

From Simon to Peter #31 - the Holy Spirit and Spiritual Discernment

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon emphasizes the necessity of spiritual discernment in the church, illustrated by the story of Ananias and Sapphira's hypocrisy and Peter's response.

Duration: 40:44

Scripture: Acts 5:1, 1 Corinthians 3:17

Topics: "Simon to Peter"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the opposition faced by the early Christian church and how it consistently fails to hinder its progress. The speaker emphasizes the transformation of Simon Peter by the Holy Spirit and highlights the importance of self-examination and judging oneself. The sermon then shifts focus to Satan's change in tactics, targeting the church from within. The speaker uses the example of Ananias and his wife, who pretend to fully commit to the church but secretly hold back part of their gift. The sermon concludes with a call for introspection and questioning of one's motives and actions.

Transcript

The Apostle Paul, in the eleventh chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians, urges Christian people in the first place, members of the Corinthian church, but he encourages Christian people generally to examine themselves from time to time. He says this, for example, Let a man examine himself, and especially at a time when we come to the table of our Lord. It comes in that very context.

Let a man examine himself and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. And again he says in verse thirty-one, If we would judge ourselves, then we would not be judged, that is, of God. If we were rigorous in self-examination, then there would be nothing in our lives for God to condemn, and no occasion for his chastisements of his people.

Now it is because of that I feel free this morning to continue with our series in the life of Simon Peter, and to base our meditation upon the first eleven verses in Acts chapter five. We have entitled this, The Holy Spirit and Discernment. The title calls attention to the gift that was given to Simon Peter, whereby he as a leader of the Christian church at that time, a God-appointed leader, was enabled to discern certain things that were evidently amiss.

In a sense we all need that gift. If we have not that particular gift in some measure, then we may fail very radically, very dismally, in judging ourselves and in examining ourselves, and of course in many other ways. Now one thing I need to say again this morning, though we have been saying it many occasions recently.

Coming to this particular passage, we are primarily concerned in what the Holy Spirit has done for one man, namely Simon Peter. It is not a purely historical interest of course, but we want to see how God really transformed this ordinary man, this man of real flesh and bone, this man who is so like ourselves or to whom we are so alike. Now I want to say again this morning, we shall be omitting many things in the narrative and in this passage, many things to which we would have to refer if we were attempting to expound the passage as a whole.

I am only referring to the things that are germane to our immediate purpose and goal. I think it is evident to all of us, evident upon a moment's reflection, how very necessary it was for the early church, and particularly the leaders of the church, to have this gift of discernment as they sought to lead the accumulating numbers of young converts through the moral quicksands and theological quagmire of that ancient world. How very necessary it was for them to be able to discern truth from falsehood, what was right from what was wrong, what was of God from what was of man.

It was necessary at every conceivable step in their pilgrimage. And yet the remarkable thing is this, God chose as the leaders of that early church the most ordinary men. And among those very ordinary men who became the apostles, the leader among the apostles was certainly one of the most obtuse and spiritually insensitive men among the twelve.

Naturally speaking, he was totally incapable of knowing and understanding things and seeing the wood for the trees. For example, this is purely one example, one moment he could be sensitive to the Spirit of God and make his great confession at Caesarea Philippi, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. The next moment he's on an entirely different wavelength.

And his master has to turn to him and say, Get behind me, Satan, because you do not savor, you do not understand the things that are of God, but the things that are of men. He was that kind of man. He oscillated from the one to the other, and you could never depend upon him.

But you see, omnipotence can afford to choose men like that to leadership. Divine omnipotence can afford to choose a man who is a natural failure to be a spiritual leader. Because omnipotence can provide everything that is necessary.

And that's the miracle that we have here. A man who naturally was incapable, a man whom you would not expect to be discerning of truth from falsehood, understanding what's going on, seeing the significance of things, that very man is the man whom divine omnipotence endows with a needed grace. And it is Simon Peter, if you please, who is here above everybody else, given the gift of discernment.

Paul speaks of, in 1 Corinthians 12, 10, as the gift of discernment of spirits. The capacity to discern between evil spirits and the Holy Spirit of God. Now, before we say anything else about this somber scene that we have here, let us first take encouragement.

Our God is able to do things like this. He is able to communicate to the weakest and the neediest the gift that may be necessary in order for that person to fulfill his appointed ministry in the world or in the church.

God, the omnipotent God, is able to do that.

But now come to this very challenging scene in Acts chapter 5. We begin by looking at the apparent expression of Christian charity. The context describes the infant church leaping joyfully forward from one victory to another. Oh, there is opposition, bitter opposition, consistent opposition.

