

EMPOWERED FOR HOLINESS

Acts 5:1-16

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several weeks, we have been talking about what it means to be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost, the Spirit descended upon the Church and transformed a frightened group of disciples into bold witnesses. We saw the Spirit create a new community devoted to worship, fellowship, prayer, and generosity. Last week we saw Peter and John stand courageously before the authorities and refuse to be silent about what God had done.

The story of Acts is a story of growth, courage, healing, and mission. It is exciting. It is inspiring. It is the kind of story we enjoy reading. Then we arrive at Acts chapter 5.

If we're being honest, this is one of those passages that makes us uncomfortable. We would much rather read about miraculous healings than the story of Ananias and Sapphira. We would rather talk about growth than judgment. We would rather focus on encouragement than accountability.

Yet Luke includes this story for a reason.

The Holy Spirit does not simply empower the Church for mission. The Holy Spirit also prepares the Church for mission. Before God entrusts greater influence to the early Church, He addresses something that could undermine everything He is building.

The issue in Acts 5 is not money. The issue is integrity. The issue is honesty. The issue is whether God's people are willing to live truthfully before God and before one another.

The Holy Spirit empowers the Church not only to speak boldly, but to live truthfully. A Spirit-empowered church is not a church that manages appearances. It is a church learning to live honestly before God and one another.

THE SIN WAS NOT THE MONEY

One of the most common misunderstandings of this passage is the idea that Ananias and Sapphira were punished because they did not give enough. But Peter makes it very clear that wasn't the problem.

The property belonged to them. They could have kept it. They could have sold it and kept the proceeds. They could have donated ten percent, fifty percent, or one hundred percent. None of those choices would have been sinful.

The problem was that they wanted everyone to believe they had made a sacrifice they had not actually made.

- They wanted the reputation of generosity.
- They wanted the respect that came from being seen as committed.
- They wanted people to look at them the way people had looked at Barnabas at the end of chapter four.

The problem wasn't what they held back. The problem was what they pretended. And in doing so, they introduced something dangerous into a young and growing church.

- They introduced the idea that appearances matter more than reality.
- That image is more important than truth.
- That what people think about us matters more than who we actually are.

The Holy Spirit confronts that immediately.

A COMMUNITY BUILT ON TRUTH

The end of Acts 4 gives us a remarkable picture of the early church. Luke describes believers sharing resources, caring for one another, and making sure no one among them was in need. This was never merely a financial arrangement. It was a relational reality.

The church was becoming a true *Gemeinde*—a gathered people, a shared community, not merely an audience.

That is why the contrast between Acts 4 and Acts 5 matters. Acts 4 ends with Barnabas giving generously and transparently. Acts 5 begins with Ananias and Sapphira imitating the appearance of that generosity without the truth of it. Peter identifies the issue plainly: they have not merely lied to people; they have lied to the Holy Spirit. The result is holy fear in the church, and then verses 12 through 16 show the mission continuing with power. Judgment does not stop the mission. Purified integrity deepens the witness.

Not simply a gathering of people who attended the same worship service. Not simply a collection of individuals who happened to share beliefs. They were becoming a genuine community.

A family. A people whose lives were increasingly intertwined with one another. Communities like that can only survive when trust exists. **Once trust disappears, everything else begins to erode.**

That is why hypocrisy is so destructive. Hypocrisy damages trust. And when trust is damaged, community becomes difficult. The Spirit was not protecting a financial system in Acts 5. The Spirit was protecting the integrity of the community He was creating.

GOD WORKS THROUGH HONEST PEOPLE

One of the things that becomes clear as you read Scripture is that God has never required perfection before He begins working in someone's life. If He did, none of us would qualify.

- Abraham lied.
- Moses doubted and even murdered someone.
- David failed in spectacular ways.
- Peter denied Jesus.
- Paul persecuted the church.

Yet God used every one of them. The common denominator was not perfection. The common denominator was honesty. **Eventually each of them reached a place where they stopped pretending.**

- They faced the truth about themselves.

- They faced the truth about their circumstances.
- Most importantly, they faced the truth before God.
- God can work with weakness.
- God can work with uncertainty.
- God can work with limitations.
- God can work with failure.

