

Session 19 A Gift, a Lie, and Holy Fear

Acts: The Book That Explains Everything

Session 19 | Acts 5:1-11

A Gift Conceals a Lie

Ananias Exposed

Sapphira Answers

Fear Spreads

Before You Read

Big idea: Ananias and Sapphira imitate an act of generosity while agreeing to a lie. Peter exposes their deception against the Holy Ghost; both die, and great fear reaches the Jerusalem assembly and those who hear.

Where we resume: Acts 4:32-37 described believers sharing their possessions, the apostles witnessing to Jesus' resurrection, and distribution according to need. Barnabas sold land and laid the money at the apostles' feet. The word "But" now introduces a contrasting gift.

Read alongside: Acts 4:32-37 and 2 Corinthians 9:7. Keep the Jerusalem setting and Paul's later instructions distinct while noticing that willing giving and honesty belong together.

Four movements to keep watching

- **A deceptive gift (vv. 1-2):** The couple retains part of the proceeds and brings part to the apostles.
- **Ananias confronted (vv. 3-6):** Peter identifies the lie; Ananias dies and is buried.
- **Sapphira questioned (vv. 7-10):** She confirms the false price and meets the same judgment.
- **Fear spreads (v. 11):** The whole assembly and those hearing the news recognize the seriousness of what has happened.

A simple right-division reminder: This remains the Twelve's Jerusalem witness in Israel's prophetic kingdom setting. The judgment displays God's holiness and apostolic authority. The moral seriousness of lying remains; this particular event is not a promise that every later lie receives immediate death. Paul has not yet entered the narrative or disclosed the mystery of the body of Christ.

Acts 5:1

But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession,

What does the passage say?

- **"But"** connects the account to Barnabas's gift at the end of chapter 4 and introduces a contrast.
- Ananias and Sapphira sell a possession. Verse 3 identifies it as land.
- Selling the property is not condemned. The next verses explain what is wrong with the gift.

Words to notice

- **Possession** - Something owned; here, a piece of property.
- **With Sapphira his wife** - Both spouses are introduced before Luke explains their shared knowledge.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Acts 4:36-37** - Barnabas sells land and brings the money to the apostles, providing the immediate contrast.
- **Acts 5:4** - Peter affirms the owner's control over both the unsold land and the sale proceeds.

Do not miss

- Read across the chapter division. The contrast is between an honest gift and a deceptive gift, not between selling property and keeping it.

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.

What does the passage say?

- Ananias retains part of the sale proceeds and brings another part to the apostles.
- Sapphira knows about the arrangement; she is not an unaware bystander.
- The deception becomes explicit in verse 8, when she falsely confirms the represented sale price.

Words to notice

- **Kept back** - Retained secretly for himself in this dishonest transaction.
- **Privy to it** - Aware of the secret and sharing in it.
- **Price** - The money received from the sale.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Acts 5:8-9** - Sapphira's answer and Peter's response expose the agreed false claim.
- **Titus 2:10** - Paul's prohibition of purloining, or dishonest appropriation, uses the same Greek word family as "kept back."

Do not miss

- Keeping some money is not, by itself, the offense Peter identifies. They present a partial payment while lying about what the property brought.

Acts 5:3

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?

What does the passage say?

- Peter identifies the deception as a lie to the Holy Ghost. The offense reaches beyond the human recipients of the gift.
- Satan's activity is named, but Ananias is still addressed as responsible for the action.
- Verse 4 continues the accusation by asking why Ananias conceived the plan in his own heart.

Words to notice

- **Filled thine heart** - The lie involves inward purpose, not merely a mistaken calculation.
- **Holy Ghost** - The divine Spirit, not a different person from the Holy Spirit.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Luke 22:3-4** - Satan's activity and Judas's willing betrayal appear together; satanic involvement does not remove human responsibility.
- **Acts 4:31** - The company had been filled with the Holy Ghost and spoken God's word boldly, contrasting with the deceit exposed here.

Do not miss

- Peter's disclosure of a hidden lie belongs to this apostolic event. The passage does not grant every later religious leader the ability to read another person's heart.

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.

What does the passage say?

- Before the sale, the property belonged to Ananias. After the sale, the money remained under his control.
- Peter's questions rule out the idea that Ananias had no choice but to surrender the entire price.
- The problem is the plan conceived in his heart and the lie against God.
- Verse 3 says he lied to the Holy Ghost; verse 4 says he lied to God. Read the two statements together.

Words to notice

- **Whiles** - While.
- **In thine own power** - At your disposal or under your control.
- **Not ... unto men, but unto God** - The ultimate offense is against God, although people are also deceived.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Acts 5:3** - The Holy Ghost is the one lied to, supporting His deity when read with verse 4.
- **2 Corinthians 9:7** - Paul later instructs giving according to one's purpose, without grudging or necessity; willing giving is a valid comparison without making the arrangements identical.

