"When Sin Entered the Church" Part 2

Acts 5. “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. 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. 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 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 these things. At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon’s portico. But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.”

Frankly, that seems a bizarre approach to church growth; killing people at the offering, frightening the people in the church and terrifying the people outside the church. But as it turns out, based upon that text, that kind of divine action bringing judgment on the church, God used as a means to add more believers. This is the first sinful event in the life of the church, the first sinful event. In fact, it is in this text that we have the word church used for the first time in the book of Acts. Even though the church began on the Day of Pentecost, that word, which is so familiar to us, doesn’t actually appear until the passage that I read you.

This is not the first sin. There was always sin from the Day of Pentecost on because though they were redeemed, they were still sinful. Believers sin, but this is the first sin recorded in Acts. This is the first public discipline of sin, and it all started out so wonderfully. Jesus rose from the dead. He spent 40 days, as the Book of Acts begins, meeting with His disciples, speaking with them of things concerning His kingdom. Then they select somebody to take the place of Judas, a man named Matthias so the apostles, it is back to 12. Then the Day of Pentecost comes, and the Spirit arrives. By the work of the Spirit, by Christ through the Spirit, He literally creates His body by the Holy Spirit placing all believers into one by sharing the common life of Christ.

The church is born on the Day of Pentecost. There are miraculous evidences that God is at work and something remarkable is happening. Then the gospel is preached and 3,000 people believe. First, it’s 120. Then it’s 3,000, and then Peter preaches again and another 5,000 men. So it’s 3, 000 men, then 5,000 men. Add the women, add the young people to that, and the church is 20,000 or so, and it’s all flourishing, and it’s all joyful. Chapter 4, as you remember, verses 32 to 37 ends with a look at the unity of the church, amazing unity. They were all, according to verse 32, “one heart, one soul.” Nobody was holding on to property that they possessed. Not only liquid assets that they possessed, but even those assets that weren’t like houses and property, they would be willing to sell in order to provide money for needy people, so that verse 34 says, “There was not a needy person among them.”

They weren’t trying to control their giving. They laid it as the apostles’ feet, verse 35, and let the apostles distribute the money to anyone who had need. Well, a man came along that becomes a very important part of the Book of Acts. His name is Joseph. He is a Levite from Cyprus. We know him as Barnabas because he was nicknamed “son of encouragement.” He owned a tract of land and sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet to be distributed to the folks who had need.

Remember, there were a lot of believers in Jerusalem who had come for the feast of Pentecost from other towns around the Mediterranean, other countries. Since this was the only church, they stayed, and there was nothing to go back to. So they’d become a burden for the church, and they need care. So people are literally selling their assets in order to meet the needs of those who depend on them in this situation. Even later in the Book of Acts, Paul is going around Asia on his missionary journeys collecting money from gentile churches to give to the Jews who were still in Jerusalem. Also, I have to add the fact that when these people identify with Christ, they would have been put out of the synagogue. Not long from now, they’ll begin to feel some serious persecution, but they would have been cut off from social life. So these folks wouldn’t have been offered economic opportunities and jobs. Maybe the opposite would have happened. Some of them would have lost their families, family support, inheritances as well as jobs.

So, everything looks absolutely wonderful. We come to the end of chapter 4 on a high point. The gospel is being preached. People are being converted. Unity exists in the church, and then we hit chapter 5. Against the background of all this wondrous work of God is this really devastating Sunday in the early church. This, by its nature is a sin that the church has to always recognize. It is the sin of hypocrisy. It is blatant in this case. It is devastating. It is exposed. It is exposed because the Lord exposes it. Normally, it’s not exposed. It normally survives for a very long time, a very long time.

In fact, in some cases, we don’t ever find out about hypocrisy. People die as hypocrites. Some men’s sins, the Bible says, follow after them, but some don’t. Time and truth go hand in hand, but sometimes hypocrisy is so well-managed that we never find out. But just to let us know that this is of dire consequences in the life of the church, this is what Paul calls the leaven that leavens the whole lump. The Lord exposes such a sin to make us aware of its presence, and shows us how He feels about it by executing in front of the whole church the two hypocrites.

By its nature, hypocrisy is hidden. That’s what it is. By its nature, it’s a disguise. It’s a mask. It’s a rouse. It’s covered, but Scripture is very clear on the seriousness of religious hypocrisy, spiritual hypocrisy. Our Lord’s most strong devastating malediction that ever came out of His lips, Matthew 23, was given against the hypocrisy of the leaders of Israel. God hates hypocrisy, even in the early years of human history.

