



# Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No.  
1307-10  
Acts 4:32-5:11  
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January 21, 2007

## You Can't Fool The Lord

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

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How many of you watch the TV show *24*? How many of you frittered away four hours last Sunday and Monday watching the first episodes? Well, as you might have guessed, I did too. Perhaps I need to explain why I like the show. By the way, Justin Buzzard has written all about *24* on his blog. He likes *24* because the main character, Jack Bauer, is a lot like Jesus—a Savior figure who is willing to sacrifice himself for others. He also likes *24* because of the things that Jack Bauer NEVER has to do. Like eat, charge his cell phone, heal from his wounds, go to the bathroom, say “please,” and use money or pay for things.

But I like *24* for a different reason. I like *24* because bad stuff happens. I mean that. I know that in other shows bad stuff happens, but not like in *24*. In *24* the bad stuff that never happens in other shows happens. Like the main characters, good guys, get killed all the time. Sometimes Jack even kills them! Or, like in the last show, a nuclear bomb that they were trying to stop from going off, really went off! Those things just don't happen in other shows.

I think that's the reason I like the Bible so much. The Bible is realistic about how really bad stuff happens. First of all, its heroes do bad stuff. Abraham lied. David committed adultery and murder. Peter denied Christ. But not only that, really bad stuff happens. Moses spent most of his life heading for the promised land. But he never gets there because he lost his temper and God said no. If I were writing that story, I'd want my hero to see the promised land. But then, hundreds of years after being in the promised land, God gets so fed up with his chosen people that allows them to get hauled off into exile. And then you have stories like the one in Numbers 16. The people of Israel are in the wilderness and a guy name Korah and a group of Levites rebel against Moses. As a result, the Bible says that the earth literally opened up and swallowed 250 of them. It's like the ancient version of the “Big Gulp.” Stuff like that didn't happen in *Gunsmoke*. But it does happen in *24* and it does happen in life.

In some ways it's comforting when bad stuff happens because we know that we do bad stuff and bad stuff happens to us. We know that we do stupid things like Moses did and Korah did. But in some ways, it's also a little bit scary because many of these stories serve to warn us. They warn us that God takes our sin and rebellion seriously; that he's not a God to trifle with; that when you try to fool the Lord you're only fooling yourself.

In Acts 5 we come to a story from the early church that illustrates this very truth. Remember that Peter and John had just been released from a night in jail. They were warned not to speak or teach about Jesus. They returned to the church where they all prayed that God would give them boldness to do what they were told not to do, and he answered their prayer. They were all filled with the Spirit and began to speak the word with boldness.

### I. The Spirit filled church knew much grace in their life together.

And this gave way to a wonderful time of blessing for the church. Listen as I read how Luke describes this.

**“And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet”** (Acts 4:32-37).

The phrase I want you to notice is right at the end of v.33, **“and abundant grace was upon them all.”** What a great line! Grace means God's unmerited favor; his blessing; his power; his joy. It wasn't upon just the apostles, but all of them. And in the surrounding verses we see what that looked like.

**A. They gave powerful witness:** One of the things was that the apostles kept right on *“giving testimony”* about the resurrection of Jesus. They didn't abide by the Sanherdrin's edict to shut up. And when it says they did so with great power it would seem that many people who listened to them were convinced that it was true, and they were being transformed by the power of the gospel.

**B. They were one in heart and mind:** Another

indication of God's grace was that *"they were of one heart and soul."* We know at this time there were well over 5,000 believers. While they were all Jews at this point, they were from all walks of life, and from all over the Roman Empire. We see here that one was a Levite from Cyprus. But there was this deep spirit of unity among them. By the way, this unity was not based on conformity where everyone was forced to dress the same and talk the same and even act the same. Forced conformity, or even conformity by social pressure, isn't real unity. This was a unity of heart and mind and love and purpose.

**C. They practiced generosity:** This led to another sign of God's grace: they practiced generosity. This started with a new attitude towards their possessions. It says *"not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but they had everything in common."* This doesn't mean that they literally renounced all private ownership. It means that while they continued to have and even own possessions, they didn't claim them as their own. They had an open handed attitude towards everything they had. And that led to sacrificial action. When someone had a need, they met it. From time to time people would even sell land to meet those needs. They would take the money and entrust it to the apostles to distribute it as they saw fit. The idea was not that everyone should have exactly the same amount, but that when there was a real need people would sacrifice to meet it.

**D. The example of Barnabas:** And it's in that context that we get a positive example in the person of Barnabas. Barnabas is going to play an important part in the book of Acts. He was from the tribe of Levi and he was a native of Cyprus, where there was a large population of Jews. Barnabas was best known as an encourager. Through the book of Acts we'll see how he always has his arm around someone, bringing comfort and encouragement. Luke says very matter of factly that he sold a piece of land and gave the money to the apostles. That's all. They didn't hold a banquet in his honor. They didn't put a plaque up on the wall with his name on it. But Luke wants us to know that this is the kind of thing people were doing. And, in keeping with his new name, that would have been an encouragement.

