

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FIRST DISCIPLINE

(Acts 4:36-37; 5:1-16)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 5:29

1. An example of a consecrated man in a Spirit-filled church (4:36-37).
2. An example of hypocrites in a Spirit-filled church
3. Fear of hypocrisy among the members of a Spirit-filled church (11, 13).
4. The power within a Spirit-filled church (12, 15-16).
5. The rapid increase of the membership of a Spirit-filled church (14).

The church had grown to a considerable size. It had begun to be popular. Whenever the church is popular it attracts hypocrites. It was inevitable that some would find their way within the early Christian Church. There was one hypocrite among the first twelve. One marvels at the mercy of God which permitted Judas to live so long among the disciples. But great as is the mercy of God it would not permit Ananias and Sapphira to live.

A great revival had taken place, thousands had been received into the church, organized opposition had arisen; but more dangerous to the church than opposition from without was corruption within. God dealt more severely with the first hypocrites within the church than He did with the first opponents outside of her membership. In the Old Testament, God dealt severely with first offenders. He made an example of them as a warning to others.

Nadab and Abihu attempted to corrupt the worship of God and they were stricken with fire from the Lord and died: **“And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord”** (Lev. 10:1-2).

Korah, Dathan and Abiram attempted to set aside both the established worship and the established government of the church, and the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up (Numbers 16).

In the New Testament Church Ananias and Sapphira pretended to be consecrated members when they were not; they told a distinct falsehood concerning their gifts to the church; they lied not only to men, but to God, and they were both stricken dead at once. In the Old Testament, as well as in the New, the first discipline came from the immediate hand of God. No one, therefore, could deny the righteousness of it, and everyone was deeply impressed with the abhorrence which God has against false worship, false words and false life.

AN EXAMPLE OF A CONSECRATED MAN IN A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH

In the last two verses of the fourth chapter and first ten verses of the fifth we are shown two men in striking contrast. Joseph, who is better known as Barnabas, is presented in contrast with Ananias. Among those who gave all of their possessions to the Lord, Barnabas was an outstanding example. He was “**a son of consolation.**”

He was a Levite who had been born in Cyprus. He had been brought up amidst unusual corruption. We are not told how he, a Levite, came to be a possessor of land. Was it because the Levitical law was frequently disregarded at that time? Was it because he had lived outside of Palestine and had taken advantage of the liberty which he had in Cyprus to gain possession of land? We do not know. We do know, however, that he had become a devout Christian and that he was ready to give his property and his life to God. Later we are told that he was a good man, full of the spirit and of faith (11:24). Like the others about him he looked upon the things which he possessed as being the Lord's rather than his own.

Men like Barnabas afforded a delightful fellowship whose company was sought. Their company was constantly increasing. It was held in favor with the people. We are not surprised that some wolves should seek to creep in with the flock. We are not surprised that Ananias and Sapphira should want a place in the new Assembly. The only thing that surprises us is the way in which they sought to receive a name in the Church. Their method is an indication of the necessity of the evidence of consecration which was necessary in the early church in order that they might seem to stand on a level with their fellows.

AN EXAMPLE OF HYPOCRITES IN A Spirit-FILLED CHURCH

Ananias and Sapphira had evidently become members of the church. They had desired a good name in the church. They had sold a possession, and agreed to pretend to lay all of the price at the apostle's feet, while they kept back a part of it for themselves. Their sin was one of aggravated deception. It was aggravated, in part, because it was premeditated and agreed upon by both. They wished to imitate as nearly as they could, the most devout in the church. It was aggravated further, from the fact that if it went unpunished it could not but bring contempt upon the church. There would be a number within the church, as well as without, who would know the true circumstances, and that the money given to the church was not all that they claimed to give. They would see them spending the money that had been saved for themselves and living in a manner out of harmony with the other members of the church. That which brought contempt upon the church would bring contempt upon the Head of the Church. Their sin was aggravated further, from the fact that they had pledged all to Christ, and the lie which they told was, therefore, a lie to the Lord.

They were not required to give all of their property to the apostles. That which Peter said to them makes clear the fact that they did not give under compulsion. **“Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God”** (4:4), said Peter. There was no communistic law within the early church. That which the members gave was given voluntarily. It was because the members loved Christ and were filled with the Spirit that they willingly gave themselves and their all to Him. The sin for which they were punished did not consist of a failure to give, but of pretending to give to the Lord what they kept for themselves.

The marvel is not that Ananias and Sapphira were cut off by the hand of God, but that others are not stricken in a similar manner. There are many who falsify in the sight of man and God, there are many who blaspheme the name of God, and yet God spares them and deals with them in mercy. Let not any such, however, think that because God does not send judgment upon them immediately that He will not punish the guilty. He will bring every work into judgment with every secret thing whether it be good or whether it be evil. Instances are not unknown, since the days of the apostles, in which God has judged the bold liar. We are told that in the market-place of the town of Devizes, England, there is a tablet which bears the historical record of a woman who fell dead near that spot. She had denied that she had in her possession a piece of money, and had just uttered the words: “If I have got the half crown, may God strike me dead!” God did strike her dead and the coin was found enclosed in her lifeless hand.

The most scathing words of our Lord were spoken against the hypocrites. The Scribes and Pharisees and others who were hypocrites were rebuked in no uncertain terms. Jesus said they were offspring of vipers, whited sepulchres, full of dead men’s bones, fools, blind, profane, murderers and adulterers. He said that it would be more tolerable for the people of Ninevah, Sodom and Gomorrah than for them. Let the hypocrite take warning! Let him not think that because God does not judge him with a terrible stroke of wrath as He did Ananias and Sapphira that He will not judge him in wrath if he does not repent and find forgiveness through Christ.

