

ATTEMPTING TO DECEIVE GOD.

– ACTS 5:1-11 – FEB. 9. –

Golden Text: – "Wherefore, putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor." – Eph. 4:25.

"WHILE MEN slept the enemy came and sowed tares,"* our Lord's parable explains. After the apostles fell asleep in death the Adversary had a comparatively free hand in the sowing of the seeds of error, and cultivated in the Church the tare class, as a result. But at the time of our lesson – shortly after Pentecost – circumstances were different. The apostles were still in the Church, and exercised the special powers of the holy spirit conferred upon them, as the Lord's representatives, for the establishment of the Church – sowing only the good seed, and hindering the Adversary from sowing tares or hypocrites in it. Our lesson illustrates the method by which the Lord, through the apostles, kept the infant church free from hypocrites.

As previously suggested, a partial community of interest amongst the believers was early established. A number of the faithful had already sold possessions and contributed to the general fund. Joses was one of these whose case is particularly cited. (Acts 4:36,37.) He was one of the noble brethren whose generosity and helpfulness in the Church was generally recognized, so that amongst the believers he received a new name, Barnabas, which signifies "son of consolation," or son of comfort and helpfulness.

Although there was nothing compulsory upon any in respect to this selling of goods and giving to the common treasury, the very fact that those who did so were highly esteemed in the Church would naturally become a snare to some who, without the real spirit of helpfulness and sacrifice, would appreciate and desire to have the approbation of the brethren. Ananias and Sapphira, his wife, were of this class, desirous of the approval of the Church, yet deficient in the

real spirit of sacrifice. They had a property which they determined to sell, and in order to pass before the believers as saints of the same order as Barnabas, they pretended to give to the general fund the full amount received for the property. Secretly, however, they had much less generous sentiments; they agreed together that they would retain part of the sale-money for future contingencies, – yet would pass as sacrificers to the full amount.

The wrong of their course is manifest. As the Apostle Peter declared, the property was their own, and after they had sold it they still had a right to do as they pleased with the proceeds; but they should have been honest about the matter, and if they wished to give a tenth, a half or all of the amount, it was a matter of their own business alone, and no one would have had the least right to find fault with or criticise them. The entire wrong consisted in the deception practiced – the palming off of a part of the price as the whole, for the purpose of deceiving the Church and of gaining an applause for an amount of sacrifice more than they made. In this and in this alone consisted the sin for which they both died.

The record is that "great fear came upon all the company" – great reverence for God and for the apostles, his representatives. It brought also a realization that *consecrations* to the Lord were far from meaningless forms. This would mean, not only to those who had already espoused the Lord's cause, but also to all who for some time thereafter would identify themselves with the church, that any who were insincere would best make no pretensions to discipleship. Quite probably the influence of the lesson lasted for a considerable time – during the lives of the apostles. Since the death of the apostles, however, any number of hypocrites have come into the Church, – indeed, have been dragged and coaxed in to swell the numbers: and God has been pleased to permit the many false assumptions and false pretenses of these "tares" to go unpunished and unchallenged. (Matt. 13:30.) This does not mean a change on God's part as respects such characters, but rather that the case of Ananias and Sapphira was made

a special one to serve as a lesson in the Church. Likewise, the first offence of Sabbath-breaking was punished with death (Num. 15:32-36), although Sabbath-breaking was not similarly punished subsequently under the law. We are not to think of Ananias and Sapphira as being sinners above others of their class, because summary punishment was meted out to them.

Those who believe that eternal torment is the punishment for sin must, to be logical, suppose that Ananias and Sapphira passed on to torments at the hands of devils, from which they have since been suffering, and such must wonder that many who are equally hypocritical in nominal churches of today, so far as human judgment can discern, go unpunished, and are encouraged by their spiritual leaders to hope for a share in the best the future has to give.

From our standpoint – the Bible standpoint – these two deceivers received no other punishment than the loss of the present life; and as they were evidently not of the "wheat" class at all, and had not become partakers of the holy spirit, but deceived themselves, as they attempted to deceive others, their conduct did not affect their cases everlastingly, but merely as respects the present life. They were made an illustration of a principle – they served as ensamples for the instruction of the Church. They received the full penalty of their deception in the loss of present life. As respects the future life, an opportunity for which the Lord Jesus has purchased for all mankind, it will "in due time" be thrown open to them and to the whole world, to be accepted or rejected, under terms of clear knowledge and obedience. They are still heirs to a share of those blessings which will come to the world after the spirit-begotten Church shall have been glorified, and begun the work of blessing all the families of the earth.

