

## **Authenticity In The New Community**

John Ortberg, November 8-9, 1995

Trying to be what you are not can have fatal consequences.

A guy is desperate for a job and goes to a zoo where they have said that there are employment opportunities. He meets with the head guy, who tells him that the only job they have an opening for is for somebody who would be willing to get in a gorilla suit, pretend to be a gorilla, get in the cage and actually try to convince people that he is a gorilla. That doesn't feel like a very authentic thing to do.

The guy is desperate and says, "All right, I'll do it." He gets into the cage for several days and pretends to be a gorilla. He fools all the people, until one day he is swinging on a trapeze and getting a little too into the gorilla thing. He swings right over the top of his cage and into the next cage which is the lion cage.

He lands on the ground and feels the hot breath of the lion in his face. He panics and starts to scream, "Let me out of here. Let me out of here," tipping folks off as to his true identity. The lion whispers to him, "Shut up you fool, or we'll both be out of a job." It turns out that he was not alone. He was a phony living in a world of phonies. Everybody in the zoo was faking it.

This business of faking it doesn't happen only in the zoo. This is an aspect of human nature so common that it has actually been written about under the title the impostor phenomenon.

Several years ago, numbers of people began to research and write on this topic. The thesis generally was that every human being -- every person sitting around you right now -- at least from time to time has this sense of being a fraud. All of us carry around the knowledge that we have pretended to know things that we don't really know or achieve things that we haven't really achieved.

We all pretend sometimes that we spoke out bravely, when in truth we were timidly silent. We pretend that we were hard at work -- in fact, we were wasting time. We pretend to be smarter, happier, kinder, stronger, humbler, cleaner and better than we really are.

To see how widespread this is, I'm going to mention a couple of ways in which people commonly fake it and commonly pose. I'm going to ask you to raise your hand if you've ever done one of these things. Those of you that are watching in the activity center have to do this, too. You don't get a free pass in there. You're a part of us.

Here's the first category. Have you ever been watching TV, hear a car pull into the garage -- it might have been your parents, spouse, roommates or so on -- turn off the

TV and pretend you've been real busy doing something productive? A show of hands here -- did anybody ever do that? I've done that, too.

How about this one? Did you ever have somebody mention to you a person, a book title or something that you felt like you should have known? Even though you didn't, you pretended like you did. Has anybody ever? -- I've done that one. I know how that feels.

A third one -- have you ever been driving, and the person in the other lane is trying to catch your eye so that you'll let him over? Hang on and wait until I'm done. You have no intention of letting him in. You pretend like you don't see him. Instead of looking like a jerk, you look like an unobservant nice guy. Has anybody ever pulled that one? I've stooped pretty low in my day, but I've never done that one, friends.

The choice to be inauthentic and to pretend to be what we are not happens everywhere. It happens even in the church. We read now about the ultimate example of it and the ultimate destructiveness that is possible.

Acts 5:1 -- we've been in a series, looking at the Book of Acts. Just before this section, it tells us about this amazing new community that God has formed and how people give away their stuff to meet needs of other people. In fact, one guy sold a field and laid the money at the Apostles' feet. That sort of thing was going on all the time.

Chapter 5, verse 1 -- "But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife, Sapphira, sold a piece of property. With his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds and brought only a part and laid it at the Apostles' feet.

"'Ananias,' Peter asked, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!'

"Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, 'Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.' And she said, 'Yes, that was the price.'

"Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.'

"Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things."

It's one of the most sobering passages in this whole book that we're studying together. Here's what is happening in this story. Here's what's going on. The new community is being formed, and people are being spiritually transformed. People who have been far from God are coming close to him. People who used to hate each other are becoming one. Old walls and barriers are being broken down every day.

One of the most striking things is that people -- normal, ordinary people and greedy, possessive people -- see other people who are in need. As their minds are transformed, they take their stuff and sell it. They give it away in Jesus' name.

This new community is amazed. People look at this behavior and go, "Wow! Wow!" Luke tells us one of the stories. This guy named Joseph takes a field and gives it away. He sells it and gives the money to be used for whoever needs it.

The Apostles -- the new community -- is so grateful that they say, "We need to express our gratitude." They say to this guy, "The name Joe doesn't cut it anymore. We want to give you a new name. We're going to call you Barney or Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, because you're a source of joy to us."