You see, being a Christian means being a part of a community of believers where this kind of thing happens. When it says up in v.31 that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit this is one of the ways in which the Spirit works. We've seen how the impact of the Spirit is felt in outreach to the world, but here we see that it's also felt in our experience of community within the church.

I received a great letter from a couple in our

church recently. For two years this couple and their young son have been without a furnace. They sent me a thank you letter because one of our elders heard about this and we used some money from our special needs fund to buy them a furnace. And they wrote me this touching letter of gratitude. They said when they came into the house and felt the warmth in their home, their son ran over and literally hugged the heater! That was so encouraging! No one should be without a furnace, and someone sacrificed for that to happen. That's the kind of thing we're called to do for one another.

When the Spirit of God invades a life what inevitably happens is that our grip on our stuff (things) is loosened, while our attachment to people is tightened. Buying a furnace for someone becomes more important to us than redecorating our living room. This is challenging for us because we tend to get so much of our security and meaning from our stuff. But when we experience God's grace and how he gave so much to us that we didn't deserve, we want to do the same for others, and we need to act on that. I'm so glad to say that we have a lot of people in this church that do that.

## **II. The Spirit-filled church knew God's judgment in their life together.**

You're probably wondering, what about all that bad stuff you were talking about? That's next because Luke doesn't just give us the positive example of Barnabas but he gives the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira. Right when we thought things were just about perfect, the roof caves in, and we have one of the most shocking stories in all the New Testament.

**A. Ananias and Sapphira act in greed and deceit:** It starts out like this. **"But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet"** (5:1-2). Ananias and Sapphira were part of the church community, presumably believers. Somehow, they caught wind of what Barnabas did. Perhaps they noticed how people appreciated Barnabas and how much attention he got for his sacrificial gift. So they sold a piece of property too and gave the proceeds of the sale to the apostles. On the surface, it must have appeared that they were doing exactly what Barnabas did, but they "kept back" some of the money. They pretended to give the whole amount, but for whatever reason they decided to hold back some for themselves. Maybe originally they intended to give it all, but the more they thought about it, the more they thought about what they could do with that money, and the more they liked the idea of holding onto some of it. They might have thought, "At least we're giving some of it. That's more than I see a lot of other people doing. And nobody will know how much we got for this property. Why, we don't even know if Barnabas really gave the whole

thing. God knows we need the money. Let's just keep part of it and give the rest."

**B. Peter confronts Ananias and he dies:** And that's what they did. But somehow Peter knew. The Spirit of God gave him the gift of discernment. So while Sapphira was in line down at the bank, Peter confronts Ananias.

**"But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.' And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him"** (vv.3-6).

Notice he acknowledges that Ananias had every right to do what he wanted with the land and the money. No one forced him to sell it and no one told him how much to give: **"While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?"** The answer is yes. The problem that Peter has with them is not so much about greed, it's about deceit. It might have been greed that led to their deceit, but deceit was the real sin. If they had just been honest about what they were giving, it wouldn't have been an issue. That's why Peter twice says, "You've lied. You've lied to the Holy Spirit. You've lied not to men but to God." Somehow they had forgotten that. They became so focused on what people would see and what people would think, they forgot what God would see and what God would think. They forgot what the writer of Hebrews said, **"There is no creature hidden from his sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do"** (Heb.4:13). We wonder how they could forget that, but Peter gives us a clue when he asks, **"Why has Satan filled your heart...?"** We should have known. Jesus called him the father of lies. He's the great deceiver. This whole thing was a plot hatched by the enemy. He's always looking for ways to tear apart the church. If he can't get to us by persecution from the outside, he'll work from the inside.

Poor Ananias! Before he can even offer an explanation, he drops dead. This might have come as much of a surprise to Peter as it does to us. Perhaps he had a heart attack from being exposed, but this is clearly meant to be seen as the work of divine judgment. Before you know it, his body is being removed, wrapped up and buried by some guys from the twenties group.

**C. Peter confronts Sapphira and she dies:** Three hours pass and I think during that time Peter thought and prayed a lot about what had just happened. I think Peter was more grieved than angry. I think he was bit torn, too. He didn't want to get in the way of what God was doing, but neither did he want Sapphira to suffer the same fate as her husband. So when Sapphira finally came in, oblivious to

the fact that she missed her husband's funeral, look what happens.

**"Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, 'Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?' And she said, 'Yes, that was the price.' Then Peter said to her, 'Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.' And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things"** (vv.7-11).

It appears that Peter gave her an opportunity to change her mind and tell the truth. That's why he asked her the question. But he also knew that another lie would lead to the same judgment, and she too fell dead.

**D. The church and others respond in fear:** Can you imagine being in church that day? Can you imagine running into someone who had missed church: "Hey, how did things go Sunday?" they ask. "Oh man, you should have been there. You know Ananias..." I mean, imagine if word got out how hard it would be to invite a friend to church. It's not the best way to grow a church. It's not something we would want to put in the bulletin or add to the web site.

