



SERMON SERIES BY PASTOR SANDY ADAMS

SCARY FAMILIES: PART FOUR

PHONY FAMILIES

TEXT: ACTS 5:1-11

Today we're back on track - we're in the middle of a series of messages I've entitled, "[Scary Families](#)." As we've learned... *when a dad throws his family under the bus... or when there's no leadership in a family, and the patients take over the asylum... or when a family plays favorites...* family dynamics grow dangerous. People get hurt. Family life gets scary.

The Bible is full of scary family moments, but none more so, than the morning after Jacob's wedding. You remember the story... Jacob stood in the altar and took solemn vows. He loved the beautiful Rachel! He'd been smitten since he laid eyes on her. He signed-up until "[death do us part.](#)" He took her to bed that night, and helped her out of her wedding attire. It was customary for brides to wear heavy, full-body veils. I'm sure that fireworks followed.

But the first crack of dawn brought one of the scariest moments a newlywed can imagine. Jake rolls over to the woman next to him, *and horror of horrors... His wedding night was followed by a real nightmare!* It wasn't his beloved Rachel after all, it was her ugly sister, Leah. She could've doubled as a beaver, she was so ugly. Leah was as ugly as a monkey's armpit.

It was protocol in the ancient world for the elder daughter to marry before the younger. Jacob had been double-crossed. His father-in-law pulled a switch-a-roo! And I'll bet there's a lot of couples who at some point in their marriage awoke to the same scary realization. Hopefully, it didn't happen the day after the wedding, but it could have. You realized your spouse was not what you thought she or he was. You'd been doubled-cross. Someone had pulled *the switch-a-roo on you!* [Where's the sweet, submissive girl I thought was behind the wedding veil?... I thought I was marrying 'Mr. Right.' No one told me his first name is 'Always...'](#)

And all of a sudden family life can get very scary. When *the honeymoon turns into a full moon* and the monster-side of your spouse comes out, it gets eery and spooky. *All families have some scary moments.*

This morning I want to talk about [phony families](#).. You could title this morning's study... [Meet the Fakers](#). Trust me, when everybody in the family buys into the lie, and covers up - when they refuse to be honest, and tell the truth... *family life can get very, very scary.* As we've done each week in this series, I have a few photos to get you in the mood for [Scary Families](#)...

Picture #1 is the epitome of a family in denial. Their [house is on fire](#) - their domicile is turning into charred embers, while they're posing - smiling for the camera. Here's a family that needs help dealing with reality! Photo #2 is really scary! Here's a family [with something to hide](#). *And in their case it might be a good thing.* What is this knucklehead dad thinking? It would serve him right if a spark flew out of the fireplace and burned his tush. *This is a scary family.* Photo #3 is in honor of Mother's Day - how about [a scary mom!](#) Hey, nothing speaks of a mother's

love more than a watermelon and a handgun... You've really got to wonder what's the story behind this picture? I've heard of Mom, Apple Pie, and baseball - but Mom, watermelon, and a 45? This is really scary! Lastly, photo #4... **The Gary Busey family** - and of course they all look like Gary. Actor Gary always plays the creepy character. A family of Buseys is very scary!

But this is a good lead-in to this morning's study... We're talking about families who pretend - who put up a facade... Like Leah, they hide behind a veil. They make you think they're something, that they're not.

Turn in your Bible to Acts 5. Here's the quintessential example of a phony family... *Ananias and Sapphira*. You might say, *they were just dying to get into their Bible...* Chapter 5 begins, **"But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession."** Here was an All-American couple living *in Jerusalem!* In High School, Ananias had been captain of the football team. Sapphira was the homecoming queen. This couple got married straight out of college. Beforehand they were the darlings of the youth group.

Now they're driving a Mercedes to church - dressing in designer jeans. They got a house in the burbs - even host a TBG. *My... Ananias is a candidate for deacon!* This storybook couple was the epitome of respectability - the poster child for conservative, evangelical success. *They even dabbled in real estate.* In fact, over the last several weeks, folks at church had developed a new seriousness about following Jesus - even to the point of it lightening their wallet. Their fellow believers - their friends - were selling off possessions - pooling resources. They were hardcore. And *the Country Club couple* felt threatened. They were thinking... *what happened to moderation?*

Ananias and Sapphira liked *playing religion* - and *appearing religious* - but all of a sudden they were surrounded by *real giving* and *genuine faith* and *costly commitment*. This was different. It felt uncomfortable. This was an encroachment on their lifestyle.