This is a good thing, but then a bad thing happens. This couple sees what's going on. To them, it brings no joy. Words of wonder and praise turn to ashes in their mouths because they're not the ones that are receiving the praise. They think, "I'd like to make people say, 'Wow!' I'd like to have the disciples change my name and have that kind of praise and honor."

They don't long to become generous people. They long to be known as generous people. They think, I'd like to have a reputation for spiritual greatness. This becomes a great danger to the new community. It is always a danger any time people get serious about spiritual growth. The danger is that the quest for spiritual growth will get twisted, perverted and lead to something far worse than people were led into, when they weren't even pursuing it.

A guy by the name of Harold Kirschner writes about a young Stanford premed student. He's competitive and driven. His parents, to try to get him to relax, sent him on vacation between his sophomore and junior years out East.

While he's out East, Kirschner writes, he meets a guru who says to him, "Don't you see how you're poisoning your soul with this success-oriented way of life. Your idea of happiness is to stay up all night, studying for an exam so you can get a better grade than your best friend."

"Your idea of a good marriage is not to find the woman who will make you whole but to win the girl everybody else wants. That's not how people are supposed to live. Give it up. Come join us in an atmosphere where we all share and love each other."

This young man, Kirschner writes, had completed four years at a competitive high school to get into Stanford, plus two years of premed courses at the university. He was ripe for this sort of thing. He called his parents from the East and told them he would not be coming home. He was dropping out of school to live at a religious commune.

Six months later, his parents got a letter from him -- "Dear Mom and Dad, I know you weren't happy with the decision I made last summer, but I want to tell you how happy it has made me. For the first time in my life, I am at peace. There is no competing, no hustling and no trying to get ahead of everyone else. Here we are all equal and all share.

"This way of life is so much in harmony with the inner essence of my soul that in only six months I have become the number two disciple in the entire commune. I think I can be number one by June." You don't know whether to laugh or cry when you read it, because it happens. It happens in churches.

We've been looking in this series at the difference between church -- which is intended to be God's version of community -- and the way that things generally run in this world, the kingdom of this world or anti-community.

One of the primary differences and one of the primary ways that life in the kingdom of God -- the new community -- differs from life in the kingdom of this world is that life in the kingdom of this world is built on competition. Life in the kingdom of this world is the constant struggle to be smarter, prettier, richer or stronger than somebody else and, therefore, to be special.

Jesus comes along to the human race and says, "Life does not have to be that way. There is a better way. You don't have to do life like that. You can die to all of that. This is a deep part of what it means to die to yourself and die to this foolish, idiotic and destructive struggle to prove your superiority or your specialness."

The new community is made up of people who decide they want to die to themselves. Then one day, one of them gets this sneaky idea -- "Maybe I can die to myself better than anyone else. I'll be the deadest person in the whole, new community."

Once again, life becomes a contest. Only now, instead of seeing who's the smartest or the strongest, the game is who is the most spiritual, knows the Bible best, gives the most money, disapproves of the world the hardest, holds the Cal Ripken, Jr., award for most consecutive days without missing devotions and is the number-one monk.

Even pastors can play at that game. They can get jealous of other pastors -- 'He is convincing more people to die to themselves than I am convincing to die to themselves. That makes me mad. It's not fair. I'd die to convince more people to die to themselves.' It's crazy when you stop and think about it, isn't it?

When that happens, it's not the church anymore. No matter how impressive it may look on the outside, it's become one more little franchise in the kingdom of this world that uses a religious scoring system. It's just one more little franchise in the kingdom of this world. It's not the church.

This is what's happened to Ananias and Sapphira. They decide to sell their land but are not ready to give up all this money. They give it some thought and decide they'll give some money. They'll give a fair amount, enough so that least everybody will be convinced that it was the fair value of their land. They decide to live a lie.

It's very important you understand this to get the story. Their decision to deceive the community was not a casual, spur-of-the-moment thing. This is not simply the slippage in authenticity that every human being is guilty of from time to time. It's very important you understand, this is not the kind of the thing that leaks out of everybody occasionally.

In verse 9, we are told that this is a deliberate, premeditated act on the part of a husband and a wife. Peter says to Sapphira, "How is it that you have agreed together?" The agreement happened beforehand. This impostor phenomenon in them was not an occasional temptation. They chose it and embraced it.

If you take a look at verse 3, then you begin to see the seriousness of what's going on. Look at verse 3 -- "'Ananias', Peter says, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?'"

