

You'll remember two weeks ago that Jeff Kramer preached on the story of Ananias and Saphira... but if you don't remember, here's the summary. Ananias and Saphira had sold a piece of land and presented only a portion of the proceeds to the Apostles. And, although they were not even required to give any of it to the church, and were even at liberty to keep a portion back, they pretended as if they were giving all of it to the church... presumably to make themselves appear very pious... very dedicated to God, if you will, when they were not. And by the Holy Spirit, their sin was uncovered, and they were both killed by God, dropping dead on the spot, in front of the church.

And it is after this is where I am picking up today. So we will be continuing in the book of Acts, chapter 5, verses 11-16.

Acts 5:11-16

Great fear gripped the entire church and everyone else who heard what had happened. The apostles were performing many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers were meeting regularly at the Temple in the area known as Solomon's Colonnade. But no one else dared to join them, even though all the people had high regard for them. Yet more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord—crowds of both men and women. As a result of the apostles' work, sick people were brought out into the streets on beds and mats so that Peter's shadow might fall across some of them as he went by. Crowds came from the villages around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those possessed by evil spirits, and they were all healed.

Now, this passage contains six verses, and I will cover the content of them all, but I would like to focus on the part that had me very perplexed as I prepared for this sermon. The portion of the account I would like to focus on says, "And all the believers were meeting regularly at the Temple in the area known as Solomon's Colonnade. But no one else dared join them, even though all the people had high regard for them. Yet more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord – crowds of both men and women."

[Slide of the Temple Mount]

What does all of this mean, with God killing Ananias and Saphira, striking fear into those both in the church and outside the church? Why did God choose to work signs and wonders at the hands of the Apostles in order to carry this

astonishing fear forward? And in a way that the power is so palpable that people didn't dare enter their congregation unless they were called to be believers.

Why would God want to do anything that would cause people all at once, to stay away from the Church, but at the same time, draw them in? Herein lies a mystery to be unraveled.

I am so very interested because these types of scriptures seem to be very good as keeping non-believers from coming to God, and it is these most difficult kinds of questions that challenge what we know about the Lord Jesus Christ and His Church. But I would also say that, although these scriptures are difficult to digest, it is these portions of scripture that can be the most reassuring to a born-again believer.

The idea that God, who is all-knowing would purposefully do something to keep people from coming in the doors... knowing in advance it would keep them out of the church seems so opposite to how we think God should be doing outreach. Why does God choose such things that both pull people in, and push them away all at the same time? Some of the most difficult discussions I have had with both believers and non-believers revolve around God's sovereign and unilateral actions. What do we say to people that ask the questions "Why does God kill people in his name?" "Why did God allow Judas, an Apostle chosen by Christ, to fall into Satan's hand?"

You see, we tell people that God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives (which is true), but by who's standard of "wonderful" do we measure? Could we really have shared that message with Judas? Judas, God has a wonderful plan for your life... he is going to hand you over to Satan, and as a result, you will betray Jesus Christ and commit suicide. Or what about Stephen. Hey Stephen, God has a wonderful plan for your life, but it involves your skull being split open by the religious of the world... and it will kill you. But just because these things happened doesn't mean that God's plan isn't wonderful... it just means it is wonderful by a different standard...

One of the most prominent reasons I hear people say that they are nervous about sharing their faith is that they will be asked a question that they don't know an answer to. And maybe your concern comes from something deeper

that you don't know about God. Because, you know what, you are right... I have witnessed to people that know enough about the Bible to respond with stories of how God "slaughtered" people in the Old Testament, for His own purposes, it effectively stops our verbal witness because evangelical Christianity, as a whole, is too short sighted in it's approach to teaching. And, in fact, I believe that a wide portion of so-called Christians actually see these things that God did in both the Old and New Testaments as obstacles to evangelism and outreach. But how can we say that God's sovereignty could be an obstacle to evangelism and outreach? When, in fact, it is God's sovereignty that even allows us to evangelize at all. If God does it, then it must be a necessity for his work.

