

*Words and Deeds: Playing For Keeps*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Leviticus 10:1-3; Matthew 23:27-28; Acts 4:32-5:14*

Today's final Scripture reading is Acts 4:32-5:14. May God bless the reading of His holy and inspired Word. "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 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. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number."

I never liked playing for keeps. It used to be a childhood thing, I think – that whatever game was being played, something was up for grabs, a baseball card or a marble or a quarter, something. My parents always said never to gamble, and I took that seriously.

I still remember when I was about 7 years old and a neighbor's dad invited the kids in the neighborhood to bet on sports games, a quarter or fifty cents each. I did it once. I didn't lose anything or gain anything, but I still remember my stomach being all upset thinking, "What if I lose a dollar?" My mom knew something was up because all of a sudden, the kid who'd never been interested in sports suddenly wanted to see the weekend sports page. My mom put a stop to that in a hurry. But it did do one thing – it took my level of interest from zero to 10. I had skin in the game. It's amazing how having a stake in something changes your perception of it. Even now, many of us check the stock market not because we really care about it, but because our retirement is tied to it. Having a stake in something matters – playing for keeps makes it serious.

I say all of that to bring a viewpoint to today's passage. And it's a troubling passage, make no mistake about it. What happened to Ananias and Sapphira caused the whole church to seize up in fear; for a time, it even kept some people from becoming Christians.

In recent months, I've read online about a growing trend, and I've even dealt with it in a friend from seminary – the trend to say, “We need to unhitch the New Testament from the Old Testament because God doesn't act in the New Testament the way He did in the Old Testament.” They think that somehow God was mean-spirited in the Old Testament, and only through Jesus' coming was the Father's wrath changed so He could love us. But I point to this passage and say, “This looks an awful lot like some of the Old Testament passages you don't like.”

The truth is, God acts the same way throughout the entire Bible. He loves His people desperately. AND He hates sin thoroughly. God never acts inappropriately. But some passages like this make us worry. Are we the next to fall over the moment we sin? Is God just waiting to zap us once we do something really bad? That's not what's on display here. What this passage proves in so many ways is that God is playing for keeps. He is real, He is involved with our world, and how we deal with Him matters. It's a life or death matter, actually. So let's take a look and see what's really going on here.

First thing I see in today's passage, and the takeaway that I hope all of us will remember: *when we take God seriously and play for keeps in our relationship with Him, amazing things (even miracles) happen.* The early church is blessed. Everyone was one in heart and mind. There was incredible unity in the church. Everyone was looking out for one another. God's grace was evident to everyone. The apostles are given amazing skill by the Holy Spirit to lead people into a relationship with Jesus.

And there were no needy persons in the church. None. Not one. *This is insane.* I want to know why sociologists and politicians and social workers don't look at this passage when they are trying to figure out how to take care of the poor. I can tell you why: if they followed this, they would be out of a job. No needy people. 5,000 men had joined the Christian movement, which means probably around 15,000 total Christians. None of them had any needs – all of them had food, water, shelter, and clothing enough for each day.

They didn't have any needs because the believers took care of their own. They shared everything they had. Now this isn't any sort of political system; it's not advocating for how any nation should do things. The early Christians freely shared what they had with one another because they loved one another. All that they owned was still theirs to do with as they saw fit. They gave as they wanted, and they wanted to help.

Barnabas is lifted up as a prime example. Someone had a need, and God had given him the means to fill that need. He sold a field and gave the money to the apostles to distribute as was most appropriate. Barnabas is remembered for this to this day for his kindness to the saints. This is where his name comes from – he was given the name Barnabas because he was an encouragement to the church.

Why would any of the believers do this? Why would they share all they had? Why would they sell off their personal property so that someone might have food or might be able to get out of slavery or have clothing enough to survive? The first answer is the work of the Holy Spirit – He empowered them to live this way. But the other part of the answer is that they took God seriously. They listened to the teaching of Jesus and took it to heart. They put into practice what Christ had taught about serving others and watching out for the interests of your brothers and sisters above yourselves.