But, in some ways, I have to admit that I like this story. I mean I was starting to think that this was pretty much a perfect church. All the love and giving and sacrifice for one another. It's just good to know that even the early church had its blemishes. But I don't think that's the main lesson of this story. I don't think the intended impact of this story was for us to feel better about ourselves. Twice Luke tells that the impact on the people there that day and those who heard about it later was fear, and not just fear but "great fear." So in this story we've seen great grace, great power and now great fear. We read this and we think, "That's terrible. What a terrible place to go to church. What a terrible atmosphere." But I think this is exactly the impact that God wanted this incident to have. He wanted them to be warned that God takes sin seriously; that you don't trifle with the house of God; that when you try to fool the Lord you're only fooling yourself.

**III. When you try to fool the Lord you are only fooling yourself.**

**A. Deceit is a serious sin:** Someone says, "Thank God this doesn't happen any more; if it did, we'd have to put a morgue into every church." But it does happen, because sin, all sin, leads to death, if not physical death, spiritual death. It cuts us off from God.

One of the things this story shows us is that there is something about the sin of deceit that God especially hates. We say, "sin is sin" and it's true. But there is something about the sin of deceit. We know how Jesus was tender with those broken over their sin, but he denounced proud hypocrites. Perhaps that's because deceit is especially destructive to the fellowship and unity of God's people. We often say to our kids that lying is the worst thing they can do to our family, because lies destroy trust. The enemy knows that and tries to destroy the precious unity, fellowship and trust of God's people through getting us to hide who we really are.

**B. How do we manifest deceit?** There are so many ways we do this. When I was in seminary, I lied to a professor. I told him I had read a textbook when in fact I hadn't. He didn't know and I got the grade I wanted but didn't deserve. Three years later the Spirit of God convicted me of my deceit and I wrote him and told him. He was gracious to forgive me, but I wonder if from that time on he thought twice about trusting his students to tell the truth about what they had read. This kind of thing can especially happen in a church because we have such high standards. Someone becomes a part of a church and learns what kinds of things are valued. You're supposed to give away at least 10% of your income. You're supposed to pray and read your Bible every day. You're supposed to witness to your unbelieving friends. You're supposed to have kids who love the Lord, never lose your temper, never drink too much and enjoy marital bliss. But what happens when your life doesn't match up with the script? Do you fake it? Do you pretend? When we do that, we die. That's what this story shows us. The minute they pretended to be something they weren't—death! When we come to church we put on a mask of spirituality, but we hide our sin. We're struggling with problems in our homes, but we hide it. We can't get along with our kids, but we'll never admit it to anyone. The pride that doesn't want anyone else to know what's going on between husbands and wives and between parents and children keeps us from sharing. We come to church and put on a mask that says everything's fine! Somebody asks us how are things going. "Great, great! Fine! Praise the Lord!" The minute we say that and it's not true, we die. Death sets in. Soon that death pervades the whole church and it feels stiff and cold and lifeless.

**C. Why do we try to deceive others?** We all know that we really can't fool God. If we really believe in God, we know that he sees it all. So why do we do this? Part of it is this incessant desire to look better than we are. We really do love the praise or at least the

acceptance of men. We want to look good. And that desire can cloud our judgment, making us more concerned with what others see than with what God sees.

Another thing is found in Peter's words to Sapphira: "*You've put the Spirit of the Lord to the test.*" What does that mean? It means they wanted to find out how far they could go and still get away with it. We do this when we presume upon God's grace. We move forward into sin and deceit thinking that we'll later confess and be forgiven. That's like a little kid saying, "I want to see how hot that stove really gets before it burns me." That's how the enemy wants us to think.

**D. What can we do about this?** So how do we deal with this? There are a number of things. First of all, we just need to take sin more seriously than we do. With that, we need to cultivate a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. But perhaps the most important thing is that we need to develop the kind of relationships where we can be open, and where people know us well enough to call us on our lies. If you're married, it starts in your marriage. I wonder if at any point along the way Sapphira thought, "I'm not really comfortable with this. Maybe I should tell Ananias how I feel. Oh, but he would get so upset. And I really should be submissive to my husband." She should have said something. I wonder if at any point along the way he thought, "I don't like the way this is heading. I need to stop this charade. But Sapphira wants that new sofa so much." He should have said something. This is also why we emphasize small groups in this church. The point of these groups is to develop relationships where we can take off our masks and be real about our lives; where we can gently wash each other's feet of the dirt that has accumulated. Sometimes we even have to take a risk and call someone on their sin.

## CONCLUSION

This week I thought a lot about this story as it relates to myself. As a preacher, as a leader of a congregation, I'm so aware of how easy it is to let people think that I'm something I'm not. I preach a sermon like the one last week on prayer and you might think that I have a prayer life like Elijah, but if you were to see my prayer life apart from a few hours here on Sunday morning, you wouldn't be impressed. I often encourage people to give to the work of God in a sacrificial way, yet when I look at the amount of money I gave this past year, and the amount of money I squandered on meaningless things, I'm ashamed. And I tell you all of this not because I want you pity me, but because I want us to be a fellowship of people who are serious enough about sin and about the pursuit of holiness that we're willing to tell the truth about what we are. Because if we try to fool the Lord we're only fooling ourselves.

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