

Title: Glory-Thief
Text: Acts 5:1-11
Theme: God will not share his glory with another
Series: Acts
Prop Stmt: Using charity as a front for self-promotion is nauseating. Using the church as a front for self-glory is deadly.

Read Text:

Most people recognize the value of momentum. You see it all over the sporting world. You see it in politics, in business, in the economy, and in armies. When you have momentum it seems as if you can do nothing wrong, and when you don't have it, seems as if you can't do anything right. On the surface it looks like at the end of chapter 4, that the early church had momentum. They were enjoying favor with the people (great for public relations), they were taking care of their own people (great internal scores), they were growing and the biggest threat (the Sanhedrin had been effectively neutralized. And in spite of being on the receiving end of some nasty threats, nothing came of it, so the early church soldiered on. And then, bam!

Like the debacle of the golden calf after the crossing of the Red Sea or the embarrassing defeat of Ai right after Jericho or David's homecoming parade for the Ark of the Covenant getting rained on by the death of Uzzah. Wow, talk about party killers and momentum stoppers. In those moments, the naysayers, the critics, the poisoned-tongue snipers whose hearts are nothing more than cauldrons of bitter poison sound as if they may be right after all. But the story is bigger than that. Why did Ai initially defeat Israel? Why did judgment rain on David's parade? Why did the initial celebration in the early church choke on the sobering news of Ananias and Sapphira? Good times are not more important than godliness. Success does not excuse disobedience. All of these things are true. But, there is never just one thing going on at a time. The truth is, while there was a lot of wonderful things happening in the church, there were also some bad things going on. There were people who were praying, serving, standing strong in the midst of persecution, sharing the gospel and seeing many people come to faith in Christ. At the same time, there were people who were attracted to this movement who had ulterior motives. They said the right things. They were baptized and identified themselves as believers and members of the church. They sang the songs, heard the word, prayed the prayers and fellowshiped with others. But, this movement gave them an opportunity to advance themselves. The church was a means to advancing their image. They wanted validation. They wanted approval. They wanted to be appreciated and needed and these believers seemed like the perfect people to get that from. They used the language of God and his glory to seek their own and God was and is faithful to expose that. God wants truth on the inside. God wanted integrity from Ananias way more than his money. The good that a gospel church does and can do, is so attractive, that it tempts people to pursue it for the wrong reasons. In fact...

I. **A gospel church is a great place for hypocrisy.** (1-2)

This week we heard about the death of the actor, Luke Perry. Luke was attracted to acting because his mom kept a picture of Paul Newman on her refrigerator. She was in love with Paul because he was a movie star. Luke reasoned that if people love movie stars, then he ought to

pursue that. Seeing someone else being the object of adoration motivated him to be that as well. That happens in the church but more subtly. Let's say that you hear someone sing, or lead worship in a way that speaks to you or connects with you and moves you. You respect the person singing. You are influenced by that person in a good way. You see others around you being influenced by that person in a good way. That person benefits you and appears to benefit others. Therefore, you desire to benefit others the way that they do. You would like to have the same kind of influence on others, that they do. That is not necessarily bad, at all. But, it can be. It can be really bad and you do not even know it. Your desire to help others can easily become a desire for others to think well of you, to think highly of you, to esteem you, respect you and adore you. If ministering to others is your attempt to get others to view you with the same esteem that you have for others, or the esteem they have for others, then ministering to others is only a veil for serving yourself. Ministering to others is good and right. But, ministering to others is dangerous, because ministering to others can be a disguise that covers up your desire for approval from people. Those of you who are prone to insecurity, are particularly vulnerable to this. It is easy to believe the lie that if you have the respect and adoration of others, that you will finally be successful, or finally be significant, or finally be fulfilled.

I was in a social setting recently where I was near a NT theologian who had taught at a prominent seminary where some of my pastor friends attended. I had met this man once briefly, but really did not know him. But, there he was in the same setting that I was, so I went over to him and asked him if I could take a selfie with him so that I could send it to my pastor friends who seeing me with him, would be impressed that I was hanging out with a "big dog." He laughed and complied. And I did and sent it out saying, "Chillin with Dr. ____" Sure enough, the response was immediate. Where are you? What?! Are you kidding me?! That was fun.

We are so tempted to believe the lie, that if people (particularly the right people) think highly of us, then that must mean that we really are validated and affirmed, right? We are tempted to believe that lie, and what this text reveals is that a gospel church is a great place for that lie, like a spot of bacteria in a petri dish to grow into a dangerous infection. Why is that? Well, because...

