

Series: Generous
#1: “Doing the Hokey Pokey with God”
Acts 4:32 – 5:11 (NIV)
By John Gill

The story of Ananias and Saphira... now there’s a scripture text you rarely hear read in church! Even when it comes time for us pastors to preach our annual obligatory sermon on money for “Stewardship Sunday,” (and this year, a series of sermons), pastors have a way of conveniently passing over this passage in favor of other “stewardship” texts in the Bible that are, shall we say, less “harsh.”

And who could blame us? This is not an easy story to like, much less preach. It makes its point with about as much subtlety as a sledgehammer. It doesn’t paint a pretty picture of the church, or of God.

And yet, as I wrestled about which texts to preach from during this Stewardship series, it seemed that God just kept drawing me back over and over again to this very disturbing text. (Of course, it could have something to do with the fact that this coming Tuesday, our Pastor’s Bible Study will be considering this exact chapter of Acts!)

What are we supposed to make of this strange story we find in the Book of Acts? If “all scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching,” as Paul writes to Timothy, then what is the lesson this “scripture” is supposed to teach us?...

- that we are all expected to sell our homes and lands, empty our bank accounts, and fork all our assets over to the church?
- that God expects us to become communists (or at least, socialists), pooling all our resources as if we were a bunch of hippies living in a commune in the 1960s?
- that ours is a greedy and vengeful God who demands we give him all our worldly possessions, threatening that, if we hold back even a little for ourselves, he will strike us dead?

Oh yes, this is a very problematic text. It’s no wonder that we conveniently overlook this passage. And yet, I kept hearing God say to me that THIS is the text he wanted me to use to kick-off this stewardship sermon series.

As I struggled with the meaning of this passage, I wrestled with what God might be saying to us. And then, something came to mind that was like a light bulb being turned on over my head. I remembered a tee shirt I once owned, with a cute saying emblazoned across the chest – “What if the Hokey Pokey is really what it’s all about?” And I knew that was the key to unlocking the meaning of this story for us this morning!

You remember that cute little song-and-dance from your childhood, don’t you? Great! So, now I’d like for you to stand up and “Do the Hokey Pokey” with me!

(play the song, project the words)

Now, you probably are thinking, “this preacher has lost his mind!” You may even think that it’s sacrilegious to play this silly childhood game during a service of worship. What does the Hokey Pokey have to do with this scripture text? Everything!

I submit to you that the truth is that we ALL are playing games with God, all the time: - games that are much more consequential... games that offend God far more than “doing the holey pokey” in the sanctuary!

You and I come to church week after week. We sing our hymns, we piously say our prayers, we throw a few bucks in the offering plate as it comes by, and nod our heads in agreement as we listen to the sermon. But for lots of us, it is only a game we play! We’re not here to BE the church. We are here to PLAY church! We may not be conscious of it, but, much of the time you and I are just “doing the hokey pokey” with God.

What do I mean? Just like the song implies, we want to “play at” being a Christian. Jesus has called us to be his disciples – to step out in faith, - to boldly leave our sinful past behind and follow him without reservation. He wants us to “put our hand to the plow” and not look back (as Jesus said to a would-be disciple full of excuses). He wants us to be “on fire” for God, not to be nauseatingly lukewarm (as he says to a church in Revelation that had lost its passion).

He wants our total commitment to him; - not some half-hearted, mamby-pamby, wishy-washy, on-again-off-again faith. In short, God has no patience for “game-playing” Christians. He’s looking for “the real thing.”

Yet, most of us would rather spend our lives “doing the hokey pokey” with God. We give him bits-and-pieces of our lives. We “put our right hand in,” but we just as quickly take it back out again. We may “put our left foot in,” but before God has a chance to do anything with it, we pull it back again. We tease God by offering him bits-and-pieces of who we are, but always stopping short of giving him “our all.”

Yes, in the final analysis, most of us are “Hokey Pokey Christians,” willing to give God PARTS of our lives, but never quite giving God our “whole self.”

