

Masters of Impression Management
Acts 5:1-11

Her stories are mesmerizing...listen to what's written on the back cover of her first book ► *I'm the accidental offspring of two people who hated each other. I never saw my father's face, because he abandoned my mother before I was born, and she hated him for it. My mother was young and didn't want to be tied down with a baby she hadn't wanted in the first place, so she left me with my grandmother on the reservation. I'm a worthless half-breed...*

Her story continues as she is forced to leave the Kickapoo reservation and move to Oklahoma City. Homeless and friendless, she attempts suicide, but then her life crosses the path of a pastor who, along with his wife, shows her love and leads her to faith in Christ.

It's the story of *Crying Wind*...first printed by Moody Press in 1977 and within two years *Crying Wind* became their best-selling book ever. She followed up her self-titled autobiography with the sequel, *My Searching Heart*, and by 1979 she was working on a third book. Based upon the popularity of her books, *Crying Wind* developed a thriving public ministry, speaking to large women's groups and churches across North America. She appeared in authentic-looking native-American dress and told stories of the reservation.

There is only one problem: none of it is true. None of it. *Crying Wind* was really Linda Davison Stafford. Linda grew up not on a Kickapoo reservation, but 25 miles from Colorado Springs in Woodland Park. Moody Press' own investigation revealed the truth and they immediately dropped all association with Stafford. Amazingly, another Christian publisher, Harvest House, reprinted her books (with the same cover art!) and recategorized them as "biographical novels." Her second book has a photo of her, her husband Don, and their four children--Snow Cloud, Lost Deer, Little Antelope, and Spring Storm...all four children are fair-skinned blondes who look more Norwegian than Kickapoo. Even today, one of her websites refers to her books as "her life story as she remembers it."

Such incredible, intentional deception

-sadly, but not surprisingly, she's neither the first nor the last to try to make herself into someone else...to create a certain image...many of us make it a full-time job working to give the impression we are more intelligent, more charitable, more spiritual than we truly are

We've already read at the end of Acts 4 how the early church is seeing a time of sacrificial, Spirit-led giving to God and to each other

-Luke, the God-inspired author of the book of *Acts*, gives the example of Joseph from Cyprus, whose generosity encourages the apostles

Read Acts 5:1-11

This is one of the most dramatic and shocking events in the early church
-let's clarify some of the obvious issues before moving to our focal point

First, we must acknowledge that this is a sin *within* the church

-Ananias and Sapphira are likely already part of the fellowship of Christ-followers...and problems from within the Body are always far more dangerous than those from the outside

--**G. Campbell Morgan** ► *The Church has never been harmed or hindered by opposition from without; it has been perpetually harmed and hindered by [the sin of those] from within.*

-keep that in mind when we talk about God's judgment in a second

It's also important to note a few things about their sin

-their sin is not refusing to give...because they *do* give

-their sin isn't refusing to give all the money...there is no pressure, no requirement, for them to give *anything*, much less give *everything*...it's definitely not a problem for them to give only part of the money

--Peter makes that clear in **v. 4**

-their sin--which we'll discuss in greater detail in just a moment--is their premeditated lie about the gift

Before we get into that, let's take a good look at God's judgment

-the guilty verdict we can understand...they both attempted to deceive

--the death sentence, however, strikes many of us as being, well, um... just a tad over the top...I mean, seriously, God strikes them dead for telling one lie?

---no wonder **v. 5** says *Everyone who heard about it was terrified.*

----and **v. 11** says *Great fear gripped the entire church and everyone else who heard what happened.*

----do you think lying was a problem in the church for a long time after that?

-so let's try to understand a little better why God judges this particular sin so severely

This event occurs during the infancy of the Church

-their fellowship is fragile...they have a beautiful interdependence upon one another

--but then thrust into that community is this deceit...and their mutual trust, as well as their fellowship, are threatened

-should this sin have go unpunished, when the truth comes out (and it will) it will send the clear message that not only can you prosper by lying, but also that God can be fooled

True, it does have kind of an Old Testament ring to it, but New Testament or Old, God hasn't changed...even today He is still righteous, holy, and just...and even today, sin is still sin...and even today, God still judges sin

-yes, God does demonstrate grace and He does forgive sin, but we're often guilty of allowing His grace to lull us into a sense of complacency believing that sin really is no big deal...and in the end God's simply going to turn His back and pretend He didn't see anything

--that's not true

One of my former Directors of Missions, Dr. Wade Paris, writes a weekly column, *The Shepherd's Call*. I received this one by email on Friday ►

My grandson Stephen and I went to the grocery. It was one of those "milk, bread and eggs" trips. To be sure we did not run out again, I got a carton of 18 eggs. As we carried in our purchases, Stephen tried to put the eggs on the kitchen counter, but missed. The package hit the floor with a thud. "Well, Stephen," I said, "Looks like we are going back to the store." We opened the carton, and it appeared none of the eggs were broken. "I guess this is our lucky day," I said as I put the eggs in the fridge.

Several days later my wife asked, "Did you look at those eggs before you and Stephen bought them?"

"Certainly," I answered. "Why do you ask?" I suspected I knew why.

"Every egg in the carton was broken." Then I told her the story of the eggs falling on the floor. When Stephen and I looked, it seemed we had gotten away with a big mistake. The truth was the consequences were just delayed —not escaped.

A biblical passage warns, "Be sure your sin will find you out." (Numbers 32:23) People often do wrong and think they got away with it. Sin has a way of showing up later.

God told Adam and Eve if they ate the forbidden fruit they would die. After they took the first bite, they must have thought God had lied or at least was mistaken because they were still alive. But the consequences would come later. They didn't die immediately, but eventually they did. It was the delayed consequence of their sin.

