



The Testing of the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-16)

Commentary: Week Eleven

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

6. A Serious Threat to the Common Life [5:1-11](#)

If Barnabas was a positive example of the community's sharing, the story of Ananias and Sapphira provides a sharp contrast. They too sold a piece of property, pledging the proceeds to the community of believers. But they held back part of the proceeds; and a terrible judgment followed, resulting in both their deaths. Perhaps no passage in Acts raises more serious difficulties for Christian readers. The judgment on these two seems so harsh, so nonredemptive, so out of keeping with the gospel. It will be necessary to return to this question; but in order to make an accurate assessment, it would be wise first to look at the passage itself and examine what it seems to say and what it does not say.

The passage falls into two natural divisions: the confrontation of Ananias (vv. [1-6](#)) and the strikingly parallel confrontation with Sapphira (vv. [7-11](#)). In both sections Peter, as the spokesman for the apostles, to whom the community funds were entrusted ([4:35](#)), did the confronting. It is striking that "equal time" is given to both the man and the woman. In both his Gospel and in Acts, Luke paired women with men, particularly in contexts of witness and discipleship. Here perhaps he was showing that along with discipleship goes responsibility; and this applies to all disciples, female as well as male. This would have been particularly noteworthy in the Jewish culture of the early Jerusalem church, where a woman's religious status was largely tied up with her father or husband and depended on his faithful execution of the religious responsibilities.

Ananias was the first to be confronted. Although the first two verses refer to Sapphira's complicity and are in that sense introductory to both parts of the passage, the verbs are singular—he "sold a piece of property ... he kept back part of the money." There is a mild irony even in Ananias's name, whose etymology is "God is gracious." In light of the fearsome judgment that befell his own actions, the grace of God was surely his only hope.

[5:1](#) Ananias had evidently sold a piece of land, like Barnabas, and also like Barnabas had pledged the full proceeds to the community. This can be assumed from the use of a rare Greek verb (*nosphizomai*, v. [2](#)) to describe his action in holding back part of the money. The verb means *to pilfer, to purloin, to embezzle*. One does not embezzle one's own funds but those of another, in this instance those that rightfully belonged to the common Christian fund. Significantly, the same rare verb occurs in the Greek version of [Josh 7:1-26](#), the story of Achan, who took from Jericho some of the booty "devoted" (i.e., set aside for God) for sacred use. Achan received a judgment of death from God himself, and Luke may well have seen a reminder of his fate in the similar divine judgment that came upon Ananias and

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 154-163.

Sapphira. They too had embezzled what was sacred, what belonged to the community in whom the Holy Spirit resided. One must assume either that the practice of the community was always to pledge the full proceeds of a sale or that Ananias and Sapphira had made such a pledge with regard to the sale of the field.

5:2-3 In any event, when Ananias placed the reduced portion at the apostles' feet, Peter confronted him with his duplicity (v. [3](#)). How Peter knew it was an incomplete sum the text does not say. The emphasis on the Spirit throughout the passage would indicate that it was inspired, prophetic insight on Peter's part, just as the Spirit inspired Elisha to see his servant Gehazi's duplicity in accepting money from Naaman the leper ([2 Kgs 5:26](#)). Peter knew that Ananias's gesture was a lie. He had not given his pledge but only a part. "Why have you embezzled ["kept for yourself," NIV] a portion of the sale price? Why have you allowed Satan to enter your heart?" One must remember that the community was "of one heart and mind" ([4:32](#)). This spiritual unity lay behind their not claiming their possessions as their own, their sharing everything they had. They were the community of the Holy Spirit, and in this community they placed all their trust, found their identity and their security. But this was not so with Ananias. His heart was divided. He had one foot in the community and the other still groping for a toehold on the worldly security of earthly possessions. To lie with regard to the sharing was to belie the unity of the community, to belie the Spirit that undergirded that unity. That is why Peter accused Ananias of lying to the Spirit. The Greek expression is even stronger than that—he "belied," he "falsified" the Spirit. His action was in effect a denial, a falsification of the Spirit's presence in the community. All this had happened because he had allowed the archenemy of the Spirit, Satan, to enter his heart. Satan "filled" Ananias's heart just as he had Judas's (cf. [Luke 22:3](#)). Like Judas, Ananias was motivated by money (cf. [Luke 22:5](#)). But in filling the heart of one of its members, Satan had now entered for the first time into the young Christian community as well.

