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A SUBTLE ATTACK ON THE EARLY CHURCH
AND HOW GOD HANDLED IT

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF THE ACTS
NUMBER 17
ACTS 5:1-6

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ACTS 5:1-6 "But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, and kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? 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. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him." In this Scripture we have just read, you noticed the severe way in which God dealt with this sin of Ananias and Sapphira. In the Bible this is referred to as "The sin unto death". This sin means that a man's life is taken or shortened and he is cut off before his time, and therefore, fails to do what God intended for him to do.

The reality of the sin unto death is stated in 1 John 5:16 "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it." This sin is also intimated in Psalm 118:18.

In addition to these Scriptures, we have seven case histories in the Bible to help us understand this sin unto death.

When one is saved, he enters into union with Christ. Once saved, a man can never lose that relationship. The sin unto death is the removal of one from this earth before his work is finished for he is overly obnoxious, as far as the Lord's service is concerned.

SEVEN CASE HISTORIES OF THE SIN UNTO DEATH

1. The case of Achan in Joshua 7
Achan took a dagger, money and a sport coat and hid it in his tent when God had commanded that everything be destroyed. He had to pay for the sin with his life. (This is why we call this sin of Ananias and Sapphira the Ghost of Achan.)
2. The Corinthian Incest. 1 Cor. 5:1-5
The sin unto death came to those who committed such lustful acts.
3. Carnality at the Lord's Table without repenting. 1 Cor. 11:30-31
Some are taken out of this world before their time because they dishonor the Lord's Table.
4. Disobedience to the Word of God. 1 Chronicles 10:13-14
King Saul died an untimely death because he disobeyed the word of God.
5. Hezekiah's Maximum Discipline. Isaiah 38
Hezekiah leaned on the weak arm of Egypt and God almost took his life, but spared him fifteen more years as a result of confession and prayer.
6. Any believer entering into apostasy. Numbers 31:8, 1 Timothy 1:19-20
Untimely death comes to believers because they fail to learn Bible doctrine.
7. The sin of lying to the Holy Spirit Acts 5:1-6
The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was the sin of false motivation. They were cut off so the church could go on growing normally.

THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SIN UNTO DEATH

1. Any unconfessed sin is probably the cause of shortening the life of the believer. Ignorance of the teaching of the Word of God concerning the confession and the forgiveness of sin.

2. It is a sin which persists unchecked. Heb. 12:15 describes it as sin never isolated and never checked.
3. It is a sin which has maximum adverse effect on others. 1 Cor. 5:2

MOST SINS ARE NOT SINS UNTO DEATH.

1 JOHN 5:16 "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it."

1. Remember--these are sins committed by believers.
2. Sins which are isolated under the principle of Hebrews 12:11-15 "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled"
3. Sins which are discontinued through the normal growth in the Christian life. The sin unto death can be cancelled or delayed by prayer and confession. As in Isaiah 38.

THE SIN UNTO DEATH IS VERY IMPORTANT

The background of this passage comes from what Barnabas did in the end of Chapter four Joseph, a man surnamed Barnabas, from the Isle of Cyprus, sold his possessions and brought the total gift and gave it to the needy church in Jerusalem. Remember, he didn't have to do it. He did it entirely on his own. He didn't give with a wrong motive, or because someone was twisting his arm to give. There was no pressure put on him to do this. Barnabas gave as unto the Lord.

In the Jerusalem church was a man named Ananias and his very beautiful wife named Sapphira. (Sapphira is the Aramaic word for very beautiful.) Both Ananias and Sapphira had become believers and had joined the Jerusalem church. These wealthy people had evidently made quite an impact on the Jerusalem church. Possibly there was quite a bit of talk when these wealthy people joined. He was wealthy and she was beautiful and they made quite a splash when they joined. You realize how people make over VIPs. So, Ananias and Sapphira were built up by the talk in the church. Everyone was talking about how great they were, how wealthy Ananias was, and how beautiful Sapphira was. Everyone was bowing to "Dear Brother Ananias" and were quite taken with "Beautiful Sapphira". He was wealthy and Sapphira was sort of a show piece.

But one day their popularity and position was challenged. This man, Barnabas from Cyprus, brought a large sum of money and presented it to the church. He did it in the right way. And his gift caused Ananias and Sapphira to go into eclipse. For several days or weeks, you don't even hear the names of Ananias and Sapphira. Everybody is talking about Barnabas. So you see what happened, Ananias and Sapphira just became wild with envy and jealousy for someone had pushed them off the top of the mountain and Barnabas, all unknowingly, was king of the mountain. Not that he sought this place or craved it, for later on in Acts, we discover he was a man of greatness and humility and grace. But it just drove Ananias and Sapphira wild, when they heard everybody in the church talking about Barnabas. Cyprus was a very wealthy summer resort and property there must have sold for a very high price. We are quite justified in supposing that this gift from Barnabas was quite substantial. So as the people talk about his great and unselfish gift, the two people who have been in center stage are suddenly pushed back into the wing. They don't like this one bit for they are carnal believers and have been living on approbation lust, and compliments, and personal attention.

