

## Keeping Up Appearances (Acts 4:32 – 5:11)

[ Read Acts 4:32-37 ]

In the last part of Acts 4 we see a beautiful picture of an idyllic church. A people who are passionate about spreading the good news of Jesus Christ (4:33), a people filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaiming the word of God boldly (4:31). A people who are united in mission – one heart and mind (4:32). A generous, caring community who shared everything they had (4:32). They looked out for each other so as if any of them were in need, others who were better off would provide for them.

You get a real sense that this church is more than a group of people who share a common interest. This goes much deeper than that. This is a FAMILY.

In a family you look out for one another because we care about our family. If a member of our family is ill in hospital, we would want to visit them. If a member of our family is in trouble, we would want to get in touch, talk to them or even go to them and stand with them if we could. And if a member of our family was struggling financially, we would want to help them if we possibly could.

I grew up in a very close family. I have two sisters and a brother. One of my sisters is 18 years younger than I am but the other three of us are all fairly close in age and so we grew up together and we were all very close. In fact, we are still a close family. Being a close family has its problems. My brother and sister and I tended to squabble quite a lot (in fact, sometimes we still squabble). Sometimes the closer you are to people, the more you can become irritated by little things that they do. My sister would get most irritated with my brother and I when we played football with her teddy bear. My brother and I would then get into trouble together. We were most aggrieved because we were always being told to play together and then when we finally found something that we enjoyed playing with together, we were in trouble for it.

But being in a close family also has some huge advantages. One of the biggest advantages in a family is that you can be yourself. Your family tend to know you better than most people do. That can sometimes be a pain but the nice thing about it is that you can relax around your family. If you've had a bad day at work for example, you don't have to pretend that everything is ok with your family. Usually, your family can tell the moment you walk through the door. You also don't have to pretend that you're feeling well when you're really feeling quite ill. My mum always knew when I was ill, and annoyingly she knew when I wasn't. Mind you, in my family, if you still had a pulse, you were well enough to go to school. But what I'm trying to say is that in front of our family we can be ourselves. We don't have to pretend in front of our family because they know what we are really like and they love us just the way we are.

Sometimes in front of others, we want to keep up an appearance. For young people it's often having the right label on your clothes or these days it might be what model of phone they have. But then there are other status things such as what time do you go to bed? Most young people discussing this will add another 2 or 3 hours onto the time to look good in front of their mates. Then there's the hairstyles. When I was at school there was a look that became popular where boys would have lines shaved into the back of their head in a criss-cross formation. We used to call it "the whack round the head with a tennis racket look". My friends and I didn't go down that route. We were at the opposite end of the spectrum. We were into rock music and so we all decided to grow our hair long. So much to my mother's disapproval, I grew my hair down to my shoulders. In a sense, this was keeping up appearances. It was being part of the group.

It doesn't stop when we get older does it? We just go after different things. For some people it's about the car they drive. For others it might be the qualifications they have or what they do for a living. I remember once we were invited as a family to my dad's boss's birthday party. He was the grandson of the man who owns Greggs the bakers and so they were a very well off family. Everyone was standing round sipping champagne and talking about the skiing holidays they had been on. I remember feeling quite out of place. At this time I'd barely been on holiday abroad let alone been on a skiing holiday.

In situations like that we can feel embraced because we don't tend to like other people looking down on us. And because we don't like other people looking down on us or thinking badly of us, we can get into this pretence of trying to make ourselves look good in front of other people. This can even happen within the church.

Right at the end of Acts 4 we are told about a man named Joseph:

<sup>36</sup>Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Isn't that nice to be nicknamed "Son of Encouragement"? Wouldn't you like that to be said of you? Joseph (Barnabas) for some reason is singled out here. We might assume that he was someone who people thought highly of, after all, he is the only person mentioned by name and the way that he gave generously is also detailed.

So you can imagine other people in the church comparing themselves to Joseph and wanting to be seen like that. They also wanted to be called 'Barnabas'. I'm sure that most of us would like people to say that of us. "Oh that Jane, she's such a great encourager", or "that John, he's such a generous giver." And others would try to be like you. I'm sure Graham (our treasurer) wouldn't mind if there was a bit of competition over people trying to be the most generous giver to the church.

Our giving in this church is a private affair. We don't know what other people are giving. But imagine if other people in the church did know what you gave. Imagine if when you put your money on the collection plate, Graham counted it after the service and made a table out of exactly who had given what and next week that was published in the notice sheet with the highest givers at the top and the lowest givers at the bottom. How many of you if that happened would give a small amount? How many of us would be concerned about what other people would give? Would you want to be towards the top of the list or towards the bottom? Would it bother you if you were the last person on the list and someone who you knew had less money than you appeared in the list a lot higher than you?

You see if we're honest, we care at least a little bit about our reputation. We would hate for people in church to think that we are stingy with our money. We would much rather people think we are generous. We want people to think we are good, upstanding Christians. So basically, whether we think of ourselves as being good people or not, in church on a Sunday morning, we would like people to think that we are. We would really like people to view us as righteous and generous.

[ [Read Acts 5:1-11](#) ]

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a little shocking when we first read it. I mean here are a couple who sell a piece of property they own and give some of the money from that sale to the apostles to be given to those who are in need. Well that sounds like a generous thing to do doesn't it. I mean if

someone did that in this church, I imagine that we would all be saying what a Godly person they were. So why was it such a problem? Was it perhaps that the field did not belong to them so they shouldn't have taken money from it? Was it perhaps because there were needy people in the community who relied on the generous giving of others. To keep some of the money back for themselves was perhaps being selfish. Was that the problem? Was it in the church rules that they had to give all the money from the sale of land?

