



**BELIEVERS CHAPEL**

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 4:32–5:16

“The Church’s Forgotten Peril”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The Scripture reading this morning is a lengthier section than we usually read for our Scripture reading, and so I will limit my comments as we read. We begin with the thirty-second verse of the fourth chapter, and we read through the sixteenth verse of the fifth chapter. Verse 32 of chapter 4 of the book of Acts, and Luke writes:

“And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul; neither said anyone of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold. And laid them down at the apostles’ feet, and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. And Joses, who by the disciples was surnamed Barnabas.”

Which is being interpreted that word really in this instance means something like translated “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. 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. But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? While it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.’ And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost, and great fear came on all them that heard these things. And the young men arose, 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?’ And she said ‘Yea, for so much.’ Then Peter said unto her ‘How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out.’ Then fell she 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.”

That probably is one of the most believable verses in all of the New Testament. And verse 12.

“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 durst no man join himself to them, but the people magnified them. And believers were the more added to 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. There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them which were vexed with unclean spirits, and they were healed everyone.”

There’s a great deal of stress in the original text on “everyone,” laying stress upon the fact, that when the apostles exercised the gift of healing, there were no failures. Often, individuals tell us that the reason for failure in healing is lack of faith, but when the gift of miracles is exercised by those who have it, there is always success. So “they were healed every one.” It is also often said, that everything that happened in the early church should happen today. Well, if it were true, that every time in the church, there was an act of hypocrisy, we wouldn’t have too many people in our assemblies, would we? This was a signal case that was designed by God to give us an indication of what takes place inwardly, and in the life of the church when a person does play the part of a hypocrite. We do not escape the disciplinary judgment of God, and this very signal outward illustration is not something that will happen constantly, as is evident from the book of Acts, but it was to impress upon us, that it is happening; that is, divine discipline is happening constantly, though it may not happen in so signal and outward fashion, as it happened then. May the Lord bless this reading of his word.

Let’s bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Our heavenly Father, we approach Thee in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the church, king of kings, and lord of lords. We thank Thee for all that is ours by virtue of his marvelous manifestation of grace to us. We who are so undeserving, who actually deserve the opposite, have been freely brought into the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, and freely forgiven, because of all that he has done. And so, Lord, we thank Thee. We praise Thy name for the goodness shown to us. We thank Thee for the privilege of preaching the forgiveness of sins to those who, by the Holy Spirit, lean and rest upon what Christ has done for time and for eternity. And bless the ministry of the word.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] Our subject this morning in the exposition of the book of Acts is “The Church’s Forgotten Peril.” If you have been reading the book of Acts along with me, as we have been studying it, you have noticed that Luke up to this time, has largely spent his space describing the church in its external life. But now he will turn to its internal life, and he will talk about fellowship. He will talk about sin. He will talk about discipline, and then he will talk about the restoration of power in witness and testimony. One thing we learn from the study of the New Testament is this, and it’s often overlooked, the church has nothing to fear from persecution and trials outside of itself.

Now, the Apostle Paul in Philippians chapter 3, and Philippians chapter 1, makes that very plain. He talks about the fact, that people were persecuting the church, and he talks about, nevertheless, the Gospel is preached, and as a matter of fact, often the trials and troubles the church receives from outside, are things that really benefit the church. So persecution is often the means by which individuals are strengthened, and actually made more firm in their faith. So we have nothing to fear from the mockery of the world, the persecution of the world, the trials that may come to us from the world. Strictly speaking, the things that we have to fear are the things that come from within. When Paul in Philippians chapter 3, talks about the troubles that he has, they come as much from within as from without. He talks about individuals who are in the church who preach Christ out of contention, and while the apostle rejoiced in the fact that they preached Christ, still it’s difficult to imagine that in a local church in apostolic days, there should be such difficulties and trials from within. But the apostle not only says there are difficulties and trials, but he speaks of these men in very strong ways. He says, “For many walk of whom I’ve told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame who mind earthly things.” So within the life of the church are its greatest dangers.