Go way back to the patriarchal period and look at Job, for example, and his conversation with his friends because the issue of hypocrisy comes up a lot in the Book of Job. Job is in the time of the Pentateuch, historically, very early in redemptive history. In Job 8:13 we read, “The hope of the hypocrite shall perish.” In Job 13:16 we read, “A hypocrite cannot stand before God.” In Job 15:34 we read, “The company of hypocrites shall be barren.” Job 20:5, “The joy of the hypocrite is but for a moment.” So way back at the very beginning of redemptive history we find out that whatever hypocrites hope for, perishes. They cannot stand before God. Their lives are barren, and their joy is only for a moment.

In the New Testament, 2 Corinthians 5 the apostle Paul warns those who he says, “Boast in appearance, but not in heart.” Hypocrisy is unmasked by our Lord again and again. I’m not going to take the time to delve into all of the things that He said about hypocrisy, but obviously just knowing Matthew chapter 23, and being familiar with that gives you a full idea of how He viewed hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy is a corrupter, and it should be exposed, and it should be judged, listen, for the sake of the hypocrite and for the sake of the church. It needs to be addressed. So-called churches, so-called churches today welcome piles and piles of people who make a pretense of interest in Jesus Christ and never warn them about hypocrisy. To be called a hypocrite, to be warned about a being a hypocrite is very offensive, very offensive. But we have to do that for the sake of the hypocrite who needs to be exposed for his own sake and the sake of the church. It needs to have the hypocrite exposed for its own health sake.

But again, churches that are that direct and that concerned about hypocrisy and that targeted at genuine conversion, genuine sanctification, genuine godliness are not the norm today. They’re just not. The idea today is to make everybody feel comfortable and to welcome people who have a nominal or superficial interest in Jesus, but that’s not God’s attitude towards hypocrisy.

His church is a gathering of truly redeemed people, and He is not eager to have hypocrites hiding in it. That, in fact, is a work of Satan. Jesus said, “An enemy sows tares among the wheat,” and the enemy is Satan who sows the hypocrites among the genuine. This literally sucks the power out of the church, corrupts the unity of the church, devastates the testimony of the church, confusing the world. Having superficially committed people in the church is not helpful. They may feel good about it, but it doesn’t help the church. It doesn’t help them, and it doesn’t advance the gospel effectively because it confuses people as to what a Christian really is, at least those who know the truth about those hypocrites.

So against that beautiful backdrop is the reality that Jesus told the disciples in Matthew 13 that when the wheat begins to grow, the enemy will sow tares and those are the hypocrites. Here, we have a perfect illustration of the fulfillment of Matthew 13, Matthew 13. This sin is a sin that needs to be recognized. There are sins that are easy to recognize. They are overt. They are manifest. They are experiential. But what you can see is not nearly as dangerous as what you can’t see. And this is the kind of thing that literally sucks the very power and testimony out of the church because, by design, it intends to be invisible.

Now, as we look at this account of this sin, we’ll just give you four little titles. First of all, sinful pretense, sinful pretense. “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.”

The little word “but” is there. We know something is up. Against this beautiful backdrop of verses 32 to 37, and you could even go back to verse 31. They had all been filled with the Holy Spirit. They were speaking the Word of God with boldness. There was all this wonderful unity, one heart, one soul, all this love, sacrifice, giving, all this trust in the apostles. Against the beauty of this background is the word “but,” “but.” A word of failure, a sad word. This is the word that signals evil. Two members of that church, two of those believers, and they are professed believers, and I think it’s fair to say they are very likely believers because there don’t appear to be in this congregation folks whose faith is called into question. Why do I say that? Because they were all, all continuing in the apostles’ doctrine, prayers, fellowship, breaking of bread. They were all, verse 31 of chapter 4, “Filled with the Holy Spirit.”

So these wouldn’t be false Christians at this early point, but these would be hypocritical believers, hypocritical believers. Two believers caught up in pride are the first hypocrites who are identified in the church. Ananias’ name means “the Lord is gracious” and Sapphira’s name means “sapphire, beautiful, jewel.” The deed is anything but gracious and anything but beautiful. They are believers. You say, “Well, wait a minute. This kind of severe discipline against believers?” Absolutely. According to 1 Corinthians 11:30-32 there were actual true believers that God was killing at the Lord’s Table. “Some of you are weak and some of you are sick, and some of you – ” what? “ – sleep.” You’re dead because of how you desecrate the My table. Some of you, some of you.