What God continually confronts throughout Scripture is pretense. Not because God needs information. God already knows the truth. Honesty is not for God's benefit. It is for ours.

Honesty does not make us worthy of grace; honesty simply opens our hands to receive the grace God is already offering.

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Acts 5 shows the danger of hiding from truth; John 4 shows the mercy of being met by Jesus in the truth.

One of my favorite examples of this is the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4. Jesus meets her at the well and begins talking about living water. He speaks about worship. He speaks about eternal things.

But before any of that can truly take root, there must be an honest conversation. Jesus asks her about her husband. The conversation becomes uncomfortable. The truth begins to surface.

- Not because Jesus wants to embarrass her.
- Not because Jesus wants to shame her.
- Jesus is leading her toward freedom.
- The living water begins to flow when the pretending stops.

The conversation about worship in spirit and truth comes after truth has been embraced. Transformation begins where pretending ends. The same principle appears throughout Scripture.

- Before healing comes honesty.
- Before restoration comes honesty.
- Before growth comes honesty.

Not because honesty saves us. But because honesty allows us to finally stop running from the places where God wants to work.

HOLINESS IS NOT PERFECTION

Unfortunately, many Christians hear the word holiness and immediately think perfection. They imagine someone who never struggles, never doubts, never fails, and never gets anything wrong. That isn't holiness. That's performance. Biblical holiness is something deeper.

- Holiness is allowing every part of our lives to come under the lordship of Christ.
- Holiness is becoming the same person in private that we are in public.
- Holiness is becoming the same person on Monday that we are on Sunday.
- Holiness is living with integrity.

Holiness is not the result of human willpower polishing our image. Holiness is the Spirit bringing every hidden, fractured, and divided part of us under the healing lordship of Jesus. The Spirit does not make us holy by teaching us to perform better. The Spirit makes us holy by making us whole.

The word integrity comes from the idea of wholeness. Things fit together. There is no gap between what we claim and what we practice.

- No gap between our words and our actions.
- No gap between our commitments and our follow-through.

Ananias and Sapphira were not condemned because they were imperfect. They were condemned because they were trying to project a reality that did not exist. The Holy Spirit was creating a community where people could live truthfully before God. Their actions moved in the opposite direction.

LET YOUR YES BE YES

This concern for integrity runs throughout the teachings of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Let your yes be yes and your no be no." That sounds simple enough, but it is surprisingly challenging.

Jesus is calling His followers to be people whose words can be trusted.

- People who mean what they say.
- People who don't need elaborate promises to convince others of their sincerity.
- People whose lives and words are aligned.

There is another verse that comes to mind. Ecclesiastes tells us, "It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it." That is not a statement against commitment. It is a statement in favor of honesty.

- God would rather have an honest answer than an impressive answer.
- An honest no is more faithful than a dishonest yes.
- An honest acknowledgment of our limitations is more useful than pretending we can do something we cannot.
- An honest commitment that is actually fulfilled brings glory to God.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE CHURCH

As I reflected on this passage this week, I found myself thinking about the journey we have been on together over the last year. One of the things I am most grateful for is that we have become a more honest congregation. That honesty has not always been easy. In many ways it has been one of the hardest things we have done.

When we began this journey, many of us believed our biggest challenges were outside these walls.

- We talked about attendance.
- We talked about demographics.
- We talked about the neighborhood.
- We talked about culture.

- We talked about programs.
- We talked about advertising.

None of those conversations were wrong. Those things matter. But eventually we discovered that our deepest challenges were not outside these walls. They were inside them. We discovered that our greatest need was not numerical growth.

- Our greatest need was spiritual health.
- Relational health.
- Congregational health.

We discovered that before we could become anything, some things needed to change. That realization was uncomfortable. But it was also necessary. Because health begins with truth.

HARD CONVERSATIONS REQUIRE HONEST PEOPLE

One of the realities of church life is that every congregation eventually faces difficult conversations.

- Questions about mission.
- Questions about priorities.
- Questions about resources.
- Questions about leadership.
- Questions about the future.

Those conversations are not signs of failure. They are part of being the church. The question is not whether those conversations will come. The question is how we will approach them when they do.