It is easy, as Christians today, to spend time talking about Abba Father. The God of all comfort. Our God of all peace. Our God of mercy. The God of healing because that is the god that the world wants. The world is looking for a god that conforms to their images and understanding of non-violence. A god that is like a good book next to a warm cozy fire. A god they can hold in their hands. A god that doesn't act as if they've broken the whole Law when all they've ever done is to tell "a little white lie". A god that doesn't require repentance, but merely understands our penchant to sin and is willing to let us into heaven just because we can't help it... and, in fact, may even blame God a little because He created them that way. They are looking for a god that doesn't need a savior to overlook our sin. A god that will accept responsibility for the faults in the world He created. A god that should just feel sorry for us and leave it at that. They are looking for a god that really understands who is good and who is not (and if "god" doesn't see them as good, then "god" must not really have any idea what their heart is like). They want a god of justice... but his judgment needs to be on a sliding scale so that only the Hitlers of the world are punished, and everyone else "makes it in"... always assuming that they are in the "make it in crowd".

And because the world can't understand the purposes God has for his people and the way he operates, they are ready to reject him outright. So when we share Christ to non-believers, we are very quick to give them only the images of God *they* are willing to accept rather than showing God, as he is... we may skip over the story of Ananias and Sapphira... we may skip over the parts of today's passage that talk about people outside of the church being fearful of God and his church (to the point that people will not join) and we go straight to the

stories of Peter walking through the streets, healing everyone in the power of Christ. And if some of us were to ever admit it, we would say that we were ashamed that we claimed to know of this God, but only focused our studies on the parts that were "attractive" because, in all reality, we don't really want to be forced to believe that God sees hate as equal to murder, and is willing to kill people over one lie. And it is even harder to understand that God had people killed by the thousands, in the Old Testament, for His own purposes. And, because it is difficult to comprehend, and difficult for non-believers to accept, and appears to be violent and malevolent, it is avoided all together.

For instance, I've heard people explain away the Old Testament saying that things have changed, and God is not a God of wrath and anger anymore. That God himself has changed. We are in an age of grace, and the laws and orders of God that brought about so much bloodshed no longer apply. We serve a kinder, gentler Jesus, not the wrathful God of the Old Testament.

But none of this is true. The Law still does apply, just not to believers. The Law still applies to those that will be judged because it is the standard by which they will be Judged.

But, even more-so, it is Jesus himself that said that it was He that Moses and the Prophets had written about in the Old Testament.

Christianity, though, sometimes tries to justify hiding these things about God because they are not attractive to the world, and hope that somehow, if we can get non-believers to join with the church, somehow we will win them over to Christ. And finally, it can tip to the point where we are spending more time trying to attract the non-believer than we are teaching the fullness of God's plan that is both wonderful and terrible to all who may come.

So, here we face these portions of scripture where it says that, although the grace of God was abounding in healing and miracles, the church was so influenced and controlled by the power of God through his Holy Spirit that people DIDN'T dare to join. But, still held them in high esteem.

So I want you to consider these thoughts. As a Two Rivers community, we have committed to a couple of statements in the past:

1. Which is located on the top of your bulletin – To pursue and share the life-changing reality of Jesus Christ
2. Which is located at the bottom of your bulletin – Where real people with real problems experience real love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus

But what if, as a church, we decided to write another statement that depicts what is happening in this passage of scripture? What if we were to add to our statements something to the effect of, "A community, full of God's grace shedding grace abroad... where wickedness and deceit dare not tread... where the gossip is unheard... where the called of God are quick to run in, and those who are not are quick to run out..."

People are usually much more willing to deal with a god that is only "positive", a god that is only "good". But you say, "Wait a minute, Brian, God is 'positive' and God is 'good'." Yes, I agree, but by who's standards will we present this message? By who's standards will we measure God's goodness? We would be fools to try and measure God's goodness, because Jesus said there is none good except God. God *is* the standard for goodness. So, we must say that when God does things that repulse people to the core, then those actions must be good.