“Among believers – ” 1 John 5:16, “ – there is a sin unto death.” So this is that kind of situation. You have sinning believers, and their sin is this hypocritical pretense that begins to unfold in verse 2. This piece of property that they sell brings a certain price, but they kept back some of the price, both of them agreeing, and they brought only a portion of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Obviously, they had publicly declared they were going to give it all. That was what others were doing. That is what we see being illustrated. For example, back in chapter 4, verse 34. If there was someone who owned land or houses, they would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet. Then there was Barnabas who did that, owned a tract of land, sold it, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet. Now, obviously, there’s gratitude. There’s affection. There’s love. There’s honor. There’s praise being heaped on the people making the sacrifice, and Ananias and Sapphira want to get in on this. So they decide they’re going to sell a piece of property, and they make a public declaration that they’re going to give all the proceeds, that it’s all going to go for God, but this is a complete pretense. They are like Pharisees, Matthew 6, “Doing their alms before men,” to be seen.

But nonetheless, they sell a piece of property, as the others had done. They show up and they lay an amount of money at the apostles’ feet minus what they had kept back for themselves. The sin is not that they didn’t give everything. That’s not the sin. You don’t have to give everything. In fact, they weren’t commanded to give anything. God didn’t command them to sell their house, sell their land. God never demanded that. The selling was voluntary. The sin was not that they kept back some of the price, that they could sell the land if they wanted and keep some of the price. They could sell the house and keep some of the price. It’s not a sin. It’s not a sin to keep it, not a sin to sell it and keep some of the price. It is a sin to lie about it. That’s the hypocrisy. They had vowed to the Holy Spirit to give everything, and this was a pretense before the congregation and before the apostles while they were secretly holding back some of it.

The sin is not in the selling. The sin is not in the keeping. The sin is in the lying. They committed a secret sin and, of course, secret sin on earth in open scandal in heaven because you can’t hide it. They wanted spiritual status. They wanted to be elevated. They wanted to be exalted. They wanted to be honored and appreciated as others who had done this. They sought prestige. They wanted to be thought of as great and godly and generous and sacrificial, but they weren’t willing to give up everything. They just wanted to appear to be giving up everything.

So they made a pretense of giving it all. The lie was simply the vehicle that their greed used to gain their ends. The sin is the sin of hypocrisy. It’s a dirty sin. It’s trying to create the impression you’re something you’re not. You’re doing something you’re not, you’re giving something you’re not. Thus, did Satan move from the outside persecution to the inside? What did I tell you about persecution? What did persecution do to the church? Empowered the church, expanded the church. The old saying, “The blood of the martyrs becomes the seed of the church is absolutely true.” The more the church is persecuted, the more it flourishes. We saw that.

So Satan was being counterproductive by persecuting the church. He’ll do it again and he’s done it through history, but a persecuted church is a purified church, and a purified church is a powerful church and a growing church. So Satan decides that his external work didn’t gain his end, so he goes inside the church to corrupt the church from the inside. This sin, which God hates, is the sin of hypocrisy among believers, among believers.

It’s not wrong not to give everything you have. It’s not wrong to hang onto your property, to hang onto your house. That’s a choice God allows you to make. The Lord has given us richly all things to enjoy. It’s just wrong to lie. It’s wrong to create an imaginary image of yourself. It’s wrong to be a hypocrite, and it also needs to be said that you’re lying to the Holy Spirit. Verse 3, “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?’” Did you think you could fool the Holy Spirit? This is so ugly in God’s eyes, so ugly. To paint spiritual beauty where it doesn’t exist, to paint virtue where it doesn’t exist, but it happens in the church all the time.

People say there’s hypocrisy in the church. Of course there is, of course there is. There always has been. That’s the first sin that is recorded in the life of the church. But you need to know God’s attitude toward that hypocrisy. That’s why the story is here. Yes, it’s in the church. Yes, it’s in this church. Yes, we’re all subject to putting on a mask of spirituality that’s not legitimate. You just need to know God’s attitude towards hypocrisy in the church by the people of the church. Sinning saints feigning holiness, feigning virtue, pretending godliness. Very dishonoring to God.