Do not miss

- Voluntary giving does not mean dishonesty is harmless. Ananias could retain money honestly; he could not make a false claim about the gift without lying to God.

And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things.

What does the passage say?

- Ananias hears Peter's words, falls down, and dies.
- Luke connects the death with the exposed sin; he does not give a medical explanation or describe Peter striking him.
- Great fear comes upon those who hear what happened. The event is a serious judgment, not a fundraising success story.

Words to notice

- **Gave up the ghost** - Died. The expression does not tell us his eternal destination.
- **Great fear** - A sober recognition of God's power and the seriousness of the offense.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Leviticus 10:1-3** - Sudden judgment in Israel's worship provides a comparison concerning God's holiness, though the circumstances differ.
- **Acts 5:10-11** - Sapphira's death is followed by another notice of spreading fear.

Do not miss

- Luke tells us that Ananias died. He does not tell us whether Ananias was saved or lost, so do not turn the death notice into a statement about his eternal destiny.

Acts 5:6

And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.

What does the passage say?

- The young men rise, wrap Ananias's body, carry it out, and bury it.
- The account describes a real death and burial.
- The men's return will connect this first burial with Sapphira's entrance and Peter's announcement.

Words to notice

- **Wound him up** - Wrapped him; "wound" is the past tense of "wind," not a word for injuring him.
- **The young men** - An age description; Luke does not identify them as an appointed order of deacons.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Acts 5:9-10** - The men who buried Ananias return and later bury Sapphira beside him.
- **John 19:40** - Wrapping a body appears in Jesus' burial account, although Acts does not specify the same materials here.

Do not miss

- The burial confirms the outcome. Luke does not describe a funeral ceremony or explain every decision made between the death and the burial.

Acts 5:7

And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in.

What does the passage say?

- About three hours later, Sapphira enters.
- She does not know what has happened to her husband.
- She already knows the dishonest plan, however. Luke distinguishes knowledge of the scheme from knowledge of its outcome.

Words to notice

- **About the space of three hours** - An approximate interval, not a named time of day.
- **Not knowing what was done** - Unaware of Ananias's death and burial, not unaware of the retained money.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Acts 5:2** - Luke has already stated that Sapphira was privy to the arrangement.
- **Acts 5:8** - Her own answer will disclose her participation without prior knowledge of the judgment.

Do not miss

- Sapphira's responsibility is personal. The account does not portray her as condemned merely for being Ananias's wife.

Acts 5:8

And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much.

What does the passage say?

- Peter asks whether the couple sold the land for the represented amount.
- Sapphira answers yes and confirms the false price.
- The question exposes the difference between an honest partial gift and a dishonest claim about the sale.

Words to notice

- **Ye sold** - The plural “ye” refers to the couple’s transaction.
- **For so much** - For the stated sum. Luke does not name the amount.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Acts 5:4** - The proceeds remained at the seller’s disposal.
- **Acts 5:9** - Peter identifies her answer with the agreement to tempt the Spirit of the Lord.

Do not miss

- The issue is truthfulness, not a minimum donation. Sapphira gives her own false answer rather than simply remaining silent about her husband’s actions.

Acts 5:9

Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out.

What does the passage say?

- Peter identifies an agreement between the spouses to tempt the Spirit of the Lord.
- He announces that the men who buried her husband are at the door and will carry her out.
- Unlike his question to Ananias, this statement explicitly announces the coming outcome.

Words to notice

- **Agreed together** - Acted in concert; agreement does not make the action right.
- **Tempt** - Here, put to the test or challenge, not entice the Spirit to commit sin.
- **The feet ... at the door** - The returning men are approaching. Their feet are not a source of supernatural power.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Deuteronomy 6:16** - Israel is forbidden to tempt the LORD, illuminating the seriousness of testing God.
- **Acts 15:10** - Peter later speaks of tempting God by challenging His action concerning the Gentiles.

Do not miss

- A coordinated religious act can still be a lie. The Spirit’s knowledge cannot be defeated by the couple’s agreement to tell the same story.

Acts 5:10

Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.

What does the passage say?

- Sapphira falls immediately at Peter's feet and dies.
- The young men enter and find her already dead. They do not execute her.
- They carry her out and bury her beside her husband, completing the parallel with Ananias.

Words to notice

- **Straightway** - Immediately.
- **Yielded up the ghost** - Died, like "gave up the ghost" in verse 5. The two English expressions do not describe different kinds of death.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Acts 5:5-6** - Ananias's death and burial supply the first half of the parallel.
- **Acts 4:35, 37** - Honest gifts were laid at the apostles' feet; now Sapphira herself falls at Peter's feet.

Do not miss

- The repeated judgment is sobering. Luke does not invite us to invent her final thoughts or to use this event as a threat that a modern leader can kill an uncooperative giver.

Acts 5:11

And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.

What does the passage say?