When we take God seriously, amazing things begin to happen. Not necessarily immediately, not in our timing, not always in observable ways, but they happen. Isn't it amazing that we have just started year 5 of CrossWay? We believed God had something more for us if we would be faithful. And we are here, against all human odds, because we took God seriously.

I say that to encourage us. At the same time, we need to take Him even more seriously. We need to spend our surplus funds not primarily on ourselves but on outreach. Spending time getting to know people God would have us invite to church, making sure that no member of the church has a genuine need. Churches have taken note that we fill 100 Operation Christmas Child boxes and have been like, “How do you do that?” If we become known for showing that kind of love to the people we meet in the community, people will want to know what God is doing here.

So let's take a look at the other side: the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. Here's something just as important for us to know: *never treat the God who plays for keeps flippantly, irreverently, or lightly.* God respects our feelings. Job thought God had treated him unfairly and was angry about it. The Psalms cry out, “Where are you, God?” God deals with our anger or frustration or other emotions that are misplaced. God is forgiving and loving. He doesn't treat us as our actions deserve. But God does not suffer fools gladly.

God repeats Himself in time so we understand what He is doing. Often, something in the Old Testament is repeated in the New Testament era so we “get it.” The story of Nadab and Abihu is parallel to this story. They were sons of Aaron the first high priest; they were in line to succeed him at his death. Very few people enjoyed such a high position in ancient Israel.

Yet they start messing around in front of the assembly. They had instructions for godly worship, but they offered up “strange fire” – sacrifices God didn't command or tell them to make. They know exactly what God wants and they do what they want instead. And God struck them down on the spot. God was not looking for sinners to zap. It was because Nahab and Abihu were leaders of Israel, but they took the worship of God as a game. It is not that the particular incense or animal matters to God, but because obedience matters.

I don't know what got into Ananias and Sapphira to think they could get away with what they were doing. Their story should unnerve us because it unnerved the early church. Ananias and Sapphira were not pagans. They are almost certainly Jewish converts. They've known about God since their earliest days. They were believers as we think of it; you would have sat next to them in worship and Bible study and prayer group. There's no evidence that they were faking it. That should rattle us. They aren't much different from us.

A few things make them different enough that we don't expect this kind of wrath for every mistake. Ananias and Sapphira witnessed the miracles of the disciples. They had a front seat to history being made. They experienced it personally. They knew the direct power of God healing and restoring people. They were not ignorant. Nobody made them sell their property, and no one made them give any of it to the church.

The only reason I can determine from the passage for Ananias and Sapphira doing what they did was that they wanted to have it both ways – they wanted the praise and prestige that would come from being recognized as incredibly generous people, but they also wanted the security of money. They disrespected God when they thought that somehow they could pull a fast one on Him. They treated God shamefully despite all they knew of His power, and they received their just punishment.

We do not live in a time and place where God's hand is so easily seen. God's power is still demonstrated all the time, but not in such a direct way. And solely due to God's grace, we don't have to fear God's full wrath every time we sin. He is merciful and gives us time to repent. But friends, never treat God lightly. Give Him the honor and respect He deserves.

Even if the word “God” is not our God's absolute proper name, don't treat His name lightly as is so popular, without thought. Remember that there is nothing in your life He does not see...and that's a good thing. He knows each sorrow, each burden, and He loves you through them. But He also sees our damaged and broken hearts and minds and the ways we scheme. Don't believe for a moment that you can do something the Almighty cannot see or know. God has made Himself known to you, which is why you're here this morning. Don't feign ignorance about God's ways. He has set His Word before you. Read it and follow it.

Now I want to be clear – reverence and joy go together. Laughter in the presence of the Lord is not a bad thing when our hearts are glad for all He's done. Jesus has a sense of humor. We don't need to be solemn or cowering in our worship. Nor do we have to believe that wearing good clothing to worship is the best way to respect God or a certain form of music. But when we approach God, we come knowing that He is God and we are not, that it is His grace that keeps us alive every single moment, that it is by His good pleasure alone that we are saved from sin and granted eternal life. We may have a “casual” service, but we do not worship God casually.

