment is still to come, when we get to heaven??

If Ananias and Sapphira had been more concerned with **glorifying God** in their offering, rather than in glorifying themselves, maybe all of this would never have happened. Maybe then they would have been **enjoying God forever** now in heaven itself? I don't know what their eternal destiny is – God is the judge, not me, but this passage is such a picture of summary judgement that it is hard to believe that they were welcomed with joy into heaven immediately afterwards.

What about that verse in James 5:9 – *'The Judge is standing at the door'*?

It means his hand is resting on the door handle, reading to open it anytime.

What about that verse in 1 Peter 4:17: *'For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?' - God's Judgement starts with us!*

Tonight, as I said, we're going to be thinking of how Jesus dealt with the Woman at the Well in Samaria. How she had five husbands and the man she was now with was not her husband. There are some churches today that wouldn't touch her with a barge-pole. They would treat her as 'beyond the pale'. As far as they are concerned, her sins were so great, that they just couldn't be seen to welcome such a notorious sinner into their congregation!

But maybe those same Christians wouldn't have seen the problem with Ananias and Sapphira at all. Maybe they would have seen this couple as very respectable Christians – selling their property, and giving most of it to the Lord's work, only keeping back a wee bit for themselves. Sure they deserve a

pat on the back, or maybe a plaque inscribed with their name on it, to be placed on the item that their money went to purchase for the church!

Well that's not how God, the Righteous Judge, saw it. He struck them down immediately, and just about afforded them a 'Christian burial.'

Maybe we as Christian Churches today condone an awful lot of sin that goes on inside the church in the lives of our members, as if it doesn't matter, when all the while there is a world out there of hell-deserving sinners, great sinners, that we don't want to touch with a barge-pole, in case they would taint the image of our respectable church! If so, shame on us!

Maybe we need this morning to begin to see *our sins* as God sees them; And then maybe we need to see sinners *out there*, as God sees them. It's time for judgement to begin with the house of God, not with the world!

But before we leave this passage this morning, it's important for us not just to see the context, and the controversy, but finally we need to see...

3. The Consequences (5 v.11-14)

How did the early church full of believers feel after these harrowing events? Look at (v.5): '**And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.**' And (v.11): '**Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.**' – The Church was filled with the fear of God.

But Proverbs says, '**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.**' The Early Church had just learned a very important lesson: To Fear God!

But read on down: In v.12 early church life went on as usual. The Apostles continued to perform miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers continued to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade – just outside the Temple in Jerusalem. But look at v.13:

***'No-one else dared join them,
even though they were highly regarded by the people.'***

I think those two things are amazing – to read them side by side – in the aftermath of these events.

Not only had the fear of God come upon the believers inside the church, as to how they should live their lives before God, but that fear of God had actually descended upon those who were on the fringes of the church as well. Those who maybe were considering whether or not to trust in Christ as Saviour. It was actually making them think twice before committing themselves. But the church, the company of believers, were highly regarded by the people in Jerusalem. God had purified his church, and the community around knew it.

But as time went by (v.14): Eventually, '*more and more men and women did believe in the Lord and they were added to their number*' in the church.

Conclusion:

What does God need to do here in Armagh Baptist Church right now?

What about those of us who are members of this church?

If God was to act towards us today, as he did towards Ananias & Sapphira in their day, how many of us would be left?

Maybe our numbers would be well whittled down?

Don't get me wrong - God's Grace *is* Amazing – we are saved by the Grace of God alone! But none of us should ever take God's Grace for granted.

It *does* matter how we live our lives after we are saved. Our lives must be *glorifying* to God, not dragging his name through the mud by our sinful behaviour in the eyes of a watching world.

So let's this morning see the sins of a believer's life in the way that God sees them, and may the fear of God fall upon each one of us, giving us the incentive and the courage to live lives that our glorifying to Him.

And tonight as we come to look at the Woman at the Well in John ch.4, I hope that we will also begin to see the sins of the world, of those who are still outside of Christ, in the way that Jesus sees them. Remember, He came, not to *condemn* the world, but that the world, through Him, might be *saved*! Amen.

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