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## **What's Up with Ananias and Sapphira? Emotional Intelligence in Acts 5:1-11**

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The skills inherent in emotional intelligence are critical to human interactions (Lorber, 2015). According to Goleman (1998), leaders must exercise the five characteristics of "self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill" to be successful (p. 94). For example, Oswald (2016) claimed that emotional intelligence was a prerequisite for pastors to succeed in ministry. This article is a hermeneutical study of emotional intelligence applied to The Apostle Peter and the ill-fated married couple, Ananias and Sapphira. The events surrounding the demise of this pair appear in Acts 5:1-11. Results indicated that Peter exercised emotional intelligence in his approach to the events in the pericope. The focus of this article is an exploration of emotional intelligence, views of the events surrounding the downfall of Ananias and Sapphira, and the connection of the three subjects to emotional intelligence as applicable to leadership today. Fortunately, with work, people can develop emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2020), so there is hope for those who recognize the need and apply themselves to the cure.

*Keywords:* Peter, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy

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Lorber (2015) noted that emotional intelligence is integral to the way people and groups work together. Lorber defined emotional intelligence as "the ability to process, manage and express emotions effectively" (p. 277). Goleman (1998) conducted foundational work on the concept and examined qualities that signify the emotional intelligence of effective leaders. These qualities deal with understanding the self and others and using that knowledge while effectively leading teams.

In the early church, Peter was a leader who had to navigate his emotions and those of his teammates as they led a rapidly expanding group of Christians. In the first five chapters of the Book of Acts, Luke recounted how Peter dealt with the disciples (Acts 1), the public who heard them (Acts 2 and 3), and the religious leaders who opposed them (Acts 4 and 5). One of the most alarming passages within these chapters tells of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). This married couple sold some property and donated a portion of the proceeds to the apostles as part of the Christian community's pattern of sharing, as denoted in Acts 4:32-37. But things did not go well for the pair. Why? While the text leaves some questions unanswered, it provides evidence that Satan somehow influenced the married couple to go astray and turn a seemingly selfless act of giving into a lie (Acts 4:3-4). One way to examine their thinking and actions is to look through the lens of emotional intelligence. A view of Peter's emotional intelligence provides a contrasting example. In a hermeneutical approach, the researcher seeks to understand what the author means (Henson et al., 2020). The focus of this article is an exploration of emotional intelligence, a hermeneutical view of the events surrounding the demise of Ananias and Sapphira, and the connection of Peter, Ananias, and Sapphira to emotional intelligence as applicable to leadership today.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

Goleman (1998) asserted that job skills and intelligence were insufficient to make a leader successful. Instead, these five characteristics of emotional intelligence marked effective leaders: "self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill" (Goleman, 1998, p. 94). In a study that rated leaders of 188 companies, Goleman found that emotional intelligence was responsible for double the weight of intellect and technical knowledge. The numbers were far higher for the most senior corporate leaders. Furthermore, Goleman found that individuals could develop emotional intelligence, and it increases as a person ages.

The first of Goleman's (1998) five elements of emotional intelligence is self-awareness. People who are aware of themselves understand their personal feelings, motivations, gifts, and flaws and have a realistic view of the impact of these traits. They seek input on self-improvement and want to develop themselves and take on manageable challenges. They can extend these judgments to their organizations, which helps them make reasoned leadership decisions.

The next element is self-regulation, which is not an absence of emotions but an ability to hold them in check and employ them for the good of the whole. Goleman (1998) offered the example of a leader whose team presented a poor presentation to the company's board. The self-regulated boss took the time to analyze the team's work, his contributions, and the next reasoned steps, communicating the results calmly and with purpose. Goleman shared that such an approach breeds further calmness in the organization and an atmosphere of trust and safety. People can share problems with a leader if they expect to be treated fairly and rationally, not emotionally. Self-regulation also promotes honest behavior, and this integrity is noticeable in an organization and to its customers. Lorber (2015) described emotional intelligence in nursing, where patients and family members frequently face emotional situations. Nurses have to navigate their own feelings while dealing compassionately with recipients of their care, all the while managing staff relationships. In these instances, self-regulation is paramount.