Allow me to test you for a bit, if you will. A couple of weeks ago, Jeff mentioned the sin of a man from the Old Testament named Achan. How, like Ananias and Saphira, he had kept back a little bit of treasure for himself when God had commanded otherwise, and how, like Ananias and Saphira, God had Achan executed, but do you remember how Achan's sin had come about?

It was at the fall of Jericho. In this same instance, God had commanded the Israelites after crossing the Jordan river into the land promised them, that they were to take the city of Jericho. Here, according to Joshua 6, is what happened:

On the seventh day the Israelites got up at dawn and marched around the town as they had done before. But this time they went around the town seven times. The seventh time around, as the priests sounded the long blast on their horns, Joshua commanded the people, "Shout! For the Lord has given you the town! Jericho and everything in it must be completely destroyed as an offering to the Lord. Only Rahab the prostitute and the others in her house will be spared, for

she protected our spies.

“Do not take any of the things set apart for destruction, or you yourselves will be completely destroyed, and you will bring trouble on the camp of Israel. Everything made from silver, gold, bronze, or iron is sacred to the Lord and must be brought into his treasury.”

When the people heard the sound of the rams’ horns, they shouted as loud as they could. Suddenly, the walls of Jericho collapsed, and the Israelites charged straight into the town and captured it. They completely destroyed everything in it with their swords—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, goats, and donkeys.

So, what happened with Achen? He kept back a portion of the spoil for himself and hid it in his tent after he was told that the spoil belonged to God. He tried to take from God what belonged to God... just like Ananias and Saphira.

But that isn't the point I want to make. I am talking about God's sovereign actions that strike fear into people, and repulse them to the core. Listen to what is said again, at the end. “They completely destroyed everything in it with their swords—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, goats, and donkeys.”

Do you hear that? God said that only one household would be spared in an entire city. Everyone and everything else, young and old, was to be unilaterally killed. And that is what happened. Why? Why didn't God do more to save the city of Jericho? And I'll repeat, Jesus said that the Old Testament was a testimony about him. How could this same gentle Jesus we know claim that He is the one being written about. How can Jesus both say he was being written about at the slaughter in Jericho, and be the same savior that has offered redemption to all who would believe? The same Jesus who saved a single household from Jericho... the same Jesus who says the way to God is narrow, and few will enter. How can this be?

If you look for an explanation as to why God would do such a thing, and are looking for a way that will bring understanding to a non-believer without their being offended, then you will never arrive at an answer.

But I tell you, if you are taught of God and realize the truth of Joshua's story in the first place, you would not feel compelled to explain it in a way that isn't horrifying to the unsaved.

Generally speaking, God's sovereignty in things like this will likely only have one of two effects. Either a non-believer will be repulsed by God's sovereignty as most in Jericho were, or a grain of faith in God will be given to them, and they will be saved from the final coming destruction, just like Rahab the prostitute.

Unfortunately, most of what you will find in Christian book stores, and most of what is being taught today won't tell you how Christ is revealed in the killing of tens of hundreds at Jericho. To a good portion of people, Jericho is merely a historical event where an angry God killed a bunch of people without really giving them a chance. It is a historical event they would rather forget and not have to explain because it doesn't fit with the picture of the slain lamb of God.

Today's mainstream Christian religion, tends to shy away from this thing that both drives people away, and draws others in... And because of this, you can see evidence mounting that there is a great falling away from the faith. It is because of this lop-sided teaching about the loving God and gentle Jesus that many have wandered away. And it is now to the point that people that some of the most learned Bible scholars... some with Doctorate degrees... who have been Christians for decades, have abandoned the sovereign God for the loving god... because by doing so, no one is excluded.

What else has befallen the Christian religion in America because of this? Because of this non-exclusionary Jesus people serve, people in high ranking leadership in some denominations are claiming that they now have a greater understanding of Jesus' message, and realize that they can be both Muslim and Christian at the same time...

