

LYING TO THE HOLY SPIRIT.

– FEB. 7. – ACTS 4:32-5:11. –

"Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." – 1 Sam. 16:7.

THE number of believers in Jerusalem was now considerable. Their new faith broke down the walls of prejudice and tended to bring rich and poor to the plane of common brotherhood in Christ. This is always the tendency with those who receive the gospel of the Lord Jesus into good and honest hearts: they are "pitiful," "kind one to another" and "love as brethren." Experience teaches us, however, that so long as there are hypocrites, who follow merely for the loaves and fishes, and so long as we are without the inspired [R2101 : page 40] apostles, possessed of superhuman wisdom in discerning spirits and rebuking them, and so long as [R2102 : page 40] even the true-hearted have such various developments of character and judgment, it is unreasonable to expect that believers could dwell together harmoniously and to mutual benefit. The incapable ones always feel themselves the most capable, and are the least willing to be guided by the judgment of others. The most capable are the most humble, the least disposed to grasp authority and to "exercise Lordship" such as would be necessary for the proper control of the incompetent. Hence, Christian people of experience and judgment have reached the conclusion that general communism of goods such as was practiced for a time in the early Church as narrated in this lesson could not be profitably practiced by Christian people in any age or country, for the same reasons that it was unsuccessful in the early Church. When that which is perfect shall have come, it will be possible for those possessed not only of perfect hearts (wills) but also possessed of perfect brains and bodies, to use communistic principles properly and to their general advantage. But all people of judgment and experience know that this time has not yet come. The failure of this early Church community and the failure of scores of communities since then is ample proof of this.*

*See article, "They Had All Things in Common," in our issue of Sept. 1, '95.

(33) Evidently the chief subject of discourse with the apostles was the resurrection of our Lord Jesus from the dead and the proof which this afforded of several things: (1) That he was approved of God, that he was what he claimed to be, the Messiah, and not an impostor; (2) that his death was the great sin-offering, the ransom price for the whole world; (3) that in his name was forgiveness of sins and all power for reconciliation with the Father; (4) that a New Dispensation of grace, mercy, forgiveness of sins had displaced the Law Dispensation of Justice, and that, now, not only could there be acceptance with God through Christ, but a high calling to jointheirship with the Messiah in his Kingdom soon to be established, in which all the families of the earth shall be blessed. The apostles hung the entire weight of their testimony upon this one matter – the resurrection of our Lord. And the Apostle Paul's preaching, later, is no less emphatic upon this than the Apostle Peter's at the time of this lesson, for he declares, – If Christ be not risen your faith is vain, our preaching is vain, ye are yet in your sins, and we (apostles) are false witnesses, because we have testified that God raised up Christ from the dead, whom he raised not up, if so be that the resurrection of the dead is an impossibility. – 1 Cor. 15:15-18.

(34) The true spirit of Christ is indicated by the fact that the needy were not suffered to lack while the others had plenty. The Apostle James calls attention to this matter, saying, He who seeth his brother have need and shutteth up his bowels of compassion against him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? And again, we are told by the divine Word, that it is not sufficient that we should express sympathy and good wishes, saying, Depart and be fed and clothed, but give not those things which are necessary to these ends. Undoubtedly, it is the design of the divine plan that the inequalities of the present time – poverty in the midst of wealth – shall be to some extent an opportunity to those who have this world's goods, and a test to them of their faithfulness as stewards. And the Scriptures pertinently inquire, If ye love not your

brother whom ye have seen, how can ye love God whom ye have not seen? Hence, the Lord's work and the Lord's poor are permitted by him to be in *need* sometimes, in order to furnish opportunities to test those who have means entrusted to them. He who is unfaithful as a steward of earthly wealth need scarcely expect to be entrusted with spiritual riches.

