

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 205

Ananias and Sapphira – Keeping Back Part of the Price

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 7th July, 2002**

Text: *"But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 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" (Acts 5. 1, 2).*

This chapter begins with a terrible *but*, a most awful *but*, a most solemn *but*. Let us remember these were the early days of the church of God following Pentecost. These were days of wonderful prosperity. These were days of wonderful blessing. These were days when Christ was being exalted. These were days when His name was being glorified in the church. "*But.*"

Perhaps there are no two chapters that have a greater contrast than chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 is a wonderful chapter: following the healing of the lame man, we have the power of the name of Jesus, the wonderful way the apostles stood in persecution, the Lord delivering them from prison, the place being shaken, their adversaries being overthrown, being confounded, and the love and union in the church of God. "*But.*" And the Word of God makes it abundantly clear that it was Satan who had crept into the early church, just as Satan crept into the Garden of Eden. O this *but*, this sin, this lying, this hypocrisy! O this terrible judgment that took place: instant death of a man, instant death of his wife; both of them church members; apparently no wrong could be discerned in them; apparently here they were displaying much godliness and grace. But God, who discerns the thoughts and the intents of the heart, read their lying and hypocrisy and there was this awful judgment. The church of God must be kept pure. O how careful the Holy Ghost was in those early days to keep the church of God pure!

Well, you know what happened. There was this man Ananias. He had a piece of land, or a house, and he sold it and he brought the price to the apostles and gave it to them – a wonderful gift for the church – but he kept some of it back. You say, What was wrong with that? Well, he implied to them, he made it known to them, that he was giving them *everything*, it was the whole lot, he was sacrificing it all, he was not holding anything back. But he was lying to them. There was hypocrisy in it. And immediately he fell down dead. Now three hours later his wife

Sapphira came in and Peter said, “Now how much did you sell this land for? Was it so much?” She said, “O yes,” and then she fell down dead as well. So you see this solemn judgment in the church of God. Now when a church is really pure, when a church is really blessed, there will be the Holy Ghost purifying the church; there will be the Holy Ghost discipline; there will be the Holy Ghost cleansing; and there will be the Holy Ghost judgment.

Now there were some solemn things in the early church. In Paul’s first Epistle to the Corinthians, it is very clear that because some of the church members were very careless about the Lord’s supper, some of them were afflicted with illnesses by the Lord and some of them actually died. “For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” (1 Cor. 11. 30). It is no wonder that “great fear came on all them that heard these things.” We do not have the same fear in the church of God today, the same reverence, the same awe for the greatness and majesty and sovereignty and holiness of our God. “Great fear came on all them that heard these things.” It is no wonder we read that people were afraid to join themselves to them. “Of the rest durst no man join himself to them.” It was a fearful thing to be a member of the early church.

And then we read an amazing thing, and beloved friends, this will always be the case when the church of God stands clear and remains pure: “Believers were the more added to the Lord” – listen: “*multitudes*” – and the Word of God does not exaggerate. “Believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.” How often we have heard of it and seen it over the years where a church has been unwilling to stand, where a church has said, “But we must not offend them”; where a church has said, “If we act like this” (knowing it is the only way, the right way), “then people will leave.” Now it worked the very opposite in the early church. The more the church was purged, the more that church was blessed, the more the church of God was increased. “Believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.”

What a solemn chapter this is, what a shock really, the opening word, after all these things had been happening! “*But* a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, and kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part” – only a certain part, but implying that it was all, implying that it was everything, deceiving, lying, hypocritical – “and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” “*But.*” I

am sure that the minds of many of you will go to a very similar occasion in the Old Testament. I am referring to the Book of Joshua chapter 7 which also begins with this solemn word *but*, this awful word *but*. Now those early chapters of the Book of Joshua just remind me of the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. It was a pure church. Israel's best days in the Old Testament were in the Book of Joshua – the wilderness period ended, entering the Promised Land. It is almost like the spirit of a new life, the spirit of the resurrection. And chapter 6, well you have that glorious occasion when by faith the walls of Jericho fell down, and Joshua was honoured before all the people. There was that wonderful deliverance, that wonderful conquest. "So the Lord was with Joshua; and his fame was noised throughout all the country. *But*."

So chapter 7, just like Acts chapter 5, begins with this awful *but*, this terrible *but*. "But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan ... took of the accursed thing; and the anger of the Lord was kindled against the children of Israel." Now one man had done something wrong, and no-one knew anything about it but that one man himself, Achan, yet all the children of Israel suffered. Sin in the heart, sin in the church, brings weakness, brings defeat instead of victory. They went up to fight against Ai. It was such a simple thing, such an easy thing, but they fled from the men of Ai. They were devastated; they were overcome. Why? There was sin in the camp, the hidden thing in the camp, the Babylonish garment, the hidden wedge, the shekels of silver. But in Joshua 7, just as in Acts 5, there was the purging. The guilty man had to be found out and stoned to death. "So the Lord turned from the fierceness of His anger. Wherefore the name of that place was called, The valley of Achor, unto this day." Then you find the blessing, prosperity, conquest. The same in Acts 5: blessing, prosperity, conquest.

"Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." It was when Israel was in its best days that this awful *but* of Joshua 7 came in. It was when the church of God was at its purest that this awful *but* of the Acts of the Apostles appears. What is it? Satan hates prosperity. Satan hates blessing. If the Lord blesses you, if the Lord blesses the church, then watch out for Satan, because Satan will creep in, either as a roaring lion, or as an angel of light, that if it were possible he might deceive the very elect. If the Lord blesses, if the Lord is with His people, if there is some measure of prosperity, then beware of Satan. Or to change the analogy, beware of the little foxes that find it so easy to creep in where the fence will keep the

big foxes out. Now Peter makes it clear that this was Satan. If the Lord blesses you, watch out! If the Lord favours us as a church, watch out!

I do not know how many of you have ever realised, the awful, God-dishonouring denying the authority of Scripture appeared in the Free Church of Scotland when that church was accounted one of the most blessed churches since the days of the apostles. Robert Murray M'Cheyne, the Bonars, Thomas Chalmers, "Rabbi" Duncan. O a most blessed church with so much authority, yet it was in that church that doubts concerning the infallibility of Holy Scripture appeared. O, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

"But." Just before this we have read of a most godly man, Barnabas, and we are told he had a piece of land and he sold it and brought the money, and the chapter ends, he "laid it at the apostles' feet." And then you read that Ananias had a piece of land, and he sold it, and it is the very same thing: he "laid it at the apostles' feet." But O the difference! These two cases seemed identical, but they were not. "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."

"But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 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." Now there are many very solemn, weighty things which have rested on my spirit concerning these verses and this chapter. One is the influence of a wife. You see, here was this man. He was a church member, it seems an honourable church member. No-one had any reason to disbelieve him and doubt him. His wife, she too was an honourable church member. He is planning to do something which is wrong in the sight of God, and his wife knows it is wrong, wrong in the sight of God, but as Scripture puts it here, she was "privy to it." She did not say, "No, Ananias, that is not right." She did not restrain him. I was talking to our young people recently about Haman and his wife in the Book of Esther. He was full of pride, full of envy, full of malice, and he was wondering whatever he could do about Mordecai. His wife Zeresh, just like Ananias' wife Sapphira, did not restrain him. She did not say, "No, Haman, this is an awful thing to do." She told him he must not put up with all these things. She encouraged him to make the gallows and told him to make it as high as he could. What about the advice of Ananias' wife? What about the advice of Haman's

wife? Haman was hanged on his own gallows, and in a few hours Ananias was lying in the grave and his wife followed him there.

Wives can have a great influence to constrain in what is right and to restrain from what is wrong. What a lot of harm has been done in the church of God when a person in his own spirit has felt he should do something and his wife has fanned that flame instead of seeking to extinguish it; when a wife has urged her husband on instead of holding him back, when she knows in her heart of hearts it is a wrong course. You girls as you grow up, and you ladies, do not be a Zeresh and do not be a Sapphira. O to be like Aquila's wife, Priscilla – whenever she is mentioned, such an honourable mention is given. Didn't she exercise a gracious influence in the case of Apollos! She was not afraid to say, "I do not really think you are right in this. I think you have made a mistake. I think you are wrong." And she was able to do it in such a loving, gracious way. What a blessing that was to the early church of God!

"But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 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." Now the next thing here, the terrible sin of lying. You see, Ananias told a lie and Sapphira told a lie and they were most solemnly dealt with for it. There have been occasions when this has been so in our country. In the market place in Devizes in Wiltshire there still stands a monument to a woman who told a lie there in that market place concerning the price of a certain article, and said, "If I tell a lie, God strike me down dead," and she died in a moment. Usually, this is not so. They used to say, "Though the wheels of God grind slow, they grind exceeding small." It is usually not at the time the judgment falls. But there are these signal happenings in the Word of God and in history. It seems clear from Scripture that lying is a sin which is especially abhorrent in the sight of God. In present-day Britain, lying in business, in people's dealings one with another, seems to be becoming the accepted thing. Now beware of not speaking the truth. You girls and boys, you children, beware of not speaking the truth. You know what we sing in the Sabbath school:

"God is in heaven. Would He know
If I should tell a lie?
Yes, though I said it very low,
He'd hear it in the sky."

I want to press this a little bit closer. David well knew his own heart, and David prayed to be kept, and we need to be kept. Think of Ananias; think of Sapphira; think of Achan. We need to be kept. But David put his prayer to be kept like this: “Remove from me the *way* of lying.” There are some people who never tell a lie, but they walk in the *way* of lying. Now that comes close. Beware of walking in the *way* of lying: when you do not speak a word to deny something, or you are silent when you should affirm something, or you give the impression that something is right, you do not actually say so, but you give the impression; or you give the impression you do not know anything about it, you do not understand what the question is, you do not understand what people are talking about. I am afraid there is a lot of that infiltrating the church of God today. There are perhaps not the actual lies, but there is this way of lying. May the Lord deliver us from it. “Remove from me the *way* of lying: and grant me Thy law graciously.” You know what that latter part means. We have God’s holy law, His sacred Word here. Grant it me graciously, in my heart, the experience of it. “Grant me Thy law graciously.” If the Lord does grant you His law graciously, then you will be delivered from lying and from the way of lying. This was the way of lying, especially Ananias. He was implying, suggesting, inferring something that was not true.