If we look down at verse 4 we see that none of those things are the problem:

<sup>4</sup>Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?

You see there was no obligation to sell the land at all. The land belonged to Ananias and Sapphira and they could have kept it if they wanted to. And when they sold it, there was no obligation either to give any of the money to the apostles. Peter says clearly to Ananias that the money was at his disposal. It was rightfully his money to do with whatever he wanted to do.

The problem was not their generosity but their honesty. They wanted people to say of them the same as they said about Joseph. They wanted to be known as righteous and generous people. They had made it appear that they were being very generous, selling a piece of land and giving the whole of the money to the apostles to distribute to the needy. But it was a lie. They had kept back some of the money for themselves. In verse 1 we see that the couple were in it together.

<sup>1</sup>Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property.

<sup>2</sup>With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

This is not just a mistake or a lack of thought, this is deliberate, thought out deception. They know full well what they are doing. Look a little further down at verse 8 when Peter questions Sapphira:

<sup>8</sup>Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

<sup>9</sup>Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?"

It is plain to see from this that Sapphira knew exactly what they were doing. It is a blatant lie and Peter says that they have not only tried to deceive people but have lied to God. And God views this very seriously. Both Ananias and Sapphira die instantly. That's a bit of a wake up call for us.

Maybe that's hard for us to hear because we know that deep down, there's a bit of Ananias and Sapphira in us. We are not the perfect people we would like everyone else to think we are.

Someone once came to Charles Spurgeon and asked him where he could find the perfect group of God's people. Spurgeon replied that if he found such a group he should not join them because then it would no longer be perfect.

You see Christian people are not perfect. Some people think that when you become a Christian you have a personality transplant, all the bad stuff disappears and gets replaced with all good stuff. I have been a Christian now for more than 20 years and I can tell you categorically that it ain't true. At least it isn't for me and it wasn't true for the apostle Paul either.

He describes himself in his letter to Timothy as "the worst of sinners":

<sup>15</sup>Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup>But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

(1 Timothy 1:15-16)

That could be because Paul is talking about his old life before he became a Christian, but look at what he says to the church in Rome:

<sup>21</sup>So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. <sup>22</sup>For in my inner being I delight in God's law; <sup>23</sup>but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. <sup>24</sup>What a wretched man I am!

(Romans 7:21-24)

Christian people are not perfect, we mess up. It's a constant struggle to live the way God wants us to live and sometimes we fail. That's ok, God understands that. When we mess up he is gracious with us. He picks us up and puts us on our feet again. As Paul says he has 'unlimited patience' with us when we try to do right but fail.

But that's not what we're talking about here with Ananias and Sapphira. This was no mistake, this was no accident or failure. This was deliberate sin. We might be guilty of that too sometimes but take the warning from this scripture. God views this very seriously. Don't make the mistake of thinking that God is soft. Ananias and Sapphira both die.

Ananias and Sapphira had tried to make themselves look generous and righteous. They had tried to make it look like they cared about the needs of others. But in actual fact, nothing could be further from the truth. All they really cared about was themselves. They were only interested in their own reputation. Jesus says this:

<sup>1</sup>"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

<sup>2</sup>"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

(Matthew 6:1-2)

Jesus says that this is no way to act. If we do things so as to impress people, then we will receive no reward from God. Jesus said if what we want is for people to honour us and that's what we get then we have received the reward we were looking for. So don't expect a reward from God.

So what is God looking for from us? What pleases him? Jesus told this story:

<sup>9</sup>To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood up and prayed about<sup>[a]</sup> himself: 'God, I thank

you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

<sup>13</sup>"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

<sup>14</sup>"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."  
(Luke 18:9-14)

God is not looking for us to be impressive, he just wants us to be honest before him and humble. That's how we impress God. It's not about how much money you give, or how many letters you have after your name or even before your name, it's not about the clothes we wear or the way we do our hair. This is all stuff that impresses people because they can only see what we're like on the outside. But God sees beyond all that, He can see what we are really like on the inside.

So how do we get it right?

Well, to be honest, with difficulty and by trying and failing and trying again. But Paul gives us the model. Here's the step by step instructions:

<sup>5</sup>Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:  
<sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature<sup>[a]</sup> God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
<sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature<sup>[b]</sup> of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

(Philippians 2:5-11)

Jesus had a right to feel self righteous. He was in very nature God. He never sinned so if anyone had a reason to boast about being righteous, it was Jesus, but he didn't. Instead he who was in very nature God, took on the nature of a servant. He wrapped a towel around his waist and washed his disciples' feet.

He who is above all things came down to the level of those who were considered to be the lowest. – He went to Matthew, a tax collector and ate at his house with Matthew's friends.

<sup>10</sup>While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup>When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

(Matthew 9:10-11)

He went to a Samaritan woman at a well and asked her for a drink. Even she was surprised by this:

<sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.<sup>[a]</sup>)

(John 4:9)

And the disciples were also surprised:

<sup>27</sup>Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

(John 4:27)

So Jesus didn't seem to worry about what other people thought of him. He was only concerned with doing the will of his Father.

He who had authority over all things submitted himself to the authorities. And he who had done no wrong was sentenced to death as a criminal.

Jesus was not after the applause of people. He wanted only to please God and to do his will.

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:9-11)

We should seek to have the same attitude. Not to do things to gain the applause of others but to gain the applause of God. Jesus said these things as part of his sermon on the mount (Matthew 6):

when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,  
<sup>4</sup>so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (v3-4)

when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.  
Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (v6)

when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (v17-18)

These all talk about not doing things so as others can see us but doing things truly before God. The next verse sums it up:

<sup>19</sup>"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup>But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (v19-21)

Amen