So we see the sinful pretense in the first two verses. Then we see the spiritual perception. Spiritual perception comes quickly in verses 3 and 4. “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.’”

Peter immediately saw the deception. How? How did he know that? I don’t think he took a look at the books, their private accounting. I don’t think he necessarily knew whoever did the transaction or brought the property or knew the price. I think the Holy Spirit is at work here, and he was given the ability to discern this. This is pretty bold on Peter’s part because everything is going really well. Peter might have said, “You know, things are going so well. The church is booming, people are being converted. This is a glorious time. There’s so much love and so much unity, and we did get a lot of money from Ananias and Sapphira. Maybe I ought to just cool my heels here a little bit. Why do I want to make an issue out of this? It’s better that they sold the land and we got what we got. After all, Ananias and Sapphira are some of the wealthier people in our congregation. We need his shackles coming in to keep the work going, and he was generous, and we want to be appreciative.” Those are not his thoughts. Those are the thoughts of a rationalizing compromiser.

Ananias comes to church, and he’s ready to receive honor from the apostles for the money that he places at the apostles’ feet in verse 2, and instead after he’s deposited his money, and assuming he’s still standing there, Peter says, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?” Whoa! Immediate spiritual perception, immediate.

The whole church back in 4:31 was filled with the Spirit, but here the same word filled is being used of Ananias being filled with Satan. I don’t know all the dynamics of this. Literally, this man opened himself up to satanic influence. I don’t believe that Christians can be demon-possessed in the sense that demons take up a permanent residence in them, but I believe they can be demon-influenced, Satan-influenced. The apostle Paul says, “Don’t let Satan take an advantage of us.” The apostle Paul say, “Put on the whole armor or God because we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against – ” what? “ – principalities and powers and the rulers of spiritual darkness and wickedness in the heavenly places.”

We’re in a battle with demonic forces. They don’t live in us because we’re the temple of the Holy Spirit, but they have influence over us. Because of the lie and the hypocrisy, they had given place to the devil. They had given place to the devil. It isn’t so much that they were money lovers. They were. It isn’t so much that they were greedy. It isn’t so much that they were liars. All of that is true. They were really glory-seekers, and that’s so ugly. Glory-seekers pollutes the church. Just be honest. Just be real.

Do you not think the Holy Spirit knows? You open yourself up to Satan’s influence. That would be the last thing any true believer would want, right? I mean we don’t want to open ourselves up to the influence of Satan. That’s what hypocrisy does. So we see the sinful pretense and the spiritual perception of the apostle who nails it while a man is still standing there just having put the money on the altar. Thirdly, come swift punishment, very swift. God moves fast to perform surgery. Cut out the hypocritical cancer from this beautiful creation, the body of Christ. The judgment is swift. The judgment is terminal.

Peter says, “Look, you didn’t have to give it. While it remained unsold, it was yours. You didn’t have to give all of it. Even after it was sold, it was under your control. You could do what you want. Why have you conceived this deed of lying that you’re giving it all when you’re not? You have not lied to men, but to God.” This is so corrupting in the church. Hypocrisy, spiritual hypocrisy is so corrupting in the church that God’s action is shockingly swift. “And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last.” He died on the spot. What an amazing moment in the church.

What killed him? Well, you remember reading from the twelfth chapter of Acts how God struck another man, and he was eaten by worms and died who usurped undue glory to himself. What killed Ananias? We don’t have any clinical report. We have no idea. There’s an old record, kind of interesting in English history that says, “One day, Edward I,” the king who was a fierce guy, “blazed in such anger at the dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London that the man dropped dead on the spot of fear, under the sheer power of the verbal barrage from Edward I.” I don’t know how true that is, but it is true that there can be literally such an overwhelming terror that grips the heart.

Just imagine Ananias comes. He’s all decked out. Sapphira’s not there. She needs three more hours to do her hair. She doesn’t show up for three hours. He’s there. He’s ready for his big moment. He walks up, lays down his money. Peter says, “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? You blatant Satan-influenced liar,” in front of the whole church. His conscience went into immediate tremors. His heart surely began to beat fiercely as he was trapped in the horrors of his hypocrisy.