The particulars of the lesson require no further detailing. We merely note the fact that the Apostle Peter evidently had the gift of discerning spirits (I Cor. 12:10), and that God fortified the knowledge granted him, as evidence or proof of his apostleship. We proceed next

to consider some of the lessons which may properly be learned from this incident of the past, by the Lord's consecrated people of today. The lesson is that God desires "truth in the inward parts" – in the heart – and that any who have not this quality – candor, honesty, truthfulness – cannot [R2944 : page 29] be pleasing to God; and therefore cannot share in the glories shortly to be dispensed to the elect class of this Gospel age. – Psa. 51:6.

As we look at ourselves, we come to realize how imperfect are all the members of the fallen race; and when we consider God's perfection, we can conceive of only one quality that the fallen creature could possibly possess, that would meet with divine approval – even when viewed through the merit of Christ's atonement. That one quality is *honesty*. The true Christian must, in honesty, confess his own shortcomings, his own deficiencies. He must, in honesty, acknowledge that his sufficiency is of God, through Christ and not of himself. He must honestly strive for the standard set before him in the Gospel. He must honestly admit that he cannot do the things that he would. He must candidly and fully accept the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus, as the covering for his blemishes. We are inclined to the belief that the greatest sin in the Church – even amongst the consecrated believers – is the sin of dishonesty – the sin of which divine disapproval is so excellently illustrated in the case of Ananias and Sapphira.

We have no desire to distort, or to make matters appear worse than they really are; but from our standpoint the nominal church teems and overflows with just such hypocrites – self-deceived, to some extent. These are the tares, or imitation wheat.

Do not all who claim to be Christians profess to be following in the footsteps of Jesus, – to bear his name, to be his Church, his body, and to take up his cross and follow him? Yet how comparatively few of the nominal whole have or have ever had any thought of so doing? By their profession they declare that they have sold their earthly

possessions, their earthly interests, that they have sacrificed these, and presented the whole matter as a loving gift and sacrifice to the Lord; yet in reality they have done nothing of the kind, and never for a moment thought of even as much liberality to the Lord's cause, keeping as proportionately little to themselves, as did Ananias and Sapphira.

We cannot judge the heart, and will not attempt to do so. We cannot even always tell which are grains of "wheat" and which "tares," but out of their own mouths we may judge those who profess to be "wheat." Some professing thus, and occupying very high positions in the Church, even as ministers of the Gospel, tell us plainly, not only by their actions, but also at times by their words, that in pretending to sell out their interests and to turn over the entire proceeds in consecration to the Lord's service, they have grossly falsified – some of them tell us that they do not even believe the things which they vowed they would preach. They thus tell us that they have been dishonest with men and with themselves, in respect to the things of God. Truly this is a serious, a dreadful condition. The Church of today, instead of being free from deceivers, has them in its very highest positions of trust and honor, – as representatives of the Lord, purporting to be his mouthpieces.

This is an individual matter still, as it was in the days of the apostles. Each individual of the Lord's people must answer for his own course, to the Lord himself. It therefore behooves all those who are seeking divine approval to see to it that they are not influenced by the prevalent disposition to hypocrisy, but that they deal with the Lord in purity and honesty of heart. They should see to it that, having covenanted to give to God and his service their all, they keep nothing back, but consider their time, their influence, their means, their lives, fully devoted to the Lord, and that they use these as his – as they believe he would wish to have them used – as stewards. He who is honest with himself will be honest with God, and be honest also with his fellow-men. As Shakespeare expresses it, –

"To thine own self be true;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

Our Golden Text is quite to the point, and requires no comment. We perhaps should, however, guard some against a mistaken view of truthfulness. Some persons of large conscientiousness fail to properly balance the subject, and reach the conclusion that they are bound to answer every question that may be asked them, telling all that they know upon any subject. This is a mistaken view; we are not bound by any laws of honesty to tell all that we know in all cases. Some people ask questions which they have no proper right to ask – about things which are not their proper business: such persons should not be encouraged; their queries should not be satisfied. Nor is it necessary to truthfulness that we should say to them in so many words, – You are busybodies, and your questions are impertinent, and I will not answer them. On the contrary, a soft answer will be better – an answer which will tell them as much or as little as suits convenience, permitting them to draw the conclusion that for some reason unmentioned you would not care to give a fuller statement of the facts. An exception to this rule would be a case in which the keeping back of the information would be to the injury of the inquirer. Then, love for our neighbor should prompt the giving of the information; perhaps, indeed, the volunteering of it without being asked – especially if it be concerning a matter of which you have not merely an opinion but actual knowledge, without the revealing of which he would suffer injury.

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