- Will we approach them honestly?
- Will we tell the truth about where we are?
- Will we tell the truth about our strengths?
- Will we tell the truth about our limitations?
- Will we tell the truth about what God may be calling us to do?

And perhaps most importantly, will we tell the truth about what we ourselves are willing to commit moving forward?

- Not what sounds good.
- Not what we wish somebody else would do.
- Not what we hope might happen.
- But what we are personally willing to place before God.

Because healthy churches are not built on assumptions. Healthy churches are built on honest discipleship. The Kingdom of God is not advanced by promises that are never kept. **It is advanced by faithful people whose yes is yes and whose no is no.**

THE GOOD NEWS OF ACTS 5

We should not pretend this story is easy. It is sobering. It reminds us that God takes the integrity of His people seriously. But the severity of the story is not meant to drive sincere people away from God. It is meant to expose the danger of pretending we can build God's church on anything other than truth.

The good news of this story is not that God punishes imperfect people. If that were the lesson, none of us would stand a chance. The good news is that God desires truth more than appearances.

- God does not ask us to impress Him.
- God does not ask us to perform for Him.
- God does not ask us to pretend everything is fine.
- God asks us to come honestly.

That is true for individuals. It is true for families. It is true for churches. The people God uses most powerfully are often not the strongest people. They are the most honest people.

- The people willing to say, "This is who I am."
- "This is where I struggle."
- "This is what I can offer."
- "This is where I need God's help."

Those are the people through whom the Holy Spirit often does His greatest work.

CONCLUSION

Luke tells us that after this event the ministry of the church continued to expand.

People were healed. Lives were transformed. The Gospel spread. The mission moved forward. The Spirit was preparing the church for what came next.

Not merely by giving power. But by cultivating integrity. Because healthy things grow. The Holy Spirit was not interested in creating a church that looked healthy. The Holy Spirit was creating a church that was healthy.

- A church built on truth.
- A church built on trust.
- A church built on authentic faith.

The same invitation remains for us today.

Not to be perfect. Not to have all the answers. Not to pretend. But to come honestly before God. To let our yes be yes and our no be no. To trust that God can do far more with honest disciples than He can ever do with polished appearances.

And as we do, we may discover what the early church discovered. That when God's people live truthfully before Him, the Holy Spirit is free to do remarkable things among them.

The Holy Spirit empowers the Church not only to speak boldly, but to live truthfully. And where truthfulness takes root, trust can grow, holiness can deepen, and witness can become credible again.

INVITATION

So let me leave you with two questions this morning. The first is personal. **Where in your life is God inviting you into greater honesty?**

- Perhaps there is a hurt you have been carrying but refusing to acknowledge.
- Perhaps there is a fear you keep trying to hide.
- Perhaps there is a relationship that needs healing.
- Perhaps there is a struggle you have convinced yourself nobody can know about.
- Perhaps there is a calling from God that you have been avoiding because it feels uncomfortable.

The invitation of the Holy Spirit is not to pretend those things are not there. The invitation is to bring them into the light.

To stop performing. To stop managing appearances. To stop trying to convince yourself and everyone else that everything is fine. God already knows the truth. **The question is whether we are willing to be honest enough to let Him work there.**

But there is also a second question. It is not only personal. It is congregational. **What does honesty before God look like for us as a church?**

Over the coming months there will be conversations about mission, priorities, opportunities, and the future. Some of those conversations may be exciting. Some may be challenging. All of them will require honesty. Not fear. Not anxiety. Not pretending. Honesty.

- Can we be honest about where we are?
- Can we be honest about what God has already done among us?
- Can we be honest about our strengths and our limitations?
- Can we be honest about what matters most?
- Can we be honest about what we are truly willing to commit ourselves to moving forward?

Because the future God prepares for a church is not built on wishful thinking. It is built on faithful people whose yes is yes and whose no is no.

People who are willing to place their lives, their gifts, their prayers, their resources, and their future into God's hands and then honestly ask, "Lord, what would You have us do?" That is the invitation before us today.

Not perfection. Not performance. Not appearances. Simply honesty before God.

And if we are willing to do that, I believe the same Holy Spirit who empowered the early Church will continue to guide, strengthen, and lead us as well.

Amen.