You see, just as Satan attempted to deceive Jesus in the desert by using scripture, one of the greatest lies being foisted on the church is preparing the way for the revealing of Antichrist. False teachings are finding their way into the churches... in mainstream Evangelical Christianity, and they are mimicking the call to forget God's sovereignty for a kinder gentler god. They are being deceived into believing that the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faiths all have

their roots from the same source, that they all serve the same God. Maybe the Muslims and the Jews don't believe in Jesus, but, Jesus aside, they are all still trying to serve the same God.

Tell me, can you say with absolute assurance that Muslims and Jews that don't believe in Jesus, but are still trying to serve God are not saved? They are sincere followers of God aren't they? They talk about God's love and his sovereignty. They believe in god and they know there is a coming messiah, or at least a great leader that will redeem their people. How do we know they aren't serving the one true living God? They pray, sometimes five times a day. And, to top it all off they acknowledge Noah and Abraham as their ancestors.

I know that many of you are confused by this lie because the bolder ones among you have come to me and asked. And, don't be ashamed if you have, because you are not alone. Many of you have these questions in your mind. How can Jews, Muslims, and Christians all acknowledge a common history, having the same ancestry far back in history, descending from men like Abraham and Noah... the very same men of God we truly born again believers acknowledge? If they have the same roots, then they must all be trying to serve the same God, right? And if they are serving the same god and Jesus doesn't condemn anyone with a sincere faith in god, then it must be OK, right, because somehow God will save them, too? That's the way the argument goes.

I can assure you, though, that this is a lie. If you know Christ's gospel, then you know that you are being saved from the wrath of God who is soon returning to take what is His and take vengeance on the wicked. And if you know that only the righteous can be saved, and that righteousness can only be found in Christ, then you know that, unless someone has placed their faith in Christ, then they remain among the wicked.

Jesus said himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me."

Do you see how scary this can be? Do you see how subtly such a lie could cause your faith in Christ and his gospel to waver? Do you see how quickly a new age belief of "all paths lead to God" can quickly be generated using Biblical language? And this isn't the first time the church has had to deal with such things. Paul warned Timothy to steer people away from discussing ancestry as

proof of their service to God because all it does is cause unnecessary speculation. And, this speculation will lay a foundation that can lead people away from the gospel that was given them, and into complete apostasy.

But what does Jesus have to say about people that will point to Noah and Abraham to prove they serve the living God? This is from John 8:

"Abraham is our father," they answered.

"If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father."

"We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself."

Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."

As we move forward into 2011, I want to stay on this idea a little longer, and make sure that I kill one of the sacred cows running headlong through so-called evangelicalism. I can't define it in any way other than nationalism, or patriotism. It is the way Christians desire to associate our country's leadership as either being ordained of God or of something else. We desire to do this because we, as Christians want to know which leaders we can fully root for and support because they have proven their Christianity... you know, the ones that fight wars against the evil Muslims... Or the ones we can merely fulfill our

obligation to pray for because they seem to be Muslim.

When you see a national leader on television claiming himself to be Christian, but insisting that the faiths all serve the same God, beware... he is not testifying by the Holy Spirit, and is calling God a liar. Do you know who I am talking about?

[Video]

You see, Christianity isn't Republican or Democrat. Those that have supported this or that leader as a Christian or a non-Christian are totally missing the point. Christians say that they are using Christ as the template to see if a leader is Christian, but, if we examine ourselves closely enough, we can see that we are trying to justify our love or hatred for one leader or another. If we like a leader that claims to be Christian then we try to convince ourselves that he is because we know that if we wage war, God will judge us if we aren't doing it for the right reasons.

In the Old Testament, God prospered wicked nations so that they could be used according to His purposes. And when he was done with them, He destroyed them.

Am I against the supposed war on terrorism? What I can tell you is that I am against the deceitful purposes of ungodly men. But I am for the purposes of Christ.

Christ's gospel is going out more easily in these war-torn countries as a result of all of this. Nation builders aren't doing it for these purposes, never-the-less, God is using them to accomplish his purposes. And as a result of the Gospel in these nations, persecution is on the rise... while, all at the same time, the way is being paved for Antichrist by these concepts of all faiths serving the almighty.

