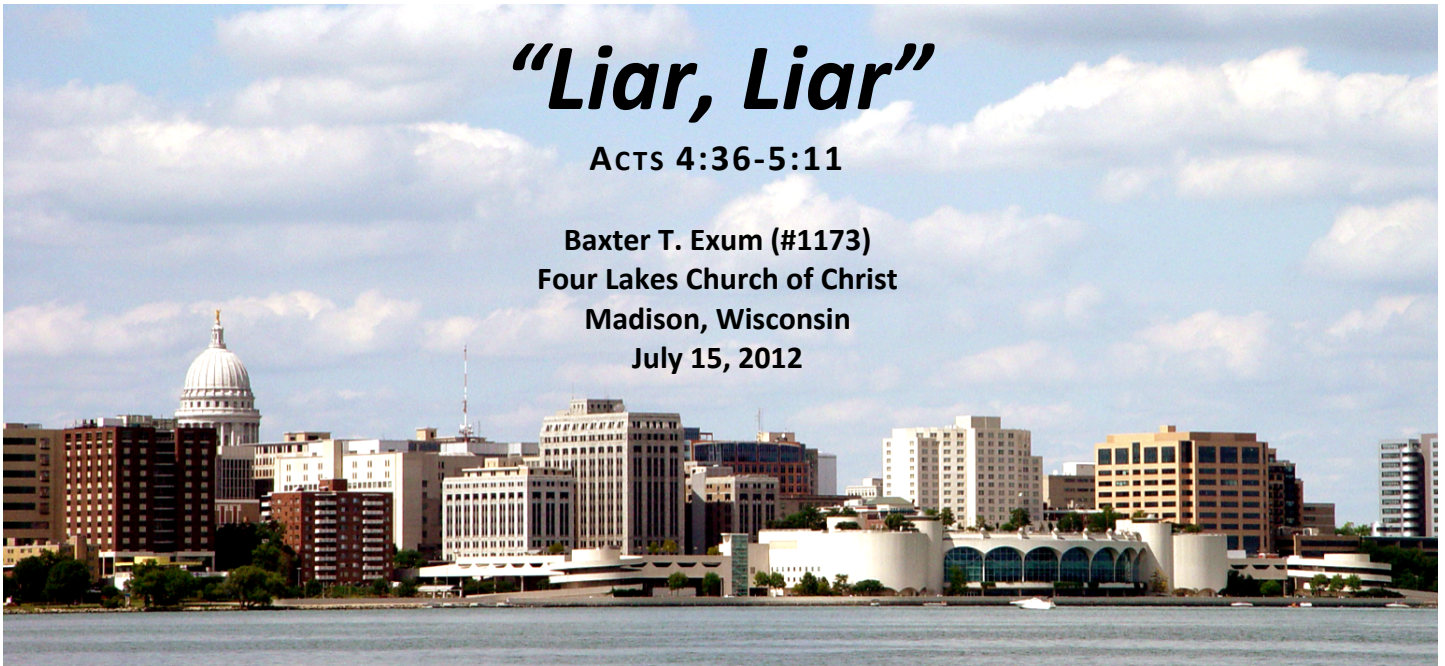


# **“Liar, Liar”**

**ACTS 4:36-5:11**

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Many years ago, I remember reading a series of statistics on the places where fatal accidents normally happen. Apparently, more than 20% of all fatal accidents happen in an automobile. 17% of all fatal accidents happen in the home. 14% of all fatal accidents happen to pedestrians. 6% take place while traveling by air, rail, or water. But the study concluded by pointing out that only .0001% of all fatal accidents happen at a place of worship. The obvious conclusion, then, is that we need to spend more time in church!

However, this morning I would like for us to go to the Scriptures to study the account of two people in the book of Acts, members of the church in Jerusalem, a husband and wife who were killed during an act of worship. It is a shocking story, and the account gives a dramatic contrast to all of the good and amazing things that had happened up to that point in the early church.