I suppose that today we figure that because we don't see people dropping dead every time they lie, cheat, or steal...then, well, we all must be getting away with something...fooling God, so to speak

-the Bible teaches, to the contrary, that we're only fooling ourselves

--God's judgment *is* coming--like it or not, believe it or not--we've all been warned

'Remember the title for this series of messages? *Dummies of the Bible*

'Remember the subtitle? *What were they thinking?*

So what *were* Ananias and Sapphira thinking?

-I said earlier that their sin was a premeditated lie...intentional deception

--why would they do this? no doubt if they give 10% of the proceeds from the land sale that would still amount to a substantial gift...so why not be satisfied with telling the truth?

---if their goal is to appear generous, a mere 10% would certainly do it...the gift was voluntary anyway...plus, it's not like anyone is going to look online and see how much the property sold for

--why would they do this?

---I think Luke gives us a clue

----remember, chapter and verse divisions in the Bible were added only about 700 years ago...so disregard them for just a moment and here's what today's texts sound like ► *There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need. For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means "Son of Encouragement"). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus. He sold a field he owned and*

brought the money to the apostles. But there there was a certain man named Ananias who, with his wife, Sapphira, sold some property. He brought part of the money to apostles, claiming it was the full amount. With his wife's consent, he kept the rest.

Reading it that way doesn't change the essence of the passage, of course, but it perhaps it *does* shed a little insight...especially when the first word of **5:1** is correctly translated *but*, instead of *and*

-*but* sets up a contrast...a contrast between Joseph, who's given a really cool nickname, and Ananias & Sapphira

--or you might even say that *but* describes not just a contrast, but a competition--a competition contrived solely in the couple's collective mind

-and because they see giving as a competition, they feel compelled to come up with a plan that ensures they finish on top...and perhaps earn them a cool couple nickname, too, like *Charley & Vicki* or *Phillip & Erin*

It's true that generosity often inspires generosity, but because Ananias and Sapphira seem to be hyper-competitive, they also appear to be especially concerned about getting proper credit for their gift

-think about it--why *else* would Ananias give the money and feel the need to claim it is the full amount (v. 2a)?

--wouldn't you figure he'd quietly hand Matthew a leather pouch with the gift inside rather than turn it into some sort of presentation?

-isn't this exactly the sin Jesus warns us about in **Matthew 6:1-4**? **[Read]**

Understand--greed isn't the issue...it's the public recognition...or, more accurately, it's an obsession with creating an image, a persona, a facade

-and if you remember from the Gospels, Jesus' harshest words are reserved not for the obvious sinners, but rather for hypocrites...those whose faith is nothing but a sham...those who wear masks pretending to be something and someone they're not

Remember how He dresses down the Jewish religious leaders of the day?

-Matthew 23:5-7a, 27b-28 ► *Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear extra long tassels on their robes. And how they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the most prominent seats in the synagogue! They enjoy the attention they get on the streets...*

Hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs--beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. You try to look like upright people outwardly, but inside your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.

So...what does this tragedy teach us today?

God knows our our motives...they are just as important as our actions...
doing the right thing (giving) for the wrong reasons (appearances) is still wrong...it's always wrong
-wrong motives negate or nullify right actions

God cannot be fooled...He judges us for who we really are, not who we pretend to be

Sometimes we in the church actually encourage people to be hypocrites
-think about Crying Wind...even after the truth was exposed Christians still bought her books, went to her conferences...it's why she still has a ministry today...like Tim insightfully told me earlier this week, "We *want* her story to be true."

- part of that is because we live in a culture of celebrity...even in the Church...and we prefer to worship our little idols than worship God
- I think we encourage some degree of hypocrisy in the Church because we don't *want* to know the truth...we don't *want* to deal with the fact that we are all fellow strugglers--saved by grace, no doubt--but sinners
 - it makes us feel better about ourselves and our own hypocrisy
 - if you don't believe me, think about the last time you were in a group of Christians and someone confessed an unacceptable sin
 - you know the difference between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" sins, don't you? ...it's the difference between ►
 - *occasional lust (which many of us men would pass off as "natural") and an addiction to pornography
 - *a little innocent gossip and malicious slander
 - *using stamps at work for personal mail and systematically underreporting income on your taxes
 - *berating your wife and slapping your wife
 - *pretending everything is okay and being a total hypocrite
 - of course, to God there are no acceptable sins--none...we tend to create such false distinctions to make us feel better about ourselves...softer language like "occasional," "little"

---so back to my scenario...in a moment of conviction, someone confesses what we label as an unacceptable sin...and what happens? people stare at the floor...some squirm in their seats...a couple cough or clear their throats...and the leader suddenly regrets showing up

----that's because we really don't *want* that degree of honesty

----we prefer to keep our confessions safe...so we can all maintain our carefully manicured images...and leave the same frauds we were when we walked in

Ananias and Sapphira may have fit in the modern American church just a little too well

-God leaves no room for doubt just how destructive deceit and hypocrisy are to the fellowship

In **Luke 18**, Jesus tells a parable that drives home the difference between being fake and being real

-in the story, we learn the only answer to hypocrisy

Read Luke 18:9-14

-and the difficult lesson here is that the two characters aren't extremes He creates for illustration purposes only...I'm convinced Jesus is teaching that you and I are one or the other of these two men--there's no comfortable, middle ground

--we are either fraudulent, self-deceived hypocrites destroying the church
--or we're sinners who are honest enough to throw ourselves at God's mercy

Which one are you?