You could say he died of a ruptured heart, or you could say God killed him, but whatever happened, no doubt he was so literally terrified of that moment that he must have been horror-stricken. When that killed him or God added to that, I don’t know. He came up for glory and he was stunned at what faced him. Burial, as you know from Lazarus, was immediate in Israel. So the young men got up and covered him up. They went up and put some kind of cloth on the dead man lying in the front of wherever they were meeting there, and carried him out and buried him.

Burial was immediate in Palestine, immediate. No embalming. We saw that, right? Just to review that. Burial was immediate. The body begins to decay and rigor mortis sets in. You know the whole process. So the burial is right then. That’s the perfect illustration of how the Jews dealt with dead bodies. The young men take him out to wherever the appropriate place was, and they bury him. This takes three hours. There elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in not knowing what had happened.

As I’ve often said, this proves that church services should be at least three hours long and maybe even longer. They should be at least long enough for people to fall out of the window, break their neck and die, be raised from the dead, come back, and hear the rest of the sermon as we’ll find out later in the Book of Acts with Eutychus.

She comes to church, puffing up her hair. All excited to get a little of the glory because by now it’s rippled through the crowd. Everybody knows they’ve given the gift. She’s coming in. It’s all theater for her. She walks in. Peter responded to her. “’Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?’ She said, ‘Yes, that was the price.’ 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’ll 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 carried her out and buried her beside her husband.”

Why would it take three hours to do that? Because burials always had to take place outside the city because grave sites, caves, places of burial were never inside the city. Notice the question in verse 9. Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Are you trying to see if the Holy Spirit can spot hypocrisy? Is that the test? Is that what you’re doing? Do you think you can deceive the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God?”

What folly. What stupidity. It wasn’t as if there was any question about the Holy Spirit being present. This isn’t now where we don’t see manifestations of the Holy Spirit that are visual; but from the very beginning on the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God came, there were visible manifestations of the Spirit’s power. Languages were being spoken people didn’t know. There was a loud noise like a mighty rushing wind. There were tremors. There were all kinds of phenomenon going on, and then there were miraculous signs and wonders being done at the hands of the apostles. Miracles were flourishing in the early church, and it was very clear that the Holy Spirit was present and powerful.

The question says, “How ridiculous are you? How stupid are you? Do you not know that the Holy Spirit is present? Do you think you need to give Him a test to see if He can spot a hypocrite?” So she fell at his feet, Peter’s feet, just like her husband had fallen at Peter’s feet. It all happens in the same spot. Ananias comes, puts the money down, falls over dead. Haul him out. She comes to Peters, falls over dead. They haul her out. Right where the money was laid. Ah, it’s just a stunning Sunday in an otherwise glorious beginning in the life of the church.

Somebody might look at this and say, “Well, this is the end. I mean this is the end. There’s no hope for that church. People are going to run like mad. They’re going to flee.” I remember when I first came to Grace Church, I’d never heard of a church, never through all my years as a student, through all of the times that I grew up in my dad’s church and knew lots of churches and pastors. Through all of my seminary days, I’d never heard of any church that did discipline like Matthew 18.

If a brother sins, go to him, confront him. If he repents, you’ve gained your brother. If he doesn’t, take two or three witnesses, confront him again. If he repents, you’ve gained your brother. If he doesn’t repent, tell the church, tell the whole church to go confront him. If he still doesn’t repent, put him out and treat him like an outcast, a tax collector because you treat him like an unbeliever because he’s acting like an unbeliever. Get him out because as 1 Corinthians 5 says, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” That’s the first instruction in the entire New Testament given to the church.

It’s in Matthew chapter 18. The church is first time mentioned in 16. The first instruction to the church is to confront sin in the church. I had never ever heard of a church that did that, never, no church. Nobody suggested that in any course I had in seminary. So I came here, and I’m looking at the Bible, and I’m saying, “Why don’t people do this because it’s clear?” So I asked some older, wiser pastors. I said, “Why don’t you do this?” “Well, people will leave. It will drive them out. You can’t do that. You can’t confront sin. People will run. You’ll frighten them away, and who are we to sit in judgment.”

I would answer by saying, “But what do you do with the passage? What do you do with this? You just ignore it?” So I was warned that if you do that, you’ll destroy your ministry and you’ll be out of there. But really I was hoping to get better advice than that, so I did what the Bible said and guess what? People didn’t run away. They ran toward us, and they’re still running toward us because the Lord wants a pure church, and the Lord blesses a pure church. True believers want a pure church, and the Lord adds to a pure church.