So far in the book of Acts, everything has been incredibly good. On the first day (in Acts 2), Peter preached a sermon, and 3,000 people were baptized. At the end of that chapter, we find that they all continued meeting together and sharing their meals with one another on a daily basis. By the time we get to Acts 4:4, we find that the number of men in the group came to be about 5,000. We can probably add about that many women, and about that many children, and the size of the group is most likely at least 15,000 people. I have never been to a Badgers hockey game, but my understanding is that the Kohl Center holds right around 15,000 people for a hockey game. So, if you can imagine the Kohl Center packed to capacity for a hockey game, that is very roughly the size of the church in Jerusalem within just a very short amount of time. The church, therefore, was growing by leaps and bounds. Things were going very well. People were sharing with each other. Towards the end of Acts 4, we get a feeling for the attitude (the culture) of that congregation. Dr. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us (starting in Acts 4:32), that,

***...the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.***

With this in mind, we come to the closing verses of Acts 4, along with a very disturbing account in the opening verses of Acts 5. If you will, please look with me at Acts 4:36-5:11,

***Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. 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 have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.***

- I. **As we think about this paragraph for just a little bit, I would like for us to start by thinking very carefully about THE SIN THAT CAUSED GOD TO STRIKE THESE TWO PEOPLE DEAD.**

But before we even get to the sin, I want us to notice that Ananias and Sapphira were basically doing a good thing. In fact, as far as giving is concerned, Ananias and Sapphira probably went beyond most (if not all) of us here this morning, because they actually sold some property and gave at least a part of that money to the Lord. How many of us have actually sold property for the benefit of this congregation? In that regard, Ananias and Sapphira are a tremendous example and an encouragement.

And something else I should point out here: In verse 4, Peter gives us some insight into what they did. He points out that their sin was not in the amount of money they gave. In fact, Peter very clearly said that this entire scenario was entirely under their control. As far as we know, God never commanded them to sell the property. And then, when they did sell it, God never demanded all of those funds. In fact, Peter specifically tells us that the funds (the proceeds from the sale) were completely under their control. God was not forcing them to redistribute their wealth. It was their business. They could have built themselves a house. They could have saved the money. They could have given part of it to the Lord, and they could have held back part of it. They could have used it to go out to dinner. They could have started a business. Their money and the decision were completely theirs.

However, the problem came when Ananias and Sapphira made the decision to deceive the apostles. And so we are reminded rather graphically that lying is a sin. What caused them to commit this sin? I doubt they started this process hoping to lie. But instead, like most lies, they probably got caught up in it. We notice in

those last few verses of Acts 4 that Barnabas had just made a huge contribution, and it appears that that is what got them thinking. Maybe they wanted some of the praise that Barnabas got. And so they got the ball rolling. They sold the land. But somewhere between selling the land and laying that money at the apostles' feet, they made a decision. They made a decision to try to make themselves look better than they really were. They were drawn into a trap. Notice what Peter said in verse 3, ***"Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie...?"*** And that is exactly how it works today. We face some situation where it seems better to lie than to tell the truth. Maybe we're about to get in trouble from our parents, and at that moment we think, "Ooo, if I just fudge the truth here a little bit, then maybe I can get out of this situation." Or maybe we're dealing with a boss at work, or maybe our spouse is pressing us on something, or maybe we are trying to impress our friends, and suddenly, it just kind of makes sense not to tell the truth. Or, as Peter said: Satan is filling our hearts to lie. Right at that moment when it seems that a lie would be the easy way out, Satan is waiting right there, and he is ready to fill our hearts to lie. We may start out with good hearts and good motives, but right at that moment when it seems like we can stay out of trouble, right at that moment when it seems that we can save our reputation, right at that moment when it seems like we really have a chance to look good to others, Satan is at the top of his game, and he is ready to step in. At that moment, we need to remember what God said to Cain in Genesis 4:7, ***"...sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."*** Ananias and Sapphira, though, failed to master sin and actually gave in and lied.

