

Homily 12 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon highlights the importance of honesty and integrity, and the consequences of sin, using the story of Ananias and Sapphira as an example.

Scripture: Genesis 42:21, 1 Kings 21:19, Psalm 9:16, Psalm 110:2, Zechariah 5:2, John 14:12, Acts 5:1, 1 Timothy 5:20
Topics: "Divine Judgment", "Christian Integrity"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the story of Ananias and Sapphira, highlighting the severity of their sin of sacrilege and deception, leading to their tragic deaths as a result of their greed and dishonesty. He emphasizes the importance of honesty, integrity, and the fear of God in our actions, warning against the dangers of covetousness and contempt for sacred things. Chrysostom draws parallels to other biblical examples of divine judgment for similar sins, urging his listeners to repent and turn away from falsehood and perjury to avoid the severe consequences that await the unrepentant.

Transcript

Acts 4:36-37

And Joses, who by the Apostles was surnamed Barnabas (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation), a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the Apostles' feet.

The writer is now about to relate the affair of Ananias and Sapphira, and in order to show that the man's sin was of the worst description, he first mentions him who performed the virtuous deed; that, there being so great a multitude all doing the same, so great grace, so great miracles, he, taught by none of these, but blinded by covetousness, brought destruction upon his own head. Having land -- meaning that this was all he possessed -- sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the Apostles' feet. 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. ch. 5:1-2 The aggravating circumstance was, that the sin was concerted, and none other saw what was done. How came it into the mind of this hapless wretch to commit this crime? But Peter said, Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Acts 5:3 Observe even in this, a great miracle performed, greater far than the former. Whiles it remained, says he, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own power? Acts 5:4 That is, Was there any obligation and force? Do we constrain you against your will? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied

unto men, but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost. Acts 5:5 This miracle is greater than that of the lame man, in respect of the death inflicted, and the knowing what was in the thought of the heart, even what was done in secret. And great fear came on all them that heard these things. And the young men arose, and wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him. And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? Acts 5:6-8 The woman he would fain save, for the man had been the author of the sin: therefore he gives her time to clear herself, and opportunity for repentance, saying, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. Then Peter said to her, How is it that you have agreed together to tempt the Holy Ghost? Behold, the feet of them which have buried your husband are at the door, and shall carry you out. Then she fell down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost; and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband. And great fear came upon all the Church, and upon as many as heard these things. Acts 5:9-11

After this fear had come upon them, he wrought more miracles; both Peter and the rest; And by the hands of the Apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. And of the rest dared no man join himself to them, i.e. to the Apostles; but the people magnified them, i.e. the Jewish people. If no man dared join himself unto them, the Apostles, there were, however, the more added unto the Lord, believers, multitudes both of men and of women, insomuch that they brought out into the streets their impotent folk, and laid them upon couches and beds, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them. Acts 5:12-15 For Peter was the wonderful one, and he to whom they more gave heed both because of his public harangue, the first and the second and the third, and because of the miracle; for he it was that wrought the miracle, the first, the second, the third: for the present miracle was twofold: first, the convicting the thoughts of the heart, and next the inflicting of death at his word of command. That at the least the shadow of Peter passing by, etc. This had not occurred in the history of Christ; but see here what He had told them actually coming to pass, that they which believe in Me, the works that I do shall they do also; and greater works than these shall they do. John 14:12 There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them that were vexed with unclean spirits; and they were healed every one. Acts 5:16

And now I would have you observe the way in which their whole life is interwoven. First there was despondency on account of Christ taken from them, and then came joy because of the Spirit descending upon them; again, dejection because of the scoffers, and then joy in the result of their own apology. And here again we find both dejection and gladness. In that they had become conspicuous, and that God made revelations to them, there was gladness: in that they had cut off some of their own company, there was sadness. Once more: again there is gladness upon their success, and again sadness by reason of the High Priest. And so it will be seen to be the case throughout. And the same will be found to hold in the case of the ancient saints likewise.-- But let us look over again what has been said.