Just suppose, for sake of illustration, that the amount of the gift of Barnabas was a half-million dollars, or ten thousand drachma. Now Ananias and Sapphira are very wealthy also, so they decide to sell a certain property. Let us say, for sake of the illustration, that they sold their property for a million dollars. They want to duplicate the gift of Barnabas, so they give a half-million dollars and then take the other part and invest it or put it away in savings. But they let it be known throughout the church that they gave the total amount that they got for the sale of their property. They are jealous of Barnabas, and they want to get back in center stage and get the praise of the church again. Please note--No one said what amount they had to give. No one put pressure on them. But look what they did. In this act of deception, they became the greatest enemies the church had. Their deception, lying, misrepresentation was the worst thing they could do to hurt the church. They were starting something--the game of playing king of the mountain in the church. They are the New Testament equivalent of Achan in the Old Testament. But Ananias and Sapphira live by approbation lust. They live off of popularity and praise.

ACTS 5:1 "But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession." The culprits are found out. The word "Certain man" is the word, "Aner" and means nobleman, a believer. This is in contrast to that word, "Anthropos" which means man in general.

Ananias is a wealthy, nobleman and a believer. Sapphira is the Aramaic for very beautiful.

ACTS 5:2 "And kept back part of the price his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet." They gave the impression they were giving all, while they were only giving part. Please note--God doesn't require you to give him all your money. God knows what you ought to give. He doesn't expect you to give more than you should and can. There are some who believe Ananias and Sapphira died because they didn't give all. They miss the whole point. The point is that they gave part but pretended it was their all. Their sin was the sin of lying. There is nothing wrong with giving part. Repeat: There is nothing wrong with giving part. But the wrong came when they gave part and said it was all.

LOOK AT THIS SIN UNDER NINE POINTS

1. It was a sin, inside the church, committed by believers. This was an inside sin.
2. It was not a sin of omission. They did not refuse to give to the Lord.
3. It was a sin motivated by approbation lust. They desired to appear to duplicate the feat of Barnabas.
4. It was the sin of king of the Mountain. They were trying to compete with Barnabas.
5. Behind this desire for praise and approval was the sin of envy and jealousy.
6. They failed to serve as unto the Lord.
7. There was nothing wrong with keeping back part of the sale. The sin was in pretending and telling the lie. The sin was rooted in pride and jealousy.
8. They lied to the Holy Spirit for they wanted the church to think they had duplicated the giving of Barnabas.
9. Behind all this incident was approbation lust. They wanted human approval and praise.

Please notice that Sapphira was not there when the tragedy struck Ananias. She probably was down buying a new robe and would make her grand entrance later. Ananias brought the money, probably in large leather bags, and dumped it at the apostles feet. This was an attack on the early church. If allowed to go on, it could and would destroy the church.

TWO WAYS TO ATTACK THIS PROBLEM

1. Maximum divine discipline which is the sin unto death. Remove the offending individual by death. In other words, cut out the cancer. This is what God chose to do right here.
2. By the teaching of Bible Doctrine concerning the weakness of the old sin nature, so people will learn how to overcome this type of sin.

ACTS 5:3 and 4 "But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? 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." Peter knew what had happened. Either the Lord revealed it to Peter or he knew the circumstances and knew the value of the property Ananias sold. Please note--Neither Satan nor a Demon can indwell any believer, for the Holy Spirit dwells within the believer. But Satan can fill the mind of a believer with pride and envy and approbation lust.

LOOK AT THE FIVE WAYS TO SIN AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. Resisting the Holy Spirit- Acts 7:51 Only committed by unbeliever.
2. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit- Matthew 12:31. The unpardonable sin is refusing to accept Jesus as Saviour. Committed by unbelievers.
3. Grieving the Holy Spirit - Ephesians 4:30. Any sin grieves the Holy Spirit and these are sins committed by believers.
4. Quenching the Holy Spirit - 1 Thess. 5:19. Committed only by believers. Is the dependence on human good.
5. Lying to the Holy Spirit - Acts 5:3. Committed only by believers. This is the sin of false motivation as illustrated by Ananias and Sapphira.

ACTS 5:5 "And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things." This is the sin unto death. God destroyed Ananias in order to save the early church. As a result, great fear came on the early church. They recognized the truth of the teachings of the Word of God.

A little bit later Sapphira is going to die in exactly the same way. God destroyed both of these lying people to keep the church from being destroyed.