## II. **How did God feel about that? It's pretty obvious, isn't it? THE JUDGMENT WAS SWIFT AND SEVERE!**

Perhaps Ananias thought that there was at least one little section of his life that God could not see, a little walled-off area that God could not penetrate – almost like a lead box going through an x-ray machine. But God is not like that! God can see everything! And so when Ananias lied to the apostles, he was actually lying to God. Have we thought about this? Have we ever thought that when we lie to a spouse we are actually lying to God? Have you ever thought that when you lie to your mom or dad, you are not only lying to them, but you are also lying to God? Lying to a friend or an employer is the same as lying to God, because God sees everything. And in the case of Ananias, the judgment was swift. He thought he could get away with it. It seemed as if lying was the easy way out. But lying always backfires. Sometimes sooner, sometimes later, but lying never pays in the long run. Nothing good will ever come of it. And so in Acts 5:5, we find that as soon as he finished lying, ***"Ananias fell down and breathed his last."*** We then have a period of three hours before Sapphira comes in. I'd like to think that she was out spending the money, but whatever the case might have been, she shows up and has no idea what has just happened. She tells the same lie, and she also drops dead right there on the spot.

Now, we think about our culture today, and we know that we usually minimize and even trivialize lying and deception. God, however, does not. As David wrote in Psalm 101:7, ***"He who practices deceit shall not dwell within My house; He who speaks falsehood shall not maintain his position before Me."*** Lying, therefore, is a capital offense in the eyes of God; that is, lying deserves the death penalty. Remember: Ananias and Sapphira did not steal the money, they did not hit somebody over the head to get it – the money was theirs! But they lied about it. They lied to impress other people. They lied to make themselves look good, and they paid the ultimate price. We have all heard the old saying, "You can fool some of the people all the time, you can fool all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." I would add to that: We can fool God none of the time!

Especially if we try to fake it at church, if we try to make people think we are more righteous than we really are, it will not end well. Think for just a moment about how the Lord Jesus dealt with sinful people. For those

who were broken down in sin, for those who admitted it, the Lord was tender, compassionate, forgiving. To the woman at the well (in John 4), the woman had been married five times and was currently living with a man who was not her husband – that’s a messed up situation, right? She was living in sin, but to that woman, Jesus offered her **“living water.”** To the woman caught in the very act of adultery (in John 8), Jesus said, **“Go. From now on sin no more.”** To Zaccheus the thief, the Lord said, **“Today salvation has come to this house.”** To those caught up in sin who were willing to admit it, the Lord was compassionate and forgiving.

To hypocrites, though, to those who faked righteousness, to those like Ananias and Sapphira who lied to maintain the image of being righteous when they really were not, the Lord God had some of the harshest language in the entire Bible. In Matthew 23, the Lord referred to people like that as snakes, whitewashed tombs. He called them sons of hell. He called them foolish and blind – blind guides leading the blind. Lying in church, therefore, pretending to be who we really aren’t, is one of the worst sins we could possibly commit.

We remember the words spoken by the One who sits on the throne in heaven (in Revelation 21:8), **“But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”** Later in life, the apostle Peter wrote a book of his own, and I cannot help but imagine that he was thinking of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira as he wrote 1 Peter 4:17, **“For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”** Lying, therefore, is a serious sin, and we find here in Acts 5 that God will judge those who do not tell the truth.

III. **Well, I realize that this morning’s lesson has been on the depressing side – I mean, we are talking about people who dropped dead in church – so before we end, I need to point out that THERE IS A NOTE OF GRACE IN THIS ACCOUNT.**

And the grace (the good thing that happens here) comes as the result of what is actually the very first case of church discipline. Discipline is never pleasant. We know, because we have been through it here – multiple times. But we also know that it ends up strengthening the church. We can look back, and we can say, “We have done what the Bible has told us to do,” and somehow we have survived as a congregation. The way we discipline each other is not nearly as severe as God’s discipline in this passage, but please notice the result. In verse 5, after the death of Ananias, the Bible says that **“great fear came over all who heard of it.”** And then we have more at the end (in verse 11), **“And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.”** By the way (as far as I can tell), that is the first time the word **“church”** is used with reference to God’s people in the book of Acts, and it comes in the context of church discipline. In other words, after these two people dropped dead for lying, the rest of the church suddenly had a renewed respect for God. “Wow! This is the same God we worshiped under the Old Covenant!”

