

# PHONY FAMILIES

## ACTS 5:1-11

But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, 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.

But 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? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.

Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" 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.

So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

Here's the story of [Ananias and Sapphira](#).

You might say, *they were a couple who were just dying to get into the Bible!* You've heard of healthy families - well this was a lethal, toxic, *phony family*.

The story begins, verse 1, **"But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession."**

If I have them pegged right, Ananias and Sapphira were the All-American couple living *in Jerusalem!*

In High School, Ananias had been captain of the football team. Sapphira was the homecoming queen. They both had been voted, **"most likely to succeed."**

The 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 hip clothes. They got a house in the burbs - even host a home group. *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.*

*Yet here's what happened*, over the last several weeks, their friends at church had developed a new seriousness about following Jesus - *even to the point of it lightening their wallet...* Fellow believers - many of their friends - were selling off possessions - pooling their resources. This was hardcore commitment.

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 hearts, 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.”** Ananias couldn't tolerate being labeled *“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.

And once it was sold the Lord never commanded that the proceeds be given to the church. What was being done by church members 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. Especially a dad. A mark of a man is honesty and integrity. Kids want to see if their dad is guided by principle, not just convenience. Does he do what's right, or what's easy?

**Hypocrisy always gets outed.**

This is why it's been said, "There is no such thing as an inconsequential lie." Honesty is important not just to our kids, but to God. The Holy Spirit is called "the hound of heaven." He 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 blight of the modern church. *Here's a major problem* - churches today are full of **phony families**. And much of the blame lies at the feet of dads. Remember we are the leaders of our families.

*Here's what happens on any given Sunday morning in millions of homes across America...* A duty-bound wife gets up

and badgers her reluctant husband to go to church. They both light a fire under begrudging kids.

A fight breaks out at the breakfast table... Dad yells at Junior. Mom yells at Dad for yelling at Junior.

On the drive to church, mom and dad argue over *whether they can afford to give an offering*. That's when 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...

*And the transformation begins!*... Mom checks her make-up. Dad tucks in his shirt. Kids start spying for their friends. By the time they get to the Usher at the front door they've all plastered a smile on their faces.

Ten minutes later, their eyes are closed - their hands are raised - they're swaying to the music as they worship God, shouting His praise, singing 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, "*What a phony family.*"

And let me be the first to confess... This has been me! *I've been there, done that, bought the T-shirt!*

There have been Saturday nights when I argued with my wife. I'm talking knock-down, drag-out, horrible fights - where I was mean, and ugly, and angry...

Then had the nerve to stand up in this pulpit the next morning, and teach on how to have a good marriage...

It's been a while since it happened... *several years in fact.*

Thankfully, it doesn't occur as much these days.

For one, my wife and I have matured spiritually...

*AND two*, we decided years ago to keep a healthy distance from each other on Saturday nights. We also drive separate cars to church on Sunday morning - *just in case*. **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 piety - 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 cause the church to think less of him.

What he should've cared about was God's opinion.

In fact, that's what every father should care about!

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.”

Phoniness in a family is a terrible sin for a number of reasons: *Hypocrisy turns off our kids to Christianity.*

*It dilutes the commitment level across the church.*

*It diminishes the true sacrifice of others.*

*It breeds distrust among believers.*

*It gives the lost world around us a reason to doubt the sincerity of our faith and to mock our witness.*

But worst of all, we offend God the Holy Spirit. Peter tells Ananias, “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. God’s family became *a frightened 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 hypocrites.

In Matthew 6 Jesus contrasted **true worship, and prayer, and fasting** with **phony worship, and prayer, and fasting** - and the difference was 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.* It's using God for your own enlargement.

In Matthew 23 Jesus squared off with the kings of Phoniness - the Pharisees - and He launched 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, *He has a low tolerance for hypocrisy.*

Understand, in Acts 5 God didn't want to strike down Ananias. This 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 should make us 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 *admitting his humanity*.

Why is it hard for us to swallow our pride, and confess our sins, and admit our failures, and talk openly about our weaknesses. *It's hard to be human*.

Why is it, everybody feels more at home on top of a soapbox. It's when I confess my frailties and flaws, I have to climb down. Now we're all on equal footing.