But it seems that everything that the enemy can thrust in the way of the onward march of this little community in the name of the risen Lord, everything, everything comes to naught. Each attempt to silence her witness, the witness of the church, and to extinguish her light has fizzled out like a damp squib and generally backfires to the confusion of the church's opponents. And so Satan decides to change his tactics.

Instead now of concentrating upon opposition from without the church, from outside the church, he decides to concentrate his efforts within the church. And so he sets about it. Now, he has as his servants in this sad scene two men, a man and his wife, very devoted to what they believe, full of zeal, full of ingenuity, but the servants of Satan.

I'd like you to notice the pattern that they allegedly follow here. When Ananias brought his gift to the apostles, he was emulating an example which had already been set. He brings his gift of money, the proceeds of the little bit of property that he has sold, at least allegedly that, and he is following a very noble example.

Something very remarkable took place at Pentecost. The experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit resulted in the gushing forth of what our Lord had referred to in anticipation as streams of living water, rivers of water gushed out of the hearts of the Spirit-filled community. And one such river was the river of love.

It was the river of a joyous affection and concern and compassion for men in their need. And this early community, in the flush of Pentecost, they loved one another so dearly they would do anything for one another. So that you remember, right at the end of Acts chapter 2, we read that many of them sold their possessions, brought the proceeds, laid them at the apostles' feet, and no man had need, no man lacked anything.

Do you know the same thing proceeded later on? Exactly the same thing. We read of it in Acts chapter 4 again. And a classical example in this recent history was a man whose name was Barnabas, son of consolation or son of encouragement.

What a name to have. His original name was Joseph, but they called him Barnabas because he was a man who always encouraged, who always comforted others. And part of the divinely inspired encouragement was this.

He sold his property, if you please, brought the entire proceeds, laid them at the feet of the apostles and said, all this is for the community. Just dispense with this according to the needs of the people. Ananias and Sapphira, or rather, to be strictly accurate, in the first place Ananias alone, the head of the household, the man, the husband, he comes sanctimoniously into the presence of the apostles and he too, if you please, has sold a plot of land or a piece of property.

And ostensibly what he is doing is emulating the pattern of the God-fearing Barnabas. There is something wonderful about this, to the undiscerning. Here is a man who is disclaiming his absolute right over his own

property and saying in other words, if you have need, mine is yours.

Communism says, yours is mine. Christianity says, mine is yours. And this man says, anything that I have is yours if you need.

Now Ananias and Sapphira, his wife, were allegedly following such an elevated example as that of Barnabas. The principle apparently practiced was this. They are hereby pretending that they are as keen as the keenest, as godly as the godliest, as holy as the holiest, as dedicated as the most dedicated.

They will do for the sake of Christ and his church what a man like Barnabas was willing to do. Now move from the apparent expression of Christian charity to the actual, what I must speak of as the actual, manifestation of blatant hypocrisy. Things are not always what they appear to be.

Judged solely in terms of its social benefit to the needy of course, Ananias' act was as good as that of Barnabas. Ananias' money would also help alleviate the need of the poor. So judged purely on that level, the one deed was as good as the other.

Morally and spiritually, however, Ananias' deed was as perverted as Barnabas' was pure. Ananias' act was as black as Barnabas' deed was white and glorious. Two things I want to say.

Ananias and his wife are pretending to be what they were not. Approaching the apostles with his money, Ananias was pretending obedience to the Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of God. He was pretending obedience to the Holy Spirit and love for the saints.

Both claims were fraudulent. He was not personally moved by the Holy Spirit, nor primarily motivated with love for the saints. The inspiration of his deed was satanic, not divine.

And the goal of his apparent generosity was self, not others. His charity was but a cover for selfishness and self-esteem. He was not parting with his money to enrich the needy, but to ingratiate himself and his wife upon what he deemed to be a gullible community.

Ananias did not love his fellows, but he loved himself. His money represented the price he was willing to pay for the reputation of being holy, rather than the expression of the reality of holiness. He wanted to be known as a man of God, not to be a man of God.

And in order to be known as a man of God, he was willing to do what the godly did. But he wasn't a man of God. Pretense is no paltry plague.

Don't play nor pander with pretense or hypocrisy, because it earns the holy wrath of God. To pretend to the people of God, or the God of his people, that we are what we are not, is a sin of the deepest dying, and can only result in conflagration. Not only did they pretend what they were not, but they desired what did not belong to them.

This is involved in what we've said already, but let it be clearly recognized that Ananias and Sapphira find themselves in the solemn situation described here, because they coveted what others had, but which didn't belong to themselves. They dearly coveted the reputation of being filled with the Spirit of God in order to get in among the leadership of the church, and thereby exercise influence for Satan. But the bold truth is, they were neither filled with the Spirit nor fitted for leadership.