Here was their quandary... In their heart, Ananias and Sapphira weren't ready for such a costly step of faith. They had faith, but it was growing - it was still a baby faith. Their faith needed more muscle and daring. *But they didn't want to look bad, or be left out...* And to this star-studded couple **"image was everything."** They couldn't tolerate appearing unspiritual...

So here's what they did. Read with me in verse 2, they **"sold a possession, and he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet."** Realize, God never required the selling of this parcel. Nor did He ask anyone to give the proceeds to the church. What was being done was strictly voluntary. Neither did God tell Ananias to give *all* the proceeds from the sell. He could've donated a portion – *and just said so.* Been honest. It didn't have to be *all the money.*

Ananias could've tithed - given just 10%... said *his faith was under construction*, and in the future he hoped to give more... Candor would've saved his life. Ananias' sin was *to give part, yet claim to give all.* He lied! And don't ever think you can lie with impunity. Hypocrisy always gets found out. It's been said, **"There is no such thing as an inconsequential lie."** The Holy Spirit is called **"the hound of heaven"** - He trees the sinner, and sniffs out hypocrisy a mile away.

Ananias lied, and he gets busted in verse 3... **"Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?"** It was a cover up - a charade. *Ananias claimed, what he never intended.* His gift was designed to *impress people* - not *please God.* Apparently, God could've tolerated Ananias' *stinginess.* His faith was growing... he would've matured out of

his *materialistic mentality* - but what God couldn't allow to gain a foothold in the church was *hypocrisy*.

Here were two folks, more concerned about *looking good* than *being real*. It was *style* over *substance*... And this is the bight of the modern church. *Here's the problem* - churches today are full of *phony families*.

This is what happens on any given Sunday morning in millions of homes all across America... A duty-bound wife gets up and badgers her husband to go to church. They both light a fire under their begrudging kids. A fight breaks out at breakfast. Dad yells at Junior. Mom yells at Dad for yelling at Junior. Mom and Dad argue on the drive in, whether they can afford an offering. Junior hits Sissy. Mom leans over the seat and swats JR. Dad scolds Mom - *he'll handle Junior later*.

Then the car door opens in the church parking lot... Everybody starts their transformation. Mom checks her make-up. Dad tucks in his shirt. Kids start spying for their friends. By the time they get to the Greeter at the door they all have a plastered smile on their face. Ten minutes later, their eyes are closed - their hands are raised - they're swaying to the music as they worship God... shout His praise... sing of His love... And as they leave, everyone thinks, "[What a lovely, Christian family.](#)" If only you'd seen them a few hours earlier, you would've thunk, "[Wow, what a scary family.](#)"

And let me be the first to confess... This is me! *Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt, Man!* I have argued with my wife on Saturday night. I'm talking a knock-down, drag-out fight - where I was mean, ugly, angry... Then had the nerve to get up the next morning in this pulpit and teach you how to have a good marriage... Now, it's been a while since this happened... *a few years in fact*. It doesn't occur as much these days. For one, I've matured spiritually... *AND two*, for the sake of the ministry, Kathy and I just decided to keep a healthy distance from each other on Saturday night. *Just in case*. We drive separate cars on Sunday... *it's just a safeguard*. We don't want to be a *phony family!*

Recently, I read of a new product, "[Spray-on Mud.](#)" It's a big hit in England where there's little real mud. When an image-conscious dude buys a nice, new 4x4 SUV, he wants people to think he's using his high-performance vehicle for more than just hauling kids to soccer practice, and bringing home the groceries. So he can pop the top on some spray-on mud, and make his new SUV look like it's been off-road for three days - climbing hills and plowing through wilderness.

This is what Ananias tried to do. He popped the top on some spray-on devotion - some pretend faith. He covered his family in what looked like real sacrifice. Every believer gets tempted to inflate our claims and embellish our testimony. We like seeming more spiritual than we are. We talk a degree of devotion we've never known. We vow to give all, then hold some back. We tend to forget that **God hates fake!**

Ananias had an image to uphold. The truth about his weakness might caused the church to think less of him. What he should've cared about was God's opinion.