This is the most critical lesson of church disciple in the Book of Acts because this is before anything is actually implemented and God does the whole thing. This is 1 Peter 4:17, “Judgment must begin at the house of God.” This is where judgment begins. The Lord was saying, “I am dead serious about my church. I’m not playing church.” I’m dead serious about my church.

That leaves the fourth principle, the sinful pretense followed by the spiritual perception of Peter led to swift punishment and that produced a solemn purging, a solemn purging. The end of verse 5, “Great fear came over all who heard of it.” Great fear. Fear of whom? Guess. Fear of God, fear of God, great fear. Verse 11, “Great fear came over the whole church and over all who heard these things.” Twice, same thing. Verse 5, second half, verse 11. This is a holy terror, holy fear.

The Lord is serious about the church. What do we draw out of this? God hates the sins of the saints. They corrupt His church. God hates hypocrisy. God hates lying. God punishes sin. People died in the early church and people died at the Communion table. There was a sin unto death. Purity is critical to the church, and critical to the power of the church and the testimony of the church. Now, we’re not perfect people, but we don’t want to hide hypocrites, and we don’t want to be hypocrites.

I don’t know. If you come up to me and you tell me, “Here’s who I am spiritually,” I’m going to have to take you at face value, but I don’t have any apostolic revelation. I don’t have any insight. I promise you I’m not going to judge you. I don’t have any secret knowledge. I have no more access to the mind of God than you do. All I know about God is revealed to me in His Word. Okay, I don’t have any secret knowledge, so I don’t want you to worry when you come up to me that I’ve got some kind of spiritual radar that’s seeing the real you. I don’t have that. I’d like to have it, but that would really be devastating.

I will take you at face value, but I will do this. I will pray that God will reveal hypocrites. I will pray that God will reveal hypocrites for their sake and for His church’s sake, and for the sake of the world that is watching us.

Solemn purging, the Lord will do some of that. The Lord will reveal some hypocrisy. The Lord will uncover sin, and we have to be involved in that. If your brother sins – what? Go to him, take two or three witnesses, tell the church, pursue purity in the church. Did it destroy the church? No. Verse 12, “At the hands of the apostles, many signs and wonders were taking place among the people.” Then parenthetically, we read this: “And they were all with one accord in Solomon’s portico.” There they are back in that place that we saw Peter with them in chapter 3 and back in the very place in John 10. They’re all back in one accord.

Somebody said this is where Hondas are first mentioned in the Bible, but that is not accurate. If you don’t know what I mean by that, you’ll figure it out. They were all in one accord. It is a moan. It’s worthy of a moan. I understand, yeah.

But I just want you to know that they all went back to the same unity that they had back in verse 32. After the sin was dealt with, the corruption was removed, the hypocrites were dead; they were back to where they were before. The signs and wonders take place. They’re all unified again. Verse 13, “But none of the rest dared to associate with them.” Is that good? That’s kind of contrary to church growth strategy isn’t it?

The whole idea was that the Lord was designing a church that non-believers would not want to belong to. I don’t know how to say that more clearly. The Lord had designed a church that non-believers would not want to belong to because it’s so pursuing purity. It’s a place of judgment on sin. It’s a place of confrontation of sin that we all desire because we have holy affections and divine aspirations, and we want to honor the Christ we love and glorify Him. But it can’t be a place where non-believers are comfortable. None of the rest dared to associate with them. They didn’t have a church growth strategy. They didn’t have any model to follow. The pastoral epistles hadn’t been written yet.

God was designing the church His way and His way was to frighten non-believers as well as to frighten believers. However, the people held them in high esteem. Ah, now that does matter. The people held them in high esteem. They had immense respect for their purity and their morality and their virtue. That’s what we want. We want the world to see our unity. We want the world to see our purity. We want the world to see that we are a group of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who confess Him as Lord and Master, and we are His loving, devoted slaves. He calls us to holiness, and we pursue that holiness. We want heaven to come down in the church, and heaven is a place of holiness and purity.

So we want to confront sin and judge sin and remove sin and corruption and hypocrisy. But at the same time, when the world looks at that, they don’t want to be a part of that because they don’t want the exposure. Jesus clarified that in John 3 when He said, “Men don’t want to be exposed by the light.” Okay? So we understand that, but at the same time, they will respect our unity and our purity. That’s the Lord’s design for a church, and it worked. Verse 14, “All the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women were constantly added to their number.” Who adds to the church? Who does that? The Lord.