Their inspiration was alien, and their motives were not God-like or God-honoring. An apparent expression of Christian charity, an actual manifestation of blatant hypocrisy. And thirdly, we look at the piercing gaze of spiritual sagacity.

When everyone else was apparently impressed, everyone else, impressed by the evident magnanimity of this deed, and more probably tempted to classify Ananias as yet another son of consolation or son of encouragement, one man, one man, sensed something alien. I wonder how Peter felt, I wonder how he reasoned inwardly, when everybody else thought that this was such a marvelous deed, this was such a wonderful thing, another Barnabas coming into the church, another man with such love and such tokens of the Spirit's power upon him and grace within him. And Peter alone among them sensed something wrong.

He must have felt abysmally lonely, like a man in an abyss when everybody else is up there somewhere in the clouds. And Peter alone among them, Peter alone sensed there's something wrong about this. Despite the apparent spirituality of the act, despite its evident generosity, and also despite the studied secrecy with which Ananias and Sapphira are practicing their studied hypocrisy, Peter sensed something wrong.

God gave to the church in that decisive hour one man, and to that one man one gift, the gift of discernment. And mark you, did he not have it, the infant church would have been spiritually stifled at birth, and polluted and poisoned in infancy. But one man had this one gift that saved and extricated the church from what might have been a very sad tale in its history.

Now what was it that Peter discerned? What did Peter recognize? What did Peter see that others did not see? I want to say three things very briefly. Negatively, by means of the gift of spiritual discernment that was given him, Peter sensed an absence of fidelity to the Holy Spirit. Peter sensed that this man was not really honoring the Holy Spirit.

You say, where did you get that from? I believe it was as surprising to the rest of the community as it was painfully disarming for Ananias to hear Peter say this to him. Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Ghost and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? Ananias has just come bouncing in in all the enthusiasm of his religion and his profession, and he's laid this down so sanctimoniously at the apostles' feet. This is a great gift.

And out of the blue, to the consternation of everybody, to Ananias particularly, Peter senses that this is not honoring the Holy Spirit. This deed is not born of the same source as the similar act performed by Barnabas, son of consolation. Far from its being an action which honors the Spirit of God, Peter says it is violently and seriously dishonoring him.

And Ananias is charged later on in the passage with lying to the Holy Spirit and with tempting the Holy Spirit with his wife. Of course, the significance is this. The Spirit of God dwells among his people.

And the Spirit of God reigned in those early leaders of the Christian church so that to lie to them was to lie to the Spirit. This sensitivity to the honoring or dishonoring of the Spirit of God is a rare but necessary gift in every Christian community. If that community is to be saved from some of the most sinister attacks of Satan, it is something for which we ought always to pray for ourselves, for our church and every other church.

But let's turn to the positive. Negatively, the Holy Spirit was not honored in this deed, though it appeared that it was, that he was. Positively, Peter discerned the presence and activity of Satan himself.

You know, this must have been a little bit of a shock. When everybody else thought this is but another token of the upsurge of the Spirit of God in generosity and in kindness and in charity, and all done ostensibly in the name of Jesus. Peter said it's not the Spirit of God at all, it's Satan.

Peter did not simply uncover a spiritual condition of soul which negatively failed to give honor to the Spirit. The condition was even more serious than that. Behind the camouflage of generosity towards the needy saints, there was the malignant influence of Satan himself.

Satan is so eager, you see, he is so eager to do something at this point that he is willing, he is willing for his servants to pay the same price as the saints of God are paying, to join the saints of God so that he can act from within and to become known as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ and one who allegedly has benefited from the outpouring of the Spirit. And it is all a satanic move. Now the satanic goal is not actually stated here.

But it can hardly be denied that the whole purpose of Satan was to disrupt the work of the church. We can put it like that generally. It was so to disrupt the work of the infant church that ultimately he would silence the witness of the community to the risen crucified Lord and thereby bring the whole movement to nothing.

To gain that objective, he would gladly inspire one of his subjects to sell his possessions, join the church, claim to be baptized with the Spirit and thereby wriggle and worm his way into the leadership of the community. Satan has not changed. And lastly, Peter discerned something else here.

How can I speak of it other than in terms of a fullness that was a veritable counterfeit to Pentecost? Over and above the absence of fidelity to the Holy Spirit and the presence of the influence of Satan, I believe the language suggests that Peter uncovered here the beginnings of a counterfeit fullness, namely the fullness of satanic indwelling. Peter asked Ananias, Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie? Satan filled your heart. What happened at Pentecost? They were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

What happened to Ananias and Sapphira? They were filled with the satanic spirit. The one fullness is in opposition to the other. No, not that only the one is a counterfeit to the other.