So this brings me to the last thing I want to talk about that we can apply from the passage: *abundant and eternal life with God comes through sacrifices, not shortcuts*. We want everything to be the quickest route from point A to point B. We don't want to read the book; we want the Cliff Notes or Spark Notes or the Books For Dummies version. Why cook when I can microwave? What's the least amount of work I can do and not get fired?

And as many, many people throughout the centuries have tried to ask, “What's the minimum I have to believe and do in order to get into heaven?” How can I get all the glory with none of the work? That kind of thinking was what did Ananias and Sapphira in. How can I get a good name in the church without giving up all I have?

The truth is, there are no shortcuts. Jesus came to make disciples that would follow Him all their lives and enjoy Him forever, not to believe a couple things that would get them out of eternal punishment. There is no simple formula in the Bible on how to be a disciple. It's a process that takes time with God, along with trial and error, of discipline and correction from God. I can't tell you that if you spend five minutes in prayer a day and ten minutes doing devotional reading that you will be OK with God because God never said that. Jesus talked about the opposite of a shortcut. He said that anyone who would become His disciple had to take up their cross and follow Him, to die to self. No shortcuts there.

My friend Ed Rapin and I talked for a little bit over breakfast on Friday about why some churches are huge, and why so many big churches have bad theology. And some large churches get most stuff right. But the shortcut mentality pervades the church, large and small. Much of American evangelicalism promises an easy road to God. Say a prayer, say you're sorry, make a promise, get baptized, you're good. The start of the Christian life has become the whole of the Christian life.

And in some Christian circles, you don't even have to do that. Think positive and give money, and you'll succeed and be blessed. Why do churches preaching that grow huge? Because we love the shortcut! It's what we want to hear! Ever since Adam and Eve heard there was a shortcut to becoming like God and they tried to take it, we've been trying shortcuts. If you're in a big church, nobody is going to hold you accountable if you don't show up every week or don't give; most people won't even know you're gone!

And the small church is not immune to bad theology either. Every week I come up against something in Scripture where to be faithful to Jesus, I have to say something that isn't pleasant. Most of you aren't easily offended, but sometimes I have to pull the gloves off. It's hard to say, "You know, if we're going to succeed, we're all going to have to invite more people, and refusing to invite someone we know God is calling us to invite is a sin." It's true, but it's easier to play the shortcut, that everything is fine.

Friends, no shortcut to God will get you where you want to go. Barnabas was praised and becomes a missionary because he took God seriously without shortcuts. We won't shortcut the process either. We will not pretend that an hour in church will save anybody. We will not pretend that God is happy with any gift we give Him just because we gave it. We will not pretend that being a true disciple of Jesus is easy, because it's not.

But what joy we can find when we break free of the shortcuts! I mentioned a friend of mine, Derrick Tucker, last week. He's a Christian comedian and preacher. He owns seven T-shirts, each one printed with a day of the week on it. Everything he owns fits into one suitcase. Several years ago, he realized that he had an apartment he never went to and stuff he never used. So he sold everything and gave a ton of things away. He goes around the world speaking with his sister Julie who has Down's Syndrome. This guy is just so alive, and part of it is his personality, and part of it is just that he's learned to be content in his circumstances as a disciple of Jesus. One of his catchphrases that I said last week that I'll say again is this: following after Christ is simple. Not easy, but simple.

Not everyone is called to travel the world and speak to people about Jesus. Not everyone is supposed to live out of one suitcase. But every Christian is called upon to take God seriously, because He is a God who plays for keeps. He was so serious about our salvation that His own Son, Himself in very nature God, came to live with us for thirty some odd years and then died on a tree so that we could live with Him forever. That's serious business.

God doesn't mess around. He has given us the way to a fruitful, wonderful, abundant life with Him, one filled with joy and peace. But it is going to take all of us. The creator of the universe is not to be trifled with. Follow Him or don't, but don't lie to yourself and pretend to be a follower if you're not. Give Him all you've got, and you will know His peace. Act towards Him like you're playing for keeps...and you'll find that He works the same way, and will keep you in His Kingdom both now and always.