This is *why a proud father never gets honest with his kids... it's why teenagers hide stuff from their parents... it's why husbands and wives refuse to really talk...*

Instead of honesty and humility, *haughtiness* causes families to grow phony. Everybody jockeys to gain the upper-hand. They want one-leg up on everyone else.

We all like feeling superior and holding the high-ground - *but before the cross it's all just level ground*.

Sometimes families would rather deny their pain and their short-comings - instead of being honest and dealing with them. They avoid the truth and live a lie.

They pretend not to hurt even when they do...

I've heard it said, "More people would learn from their mistakes, if they weren't so busy denying them." Always remember, "**Denial is not just a river in Egypt.**"

In fact, *denial* isn't a river at all. It's a blocker. It dams up the flow. What families need is *a river of tears*.

*When was the last time you cried with your family? You opened up to your spouse... or they opened up to you? When was the last time you shared your heart with a parent... or forgave your sibling? Have you ever apologized to a child?...* It's honesty that allows the pain, disappointment, hurt, and heartache to flow out.

This is what marriages and families need most - they need to honestly love and really begin to 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 pretending... Just like Ananias, **phony families die**. Maybe not instantly like Ananias and Sapphira, but they die slowly, painfully.

If you did an autopsy on **a phony family** you'd find that pride and hidden sin ate them up on the inside.

For a family to thrive - even survive - its members 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 it was when two-faced Ananias lied, and God struck him dead... “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 came home in a body bag.

Of course, this is seldom the case today.

With the event that took place in Acts 5 God was *making a point*, more so than *establishing a pattern*.

In the baby church's formative years - while standards for church life and worship were still forming, 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.

Thus, here in Acts 5 God takes severe measures.

Imagine a church today that had regular baptisms, quarterly communion, *and weekly executions*.

It's obvious now that God's intention was not to deal with all hypocrites the way He dealt with Ananias - *and we should be glad...* If He used the same standard today, we'd start to sing, *"All to Jesus I surrender..."*

And folks would start dropping like flies!

We'd have to call Wages Funeral Home to send over a whole fleet of hearses to haul off all the corpses.

In Acts 5 God was making a point! And it only took one exemplary case to show His distain for hypocrisy.

*Notice Peter saw straight through Ananias.* When the man lied, Peter asked, **“Why has Satan filled your heart?”** He recognized Ananias’ two-faced devotion - his duplicity - as an attack of the devil on the church.

Satan was trying to defile the church with hypocrisy. 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 part is just beginning.* Phony families don’t start out phony. The hypocrisy and duplicity is tolerated and builds up over time. Key factors *enable* and add to their phoniness...

Verse 6 tells us, **“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 ***first 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 was 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 was going on in Sapphira’s mind...

We’re told, **“he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it...”** Sapphira knew 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 just there, she’s **“aware.”**

She may not have *plotted with with him* or *known about it* from the start - but by this point Sapphira was very, very **“aware,”** and thought her complicity in the scheme could help him get away with it unscathed.

I'm sure Sapphira would've told you she was loving her husband. But by not speaking up and forcing correction she signed his death certificate - *and hers...*

Martin Luther King once said, **“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”**

Sapphira died that 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.

If she had really loved her husband she would've refused to be silent about his sinful behavior, and would have done what she could to get him some help.

There is a modern word. It came into usage through Alcoholic's Anonymous, and the addiction recovery community - it's the term **“codependency.”**

The idea is that a person who lives with an addict - *a spouse, or child, or parent, or friend* - may act in ways that actually support the person's addiction.

In an effort to preserve a degree of normalcy for themselves or their family, they learn ways of coping with the troubled person and their sin. But the attitude often facilitates more bad behavior from the addict.

They lie for the person. They cover-up what he does. They're trying to spare the family an embarrassment.

They'll make excuses. *They're great at excuses.*

They'll show pity instead of insisting on responsibility.

At times they even stick their head in the sand, and pretend it will all go away on its own. They embrace an illusion. They fall victim to the very false feeling that if I'm not dealing with it - then it must not be happening.

This not only occurs with spouses, but parents are also guilty. They think it can never happen to *their kid!*

To preserve the family's image they bury their head in the sand... Or they fear the child's rejection if they call him on the carpet, so they tip-toe around his rebellion. Here's a cartoon... "Son, we're stuck. Do you mind helping us with your homework." They coddle the kid. Like Sapphira they're scared to confront the issue.