They sold them, it is written, and brought the prices, and laid them down at the Apostles' feet. Recapitulation. Acts 4:34-37 See, my beloved brethren, how instead of leaving the Apostles to sell, they themselves sold, and presented the prices to them. But a certain man named Ananias, etc. Acts 5:1 This history touches Bishops too, and very forcibly. And the wife of Ananias was privy to the thing done: therefore he examines her. But perhaps some one will say that he dealt very harshly with her.

What do you mean? What harshness? If for gathering sticks a man is to be stoned, much rather ought he for sacrilege; for this money was become sacred. He that has chosen to sell his goods and distribute

them, and then withdraws them, is guilty of sacrilege. But if he is sacrilegious, who resumes from his own, much more he who takes from what is not his own. And do not think that because the consequence is not now the same, the crime will go unpunished. Do you see that this is the charge brought against Ananias, that having made the money sacred, he afterwards secreted it?

Couldst thou not, said Peter, after selling your land, use the proceeds as your own? Were you forbidden? Wherefore after you had promised it? See how at the very beginning, the devil made his attack; in the very midst of such signs and wonders, how this man was hardened! Something of the same kind had happened upon a time in the Old Testament. The son of Charmi coveted the devoted thing: for observe there also what vengeance ensues upon the sin. Sacrilege, beloved, is a most grievous crime, insulting, and full of contempt.

We neither obliged you to sell, the Apostle says, nor to give your money when you had sold; of your own free choice you did it; why have you then stolen from the sacred treasury? Why, he says, has Satan filled your heart? Acts 5:3 Well, if Satan did the thing, why is the man made guilty of it? For admitting the influence of the devil, and being filled with it. You will say, they ought to have corrected him. But he would not have received correction; for he that has seen such things as he had seen, and is none the better, would certainly be none the better for anything else that could be done; the matter was not one to be simply passed over: like a gangrene, it must be cut out, that it might not infect the rest of the body.

As it is, both the man himself is benefitted in regard that he is not left to advance further in wickedness, and the rest, in that they are made more earnest; otherwise the contrary would have ensued. In the next place, Peter proves him guilty, and shows that the deed was not hidden from him, and then pronounces the sentence. But wherefore, upon what purpose have you done this? Did you wish to keep it? You ought to have kept it all along, and never to have professed to give it.

The sacrilege, beloved, is a grievous one. For another, it may be, coveted what was not his own: but it was at your discretion to keep what was your own. Why then did you first make it sacred, and then take it? Out of excessive contempt have you done this. The deed does not admit of pardon, it is past pleading for.-- Therefore let it be no stumbling-block to any, if at present also there are sacrilegious persons. If there were such persons then, much more now, when evils are many.

But let us rebuke them before all, that others also may fear. 1 Timothy 5:20 Judas was sacrilegious, but it was no stumbling-block to the disciples. Do you see how many evils spring from love of money? And great fear, it is said, came on all them that heard these things. Acts 5:5 That man was punished, and others profited thereby. Not without cause. And yet, signs had been wrought before: true, but there was not such a sense of fear. So true is that saying, The Lord is known by executing judgments.

Psalms 9:16 The same thing had occurred in the case of the Ark: Uzzah was punished and fear came upon the rest. 2 Samuel 6:7 But in that instance the king through fear removed from him the Ark; but here the disciples became more earnestly heedful. [And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in, etc.] Acts 5:7 But observe how Peter, instead of sending for her, waited till she entered; and how none of the others dared carry out the intelligence.

Such the teacher's awfulness, such the disciples' reverence, such the obedience! An interval of three hours,-- and yet the woman did not hear of it, and none of those present reported it, although there was time enough for it to be reported abroad; but they were afraid. This circumstance the Evangelist relates with wonder even, when he says, Not knowing what was done, came in. And Peter answered unto her,

etc. Acts 5:8 And yet she might have perceived even from this that Peter knew the secret.