A. The gospel of grace creates a people of faith, love and grace.

And...people of faith, love and grace are easy to manipulate and take advantage of. We are people of faith. We not only believe in God, we believe God. We believe God's Word. We believe in Jesus Christ. We believe in the gospel. As people who are characterized by belief, we find it easy to believe what people say. When someone tells us of their faith in Christ, we tend to believe them. We do not have bouncers at the doors who only let you in if you look hot enough. We have a very indiscriminate saying on the door that says, "You belong here." Because that is the message of the gospel that no matter what you have done, there is forgiveness for you in Christ. Because we tend to believe, it is easy to take advantage of us.

Tell us of a compassionate ministry, a tear-jerking story, and we're pulling out our purses and wallets. Therefore, it is easy for us to be taken advantage of. And of course along with that, we are people who love. We are loved by God, we love one another, we look for reasons to love. We are recipients of grace. Therefore, we are vulnerable to people who want to use our compassion as an opportunity to get attention.

Barnabas was the real deal. He was a man of faith, love and grace. He sold a piece of land in order to be able to give some extra money to the apostles who would distribute it to those who had a need. When word of this got out, it was a great encouragement. This account of Barnabas at the end of chapter 4 is essential for a few things. 1) It sets up the story of Ananias and Sapphira. 2) It introduces this guy to us who will become an important part of the life of the early church. 3) It makes us aware that this matter of bringing in funds to the Apostles was a big deal. In fact, it became such a big deal that later on in chapter 5, the Apostles had to figure out another way to manage it, because the logistics were getting unmanageable. We do not yet know all of that. What we know now is that the sacrificial generosity on the part of Barnabas was a great encouragement to the early church. Ananias and Sapphira saw this. They obviously saw the esteem that the believers had for Barnabas. So, they decided to do the same thing. Luke makes this clear There are four verbs that describe the deliberate steps Ananias took (with his wife's full knowledge); sold, kept back, brought and laid it at the apostles' feet.

A couple of things to note. 1) Ananias and Sapphira did not have to do this. No one told them to do this. There was no requirement to sell this land. 2) If they chose to sell this, they could have kept all of the money. That is totally fine. They could have kept it for themselves. They could have used the funds to help people on their own. They could have given part of it or all of it to the church (apostles). They did not have to do this. But, what they could not do is lie. What they could not do is lie. It was wrong to make it look as if they gave everything they sold the land for to the church when in reality they hadn't. Because the issue is not the money, the issue is truth and integrity. If being esteemed is your god, you will sin in order to get it and you will be miserable and sin when you don't get it. (1 Cor. 13, give all that I have, give my body to be burned, but not love – why would someone do that? People will do many sacrificial things in order to look good in front of others) And the church is a target rich environment for people who crave esteem.

Years ago, (not around here) I watched a guy “in the ministry” work a group of people. He was slick. He told them what they wanted to hear. He flattered them. Then he casually let them know of a little need that he had, and “to his surprise” they met that need. It was nauseating

B. The gospel is the most precious commodity in the universe.

I could have said that the gospel and therefore, a gospel people (church) are the most precious commodities in the universe. Only the gospel can actually change people. The gospel is the good news that even though we have rebelled against God and deserve his wrath, that instead of justly punishing us, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ to come to this earth and die on the cross in our place. His death paid for all of the sins of those who trust in him. Through Christ we have forgiveness of our sins. That means that through Christ we have eternal life with God. Through Christ we have an eternal inheritance in eternity. Through Christ we have a perfect relationship with God and with one another that we will enjoy forever! What on earth is better than that!? This is it! And, because only things that are precious are worth imitating, it is very tempting to want to be part of something that is that great, but for the wrong reasons. God will not look the other way. This text is so counter-culture, even in the church today. We need to heed this warning.

II. A gospel church is a terrible place for hypocrisy. (3-11)

I really shouldn't assume that we all understand or agree on a definition of hypocrisy. For example, if you tell me that the church is full of hypocrites, I will probably ask you what you mean by that and perhaps to give me an example. If what you mean is that the church is full of people who have problems, I am going to agree with you. Having problems is not the same as being a hypocrite. Having problems is the result of being a sinner and we are all that. A hypocrite is simply a sinner who won't admit it. A hypocrite is one who says one thing and does another. Hypocrisy, as one guy said, is when the outside doesn't match the inside. And while that goes on all of the time in our world, it is devastating when it takes place in the church ...

A. **Because Who we represent is so important.** (3-4)

I just finished reading Allen Guelzo's magnificent work on the Battle of Gettysburg. 156 years later we still study, discuss and dissect this battle because there is so much politically, militarily, and nationally hanging on this, and because this 3-day battle resulted in over 51,000 casualties, the most casualties of any battle in the history of our country. The generals and their decisions that shaped the outcome of the battle are analyzed incessantly. The consequences of their decisions are huge. That is the case here. There is so much at stake in the church, that when we get it wrong, when we are exposed as hypocrites, the consequences have eternal influence. Most of us know people who witnessed or experienced hypocrisy and said, that's it. I'm done. And they walk away. And what do we hear? "If that is Christianity, I don't want it!" And so often we never get a 2nd chance to say that it's not. Peter, with the insight of an apostle, but also with the perspective of an elder knows what is at stake. Look at the language that Peter uses in v.3. There are four questions and then the conclusion. The questions are like a scalpel in the hand of a heart surgeon that lays Ananias's heart open. Look at the first one.

"Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?"

He will come back to the question of "why" again. But, the rest of the question makes it clear that Ananias plotted to deceive the church by claiming that he/they were donating the entire proceeds of the sale of the land, when that was not true. Do you see the point? This was not simply a matter of one guy not telling the full story. This had to do with Satan and God. By planning to lie, Ananias had given himself to Satan to be filled, to be used, to be controlled in such a way that Ananias was an adversary of God. He was not just lying to man, he was lying to God. And you cannot lie to God! It will never work. And when you lie to the people of God, you are lying to the God of the people. How many times do you think that you cannot afford to tell the truth? When, in reality, we cannot afford not to.

The second and third questions go together: *"While it remained unsold, did it not remain in your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?"* Ananias, no one made you do this. This was all on you. You did not have to sell the land and you did not have to give any of the money to the church, or all of the money to the church. Selling the land was yours to do if you wanted to. Even if you gave a little bit of it to the church to help out others, would have been wonderful.

But, what you cannot do is lie. By the way, as an aside, isn't Peter's response refreshing? He knows that the encouragement that this money would bring to the congregation is not worth selling your soul for. Peter is not impressed with the gift because he knows the heart of the giver. Peter knows that it is not worth lying for.

Fourth question: Why? "*Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?*" Can we just stop here for a minute, because this question deserves our attention? Why? Why did you create this plan? What was it that you wanted so badly that you were willing to go through all of the hassle to create your plan, publicize your plan, and then execute your plan? You went to a lot of trouble in order to pull this off. Why? What was it that was so important for you to get that you were willing to be an agent of Satan in order to achieve it? Ananias, was it worth it?

From the text we can assume that Ananias and Sapphira were desperate for admiration, recognition, or respect. Admiration, recognition and respect are cruel masters who will drive you to desperate measures and desperation because they cannot be satisfied. If you live for the admiration of others, you will never rest because the drug of approval only makes you lust for more.

B. Because what we do is so personal.

What Ananias did was a terrible kick in the gut of the church. He used the beautiful act of sacrificial giving for the sake of others as a way to make himself look good. When he brought this money in, it had all of the appearance of being an act of love for others, in reality it was an act of love for self. It reminds me of what Judas did in the garden to Christ. Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. He planned it that way. He used a deeply personal expression of affection as a means to express his hate. And Jesus knew it. Jesus felt it. Here, Peter knew it.

All of this is why the church is such a terrible place for hypocrisy. We are dealing with people at the most personal level there is. We talk about, pray about, sing about, teach, preach, counsel about things of our souls. When we talk to one another at the heart level, we are using truth. This is deeply intrusive. Helping one another in many cases involves working through issues of addictions, incest, rape, abortion, fear, abuse, neglect, shame, sexual struggles, and other really deep secrets. This is what we get to do for one another. The Word of God and the power of the gospel goes wondrously deep into our souls and brings healing. What we do is personal because this is not a game.

C. Because the collateral damage is so big. (5-11)

There are certain scenes that you will never forget. For the young men present, this had to be one of them. Ananias was lying dead next to the pile of money he had brought in. His plan to buy admiration failed. His lust for recognition certainly got him recognition, but not the kind he was looking for. In both verse 5 and verse 11 Luke speaks of the great fear that came upon them all. You can see why. The young men who carried out the lifeless body of Ananias and put him (presumably) in the family tomb had to realize that this was no game. This was pressed home even further when 3 hours later Sapphira arrived and Peter gave her an opportunity to tell the truth. Did she anticipate being received with favor? Did she have any tinge of guilt, or pang of

conscience? If so, she suppressed it. When she repeated the same lie, she suffered the same fate. It sounds as if the young men, upon returning from burying Ananias found Sapphira dead, and now had to bury her next to him. What is the collateral damage? The young men, the people in the church and now, the reputation of the church to others. This hurt. But, at the same time, it was a very clear message. God knows our lies and we will be held to account. By the way, v.11 is the first time that Luke uses the word “church” to describe the community of believers. If persecution from the outside won’t destroy the people of God, perhaps deceit from within will.

Conclusion:

- God, please help me to see the truth about my life.
- God, help me to see how I try to make myself look better than what I really am.
- Help me to embrace what you know to be true about me.
- God, please help me admit and accept the truth about my life.
- God, please help me admit and accept the truth about my life without excuses or shifting blame.
- God, please help me to admit the truth that I might receive your grace. Thank-you that if we confess our sins, you are faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.