In verse 4 he says, "You did not lie to us. You lied to God!" There is a very vital point that needs to be made here about the church and about the new community in the eyes of God. It is so important that we understand this and share it together. The church and the Holy Spirit are so closely related that when Peter talks about this issue, to say that Ananias lied to the church is to say that he lied to the Spirit. The church is the place on earth where the Spirit takes up residency.

This kind of identification happens several times in the Book of Acts. You don't have to turn there right now, but -- chapter 13, verses 3 and 4 -- the church at Antioch is commissioning Paul and Barnabas. Luke tells us that members of the church laid hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them off.

Then it says directly, "So being sent out by the Holy Spirit." The church lays their hands on them and sends them out. So Luke says that they are sent out by the Holy Spirit. The relationship between the church and the Holy Spirit is so close and

intimate that it can hardly be overstated. To be sent out by the church is to be sent out by the Holy Spirit. To lie to the church is to lie to the Holy Spirit. To wound the church is to wound the Holy Spirit of God.

What lies at the heart of this story is not just greed. It is not even simply deception. It is the choice to use the church instead of to serve the church. It is the deliberate choice to violate the bride of Christ and to violate the human beings for whom he died.

Ananias and Sapphira decide that instead of being humble members of the new community to serve others, they will use this new community to serve their own desires for grandiosity, self-exaltation and self-aggrandizement. God will not allow his dream for the human race to be destroyed. He cannot. God is implacably committed to the protection of his bride.

I'd like to read some other words for you. If you have your Bibles here, turn over to 1 Corinthians 3:16-17. Our words are intended by Paul to be a wonderful comfort to the church. They are, but they are also like the words that we read in Acts 5 -- frightening words.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul says, "Do you not know that you' -- a grammatical note here is when he says "you," he uses the plural form of it, all of you, that is, the church -- 'are God's temple' -- in other words, you as the church, and the church is God's temple -- 'and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"

God's spirit dwells in all of you in the church. The church is God's dwelling place on earth. Then again, words we don't read all that often, because they are fear-inducing words -- "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

Paul says that God's love for the church is fierce, holy, jealous and wonderful, because God loves people and people are the church -- the people who have said yes to God. God longs for people, the people that he made to be in community. Therefore, if you touch the church, you touch God. God will protect his church. This means sometimes God will protect the church against me.

For most of us, this problem has not reached anywhere near the depth that it has for Ananias and Sapphira. The vast majority of the people in this room have not made a subtle resolution to embrace life as an impostor, to deceive the church or hold it in contempt, but the temptation to use and violate the church is still there.

Let me run through different ways and different forms that it takes. When I use the church as a tool to further my own ambitions or to showcase my talents, I violate the church.

I remember several years ago -- not at this church -- hearing a woman who demanded to see the top leadership of the church. She said, "God has called me to head the ministry of Amy Grant." That's what she said -- "God has called me to head a ministry of Amy Grant," although God had forgotten to teach her how to sing. She had no musical skills at all, but she says, "God has called me to this ministry." She wanted the church as a platform.

When I seek to gain control over others in the church to show how dominant I can be, I violate the church. When I live in judgmentalism over those who do church differently than me, I violate the church.

When I pursue truth, and when I study the Bible simply to be able to win theological arguments and show others how smart I am, I'm misusing the church of God. When I join a little clique within a church that gossips about, critiques and excludes those outside of my little clique, I'm misusing the church of God. When I subtly seek to let other people know how spiritual I am, I'm misusing the church of God.

All of us, friends -- every one of us -- needs in moments of truth, periodically in life, to own up to what it is that we've done and throw ourselves on the grace of the Father. There comes in this story a moment of truth. They come every now and then for every human being. Occasionally, they come for you. Tonight might be one of them.

One comes in this story for Sapphira in verse 8. She enters this room and is probably expecting there's going to be a lot of rejoicing, because she and her husband have planned out this gift that's given to the church. Instead of rejoicing, she gets this strange silence. Then Peter asks her, "Tell me is this the price you got? This price that you told us that you got, is it the truth?"

Everybody in the room holds their breath for a moment to see what will happen and to see if she'll own the truth. If she would own the truth, the story would have such a different ending. It would be life instead of death and grace instead of fear. She will not. She refuses to own the truth about who she is and what she's done. She chooses death.