Joseph Parker, one of the great preachers in the city of London a few generations ago said, “One cold heart in the house of God is more to be dreaded than all the devils that are in perdition.” And Mr. Parker was probably right. “One cold heart in the house of God is more to be dreaded than all the devils in perdition.” The Lord Jesus has given us assurance that the church will not fail. He has promised that he will keep us, and that the gates of hell shall not prevail against us, but it so happens that often in the church, things happen within the body, that give us more difficulty than the things that come to us from without.

One finds this illustrated in the Old Testament in a number of ways, but one of the striking illustrations is the experience of the nation Israel when they came out of Egypt, and then into the land. One of their first obstacles was to take Jericho and, of course, God prepared them and prepared Joshua for the place of leadership; assured Joshua that the Lord God was with them in a remarkable experience. But he said, “One thing must be done. When you enter Jericho, and when you take the city, you are not to take any of the wealth of that city for yourself. The gold, and the silver, and all of the possessions of the people within the city, are to be dedicated to the use of the people of Israel.” Well, you know what happened. God performed this mighty miracle, and the walls of Jericho fell down, but there was a certain man by the name of Achan, and sad to say he was of the tribe of Judah, our Lord’s own tribe. And he saw a goodly Babylonish garment. It was a very beautiful garment that one of the Jerichoites owned. He saw other things, including gold and silver, and he took them to himself, and he hid them.

And in the flush of that great victory, Joshua and the children of Israel, realizing that they probably had to next take the city of Ai, they had the attitude that God was so much with them, that they didn’t even need all of their forces, so they said, “We’ll just take a few thousand men, and we’ll go up and take the city of Ai.” And they went up, and they were humiliated. They not only lost, but they lost many of their own men. And Joshua realized evidently, that something was the matter, and he got down on his face before the Lord God, and plead with him, and God said, “The reason for the defeat, is that one of you has taken of the possessions of the Jerichoites to himself, and as a result

of that” and notice this “all Israel has sinned.” Not simply Achan, but all Israel has sinned. Well the result was that there was a kind of inquisition that was carried out, and finally, Achan confessed his sin. And God had warned, that not only would the individual be judged, but all of his family as well, and so Achan and all of his possessions, his wife and his children were stoned to death. To illustrate very, very definitely and clearly at the beginning of Israel’s history, that for one person to sin, affected the whole of the body.

Now, what is so striking about it is that Luke who wrote the book of Acts, was an individual who had read very widely in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. That is evident when one compares the language of this book with the language of the Greek Old Testament. The very word that is used to describe what Achan did is the word that is used right here in verse 2 of chapter 5, when Luke writes, “And kept back part of the price.” In other words, just as Achan purloined for himself those possessions of the Jerichoites, so writing here he says that, “Ananias purloined for himself part of the price,” and thus played the part of a hypocrite, and brought judgment upon the church of Jesus Christ. You see, standing right at the beginning of Israel’s history is the signal illustration of Achan. Standing right at the beginning of the church’s history is the signal illustration of Ananias and Sapphira. These things are designed to teach us in the church of Jesus Christ some important lessons.

One also notices in this particular context, something that has troubled Christians, and particularly has interested non-Christians. Verse 32 of chapter 4, says, “And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul. Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things common.” Some people have had the nerve to suggest that the early church was really communistic and that this should be an illustration for us and for the kind of political organization that should be in control of our country. One doesn’t have to read very far in this passage, however, to see how far this is from the sense of the passage. Men like to read the Bible selectively. They like to take little phrases, and little clauses out, and even little verses out, and then remove them from their context, not paying attention to anything else, because

the words as selected might support some particular truth that they hold for other reasons. You’ll notice first of all, that this was a voluntary sharing not something that was required. It was totally voluntary. While we read in verse 37, the Barnabas had land and he sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. In the thirty-second verse we read nothing of compulsion; no sense of requirement. But rather, that they in proper Christian stewardship recognized that everything that they had belonged to the Lord, and they felt led of him to take what they possessed and to render it for the benefit of the body which was in need.

So what we have is voluntary sharing. As a matter of fact, Peter says to Ananias in the fourth verse of the fifth chapter, “While it remained was is not thine own?” In other words, the land belonged to Ananias, and he recognizes the fact that it belonged to Ananias.