I know sometimes when we start talking about church discipline, some people will always say, “Well, church discipline doesn’t really work – nobody ever comes back because of it.” First of all, I would say, “Not true!” I have seen it work. But secondly, we need to reconsider our definition of successful discipline. As far as the Scriptures are concerned, I can find at least three goals of discipline: 1.) To restore the individual, 2.) To keep the sin from spreading in the church, and 3.) To maintain the reputation of the church in the community. And so even if the individual is not restored (even if the discipline failed in that regard), at least we have succeeded with the other two goals – we have made a strong statement that certain behavior is not acceptable in our Christian family. We remember Paul’s words to the young preacher in 1 Timothy 5:20, **“Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.”** That is exactly what

happened here! As far as I can tell, the discipline didn't do too much good for Ananias and Sapphira, did it? Some people might say, then, "Oh, look! God's discipline failed!" And yet it did not fail! The remaining members, those who could have filled up the Kohl Center, the rest of them were filled with a renewed fear of God.

You know, if I had written the book of Acts, I might have left this out. If I were to write the history of this congregation, there are some episodes I might leave out. And yet as Luke outlined the history of the early church, he knew it was very important to tell us about what happened here. Even though two people died, all of us have learned something very important about God, and that is: He loves His church so much that he will take drastic measures to save it. Keola and I have a friend from our college days at Freed-Hardeman, and he has been posting online lately about a surgery he recently had to remove an aggressive melanoma from his leg. About two weeks ago, he finally posted a picture of it as a reminder of what cancer can do. It is a huge gaping hole in his leg where the surgeons went in and scooped out the growth to keep it from spreading. At this point, it looks like they got all of it, but the wound looks horrible. I am sure it hurt, and I am sure it will hurt for quite some time, but thanks to good surgeons and the grace of God, our friend is alive. And I believe we can say the same thing about Ananias and Sapphira. In God's eyes, sin is serious, and the cancer had to be removed from the early church – it was painful, but it was actually an act of grace.

At first, we might not expect the church to grow as the result of God killing two of its members, and yet that is exactly what happened! If we were to continue reading, we would find in verse 14 that, ***"...all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number."***

### **Conclusion:**

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I would point out that when we sin, we can go in one of two very different directions. On one hand, we can try to hide it. If we have lied, for example, we can keep on lying – we can lie to our friends, we can lie to our families, we can lie to our brothers and sisters, we can lie to ourselves, we can lie to God. We can fake it. We can try to appear more righteous than we really are. And yet we know from the Scriptures, that, ***"It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God"*** (Hebrews 10:31).

On the other hand, though, we have the option of turning away from sin and turning our lives back toward God. If we have lied, we can admit it. And when we repent and confess our sins, the Lord forgives. If you are already a Christian, and if you need to confess sin this morning so that we can face it together as a Christian family, please let us know. Write it down, bring it to the front, and we would love to go to God in prayer on your behalf. Let's be real with each other. If you've been faking it in the past, don't fake it anymore.

On the other hand, if you are not yet a Christian, we want you to know that when we allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water as God has told us to do, our sins are forgiven and the Christian life begins. We are baptized as basically a reenactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. If you have never obeyed the gospel, this morning would be a great time to do that. We still don't have a water heater in this building, but in about 25 minutes we can fill up the baptistery downstairs with some of the coolest and cleanest water you have ever seen. Or, we can take a quick trip over to Lake Monona. If you have any questions, we hope you will talk with us right away. But, if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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