For why, having questioned none other, does he question you? Was it not clear that he asked because he knew? But so great was her hardness, it would not let her attempt to evade the guilt; and with great confidence she replied; for she thought she was speaking only to a man. The aggravation of the sin was, that they committed it as with one soul, just as upon a settled compact between them. How is it that you have agreed together, he said, to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of them which have buried your husband are at the door.

Acts 5:9 First he makes her learn the sin, and then shows that she will justly suffer the same punishment with her husband, since she has committed the same wickedness: And they shall carry you out. And she fell down straightway at his feet, for she was standing near him, and yielded up the ghost. Acts 5:10 So entirely by their own act had they invited upon themselves the vengeance! Who after that would not be struck with awe? Who would not fear the Apostle? Who would not marvel?

Who not be afraid? And they were with one accord, all of them in Solomon's porch, Acts 5:12 no longer in a house, but having occupied the very Temple, they there passed their time! No longer they guarded themselves against touching the unclean; nay, without scruple they handled the dead. And observe how, while to their own people they are severe, against the aliens they do not exercise their power. But the people, he says, magnified them. Acts 5:13 And as he had mentioned their being in Solomon's porch, that you may not wonder how the multitude allowed this, he tells us that they did not dare even to approach them: for no man, he says, dared join himself unto them.

But believers were the more added unto the Lord, multitudes both of men and women: insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them. (v. 14, 15.) Great faith, surpassing what had been shown in the case of Christ. How comes this? Because Christ declared: And greater works than these shall he do, because I go unto My Father. John 14:12 And these things the people do, while the Apostles remain there, and are not moving about from place to place: also from other places they were all bringing [their sick] on beds and couches: and from all quarters accrued to them fresh tribute of wonder; from them that believed, from them that were healed, from him that was punished; from their boldness of speech towards those (their adversaries), from the virtuous behavior of the believers: for certainly the effect produced was not owing to the miracles only.

For though the Apostles themselves modestly ascribe it all to this cause, declaring that they did these things in the name of Christ, yet at the same time the life and noble conduct of the men helped to produce this effect. And believers were more added unto the Lord, multitudes both of men and women. Observe, how he now no longer tells the number of them that believe; at such a rate was the faith making way even to an immense multitude, and so widely was the Resurrection proclaimed.

So then the people magnified them: but they were now no longer lightly to be despised as once they were: for in a little moment, at a single turn of the scale, such have been the effects produced by the fisherman and by the publican! Earth was become a heaven, for manner of life, for boldness of speech, for wonders, for all besides; like Angels were they looked upon with wonder: all unconcerned for ridicule, for threats, for perils: compassionate were they, and beneficent; some of them they succoured with money, and some with words, and some with healing of their bodies and of their souls; no kind of healing (π■ν ε■δος ■ατρε■ας) but they accomplished.

Peter all but pleads for himself, when at the point to inflict the punishment, and at the same time gives a lesson to the rest. For because the act would seem exceeding stern, therefore it is that he does so much in the case. In respect of the woman also the process of judgment was terrible. But see how many evils grow out of the sacrilege: covetousness, contempt of God, impiety; and upon these too he pleaded for himself before the assembly, in that he did not immediately proceed to punishment, but first exposed the sin. None groaned, none lamented, all were terrified. For as their faith increased, the signs also were multiplied, and great was the fear among their own company: for the things which are from without do not so militate (πολεμεῖ) against our peace, as do the acts of our own people. If we be firmly joined together, no warfare will be hard: but the mischief would be the being divided and broken up. Now they went about in the public place: with boldness they attacked even the market, and in the midst of enemies they prevailed, and that saying was fulfilled, Be Thou Ruler in the midst among Your enemies. Psalm 110:2 This was a greater miracle, that they, arrested, cast into prison, should do such acts as these!