In verse 4, Peter grills Ananias, "[While it remained, was it not your own?](#)" It was his property. His name was on the deed - not God's... "[And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?](#)" The Lord never laid claim to the parcel. He never required it as an offering. This was all a scheme to pass off phoniness as true devotion. He asks, "[Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.](#)"

A phony family is an offense to many people... When we pretend to be something we're not we water down the commitment level across the church... We diminish the true sacrifices of others... We breed distrust among believers... We give the lost world around us a reason to doubt the sincerity of our faith and to mock our witness... But worst of all, we offended God the Holy Spirit. Peter tells him, "**You have not lied to men but to God.**"

God took Ananias' phoniness very seriously. Verse 5 reads, "**Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last.**" God struck Ananias. Seized up his heart, perhaps. He took a final gulp of air and died. Even the staunchest skeptic of the Bible believes the next verse, "**So great fear came upon all those who heard these things.**" I'm sure it did. It scared the church spit-less. Suddenly, *God's family was a scary family.*

Actually, the disciples should've expected as much. While on Earth, the one sin Jesus detested the most was hypocrisy. He offered forgiveness and showed compassion to the tax collectors and prostitutes. But our Lord hurled fiery daggers at the hypocrites.

In Matthew 6 Jesus contrasts **true worship, and prayer, and fasting** with **phony worship, and prayer, and fasting** - and the difference is simple. The phony variety wants to be "**seen by men**" - while true worship desires only to glorify God. **It's motive that matters!** Ananias did *a spiritual act for a selfish reason*. He tried to appear spiritual in the eyes of his peers, while in the eyes of God he was something else. This is the most insidious evil... *worse than simply ignoring God* - is using God for your own enlargement.

In Matthew 23 Jesus squares off with the Kings of Phoniness - the Pharisees - and He goes on a tirade. Jesus goes off on them - He calls them every name in the book... "**blind guides," "fools," "sons of hell," "white-washed tombs," "serpents," "brood of vipers.**" Then and now, *Jesus has low tolerance for hypocrisy.*

Understand, in Acts 5 God didn't want to strike down Ananias. The man's *struggling devotion*, his *immature faith*, the *leftovers of his materialism*, even the *limits of his generosity* weren't the deal-breakers for God. Certainly, Jesus wants us to grow spiritually, and exercise our faith until it becomes rock-solid. It's been said, "**The biggest room in the world is the room for improvement.**" And we all have room to grow in Christ. God isn't surprised when His children act childish. Psalm 103:14 tells us, "**He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.**" God threw-the-switch on Ananias not because of his *immaturity*, but *hypocrisy*.

Here's a quote that'll make you think, "**We know perfectly well how to be spiritual. It's being human that we have trouble with.**" Ananias knew how to "*do spiritual.*" He could put on an act. He was more at ease with appearing spiritual than he was with his humanity. It's hard to swallow your pride, confess your sins, talk about your weaknesses... admit your human frailty. Everybody feels more at home on top of a soapbox. But when I start admitting my flaws and failures, I have to climb down. Suddenly, we're on equal footing.

This is why a proud father never gets honest with his kids... and teenagers hide stuff from their parents... and husbands and wives refuse to really talk... Instead of honesty and humility, *haughtiness* causes families to grow phony. Everybody jockeys to gain an upper-hand. They want one-leg up on everyone else.

That's why people mask their flaws - and cover up questionable intentions... Families avoid the truth and live a lie. They pretend not to hurt even when they do... They think if they can deny their pain and short-comings long enough it'll all go away. I've heard it said, "[More people would learn from their mistakes, if they weren't so busy denying them.](#)" It's always good to remember, "[Denial is not just a river in Egypt.](#)"

In fact, *denial* isn't a river at all. It blocks the flow that we need. What families really need is *a river of tears*. When was the last time you cried with your family. *You opened up to your spouse... they opened up to you... you shared your heart with a parent... or forgave a sibling...* and all the pain, disappointment, hurt, and heartache flowed out. This is what marriages and families need most - they need to love and care again. I've heard it said, "[Tears are a river that takes you somewhere. Tears lift your boat off the rocks - off dry ground - carrying it downriver to someplace better.](#)"

And if tears don't flow... if a family doesn't put an end to the phoniness, and lies, and pretend... Just like Ananias, [phony families die](#). Not instantly like Ananias and Sapphira did, but they die a slow, painful death. If you did an autopsy on [a phony family](#) you'll find that pride, guilt, hidden sin ate them up on the inside. For a family to thrive - even survive - they need to come clean, and be honest, and join together for the common good. Truly healthy families maintain an atmosphere of humility, and truthfulness, and trust.