“But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 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.” Now there is one very solemn point here which to me comes very close, and that is just how far and how near the Lord’s judgments came. Have any of us ever had another house we possess, a second house, and have we done like Ananias did, and gone and sold that house and, well, if he sold it for £100,000, he put £80,000 in the collection? Now what am I trying to say? Ananias went a lot further than most people in the church of God today. Where is a person today who has a second house worth £100,000 and puts £80,000 in the collection, only keeping £20,000 for himself? You would say, “What a noble man! What a gracious man!” Now the Lord struck Ananias down in his sins. These things are very solemn and come very close. There was so much good about him, and he went so far – he went a lot further than most of us – yet there was sin in it and deception in it and hypocrisy in it. O when weighed in the balances, aren’t we found wanting! What about our profession, our religion?

“But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 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.” Now no-one knew about this but God, and there are certain things that you and I do, and nobody knows about them but God. But God has a way of bringing sin to light. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” “Be sure your sin will find you out.” Well, how could anybody know whether Ananias was putting the whole lot in the collection or whether he was only putting in some? Now Peter was blessed with more than ordinary discernment and discrimination. The apostles were under the immediate leading and inspiration of God. I just linger a moment, because this point comes in our Articles of Faith, and if any denomination has ever been mocked at for their Articles of Faith, it is us, especially that article which says we cannot act and believe and preach exactly like the apostles. It is very, very clear that the apostles were under the immediate inspiration of God. No-one today standing at the door taking the collection could stop someone as they were contributing and say, “Thy money perish with thee,” and tell them that they would be dead in a moment. No minister today has the right to go to any person in the congregation and say, “Thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity” – that is to a person who is professing the truth. Now no person has a right to think that he is a Simon Peter or an Apostle Paul and judge the innermost state of any other person, or what lies beneath anyone’s act. Having said that, it is very, very clear that God’s eyes are as a flame of fire, discerning between the evil and the good; that “man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” – those all-seeing eyes. It seemed to be a good, a gracious, a blessed act. But Peter was speaking by immediate inspiration under the power of the Holy Ghost. He said, “Why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? 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. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things.”

“But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 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.” Well, perhaps the main lesson for us today is this: as professed believers on the Son of

God, the sin of keeping back part of the price. Now we can do this in many different ways. The Lord does not judge the churches as He did in the days of the Acts of the Apostles by these sudden, solemn judgments. That is a mercy. How would some of us stand? O but this keeping back part of the price! Sweetly constrained by the love of Jesus, believing that He is true Almighty God and yet as a real Man He suffered, bled and died in the sinner's place, then we should be "surrendered to the Crucified," not keeping back part of the price. We are all guilty of it, and some are guilty of it more than others. We keep back part of the price. "Brethren, we are debtors," debtors to the love and mercy and goodness of God. What poor returns! What keeping back part of the price! They used to talk about "All on the altar." Like Isaac on Mount Moriah, he did not keep back part of the price. Barnabas in the previous chapter did not keep back part of the price. "Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach." That is not keeping back part of the price. "This one thing I do," and only this one thing I do. That is not keeping back part of the price. "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me." That is not keeping back part of the price. "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world." Now that is not keeping back part of the price.

Joseph Hart says,

"Partial service is His loathing;
He requires pure desires;
All the heart, or nothing."

Now Satan is happy to accept a divided heart, but God is not. "All the heart, or nothing." O to know that response of one of our hymns: "Thou art our mighty All; may we give our whole selves, O Lord, to Thee." But Ananias-like, Sapphira-like, don't we keep back part of the price? What about those who have professed the Lord's name? O how far short we come! How unworthy we are! What about going the second mile? O that keeping back part of the price. Especially what about those whom the Lord has blessed with a vital, personal, saving knowledge of Himself, and they never speak of it, never testify of it, never openly profess it? O this

keeping back part of the price. If a minister had time, grace and ability, I believe he could preach a hundred sermons on all the different ways the Lord's people keep back part of the price, part of the price they owe. "Ye are not your own. For ye are bought with a price." We are not our own, but we keep part back for ourselves. Our time, O the time we waste. Concerning our time, how much there is of keeping back part of the price. Concerning the Sabbath day, keeping the Sabbath day honourable, keeping it holy; just two services at chapel on the Sunday, O and what else? Keeping back part of the price.

Now there is so much in it. The Lord Jesus suffering, bleeding, dying for sinners and the standard set before us in God's holy Word, in the Epistles, and we see it and we know it and we believe it, and yet so often we keep back part of the price. There is one verse on my mind, the end of Anne Steele's beautiful hymn on Calvary:

"What glad return can I impart
For favours so divine?

O take my all, this worthless heart" – not keeping back
part of it –

"O take my all, this worthless heart,
And make it wholly Thine."

"But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, and kept back part of the price." Now the Lord in love and mercy save you and me from being Ananiases, being Achans, being Sapphiras.