The statement in the *Manifesto of the Communist League* by Marx and Engels in the discussion of bourgeois property is this; in this sense, the theory of the communist may be summed up in the single sentence, “Abolition of private property.” The Bible teaches the right to hold private property. Of course, the Bible is not a handbook of economics, nor a handbook of political systems, but in the course of its teaching, there is a clear recognition of the right of private property. Our Lord told a little parable in Matthew chapter 20, about some workers, and in it there is a clear indication of the right of private property. The Apostle Paul states in Ephesians chapter 4, “Let him that stole, steal no more.” In other words, it was a recognition of the fact, that some people own certain things, but Peter particularly here, recognizes it when he said to Ananias, “While it remained, was it not thine own?” So there is a clear recognition of the right of private property. But there is also here, a recognition of the right that believers have for sharing what they have if they wish voluntarily. So we should not think of this as support for communism. Just read the passage, and you will see there isn’t anything about a communistic political system set out in this particular chapter.

One sees, as he looks at this passage that the church was making great progress. In fact, the answer to the prayer that they had prayed is seen in the description that is given of the early life. They had prayed, “Lord, behold their threatenings, and grant unto us thy servants, that with all boldness

we may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus.” And then we read of the signs and wonders being accomplished, “With great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection, and great signs of the presence of God were manifest among them.” So, great power. That was the product of their faith in a resurrected Savior, and so there was a warm stream of brotherly love that was flowing in the early church in Jerusalem; love for Jesus Christ, and love also for the saints. In fact, that’s the master passion of Christian activity, and it flows out of gratitude for what Christ has done, and one sense that this is the supreme evidence of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus; the magnificent change that has taken place in these individuals who made up that church in Jerusalem.

You can sense that everything is done voluntarily. There is no compulsion. There are no rules. There are no regulations. There are no pledges. G. Campbell Morgan said many years ago, I think so beautifully, “The multiplication of pledges is always a sign of the decadence of the church’s life.” And one can look over the history of the Christian church, I think, and find that, that is very true. What we fail to do when we multiply pledges, we fail to realize that God has promised to supply the needs of his believers, and to supply the needs of the bodies of believers. And he has promised to supply those needs directly. Now, of course, he expects that we maintain relationship with him, that we pray. In fact, he expects us to pray that he supply our needs. There is no contradiction whatsoever between the unconditional promise to meet our needs, and the exhortation to pray, for it is by means of our prayers that he accomplishes his unconditional promises. And the reasons for that are simple; that it is by the prayers of the saints that we enter into relationship with him that is personal, and vital, and important for our spiritual life. When we start, of course, with pledges and other forms of human endeavor to raise money and to do the work of the Lord, we’ve turned aside from him. We’ve lost our sense of his ability to supply our needs.

One of the things that has always, to me, meant so much about Believers Chapel, is that the elders have remained firm and steadfast in their conviction that we should look to the Lord for the supply of the funds necessary to carry on this work. And whether it be for the tape ministry or the



radio ministry or other ministries or just the ordinary expenses of Believers Chapel, they have faithfully looked to the Lord to supply the needs, and to the praise of the Lord God, he has supplied our needs. And not a one of you has been ever asked for money by the elders. Of course, we expect, and you expect, that we shall all pray that God will meet our needs, and of course, the elders expect of us that we shall earnestly petition the Lord, that the needs of the Chapel may be met. But we do not have pledges. We have no faith promises.

I often regret that many of us support activities and works that do not believe as we do. That’s unfortunate. I think often we contribute to that which is not the best way to do the work of the Lord, by the fact that we help them, and we should give our money to those who follow principles that are similar to ours. I know I speak for myself, not for the elders, because I’m not one of the elders, as you know. And I’m speaking for myself, not for any of you. But in the giving that I do, I like to give to works that generally look to God for the supply of their funds. I love works like the China Inland Mission, which for so many years looked simply to the Lord God; never made any appeals for funds. I would love to have been able to give money to George Mueller and the Bristol Orphanages, which look simply to the Lord God.