5:4 Peter reminded Ananias that he had been under no compulsion (v. [4](#)). He did not have to sell his land. Even if he sold it, he still could have retained the proceeds. The act of dedicating the land to the community was strictly voluntary. Once pledged, however, it became a wholly different matter. It had been dedicated to the community. In lying about the proceeds, he had broken a sacred trust. Ultimately, he had lied to God. Not that he had not betrayed the community. Not that he had not lied to the Spirit. Rather, to betray the community is to lie to the Spirit that fills the community, and to falsify the Spirit of God is an affront to God himself.

5:5-6 When Ananias heard these words, "he fell down and died" (v. [5](#)). How did he die? Was it from shock from overwhelming guilt and remorse upon the exposure of his sin? Was he struck down by God? The text does not say. The note about the fear that came upon all who heard about it, however, would indicate that they at least saw the hand of God in it all. The manner in which his funeral was handled would likewise indicate that a divine judgment was seen in the whole affair. The young men arose, wrapped up his body, and carried him outside the city to bury him. They wasted no time in ceremony, for they were back in three hours (vv. [7](#), [10](#)). This was most unusual procedure. Burials were often fairly hasty in Palestine, but not that hasty, not, that is, except for death under unusual circumstances, such as suicides and criminals—and judgments from God.

5:7 About three hours later Sapphira appeared on the scene. Just where the scene was we are not told. Luke told the story with the greatest economy. We are also not told who was present. Were all the apostles there? Only Peter is mentioned. How many of those upon whom fear came (v. [5](#)) were actually present to hear the confrontation? We must assume that at least the young men were there with Peter and Ananias (v. [6](#)). For all we are told, in this scene it may have been a matter of only Peter and Sapphira. Where had she been all this time? Why had she not been informed of her husband's death? Why did she now appear; was she looking for her husband?

Luke was not interested in such details. His only goal was to point to the grim outcome of her duplicity with her husband. She joined him in the conspiracy with the funds. She would join him in death.

5:8 Peter confronted her about the sale price, just as he had confronted Ananias. “Is this the price you ... got for the land?” he asked her (v. **8**). “Yes,” she replied. We are again left with questions. Did Peter mention the actual sale price or the reduced sum Ananias had brought? In giving an affirmative answer, was Sapphira conforming her guilt by continuing the lie? That is the most likely event, and most interpreters so take it. Yet if Peter had mentioned the actual full sale price, then her response would have been an admission of guilt, a confession.

5:9–10 In any event, with neither Ananias nor Sapphira did Peter pronounce a curse. His questioning of Sapphira left her the opportunity of repentance, and one can probably assume the same for Ananias. Peter’s role was to confront—not to judge. The judgment came from God. But Peter had to lay before her the consequences of her action. She had joined with her husband in “testing” the Spirit of the Lord. This time the expression was not of lying to the Spirit but of testing him, to see how far he would go in his tolerance. Not very far, was Peter’s answer: “The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.” This was the first Sapphira had heard of her husband’s death, and she fell down immediately at Peter’s feet, dead.

Peter’s words scarcely sound redemptive. He was fulfilling the prophetic role of the divine mouthpiece, pronouncing God’s judgment on her for her complicity with her husband. She may have died of shock; but if so, it was inevitable, for Peter already knew and informed her that her doom was sealed. One can scarcely miss the irony of the situation. Now she lay at Peter’s feet, in the place of her money. She had joined her husband in conspiracy. Now she would join him in the grave.

5:11 Sapphira’s story is bracketed by the same epitaph as that of her husband (cf. v. **5b**): “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.” The repetition is not by chance: it is the whole point of the story. The church is a holy body, the realm of the Spirit. By the power of this spiritual presence in its midst, the young community worked miracles, witnessed fearlessly, and was blessed with incredible growth. The Spirit was the power behind its unity, and its unity was the power behind its witness. But just as with God there is both justice and mercy, so with his Spirit there is also an underside to his blessing. There is his judgment. This Ananias and Sapphira experienced. The Spirit is not to be taken lightly. As the Spirit of God he must always be viewed with fear in the best sense of that word (*phobos*), reverent awe and respect. It might be noted that this is the first time the word “church” (*ekklesia*) occurs in Acts, which denotes the people of God gathered as a religious community. Perhaps it is not by accident that it occurs in the context of this story. The church can only thrive as the people of God if it lives within the total trust of all its members. Where there is that unity of trust, that oneness of heart and mind, the church flourishes in the power of the Spirit. Where there is duplicity and distrust, its witness fails.