It appears from the account that the apostles did not institute the community of goods in the early Church, rather it was the spontaneous sentiment of the believers; and the apostles under the divine guidance did not hinder it, evidently to the intent that an object lesson might be furnished and the importance of consecration illustrated in the story of Ananias and Sapphira. The writer first mentioned instances of those who honestly consecrated all of their property to the general good. Notable amongst these was Barnabas who afterwards was the associate of the Apostle Paul in doing a great work. The principal figures in the lesson, however, are Ananias and Sapphira. None had been *commanded* of the Lord to give all their property to the general treasury; nor had there been any request to do so, although it is only a reasonable service for all who realize that they were "bought with a price." But God wants only a free-will consecration. Ananias and his wife saw others do this and were probably anxious for the honor and praise bestowed upon such liberal givers, and concluded that they would make a reputation for themselves among the believers; and at the same time hold back a sufficiency for future requirements. There was nothing necessarily wrong in such a provision, reserving for their own personal use a portion of the proceeds of the sale of their property. The wrong came in the attempted deception of the Church, in the attempt to have the apostles and the fellow-believers think that they were exercising all the faith and practicing all the self-denial, which some others had practiced. The Apostle Peter indicates that this was not merely lying to the Church and attempting to deceive [R2102 : page 41] the Church, but more, it was an attempted deception of the Holy Spirit.

The penalty was death to both the participants, for husband and wife alike united in deception. The Lord would evidently thus teach the Church, (1) that while men might be deceived, it was impossible to deceive God; and (2) that such a fraud is a very heinous sin in God's sight.

The question naturally arises, Was this death of Ananias and Sapphira merely a prompt infliction of the Adamic death, under whose sentence they already were? Or, was it the infliction of the Second Death, and does it teach us that the attempted deception of the Holy Spirit is punishable by the Second Death; and that there is no hope in any sense of the word for Ananias and Sapphira. No one, we believe, can satisfactorily answer this question, because the facts relating to the matter are too indefinite. For instance, we do not know whether they had "passed from death unto life" (reckonedly from the Adamic death to life in Christ). We do not know that they had more information on this subject than some who followed the Lord and to whom he said, "Ye follow me, because of the loaves and the fishes." Ananias and Sapphira may never have been true converts at heart, but merely, yet in their sins, have been struck with the possibilities of the growing community, and acquainted with some in it; they perhaps thought it a good opportunity to fix themselves for future days, and in order to have a standing and place in the community were willing to give part of the proceeds of their property. If this was their state of heart, if they had never really received the grace of God, then we believe that their death was merely a sooner accomplishment of the general sentence of the Adamic death and not Second death; and we should expect that the due time will come in the Millennial Kingdom, when the blinded eyes of their understanding would be opened, and they should see matters in a full, clear and proper light with the opportunity of either accepting or rejecting God's provision. But if they had come to a clear knowledge of the truth, had tasted of the heavenly gift and had been made partakers of the holy spirit, and then sinned willfully in this matter, we should understand that their death was the Second death, the penalty for their own willful transgression. The particulars are not stated, nor was it

necessary to the narrative. The lesson to the early Church and the lesson to us is the same in either case; namely, that it is impossible to deceive God who discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart.

This entire lesson brings forcibly to our thought the fact that every "new creature in Christ" has consecrated something to the Lord. Our offering should be not merely a portion of our substance, but all of it, including ourselves – time, influence, possessions – and these we may lay not at the apostles' feet, but at the feet of our Lord, in consecration. We cannot refrain from the thought – How many who have consecrated their *all* to the Lord are attempting not only to deceive the Lord, but to deceive also themselves, and to give a portion only of that which they have consecrated?

This is the great point of this lesson to all who are of this consecrated class; and the Apostle Peter's words to Ananias should be carefully weighed and applied by each one who has professed full consecration to the Lord – "While it [thy possessions] remained was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?" We may apply this to ourselves, and say, The Lord did not compel my consecration; it was a voluntary thing, even though admitted to be a reasonable service; and as we have hitherto seen in the Lord's estimation, it is a very serious matter to make vows and afterward to re-consider, or attempt to take back, that which we have consecrated to him.

No wonder great fear came upon all the Church – the feeling of responsibility; a feeling that in contracting with the Lord they were engaged in serious business. And so the Apostle says to the consecrated, "Let us fear, lest a promise having been left us, any of you should seem to come short of it."