What a day this was... "great fear came upon all..." I've heard Christians say they wish they lived in the days of the early church - where they could've seen firsthand the miracles written of in Acts. *I'm not so sure!* In the first century when a hypocrite went to church he either repented, or went home in a body bag.

Of course, this is not the case today. In Acts 5 God *made a point* - more so than *established a pattern*. In the baby church's formative years - while standards for church life and worship were still taking shape - God took serious issue with people who played at religion. He didn't want posers - folks who claimed to be more than they were - to be the norm in the church. This is why he took such severe measures in Acts 5.

Imagine a church where you have regular baptisms, communion, and weekly executions... It was obviously not God's intention to deal with all hypocrites the way He dealt with Ananias... *And we should all be glad...* If God used the same standards with us, today, we'd break out singing, "[All to Jesus I surrender...](#)" And people would start dropping like flies! We'd have to call Wages to send a truck over, and haul off the bodies.

In Acts 5 God made a point. And it only took one case - one example - to show His disdain for hypocrisy. As Ananias lies through his teeth, Peter sees straight through him. He asks, "[Why has Satan filled your heart?](#)" Peter realized Ananias' two-faced devotion - his duplicity - was an attack of the devil on the church. And if God hadn't stamp it out early on, it would've ruined for all time His growing and blossoming church.

But the story isn't over. The scariness is just warming up. Phony families don't start phony. They devolve over time. Key factors *enable* and add to their phoniness... Verse 6, "[And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.](#)" In ancient times, and in hot, humid climates, corpses were disposed of quickly. No need to risk stench or disease. They didn't even take time to notify the next of kin. That's why Ananias' bride, Sapphira, was oblivious to what had happened to her husband. Verse 7 tells us, "[Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.](#)" She's late for church - and strolls in, ready to join in the praise!

Go back to verse 2 and you'll find a crucial detail that helps us know what's going on in Sapphira's mind... We're told, "*he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet.*" Sapphira knows about the scam. She was privy to her husband's hypocrisy. The wording used is very deliberate. While her man works his con... Sapphira isn't there, but she's "aware."

Notice, the author of Acts doesn't write, "she plotted with him..." or "she approved..." or "she was in on it from the start..." - but Sapphira was very, very "aware." She knew her husband was on the verge of spiritual suicide, yet she thought she could help him get away unscathed. So *she tried*. She would've told you she was loving him. But by not speaking up and forcing the issue she was signing his death certificate - *and hers...*

As Martin Luther King put it, "*Our lives begin to end, the day we become silent about things that matter.*" Sapphira will die this day, as did Ananias. They'll be buried side-by-side. But deep inside she started to die when she chose to help her husband carry out his ruse, and not stand up for what was right before God.

There is a modern word. It came into usage through AA and the addiction recovery community - it's called "*codependency*." The idea is that the person who lives with an addict - *a spouse, or child, or parent, or friend* - may act in ways that actually support his dependency. In an effort to gain a degree of normalcy, they learn ways of coping with the troubled person and their sin... But their habits often facilitate more bad behavior.

They'll lie for the person. Cover-up what they did. They're trying to spare the family an embarrassment. They'll make excuses. *They're great at excuses.* They show pity instead of insisting on help. At times they even stick their head in the sand, and pretend it will all go away on its own. They embrace an illusion. There's the very real feeling that if you're not dealing with it at the time, it's not really happening.

This not only occurs with spouses, but parents are also guilty. I've seen insecure, unsure parents tip-toe around their out-of-control kid out of a fear of rejection. Like Sapphira they refuse to confront the real issue.

How many parents have failed their adult children by bailing them out of trouble over and over again? I know parents who make excuses for their kid's poor behavior even into adulthood. Parents shelter their kids, without realizing the crippling effect it causes. When a young person never has to face up to the consequences of his foolishness he never learns discipline, and responsibility. *Make someone's life easy at every turn...* and you contribute to their delinquency.

Apparently, Sapphira would rather lie to God, than make waves or cause friction at home. *This is scary.* A passive, non-confrontational approach makes life easier *for you* - but it doesn't help the person in trouble. We all want to *cover up, make excuses, lower our expectations* - but God wants to deal with the issue.