*How many parents have failed their adult children by bailing them out of trouble over and over again?*

I've seen parents make excuses for a child'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 their foolishness they never learn discipline and responsibility. *Make someone's life easy at every turn...* and you contribute to their delinquency.

Apparently Sapphira would rather have lie to God than confront her husband. She didn't want to make waves or

cause friction. *This is was a sick family.*

Realize, it might be true that a passive, non-confrontational approach will make life easier *for you* in the short run - but it doesn't help the person in trouble, and it certainly won't help you in the long run.

It's easier to *cover up, make excuses, lower your expectations* - but God wants us 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 some help - at least go to Peter and the elders with her concerns* - she chose to stay quiet and aid in Ananias' hypocrisy. This made her complicit.

Sapphira chose to be *part of the problem* instead of *part of the solution*. This helps make **a phony 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 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 wanted to impress him...

Maybe she did want to tell somebody, but Ananias physically threatened her (*that sometimes happens*)...

Maybe this wasn't the first time he had played the hypocrite, and she thought he'd get away with it again..

Maybe she enjoyed the lifestyle and prestige his money provided. Her pride propped up his hypocrisy.

Or maybe she went along with the scheme because she had designs on the money he held back from God.

Or it could be that Sapphira had a warped sense of devotion, and wanted to stand by her man no matter what...

*And I understand this thought process...*

The Scripture teaches that a wife should submit to her husband, even in the midst of his mistakes.

The Bible commends **Sarah** for submitting to Abraham even when he lied about her being his sister.

Remember in Egypt, Abraham denied his marriage because he feared for his life. He let the Pharaoh add Sarah to his harem. To save his own skin, Abraham threw his wife under the bus. He was pathetic. And it was a submissive Sarah who trusted God to protect her virtue, and be greater than her husband's blunder.

**But evidently, there's a fine line between submission to a weak husband and complicity in an evil scheme.**

Sarah trusted God in the face of Abraham's fear.

But Sapphira was not as noble. She stepped over her conscience, and threw off her integrity to pursue her own



agenda (whatever it was) - *choices Sarah didn't make!*  
Sapphira engaged in her own hypocrisy.

There wasn't 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 of 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 the scheme has backfired a time or two.* I would imagine when most women learn the news that they've been conned - that the man's generosity was phony, not real - 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 episode the church was on its best behavior. Everyone learned *honesty is the best policy.*

**I want to close this morning by telling you what Sapphira should've done...** When Sapphira caught wind of Ananias' scheme to *defraud God* and *play the poser*, she should've realized her household was sick.

Her husband was infected with sin. *He had a fever.*

And fevers need treatment. You can't afford to wait on a fever to see if the person infected gets better on their own. A passive approach only gives the fever room to grow. A person with a fever needs a physician.

Perhaps this is why Peter was quick to call Sapphira on the carpet. For him, this all hit too close to home.

*Remember, he too had been in a similar situation...*

In Luke 4, Peter's mother-in-law was home with an actual fever. The original language calls it "**a mega-fever.**" *And what did Peter do?* He went to the synagogue to get some help, and recruited Jesus.

*He brought Jesus home from church!*

Here, *the Country Club couple* went to church to show-off how healthy they appeared to be. They had no intention of being honest, and getting help. To keep up their image, they were content to let the fever rage.

Sadly, their *pride* had too much to *hide*. They weren't going to bring Jesus anywhere near their family.

And realize this is why phony families really do die.

This is how a family that attends church every week can suddenly break up. It's because they're coming to be seen rather than to meet Jesus. They're not going to Jesus - let alone His Church - and bringing home the healing and help

they so desperately need.

In contrast, Peter had been honest. His family had a fever and He brought Jesus home trusting in His cure.

Luke writes, “(Jesus) rebuked the fever, and it left her. And immediately she arose and served them.”

**The honest family** was sick, but they brought Jesus home, got healed, and served... **The phony family** bragged about its service, yet was sick, and died.

*Peter's family was sick and 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.

But one family was honest and got healed.

While, 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!

Today, on Father's Day I appeal to us men to take the initiative. Guys, be honest before God - *and begin with your own shortcomings*. Don't live with a fever in your family. Go to Jesus and get the help you need!