I can remember the day when there were theological seminaries that looked purely to the Lord God. Now, almost all works send out very professional kinds of material in order to get us to give and they play upon our sympathies. They play upon our interest in the things of the Lord God, and when you get into the inner circles, you often discover they have a rather crass view of the Christian public. They know that the percentages are, that you will respond to a certain degree to every appeal that they make, and so they make them, and they will keep making them. It’s kind of like the “book of the month club,” which is no longer the “book of the month club.” At least, their requests or solicitations come to me, it seems, more than once a month. If they discover that you respond in a certain way, they will give you some other opportunities to respond, and so I find every time I go in my mailbox, I’m a member of two or three book clubs, I find one of those things there because people respond. And there’s one place, they send out monthly notices twice a month. If they

can get you to going and giving, they will do it, and then we fall for that in the Lord’s work, and we think that’s the way the work was done.

I think the apostles, if they were here, they would have been absolutely astonished at the way the Christian church solicits money from its believers. Here is a local church that had no needs because they had some more fundamental relationships to the Lord God and they voluntarily gave. What an opportunity to serve the Lord you have, and I have; to voluntarily give to the Lord’s work, and how God’s blessing abides upon those who maintain that relationship with him, and respond accordingly.

Now, Barnabas’ case is singled out as a special one. There were others who did what Barnabas did, but he is singled out for special mention. “Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, son of consolation.” Later, Luke describes Barnabas in some lovely words. “He was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith, and much people was added unto the Lord when he came to Antioch, and saw the grace of God, and exhorted them with purpose of heart. They would cleave unto the Lord.” So Barnabas, who was the brother of Mary, Mark’s mother. Mark was his nephew. Good and gifted man; evidently rich, but he flung his dusty possessions away, and took hold upon the infinite things by giving voluntarily to the work of the Lord. Of course, we’re not told how much property this was. One gathers from the special stress laid upon it that Barnabas probably was a man who had some significant possessions, and he made his investment. And the investments that we make for the Lord God, are investments that bear everlasting dividends.

Now, people think a lot about dividends today, and they talk about deposits in our banks, and securities, and various other ways by which they can invest their money to secure the highest return. I’ve nothing against that. It’s perfectly all right to do that. In fact, it’s the wise thing to do. We should simply remember, that all of our possessions are the Lord’s, and we hold them in trust. In trust. Well, we look for the highest return. I suggest to you, that the highest return is not found in municipal bonds; not found in deposits, and deposits that bear high interest; not found in securities; not found in investing in IBM when it was a small company, and now your investment is perhaps

two hundred times what it was when you invested it at the first time. Oh, you may be proud of that investment that you made, but that’s not the highest return that you can get. The highest return that you can get, is something that is invested in the Lord’s work; invested in true spiritual things. Here is where the real returns are and Barnabas has been drawing interest and dividends upon the investment of that property for about nineteen hundred years now. And I suggest to you that, that’s better than owning IBM when the company was formed, and you have the opportunity of investing in things that really will bring you a dividend throughout eternity.

Barnabas illustrates, of course, the supremacy of the spiritual over the material, and that Christian stewardship is the answer to socialism and communism as well. Isn’t it striking the way that we do not understand the realities of life, even as Christians. When we think of what Barnabas sold we say, “He sold some of his ‘real’ estate.” “Real” estate? No, no. Land’s not “real” estate. It may be “real” estate if you compare it with some other forms of property, but “real” estate is something given to God. That’s “real” estate. The other is not “real” estate. That’s our limited view.

Now, there were some people in the church who thought that Barnabas had given such a magnificent illustration of things, that they would like to do the same thing, for evidently, Barnabas was greatly admired and respected, not only for what he was, but for what he had done. And they saw that this was an unusual manifestation of dedication to the Lord, and they liked the way perhaps, that the Christians responded, praising what Barnabas had done, and they thought that they would like to have some of that praise too.

They would like to be another Barnabas, but oh, what a base copy of Barnabas, Ananias was. We read he had a wife named Sapphira. What names. Ananias means “graced by God,” or “to whom God has shown grace.” Sapphira. Oh, Sapphira had a name that every woman would like to have in reality. “Beautiful” was her name. Beautiful. So Mrs. “Beautiful” and Mr. “Graced by God.” Well, they had some property too. I don’t know the way the conversation went, but it’s obvious she knew what was happening, and I can imagine that Ananias said, “Sapphira, people have greatly appreciated what Barnabas has done. Why shouldn’t we do something like that too, because we have some