Here's another term for Sapphira... She was a classic "*enabler*." Rather than *confront her husband in love, and try to get him help* - or *go to Peter and the elders with her concerns* - she chose to stay quiet and *enable* Ananias' hypocrisy. That made her complicit. Sapphira chose to be *part of the problem* instead of *part of the solution*. And this makes for *a scary family...*

Keep reading... Verse 8, "And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" Peter knows the answer, but he's giving Sapphira a chance to come clean. Sadly though, "She said, "Yes, for so much." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?" Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out. Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband." The royal couple get buried in adjacent plots

We're not told why Sapphira sold out the truth to support Ananias' scheme. *We're left to speculate...* Maybe her low self-worth needed to impress him... Maybe she wanted to tell somebody, but Ananias threatened her (*that happens sometimes*)... Maybe this wasn't the first time he'd played the hypocrite, and she thought he'd get away with it again... Maybe she liked the lifestyle his salary provided - or had designs on the money he'd held back from God...

Or maybe she just had a warped sense of devotion, and wanted to stand by her man no matter what... *And I understand this thought process...* In the church we teach that a wife should submit to her husband, even in the midst of his mistakes. **Sarah** is commended for submitting to Abraham even when he threw her under the bus. To save his own skin, he let the pharaoh take her... and Sarah still trusted God to be greater than her husband's blunder.

But there's a fine line between submission and complicity with evil. Sarah's acceptance represented a trust in God even in the face of her husband's fears. But Sapphira was not as noble. She agreed to sin. She stepped over her conscience, and threw off her integrity - *choices Sarah didn't make...* Sapphira went along with a scheme that was patently hypocritical. There's not a trace of faith in any of her actions.

Notice how Peter describes her sin. In verse 9 he says, Sapphira agreed to "**test the Spirit of the Lord...**" She challenged God's omniscience - His character. The fact she lied to God, and thought she could get away with it, was a slap in the face to the Holy Spirit.

I read of a restaurant in NYC that's built a business on hypocrisy. Husbands bring wives, boyfriends bring girlfriends - couples are seated and handed a menu. But what the girl doesn't know is the prices in her menu are triple the cost of those on the man's menu... So, when he leans in, and tells the girl he's trying to impress, to order whatever she wants - it's a trick. *And I'll bet it's backfired a time or two.* I would imagine when a woman learns the news that she's been conned, the relationship can get pretty scary.

That's what happened to Ananias and Sapphira. Their attempt to con God backfired. Hypocrisy always does. Nobody pulls the wool over God's eyes. The story closes as it should, "**So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.**" After this **scary family**, the church was on its best behavior. They learned **honesty is the best policy**.

I want to close this morning by telling you what Sapphira should've done... When Ananias informed her of his scheme to *defraud God* and *play the poser*, Sapphira should've realized her household was sick. Her husband was infected with sin. *He had a fever.* And fevers need a physician. You can't afford to wait and see if they get better on their own. Your passivity only gives the fever room to grow. You need help.

Perhaps this is why Peter was quick to call Sapphira on the carpet. *He'd been in the same situation...* Recall Luke 4, his mother-in-law was

home with a fever. The original language calls it “**a mega-fever.**” *And what did Peter do?* He went to the synagogue, and recruited Jesus’ help. *He brought Jesus home!*

The Country Club couple went to church to show-off how healthy they appeared, but they had no intention of bringing Jesus anywhere near their household. Their *pride* had too much to *hide*. A fever had taken over. Phony families eventually die because they never get help - they never go to Jesus, and ask for healing.

On the other hand, Peter was honest. His family had a fever and He brought Jesus home to provide a cure. Luke writes, “**(Jesus) rebuked the fever, and it left her. And immediately she arose and served them.**” **The honest family** was sick, but brought Jesus home, got healed, and served. **The phony family** bragged about its service, yet was sick, and died.

Peter’s family was sick... Ananias’ family was sick... I hope you realize all families are sick to some degree or another - at least they run a low-grade fever... That’s even true of your family and my family. One family was honest and got healed. One family played the hypocrite and died. **Which family do you want to be?**

There are *no perfect people* and *no perfect families*. But neither should there be any **phony families**. Jesus comes... healing comes... to families that are honest with their problems, and seek the Lord for help. We all belong to families that are *under construction*. And the more honest we are about it, the sooner and better God can complete what He’s building in us.