There is a warning here to the church today concerning those whom she welcomes within her membership. There is generally too little care, on the part of the officers of the church, to make a diligent effort to receive only those who are devout followers of Christ. Those of the Ananias or Sapphira type will be of no benefit to the church. They will only bring upon her reproach. An important duty of the officers of the church is to keep her pure. It will not always be possible to discover the hypocrite, either when he seeks admission or afterward, but when he is discovered he should be shown the true nature of the church and either won to Christ or eliminated from the membership of his church. One wolf within the fold can do more damage to the flock than many without.

FEAR OF HYPOCRISY CAME UPON MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH

“And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things . . . And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them” (4:11, 13). This is the first time the word “church,” is used in the record of The Acts.

It indicates that there was a definite organization to which members might be added in a special and orderly manner.

It is well if we can keep this picture brilliantly illuminated as the years pass. God intended that men both within and without the church should look at it and take warning. Those who had been received into the church had experienced the newness of heart and the love of Christ. Now they came to see that love was not all, that there must be purity which the Spirit demands among Christ's own. The Spirit had come to energize, He had come to give boldness, and now He had come to demonstrate His abhorrence of impurity and His love of purity.

It was not the ill-will of Peter; it was not the power of Peter to destroy that had caused Ananias and Sapphira to die. It was Christ's working through His Spirit. So while Christ seeks and saves the lost He deals in judgment with the hypocrite. Godly fear is an essential thing for the Christian. **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction”** (Proverbs 1:7). It would be well if the members of the church in our day gave a deeper and more serious consideration of the necessity of purity in worship, singleness of heart in giving to the Lord, and whole-hearted consecration in living for Christ.

When the church is pure and when she is faithful in her discipline she will make more of an impression upon the community about her. When they heard of Ananias and Sapphira men feared to approach the church with hypocrisy in their hearts. The church always weakens her testimony to the world when she becomes more like the world. She is in a much more wholesome state when men about her know that they are expected to give up their dishonest business, their impious ways, their godless associations and their worldly amusements before they seek an entrance into her holy fellowship. She may be persecuted, she may be few in numbers, she may be poor in the world's wealth, but these things do not weaken. That which weakens her is that which is unholy within and robs her of the power of the Holy Spirit.

THE POWER WITHIN A Spirit-FILLED CHURCH

“And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch . . . Inasmuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them. There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them which were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed every one” (4:13, 15-16). The church must be kept pure in order that she may have power. We are told again and again that Christ witnessed to the genuineness of his Gospel by the signs and wonders which were wrought by His servants. Multitudes were healed both in Jerusalem and from round about. The physically sick were healed and the mentally sick were healed. There was no case too difficult for the apostles to cure. Among those who sought healing for their friends there were many who were superstitious. They carried out the sick into the streets that the shadow of Peter might fall upon them. We have no reason to believe, however, that the shadow of Peter had any special effect upon any of them. It was by faith that they were healed, when healing was wrought, and not by superstition.

What we, as members of the church, especially desire today is power to heal the sin-sick. We cannot be used as instruments of God in this great work unless we are clean and pure. We will fail, as the disciples once failed to cast the demon out of a boy, unless we go about our work in humility and prayer. We notice a woeful lack of power in many sections of the church today. This is due to the fact that other things have come in and Christ has been crowded out. The Holy Spirit uses clean vessels. May God make us clean!

THE RAPID INCREASE IN THE MEMBERSHIP OF A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH

“And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women” (4:14). Multitudes were added to the church in the face of great obstacles. Though it was shortly after the crucifixion of their leader, when the Spirit came into the church, multitudes were added. When the people saw the blessed fellowship of the church many more were added. When opposition arose against the church many more were added. When discipline was exercised by God and the hypocrites were cut off multitudes more were added. Obstacles of various kinds, great though they may be, cannot prevent the growth of a Spirit-filled church. It grows after opposition arises; it grows when discipline is exercised. It is faithful, it is pure, the Spirit works within it and gives it power.

Sometimes opposition is so much feared by the members of the church that they will compromise with evil rather than persist in the presence of opposition. Compromise brings weakness. Sometimes it is feared that discipline will bring unpopularity and the church does not exercise it lest she should cease to grow. But lack of discipline permits impurity and impurity in the church is accompanied with weakness. A church may feel that she is making splendid progress when she is in fact almost useless. The Laodicean church felt that all was well, she was rich and comfortable and contented. She was in reality, as Christ saw her, miserable and poor and blind and naked. The church should seek first purity, righteousness, holiness, boldness, earnestness and spirituality and God will take care of the increase. In the midst of every kind of opposition in the days of the apostles, **“And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.”**

QUESTIONS **(Acts 4:36-37; 5:1-16)**

1. When does the church attract hypocrites?
2. What had taken place in the early church which made it popular?
3. Tell how God dealt with the first offenders in the Old Testament church?
4. What kind of members did Ananias and Sapphira pretend to be?
5. From whose hand did the first discipline come in both the Old Testament and the New?
6. What two men are presented in contrast in this passage, one who was consecrated and one who was a hypocrite?
7. How did Barnabas show his consecration?
8. Who did Barnabas think had first right to the things which he possessed?
9. What would be the nature of the fellowship in a church with men like Barnabas?
10. What did Ananias and Sapphira apparently think was necessary in order that they might have a good name in the church?

11. What does this indicate concerning the members of the church?
12. Why was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira aggravated?
13. Was there any communistic law in the early church?
14. Why are not men stricken today as were Ananias and Sapphira?
15. Will hypocrites always escape judgment?
16. Against whom did Jesus speak most scathingly?
17. What effect did this discipline have upon the whole church?
18. When the church was cleansed in what way did God manifest His power through the apostles.
19. What was the result concerning the membership of the church?
20. What was the result concerning the reputation of the church in the community? How does it compare today?

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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