property?” And Sapphira said, “I think that’s a good idea.” And so they sold the property, and they brought the money into the house, and it was a large pile of silver, and evidently, in Ananias’ heart there came out the comment, “You know, this is a real large amount of money to give to the church. Perhaps we ought not to give it all.” But they had, of course, thought that they would give it all, and Sapphira did what a woman should never do. If a husband is determined to do something that is really worthwhile, she should support him. She should I have said, “No, I think we ought to add something to it,” and vice versa. If it were a woman, a man. So often we don’t help each other, even in our marriages, but at any rate, she knew what was happening, and so they held back a part of it. But they didn’t come and say to Peter, “Now Peter, we’ve sold this property, and we have kept back some, but we’d like to give the larger part of it,” or whatever part it was. That would have been the honest thing to do, and Peter would have done nothing other than give thanks for the gift. But it’s obvious that they kept back part of it, and they did not reveal it to others. They presented themselves as if they were doing what Barnabas was doing.

Now, the sin did not exist in the refusal to contribute. They contributed. The sin was not in the refusal to give all, but the sin was in the pretense that “part” was “all.” In other words, it was the sin of hypocrisy. They were living a certain way, but they were acting or they were professing to live in a certain way, but they were actually living in a different way. Hypocrisy. That’s something that drew our Lord’s unsparing severity. One only has to read what he says about the Pharisees to see that. The church is not a society of perfect men then or now. Someone has said, “The hypocrite is one who prays on Sunday, and then on his neighbors the rest of the week.” The church never has said, “Behold these Christians.” It always says, “Behold the man Jesus Christ.” We know that we are sinners. We know that we commit sin. We know that the church is filled with hypocrites. The world reminds us of that constantly. They don’t have to remind us of that. We know that we are filled with hypocrites.

But we know also that, that kind of sin draws the unsparing severity of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we also know this that one cold heart in the church of Jesus Christ can do untold damage

to the church of Jesus Christ, because you see, the tendency of sin is to spread. The man who is sinning is on a downhill run. He will accumulate to him others, who also have weaknesses, and all those who are critical, sinning hypocrites tend to gather together. The tendency of human nature is to sin; not to do good, to sin. And so the result is inevitably one of two things. We either confess our sin; get down upon our face and acknowledge that we have sinned, and ask God’s forgiveness or we seek to find excuses. And in finding excuses, we long to criticize others, and sometimes it’s the elders, or the deacons, or the principles of the church, or the ministry of the word of God, or whatever, because if we can do that, we can divert our attention from the real question, the real problem, which is down in our own hearts.

You see, this is designed to be illustrative for the church. That’s why Luke gives it to us. It’s a signal demonstration of how God feels about one cold heart in the local church. His wife, Ananias also being privy to it. What a sad picture of domestic life.

Now, Peter confronts Ananias and he said, “Ananias,” evidently Peter, speaking like a prophet, senses that something is wrong. The apostles had a way of doing that, you know. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they could pretty well look at you, and see that you are not really in fellowship with the Lord. When Paul met those disciples at Ephesus later on, he said because he saw something that was different about them, he said, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” Those apostles of John with whom he had come in contact said, “We haven’t even heard anything about the Holy Spirit coming.” Paul hadn’t noticed you see because the characteristic feature of a Christian is, there is the sense of the Spirit of God about him. “He that hath not the Spirit of Christ is none of his.” And the Spirit of God in the life of a believer is evident; not in false enthusiasm, not in patting one another upon the back, not necessarily in opening your mouth and giving your friend a lot of teeth. That’s not necessarily filling of the Spirit. That takes place in all of our lodges, and clubs, and among our friends. We’re talking about the reality of a spiritual relationship with the Lord God.