We do it all the time. We resolve that we’re going to pray and read our Bibles daily, and we are faithful for a time – but quickly we allow other things to divert our attention. We want to SAY we are followers of Jesus and active members of this (or some other) congregation, but we fail to make worship a priority in our lives, finding lots of excuses to be absent on Sunday mornings. We declare through our profession of faith in Jesus Christ, that God has the preeminent place in our lives, and yet, instead of offering him our first-fruits (a tithe of the first 10% of our income), we give him the last-fruits of whatever is leftover at the end of the month. We discover the talents, abilities, and spiritual gifts God has blessed us with, and we may even thank God for them, but then we fail to follow-through and use them for his glory through ministry in our church.

You see, that is what our text this morning is really all about. It actually wasn’t about the money. To you and me, the offering Ananias and Saphira presented was VERY generous, indeed! It was a voluntary gift of sizable proportions. It represented a true sacrifice they were making. If any of you did the same thing, our finance committee would be thrilled, and eager to accept it! (Hint, Hint)

But the issue in this text has nothing to do with the money. The partial offering Ananias and Saphira brought was only a symptom of something much more disturbing at work in their lives. It exposed the fact that they were “playing games” with God. Peter could see it clear-as-day: Ananias and Saphira were guilty of being “Hokey Pokey Christians!”

Why did Ananias and Saphira make their generous donation? What motivated them? - pride? - maybe, greed? They had watched as Barnabas sold a piece of property and gave 100% of the proceeds to the church, and they took notice of the way the church held him in such high esteem. THEY wanted that same kind of admiration and honor. So, they decided to do the same thing.

The problem was that they tried to pretend that they had given God ALL the proceeds of the sale, when in fact, they had conspired together to give God something LESS THAN they had pledged.

As it says in the Old Testament Book of Numbers (30:2): “When a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears on oath to bind himself to a pledge, he shall not break his word... he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”

Ananias and Saphira had broken their vow to the Lord. And they paid a high price for their deception. Like the Hokey Pokey, they were enthusiastic about “putting their right hand in” (giving to God), but then, just as quickly “pulled it back out.”

So, the lesson from our text is NOT what it might first appear to be! No – this passage is NOT meant to teach us that God is greedy, NOR that he is vengeful or unreasonable. He is NOT like those bandits in old black-and-white westerns, who hold-up a stage-coach and demand, “Give me your money, or your life!” (After all, why should he? He already HAS both our money and our lives in his hand!) No – this scripture passage DOESN’T reveal a greedy, vengeful God.

The lesson from this story is simply this: God doesn’t like to be lied to, or trifled with. God is saying, “Stop playing games with me! Stop pretending to be my disciple unless you are willing to act like one in all areas of your life. Stop giving me bits-and-pieces of your life, only to pull them back again. Stop singing, “I Surrender ALL,” when you really mean, “I Surrender SOME!”

In other words, “Quit being a Hokey Pokey Christian!

And so – now we know WHY this story is so troublesome for us – because it strikes a little too close to home. We avoid this story like the plague because we don’t want to have to answer the challenging question it confronts us with: “Do you and I give our lives totally over to God? Or, do we only pretend to, but actually hold-back those parts of our lives we can’t bring ourselves to surrender to him?” Or, put another way: “Have you and I been guilty of ‘doing the hokey pokey’ with God?”

In this month of February, we are being reminded about the vows we took when we professed our faith in Jesus Christ and joined the church; that we would “support our church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.” We vowed to dedicate 100% of who we are to Christ – to ask him, not only to be the Savior of our souls, but also the Lord and Master of our lives. We pledged to surrender ALL WE ARE, and ALL WE HAVE to him.

Later this month (if you are on our mailing list) you will be receiving an Estimate of Giving Card for you complete and bring with you to worship on February 23rd so it can be laid upon the altar as a sign of your faithfulness and gratitude to God.

Friends, when we professed our faith in Christ and took our vows of membership into his church, we either meant what we said – or we were just “playing games.” We’ve all tended to put parts of our lives

“in God’s hand,” and then later, “take them out.” And because we have done it that way for so long, we have convinced ourselves that that is what “being a Christian” is all about.

In reality, though, what it is REALLY “all about” is putting “our whole selves in” God’s hands – and letting HIM “turn us about.”