Overview. There have been numerous approaches to dealing with the severity of this passage. One has been to note the various parallels to this story elsewhere. In form this story can be classified as a “penalty miracle,” or miracle of divine judgment; and such stories are common in the Old Testament. To those of Achan and Gehazi, one could add the incident of Nadab and Abihu in [Lev 10:1f.](#), who were consumed by the same “unauthorized fire” that they laid upon the censor, or the devastating judgment on Jeroboam delivered to his disguised wife by Abijah the prophet ([1 Kgs 14:1–18](#)). Even closer is the unhappy fate of the two elders whose lie about Susanna led to their own death rather than hers (Sus). The most apt Old Testament parallel is the provision for Israel’s purity, which one encounters frequently in Deuteronomy: “Root out the evil one from your midst” (author’s translation). A number of recent interpreters have sought a closer parallel in the punishment the Qumran community enforced on those who held back goods from the common fund. As has already been noted, this is not a real parallel, since the early church seems to have had a voluntary system of sharing and not an enforced monastic

community of goods like Qumran. What happened to Ananias and Sapphira is quite remote from the punishment meted to the Qumran member who failed to surrender all his property on entrance to the community. Such violators were excluded from the common meal for a period of a year and had their food rations cut by a quarter.

Other suggestions have sought to alleviate the judgmental note in the story of Ananias and Sapphira. It is often argued that their “lying to the Spirit” was the sin Jesus declared to be “unforgivable.” It has already been noted that [Acts 5:1–11](#) simply does not depict Ananias and Sapphira’s sin in terms of blaspheming the Spirit, attributing the work of the Spirit to Satan. Often it is said that the pair died of psychological fright. This can be neither proved nor disproved from the text, and it well may have been the case; but it does not alleviate the strong judgmental note of the text. Peter knew and told Sapphira beforehand that she was about to be carried feet first out the door. Luke’s emphasis on the fear of the people would likewise indicate that they saw divine judgment in the incident, not just a couple’s panic in being caught with the goods.

When all is said and done, there is no “comfortable” solution to the passage. It is a unique story. There is nothing like it elsewhere in Acts, or for that matter in the New Testament. But nowhere in the story are Ananias and Sapphira condemned to eternal perdition. Their death did not necessarily involve their loss of salvation. Still, the judgment that befell Ananias and Sapphira was severe, and one is all too aware that today’s churches would be much emptier if such standards were consistently applied. It is part and parcel of Luke’s ideal portrait of the early church in Acts. None of the standards fit the church of our experience—“one in heart and mind,” no one “claimed that any of his possessions was his own.” Luke depicted it as a unique period, the new people of God in Christ, filled with the Spirit, growing by leaps and bounds. There was no room for distrust, for duplicity, for any breach in fellowship.

The same Spirit that gave the community its growth also maintained its purity. This seems to have been Luke’s point, for the Ananias and Sapphira story is bracketed by an emphasis on the unity of the community ([4:32–35](#)) and the power of the Spirit in its midst ([5:12–16](#)).

One must not pass the story off, however, as a unique phenomenon of the primitive church or an adjunct to Luke’s ideal portrait of the church. If the incident makes us uncomfortable, it should. For one, it deals with money. Luke, who as a physician probably had known personally the pitfalls of wealth, of all the Gospel writers gave the strongest treatment of money’s dangers. Ultimately the temptations of money ensnared Judas ([Luke 22:5](#); [Acts 1:18](#)), the rich young man ([Luke 18:18–23](#)), and the rich fool ([Luke 12:15–21](#)). The same quest for material security trapped Ananias and Sapphira. Not only was it their undoing, but it also threatened the church. Then, and now, the mark of any Christian fellowship is the relationship of its members to material matters. That is where its real heart and mind are revealed. This story reminds us of a further truth. The church, when it *is* the church, is a holy community, the temple of the Holy Spirit ([1 Cor 3:16f.](#)). Disunity, duplicity, and hypocrisy always “believe” the Spirit and hinder his work. If the church is to have genuine spiritual power in its life and witness, it must be an environment of the Spirit, devoted to maintaining its sanctity and purity.