Next is motivation. According to Goleman (1998), the desire to improve and see others do better marks this trait. Motivated people like to rise to a challenge. They approach tasks with optimism, which further helps them lead a team to achieve. Goleman expressed that they are intrinsically motivated to succeed for achievement's sake, not just for a bonus or other reward. Goleman referred to this drive as "a passion for the work itself" (Goleman, 1998, p. 88). Purushothaman (2021) described the importance of emotional intelligence and referred to self-motivation among its traits. Purushothaman characterized self-motivation as being regulated by self-awareness and self-regulation. Thus, the first two traits of emotional intelligence keep self-motivation in check so its owner does not wander from the task at hand. It represents an internal drive and coincides with optimism that moves a person to engage and push past the status quo.

The fourth element of emotional intelligence is empathy (Goleman, 1998). This trait involves maturely taking into account the feelings of others. There could be cultural nuances to be aware of as leaders navigate the varied personalities and people who are members of a team or parties to a business relationship. Goleman noted that empathetic leaders made effective coaches and mentors, thus leading to increased employee retention. Goleman showed that leaders who understand their employees and help them grow make people want to be part of their team.

Finally, Goleman (1998) listed social skill as a complicated but enriching characteristic, calling it "friendliness with a purpose" and "the culmination of the other dimensions of emotional intelligence" (Goleman, 1998, pp. 101–102). I note that social skill does not have to equal extroversion. Instead, a person with social skills can forge meaningful relationships and convey empathy with people, being aware of how actions affect others and bringing motivation, unity, and encouragement to a team. Purushothaman (2021) described social skill as understanding other people and their expected responses in various circumstances, getting along, and helping them cooperate with others. Altogether, these five characteristics are a tall order for a leader to embody, and no person could perform them all perfectly. Yet, the self-awareness to look out for weaknesses and the motivation to work on them are further evidence of someone with emotional intelligence.

Oswald (2016) applied emotional intelligence to clergy, claiming it was a prerequisite for pastors to be in ministry. Regardless of a pastor's education level, preaching expertise, or visits to the infirm, Oswald called a trusting relationship with the church's people the most significant contributor to successful ministry. Pastoral examples demonstrating low emotional intelligence and a lack of trusting relationships include staff micro-management, a flaring temper that causes parishioners to steer clear, conflict avoidance instead of working through issues, stand-offish behavior, and taking credit for successes while failing to offer credit to contributors.

On the other hand, Oswald (2016) noted that self-awareness is a learned behavior that allows a person to observe the self and determine if changes are necessary. A mentor can help someone identify deficiencies, but the person must accept the need to manage them. Oswald presented a continuum that moves from experience to feelings to thoughts to actions. Oswald described Goleman's (1995) distinction between the thinking and feeling centers of the brain. The thinking side can analyze facts, but the feeling side carries emotion and makes decisions. Therefore, the thinking side can view experiences and think thoughts, but a person needs the feeling side to experience the connected emotions, make relative judgments, and commit to acting. Thus, using Oswald's continuum, the dual brain capacities are at work off and on along the continuum that could transact in seconds or take far longer. Failure to employ the thinking or feeling side leads to incomplete follow-through and potentially flawed action. Emotional Intelligence is an application of both sides to everyday life and relationships.

Segal (2002) claimed there was research to suggest that some people have innate emotional intelligence. Segal believed others could develop personal and social skills to increase their emotional intelligence, but not through traditional paths. Segal observed that emotional intelligence is both physical and mental, with links to deep feelings and instinctive responses that people could block, employ, model, or learn by example. Goleman (2020) referred to brain circuits that impact emotional intelligence development.

Segal (2002) recommended that religious ministry leaders practice some traits that give evidence of emotional intelligence. They include connecting one's thoughts and instincts and learning to trust them, paying attention to the feelings behind what people say, using and recognizing nonverbal communication, connecting with empathy, being in charge of personal emotions, and letting others own their responsibilities. Segal noted that leaders could best carry out these actions after healing their own traumas, making healthy pathways toward connections with hurting people.

According to Bar-On (2006), the topic of emotional intelligence has its roots in the 1800s with Darwin's work. Literature from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century covered "socially competent behavior" and how it could impact human effectiveness (Bar-on, 2006, p. 13). Bar-On described the early influences on the topic, including some skepticism about its existence, and labeled it emotional-social intelligence. Bar-On defined this

phenomenon as the ability to understand feelings in self and others, master personal emotions, deal with change, and maintain optimism and motivation. Bar-On developed and validated an instrument to measure socially competent behavior, finding that people in their late 40s scored the highest on the scale. Bar-On's work showed that people could improve their emotional-social intelligence, with subjects ranging from business leaders to heart patients who improved in areas like self-awareness, empathy, happiness, and stress management.