Our hearts should not be consumed by the idea of whether or not we or anyone else is an American patriot. We should be fearful in watching God accomplish his purposes in both the wicked and the righteous, and hide in Christ. Why do you pledge allegiance to a flag and a worldly ideology that can be perverted and twisted to fit the latest round of kingdom building? Pledge your allegiance to Christ, and watch God use a nation that has turned from him to accomplish his

purposes.

Hide in Christ! This is the reason the world will not be able to tolerate Christianity... because we claim exclusive access to the Father that no one else has. But, like today's passage, those that know us best will hold us in high esteem because we are good to them, in the name of Christ. We will walk through the streets and heal as we are able. We will enter their homes with love. We will walk with the sinner and the unrighteous so that they may know that the Lord has been near. But we must not compromise the truth.

Today's passage cries out against the Christian church being a place that is safe for the views of the world. The Christian church is not a safe place for those that refuse to repent and give their whole heart to Christ.

Uncompromising commitment to holiness in the true gospel of Jesus Christ characterized these believers – not the fearful commitment of self-righteous legalism, but one springing out of love for the Lord. They were a fearful group that kept those who loved their sin away, and those who wanted forgiveness for sin near. This passage stands in sharp contrast to the idea that masses of uncommitted and unsaved people should be able to sit comfortably in church today.

1 John 5 says this:

Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead

to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them. We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

So what is the point I am making as we look forward into 2011? That we are able to see that God draws a sharp line at the gospel of Jesus Christ, and learn what the Gospel really means. It is the only thing that will keep us from being led astray. Anything and everything will be used by the enemy to draw you away... and it will be your own desire that he will use to do so. The world may be deceived into thinking that God will understand, and will seek a peace between the faiths... that God will understand if we allow sin to run rampant in the church... for the sake of drawing in unbelievers... but He will not.

Here's what 1 Thessalonians 5 says:

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

I would like to close with this.

If you've ever read the book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* it is a book within in a series of books written by C.S. Lewis, called The Chronicles of Narnia. The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe tells part of the story of the redemption of the kingdom of Narnia by it's rightful king, who is named Aslan in the story... from his enemy, the White Witch. Aslan is not only the king of Narnia, but he is also the creator of Narnia.

There is a part of the story where the main characters in the book (the Pevensie children) are talking to Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, trying to figure out a way to save their friend Mr. Tumnus who has been captured by the White Witch.

"Couldn't we have some strategem?" said Peter. "I mean couldn't we dress up as something, or pretend to be – oh, peddlers or anything – or watch till she was gone out – or – oh, hang it all, there must be *some* way. This Faun saved my sister at his own risk, Mr. Beaver. We can't just leave him to be – to be – to have that done to him."

"It's no good, Son of Adam," said Mr. Beaver, "no good *your* trying, of all people. But now that Aslan is on the move – "

"Oh, yes! Tell us about Aslan!" said several voices at once; for once again that strange feeling – like the first signs of spring, like good news, had come over them.

"Who is Aslan?" asked Susan.

"Aslan?" said Mr. Beaver. "Why, don't you know? He's the King. He's the Lord of the whole wood, but not often here, you understand. Never in my time or my father's time. But the word has reached us that he has come back. He is in Narnia at this moment. He'll settle the White Queen all right. It is he, not you, that will save Mr. Tumnus."

"She won't turn him into stone too?" said Edmund.

"Lord love you, Son of Adam, what a simple thing to say!" answered Mr. Beaver with a great laugh. "Turn *him* into stone? If she can stand on her two feet and look him in the face it'll be the most she can do and more than I expect of her. No, no. He'll put all to rights as it says in an old rhyme in these parts:

*Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.*

"You'll understand when you see him."

"But shall we see him?" asked Susan.

"Why, Daughter of Eve, that's what I brought you here for. I'm to lead you to where you shall meet him," said Mr. Beaver.

"Is – is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man? Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion – *the* Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and make no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about being safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."