In every life come moments of truth. I want to invite all of us who are here tonight to have one of those moments with God. Take time to look at your own life. See what it is that fills your own heart and then own up to the truth and darkness as well as the good parts. Own up to the truth about who I am and who you are before God. Into every life come moments of truth and times when we are invited by the severe mercy of God to face up to the truth about ourselves. This is a matter of desperate urgency.

Again, this comes out in the story. Look at verse 3. I don't know how to soften this and would not soften it if I could. It simply is the Word of God. Peter says in verse 3 to Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" In other

words, Peter says that the darkness at work here is so great that there is only one explanation for it. The evil one is at work. This is darkness.

There is a great deal written these days about spiritual warfare. Frankly, a lot of it tends to be fairly superficial, as if it were about a special-effects deal to see which side is the most powerful -- as if the presence of darkness is primarily indicated by weirdness like somebody's head spinning around 360 degrees.

There is spiritual war that rages. It rages in this world and inside every human heart -- inside mine and inside yours. It's going on right now in this room -- spiritual war. It is too important to be trivialized. The battle is won not primarily in dramatic, powerful encounters and not in special-effects moments, but in quiet, unseen moments, in the choice for submission or self, in the choice for servanthood or self-promotion and the choice for honesty or stealth.

Friends, as surely as it was for Ananias and Sapphira, it is for every human being that lives a choice between life and death. Not suddenly and not dramatically, maybe, but it is about life and death for you and for me. That is why it is so urgent.

Choose life. Own the truth about the state of your heart and give up trying to fake it. Before God, before others and before yourself, come clean. Some of you who are here need so desperately to come clean tonight before God and then somewhere to huddle with or call the right person.

The story would have turned out so differently if Ananias or Sapphira would have fallen before Peter and said, "Here's the truth about me. I want to be a part of the new community, but there is a part of me that wants darker things and wants to get them in darker ways."

Live as an open, honest and sin-confessing member of the new community. If you'll make that choice, I want to give in the moment or two that remains two practices or two disciplines that are recommended by Jesus, especially for people who are pursuing spiritual growth and spiritual life and who might get off track on it.

Two practices -- my guess is a lot of us in here need -- to build into our lives are recommended by Jesus. One of them is what could be called the practice or the discipline of secrecy, of doing good things secretly.

Remember, Jesus says in Matthew 6:1, "Beware of practicing your piety -- your righteousness -- before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

Then he goes through, "When you give money, don't send people ahead to blow trumpets so everybody notices. When you pray, fast and so on, do it in secret."

The idea here is if you do these things in front of other people, it will cause you to become more addicted to needing to wow the community. But if you begin to do them in secret where other people don't know about them, you'll discover eventually this wonderful thing that you don't need to be applauded for it. You begin to give and discover it's a good thing to give. You don't need everybody to know about it.

This week, somewhere along the line, try practicing secrecy. If you're at work and some time this week you could help somebody else win -- when it won't advance your career a bit -- help him.

This week if you find somebody who is in need -- and you won't benefit in any way from it -- find a way to give to that person without them ever finding out that you've given.

You and a rival -- another guy -- are pursuing the same woman, and she's beautiful. You love her, hope to marry her and find the other guy secretly wears a toupee. If it were me, I would tell her. There are some places you'll violate it somewhere along the line this week.

If Ananias and Sapphira had practiced this and together had said: "Let's give some money to the new community. Let's sell something, not the whole thing, because we're not ready to give everything, and let's give a part of it and not let anybody know who it's from" -- then instead of death, there would have been life. Instead of fear, there would have been joy.

This one practice, if they would have appropriated it and used it diligently, could have turned their whole lives around. That's why Jesus recommends it, especially to people who are trying to do good things, but who are prone to get off track -- getting all caught up in making sure other people think that they're really good.

He says, "Do good things secretly. If you are prone in that direction, you discover that the joy is in goodness, in this life of righteousness and not in having people think that you are a righteous person." Give up the whole project of trying to manage what other people think of you. Die to it. Practice secrecy.

The other one that Jesus does and recommends is to practice regular times of solitude. Sometimes to be healthy in community, you must withdraw from community and be alone with the Father. You must receive what no community on earth can give to you. You must receive that which you can receive from God alone. Otherwise, you get off track. I grew up in the church and have been in the church my whole life. One of my earliest memories was when I was in first grade or kindergarten. I was in a Sunday school class, and we were supposed to memorize Bible verses. We decided, or our teacher decided, that we would have a contest to memorize Bible verses.