So Peter, he evidently sensed that something was not right, and he said to Ananias, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price

of the land? While it remained, didn’t it belong to you? After it was sold, didn’t you have complete power over it to do with it what you wished? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You’ve not lied to men, you’ve lied to God.” You see our professions are professions that are not simply made to men, they are professions that are made to God. That’s why it’s so serious. Lie to the Holy Ghost. He says in one verse, “lie to the Holy Ghost,” in the next verse he says, “lie to God.” Well, of course, that’s because the Holy Ghost or the Holy Spirit is God, and incidentally, you don’t lie to an influence. He’s more than an influence. You lie to a person. This is one of the great passages on the deity and personality of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

Notice, the two questions that he asked too, because they show the double source of sin, and mind you, these people were on the church rolls. Of course, they didn’t have a membership roll in the church at Jerusalem. In that sense at least, Believers Chapel is like the church in Jerusalem. We don’t have a roll either, but they were recognized as members, just as you are recognized as a member when you attend regularly this assembly. And so Peter, acting as the elders act with us. When they see things that are wrong, they confront us, and so he asks two questions. He says, “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Ghost?” Ah, one might say, “Ah yes, my trouble is, the devil made me do it.” But no, there is the other side as well. Oh, if Flip Wilson had only read this side of it. In the fourth verse he says, “Why has thou conceived this thing in thine heart?” So it’s true, that Satan exists through his own activity, and the activities of his well-organized kingdom; to tempt the saints. But the conception of the sin, Peter links with our own hearts. We proclaim the sovereign unconditional grace of God. I hope that as long as I’m living, Believers Chapel shall proclaim the sovereign unconditional grace of God. But at the same time, we proclaim just as fervently, human responsibility to God, and here is a beautiful illustration of it. He says, “Satan has filled your heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, but you have conceived this thing in your own heart.” And they did not have a leg upon which they could stand.

It was obviously something that they had done, and while Satan may have participated in it, still they were guilty. Now mind you, these are people who are professing believers. They’re not

unbelievers. They’re professing believers. Many commit Ananias’ sin. We make so many professions in the church. We look upon each other’s faces when, if we could really look down in the heart, what a different picture we might see. That’s evident. That’s evident from human experience, and there are so many illustrations in the thirty-five years that I’ve spent preaching, that we could spend a long time just in the confessions that individuals have made after they’ve made great professions. We sing in our meetings, “My Jesus I love thee; I know thou art mine; For thee all the follies of sin I resign; My gracious redeemer, my Savior art thou; If ever I loved thee, my Jesus ‘tis now.” And, of course, we’ve often sung that. May I make a confession? I’m speaking of myself. We’ve often sung that when we really didn’t mean it. We may have sung it as a petition, as an aspiration, and, of course, that’s perfectly all right. I hope you do. But when we sing it as if it’s a profession, and it’s not true, we too are lying to the Holy Ghost. Oh, it’s very good that the Lord does not carry out judgment now as he did then. Of course, he carries it out, but I should say in the same way.

Notice too that Peter, he’s not the kind of counselor that you might like to have. “Ananias, it’s evident to me that you can hardly help this. I see you have some psychological weaknesses. You are afflicted by avarice, and that’s one of your weaknesses, and really, to tell you the truth Ananias, as we know, alcoholism is not a sin. It’s a sickness. And we know, to be under the influence of drugs so that we’re a danger in society, is not really a sin. It’s a weakness. And as we know, that gluttony is not really a sin. It’s a sickness. So avarice is really not a sin, it’s a sickness, and what you need is to go to a few meetings of the Society or call upon some of the Christian counselors who will counsel you over your avarice, your sickness of avarice.” Oh, we are really foolish. We are really foolish. The word of God sets out these things as sins. They are ways by which we displease the Lord God, and there is a provision made in the word of God for those who are concerned over them, and would like to have deliverance. It is found in the way of forgiveness, confession, and restoration.

Peter was not soft. He was very strong, and God answered the strongness with a mighty act on his part. It was God, incidentally, who performed this miracle; not Peter. None more were more surprised probably, than Peter. When Ananias fell down dead in front of him, it made such an

impression upon him that later on, in his first letter that he wrote, he has a statement there that almost sounds as if it were an echo of this. He says, “For the time has come that judgment must begin at the house of God. Now if it first begin at us, what shall the envy of them that obey not the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ?”

Someone has said that, “If the Lord God did this in the churches today as he did then, this outward expression of judgment upon hypocrisy, we would have to have morgues in the basement of our churches, and we would have to have three offices in the churches; offices of elders, and deacons, and pall bearers, because there would be so much need of them.” You see, this was designed to teach us something; being a signal act of divine judgment to show us this is how God really feels about a cold heart in the church of Jesus Christ; how he really feels about a cold heart in our midst as well.