- Great fear comes upon the whole church and those outside it who hear the news.
- Luke distinguishes the gathered believers from the wider circle learning about the event.
- The sin involves two people, but its exposure affects the entire assembly and its public witness.

Words to notice

- **Church** - An assembly; here, the believing company in Jerusalem under apostolic authority.
- **As many as heard** - The effect reaches beyond those present at the deaths.

Cross-references worth marking

- **Acts 2:43, 47** - Fear accompanies apostolic wonders, and the KJV already refers to the Jerusalem company as "the church."
- **Acts 19:32, 39, 41** - The same Greek assembly word appears in a civic setting, showing why the word alone does not establish an assembly's dispensational identity.

Do not miss

- The existence of an assembly in Jerusalem is plain. Its identity must be understood from the narrative; "church" alone does not insert the later Pauline revelation of the body of Christ into this scene.

Text And Translation Helps

- **Older English:** “Privy” means aware of a secret (v. 2); “whiles” means while (v. 4); “wound him up” means wrapped the body (v. 6); “straightway” means immediately (v. 10). These are explanations of the KJV’s wording, not corrections of it.
- **Holy Ghost and God (vv. 3-4):** Peter identifies the lie as directed against the Holy Ghost and then against God. The wording supports the Spirit’s deity and personal involvement.
- **“Tempt” (v. 9):** The context concerns testing the Spirit’s knowledge and response. It does not mean the couple could entice God into sin.
- **“Church” (v. 11):** The Greek word *ekklēsia* names an assembly. Audience, location, apostolic ministry, and progressive revelation establish which assembly is meant. Etymology alone cannot identify it as the body of Christ.
- **Textual differences:** The TR includes *tauta*, “these things,” at the end of verse 5, while Westcott-Hort omits it. The KJV preserves the explicit reference to what was heard. Both texts report Ananias’s death and the fear of those hearing. This small variant changes neither the event nor its central meaning. [Greek texts, Acts 5:5](#).

Common Ideas To Test

- **“They died because they did not give every dollar.”** Peter explicitly affirms their control of the property and proceeds (v. 4). Their false representation and shared deception are the issue.
- **“Sapphira knew nothing about it.”** She did not know what happened to her husband (v. 7), but she knew the arrangement (v. 2) and confirmed the false price herself (v. 8).
- **“Satan made Ananias do it, so he was not responsible.”** Peter names Satan’s activity and also asks why Ananias conceived the plan in his heart (vv. 3-4).
- **“A voluntary gift cannot involve disobedience.”** Giving freely and telling the truth are compatible obligations. Freedom to retain money is not permission to misrepresent it.
- **“This proves their eternal destiny.”** Luke states the sin, deaths, and public fear. He does not state whether either person was saved or lost.
- **“Every church must reproduce this judgment.”** The event displays God’s holiness under apostolic authority in Jerusalem. It supplies no standing authority for later leaders to pronounce immediate death.
- **“Right division makes honesty unimportant today.”** Paul also rejects lying (Ephesians 4:25) and directs willing giving (2 Corinthians 9:7). Distinguishing the administrations preserves both the event’s particular setting and the enduring seriousness of deceit.

Session Summary

- Barnabas’s gift provides the immediate contrast for the couple’s transaction.
- Ananias and Sapphira bring a partial payment while agreeing to a false claim about the price.
- Peter affirms their control over the land and money, then exposes their lie against God.
- Each spouse’s participation becomes clear, and each dies in connection with the exposed deception.
- Great fear spreads through the Jerusalem assembly and beyond it.

Mark these themes as Acts unfolds

- **Giving and actual need:** Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; 5:4; 6:1-4. Notice ownership, willingness, distribution, and responsibility.
- **The Holy Ghost and truthful witness:** Acts 4:31; 5:3-4, 32. The Spirit who empowers the witness is also the one whom the couple attempts to deceive.
- **Apostolic authority and signs:** Acts 3:6-16; 5:1-16. Distinguish what the apostles do from instructions addressed to all later believers.
- **Assemblies and their identity:** Acts 2:47; 5:11; 19:32, 39, 41. Let the setting determine who is assembled.

Questions to keep asking

1. Why does the opening word “But” matter for understanding the gift?
2. Which statements in verse 4 establish Ananias’s freedom before and after the sale?
3. What evidence distinguishes a partial gift from a deceptive one?

4. How do verses 3 and 4 describe the Holy Ghost?
5. What does Sapphira know, and what does she not know, when she enters?
6. How is her own answer connected with the agreement Peter exposes?
7. What does Luke record about the deaths, and what does he leave unstated?
8. How does verse 11 distinguish the assembly from the wider public?
9. How can we retain the passage’s seriousness about lying without making its immediate judgment a universal rule for today?

One sentence to remember

A gift that looks generous cannot conceal a lie from God, and the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira brings holy fear to Jerusalem’s believing assembly.

Teaching text: [Acts 5:1-11](#), [King James Version](#).