If those for lying suffered such things, what shall not the perjured suffer? Because she simply affirmed, Yea, for so much, ye see what she suffered. Bethink you then; they that swear and forswear themselves, of what should they be worthy? It comes in opportunely today even from the Old Testament to show you the heinousness of perjury. There was, it says, a flying sickle, ten cubits in breadth. Zechariah 5:2 The flying betokens the swift advent of the vengeance which pursues oaths; that it is many cubits in length and breadth, signifies the force and magnitude of the woes; that it comes flying from heaven, is to show that the vengeance comes from the judgment-seat on high: that it is in the form of a sickle, denotes the inevitableness of the doom: for just as the sickle, where it comes and has hooked the neck, is not drawn back with nothing but itself, but with the head reaped off, even so the vengeance which comes upon the swearers is severe, and will not desist until it have completed its work.

But if we swear and escape, let us not be confident; this is but to our woe. For what think ye? How many, since Ananias and Sapphira, have dared the same with them? How is it then, say you, that they have not met with the same fate? Not because it was allowed in them, but because they are reserved for a greater punishment. For those who often sin and are not punished, have greater reason to fear and dread than if they were punished. For the vengeance is increased for them by their present impunity and the long-suffering of God.

Then let us not look to this, that we are not punished; but let us consider whether we have not sinned: if sinning we are not punished, we have the more reason to tremble. Say, if you have a slave, and you only threaten him, and do not beat him; when is he most in fear, when most inclined to run away? Is it not when you only threaten him? And hence we advise each other not to be continually using threats, thereby choosing rather to agitate the mind by the terror, and lacerating it worse than with blows.

For in the one instance the punishment is momentary, but in the other it is perpetual. If then no one feels the stroke of the sickle, do not look to this, but rather let each consider whether he commits such sins. Many like things are done now as were done before the Flood, yet no flood has been sent: because there is a hell threatened, and vengeance. Many sin as the people did in Sodom, yet no rain of fire has been poured down; because a river of fire is prepared. Many go the lengths of Pharaoh; yet they have not fared like Pharaoh, they have not been drowned in a Red Sea: for the sea that awaits them, is the sea of the bottomless pit, where the punishment is not accompanied with insensibility, where there is no suffocation to end all, but in ever lengthened torture, in burning, in strangling, they are consumed there.

Many have offended like the Israelites, but no serpents have devoured them: there awaits them the worm that never dies. Many have been like Gehazi, yet they have not been struck with leprosy: for instead of leprosy, it remains for them to be cut asunder, and numbered among the hypocrites. Many have both sworn and forsworn; but if they have indeed escaped, let us not be confident: the gnashing of teeth awaits them. Yea, here too they will suffer many grievous woes, though, it may be, not immediately, but after further transgressions, that the vengeance may be the greater; for even we often set out at first with small sins, and then through great offenses lose all.

Therefore when you see anything happening to you, call to mind that particular sin of yours. The sons of Jacob are an example of this. Remember Joseph's brothers; they had sold their brother, they had even attempted to slay him; nay, they had slain him, as far as inclination went; they had deceived and grieved the old man; they suffered nothing. After many years they are brought into extreme peril, and now they are put in remembrance of this their sin. Exceeding wisely is this circumstance brought in.

Hear what they say: We are verily guilty concerning our brother. Genesis 42:21 In this manner then do thou also, when anything happens, say, We are verily guilty, because we have not obeyed Christ; because we have sworn; my much swearing, and my false swearing, has fallen upon my own head. Confess thou; since they also confessed, and were saved. For what though the punishment follow not immediately? Since Ahab also did not immediately after his sin in the matter of Naboth suffer that vengeance which he yet at last suffered. 1 Kings 21:19 And what is the reason of this?

God sets you a time, in which to wash yourself clean; but if you persist, at last He will send down the vengeance. You have seen the fate of liars. Consider what is the fate of false swearers, consider, and desist. It is impossible a swearer should not forswear himself, whether he will or not; and no perjurer can be saved. One false oath suffices to finish all, to draw down upon us the whole measure of vengeance. Let us then take heed to ourselves, that we may escape the punishment due to this offense, and be deemed worthy of the loving kindness of God, through the grace and mercies of His only-begotten Son, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost be glory, power, and honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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