7. The Miracles Worked by the Apostles [5:12–16](#)

This third summary statement in Acts comes close on the heels of the second. That one emphasized the community of sharing practiced by the church ([4:32–35](#)). This one emphasizes the healing ministry of the apostles and bears out the divine response to their prayer for signs and wonders in [4:30](#). In structure the first statement, about the signs and wonders done by the apostles (v. [12a](#)), connects directly with v. [15](#) and constitutes the main new emphasis in the summary statements—the healing ministry. Verses [12b–14](#) are a sort of parenthesis, continuing emphases that have been made in all the summaries—the

effectiveness of the Christians' witness and their favor with the people (cf. [2:47](#); [4:33](#)). The whole passage, with its focus on the healing ministry and the growing acclaim of the people, prepares for the renewed concern of the Sadducees and their arrest of the apostles, just as the healing of the lame man ([3:1–10](#)) led to the first arrest ([4:1–22](#)).

5:12–14 Verses [12–13](#) are deceptively clear in the NIV. The Greek text is far more ambiguous. The first statement is clear enough: "The apostles performed signs and wonders among the people." An example of such a sign has already been given with Peter's healing the lame man ([3:1–10](#)). Now all the apostles were shown to be doing miraculous works. The miracles were performed among the Jewish populace (*laos*) and were "signs" that pointed to and prepared the way for the witness to the word. The Greek of v. [12b](#) says that "they all" were accustomed to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. The NIV clarifies by adding "believers." Some interpreters would see the "all" of v. [12b](#) as referring only to the apostles and then see "no one else" in v. [13](#) as referring to none of the other Christians. This has the advantage of solving the seeming contradiction between vv. [13–14](#), where no one dared join the Christians, yet many new converts were added. It, however, raises the rather serious question of why the other Christians wouldn't join the apostles in Solomon's Colonnade. Were they afraid of their power after what happened to Ananias and Sapphira? Were they afraid of being arrested by the temple authorities? Such timidity is scarcely likely for the community that prayed so boldly in [4:23–31](#). It is probably best, and the most likely reading, to follow the NIV and see v. [12b](#) as referring to the other Christians joining the apostles in Solomon's Colonnade. Peter had preached there after the healing of the lame man ([3:11](#)), and it was likely the customary gathering place for the Christians. Other references to their preaching in the temple may well have been in this place just inside the eastern wall (cf. [5:20f.](#), [25](#), [42](#)).

The people were awed by the power of the apostles, seeing the miracles worked through their hands, and perhaps having heard the report about Ananias and Sapphira. They did not run up and join the Christian band in the colonnade but kept a healthy distance (v. [13a](#)). Nevertheless they held the Christians in the highest regard. Luke was working with a paradox here. It is the same two-sidedness of the Spirit's power that had just been demonstrated in Ananias and Sapphira. The power of the miracles attracts. The awesome power of the Spirit that judges also demands commitment and responsibility. Before that power the crowd kept its distance with healthy respect, unless they were willing to fully submit to that power and make a commitment. Many did, Luke said, making it clear this time that men and women became disciples and were added to the growing community of believers (v. [14](#)).

5:15 Verse [15](#) returns to the main theme of the summary, the healing ministry of the apostles. Again Peter was the representative. So widespread was the fame of his healing powers that people would bring their sick friends and relatives into Peter's presence in the hope that even his shadow might fall upon them. One is reminded of the woman who shared a similar hope that the fringe of Jesus' garment might heal her ([Luke 8:44](#)). In the ancient world a person's shadow was the subject of much superstition and was believed to represent his or her power and personality, to literally be an extension of their person. Whether or not they were healed by Peter's shadow Luke did not explicitly say, but the note underlines the strength of the apostle's healing reputation.

5:16 In any event, crowds came from all the surrounding villages to Jerusalem to be healed by the apostles. One is reminded of Jesus' own healing ministry as recorded in [Mark 6:53–56](#) and the similar response of the people. At this point the apostles were still confined to Jerusalem. The people came to them from the outlying villages. Only later would they go forth from Jerusalem and take their gospel and their healing ministry into the villages of Judea (cf. [9:32–43](#)).