Well, the rest of chapter 5, verse 12 through verse 16, is a picture of how, when the difficulties are finally resolved by the Lord God, fear on the part of the saints, and at the same time, power in the proclamation of the ministry takes place. That’s why Paul will say, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” My dear Christians, it is a very serious thing to be a Christian; a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, I know, you’re anxious to go home and take a look at that most important event; Dallas versus St. Louis. But there are some things that are more important, and I’m going to take about three more minutes, and then I’ll let you go. You notice the blessing that comes from the life of purity. “The church pure,” Campbell Morgan said, “is the church powerful.” If we are to do the work of the Lord in power, and have an influence in our community, we must be a church characterized by purity.

As many of you know, I was led to the Lord by Donald Grey Barnhouse, a very unusual man. He was a man with great skills and abilities, and great forthrightness, and great courage. He had his weaknesses, like we all do, but I admired him very much for his strengths. He was pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian church in Philadelphia, and as you may know, Presbyterian custom is for the



presbyteries to meet in the various churches of the Presbytery, which are generally somewhat localized organizational church court groups. Well, finally, the Presbytery met one day in Dr. Barnhouse’s church in Philadelphia, and the meeting of the day were the business meetings, and then some preaching, devotional preaching, and finally, they concluded their meetings with the observance of the Lord’s Supper every month, for they met monthly.

Well, there had been some very unusual manifestations of unbelief; some public expressions of unbelief on the part of certain individuals in the Presbytery. It was a Presbytery that was drifting a little bit into unbelief, and so when the time came to observe the Lord’s Supper, Dr. Barnhouse refused to observe the Lord’s Supper with his fellow Presbyterian elders and pastor-teachers.

Well, he was brought before the Presbytery meeting at the next meeting, and he was excoriated by one of the members for what he had done, and the individual who was bringing the judgment against him said, “Dr. Barnhouse, you know that when we became Presbyterian ministers, we promised to observe the peace and unity of the church, and your act is a divisive act.” And Dr. Barnhouse was on his feet as soon as he had a chance, and he said, “I would like to reply. I would like to remind my brother, and I’d also like to remind the local Presbytery that the book of church Order reads that we are bound to observe the peace, the unity, and the purity of the church, and we cannot have purity or unity and peace if we do not have purity.” He made his point.

It’s true. We cannot have unity, and we cannot have peace in the church of Christ if we do not have purity. There’s a corollary. Mathematics sized numbers are irrelevant. Ecumenical movements are confessions of impotence. Reliance upon size in order to make up for what we may have lost in relationship to the Lord God. The church cannot escape disciplinary judgment, corporately or individually. Jesus said in the church, his message to the church at Ephesus, “After this time,” he said, “you’ve left your first love, and if you do not respond to me, I’m going to come and remove your candlestick.” That didn’t mean, of course, that the church would lose its salvation. They had been true believers. He praised them for certain things that they had done, but he said, “I’m going to remove your candlestick.” In other words, their testimony.

There is such a thing in the Christian life as sin unto death, and there is such a thing in the church life as sin unto physical death. The church at Corinth, because of the abuses at the Lord’s Table was weak, and sickly, and some had fallen asleep physically. The Psalmist says the same thing in Psalm 19. He says, “If you will keep your servant back from presumptuous sins, and let them not have dominion over me, then I shall be upright and I shall be innocent from great transgression. O Lord, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight.”

I’d like to close with just one comforting word. Paul gives it in that eleventh chapter of 1 Corinthians. He says it to us. He says, “If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.” May God help us as Christians, as members of Believers Chapel, as members of the body of Christ to judge ourselves, confess our sin, seek forgiveness. Then may God make us really true Ananiases; those to whom God has shown grace. Again, if you’re here and you’ve never believed in Christ, we invite you to trust in him who made it possible for us to experience communion with him, by the blood that was shed on Calvary’s cross. Come to him. Flee to him immediately for free forgiveness offered to all.

May we stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are thankful to Thee for these very important words to us. O God, deliver us from hypocrisy, from every form of unreality. Give us a right spirit before Thee. May we be servants who seek Thy face, earnestly desiring the glory of Jesus Christ, and no glory for ourselves. For those without Christ, Lord bring them to him, whom to know is life eternal.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.