Have any of you ever experienced what that's like to be part of a little group of kids who are in a contest to memorize Bible verses? The way this deal was set up for us was that for every verse that you could recite, you would get a sticker.

We all had a poster that went up on the wall. It was a poster with a mansion in it, and each sticker was a little room. The way the contest went was whoever had their mansion filled up with the most little rooms would win. If you won the contest, you would win a white Bible. Your name would be printed on it with gold letters.

I wanted that Bible so bad I would have lied, cheated and stolen to get it. I would have violated most of what's inside of it to get a hold of it. Fairly soon, it came down to me and one other kid. We had blown away the rest of the competition. The rest of those guys were fallen by the side of the road.

It was a contest between me and a little girl with great, big glasses named Louise -- a freckle-faced, dark-haired, snotty, little kid. For weeks, it was nip and tuck between us. One of us would get up by a room, and then the other one would get up by a room or so. It was nip and tuck, until the final month she began to pull away. Rows and rows of rooms in her mansion began to exceed the rows of rooms in my mansion, until by the final week it was clear she was going to win.

I began to wonder what could I do about Louise? So I killed her. You're wondering what I'm going to say next, aren't you? At least in my mind, I did. I did not like her. I would have done almost anything to be the one to win and to have my name spelled out in gold letters.

I did not rejoice when her name was the one called. I was beginning to learn that the church could be a place where I could shine and prove how good and smart I was. I hate to say it, but that was not the last time that I've turned the church into a contest where I could win a great big, white Bible. Sometimes, I do it still. Probably, some of you do, too.

Probably some of you here know the temptation to turn this community into a contest to see if you can get more stickers than anybody else. Only when that happens, it's not the church any more. Although it may be filled with lots of people, it's not the community that Jesus died to create. It's not God's dream.

This crazy, frantic wrestling and struggling to see who's best, prettiest, smartest, the most spiritual or who's right is not the church. Some very wise people in the early church used to say that society -- the kingdom of the world and the way that the world normally runs -- is a shipwreck from which any sane person will swim for her or his life to get away from.

It doesn't mean you leave it forever. It means you're just immersed in the system of this world -- immersed in your job, your bills, your worries, the media and maybe even in the church -- in it all.

It begins to feel like all the messages you receive are true that you've got to have enough money, success and enough people in the church saying, "Wow." It's a shipwreck, and you must swim for your life.

You've got to die to it. Otherwise, it will kill you. When I'm alone with God, I come to the truth about myself -- the dark parts as well as the good parts. Some of the dark truth is I'm not trying to win that big, white Bible, because I'm so spiritual. A lot of it is because I want to hear the other kindergartners go, "Wow!" That's a lot of it, and I need to face that truth.

When I'm alone, I come to the truth about life. Even if I were to win the great, big, white Bible, it wouldn't be enough. Somebody out there would have a bigger, whiter Bible with their name spelled out in even bigger and costlier, gold letters. It's a fool's game.

One of the great ironies of the story of Ananias and Sapphira is to play it out another way. Suppose they would have won. Suppose they would have been able to convince everybody that this really was all the money that they had gotten from the field. They kept part of it back, so they got to keep the money and fooled everybody else.

Then people would come up to them and say, "Ananias and Sapphira, what amazingly generous people you are. We want to give you new names." Every day in their heart, every time they heard those comments and someone called them a new name, then in their heart they would say, "Yes, but if you only knew the truth."

They would live with the constant anxiety that some day the truth might get out. They would live with a kind of contempt for the other people in the church. Gradually, they'd begin to think of those other people as gullible sheep that they can manipulate by their own patterns of deception. The great irony is if they'd pulled the thing off, they would have died. It just would have been a slower death and infected the rest of the community.

When I'm alone, I come to the truth about life. Winning the big, white Bible is not going to be enough. It's not going to last. It's a fool's game. When I'm alone with God, I come home to the truth about the Father.

The truth about the Father is this. It's okay with him if Louise wins the big, white Bible. It really is. It's okay if somebody else has more money, a better job or a bigger church. God wouldn't love me any more than he already does if I got the big, white Bible -- or you either.

God wouldn't love you any more if you took every field you owned, sold it and gave all the money to the church. God will never love you any more than he loves you right now.

Make this a moment of truth with God and choose life. Choose life! Choose life!