Don't forget, Satan can be as religious as the saints. He can be as generous as Barnabas. He can be as orthodox as the saints of God.

But his motive is, when he gets to the position, to disrupt and to break and to poison and to dishonor the Christ of the cross and the risen Lord of the church. And someone has to discern the ugly thing. And where the gifts of the Spirit are not abroad, there is no one to discern.

This is what is happening in our churches today. One of the many things. You hear people speak of the most liberal Christ, dishonoring preachers abroad.

Wasn't he good? Wasn't he marvelous? You hear ostensible saints of God lauding the ungodly. It is all because there is no spirit of discernment, no understanding of things, no penetrating vision, no capacity to discern. Oh God, give us this again.

You know, it seems that every major act of God is aped by Satan. Way back in the book of Exodus, when Moses was able to do something, you remember the story. The magicians of Egypt could ape it.

Not by the power of God, but by the power of Satan. When the Holy Son of God became incarnate in flesh and blood like to yours and mine, it seemed that all the demons of hell became incarnate. There was more demon possession in that first century than in any subsequent century, probably until this.

This one. A counterfeit movement. God becomes incarnate in man.

Satan takes possession of man. So here, when the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost and came to take possession of His saints, the spirit of Satan made this one mighty sweep to baptize the agents of Gehenna with a power that would make them acceptable even in the courts of the saints. We live in a world where our enemy is sinister and strong, and the whole day would have been lost, and the whole church would have been polluted and diverted from its task because it would have been robbed of the glorious witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ were it not for one man.

One man. One man of God, called by God, endued by God, equipped by God with the one gift necessary for the hour. And that one man was Simon Peter.

Oh, let us note that this very solemn scene points to the presence and sufficiency of God to guard His people. It was He who gave Peter the gift. It was He who called Peter.

Now, though I'm not going on into the details of it, it was He, not Peter, who brought death to these two. John tells us there is a sin unto death. By that he means this.

Every sin, of course. Every sin comes into the category the wages of sin is death. But not every sin is meted or is judged immediately with physical death.

We all die physically as the result of sin, in due course. The years of our life are three score years and ten, and we may have a few extras, and we have to die, and death is the result of sin. But there is a sin which brings forth death immediately.

Here is one of them. It was not Peter who was the judge here who condemned Ananias and Sapphira to die. It was God.

Can I repeat, as I close? Just as Achan, Joshua chapter 7, kept back part of the price and pretended to be what he was not, as the ancient people marched into their promised land of old, into Canaan, so has the new Israel moved into their Canaan of Pentecostal benefits. The same subtle sinister foe has not an Achan but an Ananias who will keep back part of the price because Satan's agents can never go all the way with the children of God. They can only appear to go all the way.

Ultimately, they will always have a reserve. Ultimately, they cannot honor Christ as Lord. I then close with this.

As you and I bear our hearts before the Lord this morning, what goes on there? Are you professing what is not true? Am I pretending what is false? Am I creating an impression that is altogether wrong? What spirit generates my action and motive? Ultimately, you do not judge that spirit in terms of generosity. The test is the test of truth. And of loyalty to the Christ of God who died on the cross and who rose again and who sent forth His Holy Spirit and who is the one Lord and Head of the Church.

Let us, therefore, with honesty and sincerity, as we come to the table of our Lord today, let us do it as we have never done it before. Let us examine ourselves. Don't let's look around.

Never mind who is sitting next to you. I am not looking at you. I must look at myself.

For be sure of this, them that destroy the temple of God, them will God destroy. 1 Corinthians 3, 17.
Ananias and Sapphira He will die the death.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts and let him return unto the Lord and He will have mercy upon him and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as wool.

Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as snow. Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord. Let us pray.

The Father in heaven, whose love profound a ransom for our souls hath found, before thy throne we sinners bend, to us thy saving grace extend. O Spirit of God, who didst grant to this thy servant of old the discernment that was able to save the early church, give us such discernment particularly in relation to the things that go on in our own hearts and in our own lives and to those who lead in holy things such discernment as they need to lead thy people in the way of holiness and of righteousness and of thy word. Cleanse us from our sin who confess and acknowledge our wrongs before thee now that we may come to thy table as a penitent people but rejoicing in the plentiful grace and thy inadequate pardon.

O Lord, receive us, clothe us upon with the righteousness of thy Son that despite the memory of things done in the body and in the spirit and in the mind we may now come to thy table and benefit and profit eternally and enjoy the fellowship which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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