So what do we think? We’re going to do it by developing our own strategy. Confronting sin, purifying the church will drive away and frighten those who love their sin. It will make them uncomfortable, but it will attract those who hate sin, and that’s necessary to become a believer.

This is so far away from the interest of the contemporary church of our day. Uncalled, unfaithful pastors who try to build their churches on tolerance. Tolerance for sin, making unbelievers feel welcome. This is totally contrary to the very action of God Himself in the Book of Acts.

Look at 2 Corinthians 12 for a minute. I’ll wrap this up. Verse 20, 2 Corinthians 12:20 Paul says, “I’m afraid that perhaps when I come - ” come back to Corinth, “ – I may find you to be not what I wish. I may find you to be not what I wish. Perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances. I’m actually afraid – ” verse 21 “ – that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality, sensuality.”

He says, “I’m afraid to come back to the church and find strife, jealousy, anger, disputes, slander, gossip, arrogance, disturbances, impurity, immorality, sensuality.” That’s what I’m afraid of. Verse 1 of chapter 13, “This is the third time I’m coming to you – ” and I’ll tell you this, “ - every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” What does that mean? When I get there, if I find this, I’m going to confront it, and I’m going to do what Matthew 18 says. I’m going to speak, and if you don’t repent, I’m going to get two or three witnesses. We’re going to do it by the book. “I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well that if I come, I will not spare anyone.”

That’s a real pastor. That’s a true shepherd. I will not spare anyone. I will do it by the book, by the plan that God has ordained. So, verse 5, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves or do you not recognize this about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you unless indeed you fail the test?” You’d better take a look at your life. You’d better examine whether you’re a true believer or not because when I come, it’s going to be a no-nonsense approach. I’m going to be looking to see if any of those sins are there, and if they’re there, they’re going to be confronted, and I won’t spare anybody. I don’t care who you are.

There’s an, “I don’t care who you are” in the Ananias story because they were wealthy, just the kind of people that leaders don’t want to offend. This is the strategy for church growth and the church grew. Back to the book of Acts. “The Word of God – ” verse 7, chapter 6, “ - kept spreading; and the number of the disciples – ” chapter 6, verse 7, “ – continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem and even a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” Chapter 8, “The crowds as one accord were given attention to what was said by Philip as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. More crowds, more crowds. This in the ministry of Philip.

Chapter 9, verse 31, “The church throughout all Judea now and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up, going on in the fear of the Lord.” There it is. They were going on in the fear of the Lord, the kind of fear that gripped them on that very Sunday when Ananias and Sapphira were killed. That fear of the Lord, “And as well in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.” This is the biblical plan for church growth. Chapter 11, “The hand of the Lord was with them – ” verse 21, “ – and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.” A large number. The end of verse 24, “Considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.”

The church just exploding and exploding and exploding off this base of purity and unity, unity and purity. The apostle gives us a summary I think that’s really helpful. In 2 Corinthians 11, “I wish that you would bear with me – ” verse 1 “ – in a little foolishness. Indeed, you are bearing with me for I am jealous for you with a godly jealously. I betrothed you to one husband so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin.” He sees this church like a pure virgin that he has sought and found to give to Christ. “I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.” This is a real pastor. This is a sanctifying shepherd who is concerned about the purity of his people.

You can read Revelation 2 and 3 on your own and you can read the letters to the churches, and you will notice how the Lord Himself says that when a church is impure, He may come and fight against that church with the sword out of His mouth. Where there is an impure church, judgment is hanging like Damocles sword over its head, and the Judge will come.

This is a great message for every church in every age to know and to learn, and the motivation from this is that we would be unified in our pursuit of holiness and purity and confronting sin. At the same time, generously and graciously forgiving others as we have been forgiven by Christ. It’s a place of the confrontation of sin, forgiveness, grace, and restoration. That’s for another message.

Lord, we are grateful that we are not lost in any confusion about what you desire, what you require. You made it crystal clear how important your holiness, your character is to be upheld by the church. You were doing this in your church through your Spirit. This sets the standard for us. May we never be so brash as to lower that standard. Keep us faithful. Keep us one. Keep us pure. Keep us joyful we pray in Christ’s name. Amen.