Shirkani (2016) drew on 20 years of consulting and coaching to describe the impact of emotional intelligence on leadership. Offering illustrations of failed moves up the corporate ladder, Shirkani presented eight "ego traps" that leaders can fall into, hampering their success (Shirkani, 2016, p. 1). They included concepts like falling back on technical skills instead of leading the team, only listening to sycophants, not understanding the emotional impact of circumstances on others, and forgetting what it was like to work in the entry-level phase of the field. Shirkani suggested ways to counter these trends, all connected to developing and building off emotional intelligence.

### **Acts 5:1-11**

Before this pericope, Luke's description of the early church showed a group of like-minded people who took care of one another so that no one was in need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32). In Acts 4:34-37, Luke related the account of people who owned property and occasionally sold it, bringing the proceeds to the apostles. Verse 36 offered a specific example of a man named Joseph, who "sold a field" and "brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Acts 4:37). This act was presented as a fact, without further commentary. Immediately following this passage, Luke related the events with Ananias and Sapphira, which show a surprising account of rapid judgment.

There are alternate viewpoints for approaching the pericope. For instance, there is the assumption that Peter acted completely correctly in his interactions with Ananias and Sapphira. The swift judgment that ended in death followed the Old Testament model instead of offering the opportunity for forgiveness (Verbrugge, 1980). Another approach is that Peter did not act correctly, that he jumped to a conclusion too swiftly, like a power-tripping tyrant, and doomed the couple for using poor judgment. Peter was the very disciple who denied Jesus and later received His forgiveness. Should he not have exercised grace, asking the Lord to forgive them? Was Peter lacking the emotional intelligence required for his leadership position among the disciples in the early church? Upon reading the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11, how does a Christian react?

### **Potential Explanations for the Couple's Behavior**

Ascough (2000) brought up the troubling nature of the extreme consequences to Ananias and Sapphira, citing scholarly arguments about the passage. First was the explanation that the untruth was sufficient to condemn the couple. Ascough did not find this reason enough for the pair's immediate death. Another argument featured the

comparison to Achan in Joshua 7, in which Achan defied the Lord's instructions and kept plunder for himself. The Israelites suffered, and Achan's entire family was destroyed. Joshua's question and comment to Achan in verse 25 were, "Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord brings trouble on you today" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Joshua 7:25). In parallel, Peter asked Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Acts 5:3). Ascough noted that the two situations were not very similar in circumstance. Achan was taking goods after being instructed not to, and the whole group suffered. Ananias and Sapphira were dealing only with their personal property. Perhaps they suffered the most, but the entire group experienced fear (Ascough, 2000). Luke employed repetition, perhaps to emphasize the point when writing in Acts 5:5 and 11 that everyone who heard about this incident experienced immense fear.

Ascough (2000) presented a question regarding the financial state of Ananias and Sapphira. While Ascough mentioned that several commentators thought the parcel of land in question comprised the total of their wealth, Ascough found no indication that this was the case. There is insufficient information to determine whether the property they sold represented all their wealth or only a part of it, which makes it impossible to understand the impact of this parcel's sale on the couple's ability to support themselves afterward.

Capper (1983) presented options to explain Ananias and Sapphira's social commitment to the believers' community, settling on the donation as something an initiate would offer. Capper related that the Essenes, Pythagoreans, and Anabaptists shared a procedure in which a new member would commit all possessions to the group. After going through an initial term, the initiate could reclaim the donations or make them permanent, fully joining the group. Capper (2008) defended this assertion, showing that the Essene practices related to wealth sharing in communal living were well known at the time. If this procedure were the practice in the early church, then it could explain the exceptional results for Ananias and Sapphira.

Ascough (2000) and Combet-Gallard (2005) related that Ananias and Sapphira's actions interrupted the Christian community's unity, a cultural foul. Likewise, Story (2010) addressed conflict as exhibited in Luke's writing. Rather than presenting a conflict and its solution, Luke related the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira as hypocrisy that ended in death. But the story did not end there. As a result of the couple's sin and their dramatic deaths, Christians were scared, and new church members did not join the recurring gathering mentioned in verse 13. Yet, the church grew (Acts 5:14), and Story related that the shocking incident presented a much-witnessed miracle that added to the credibility of the disciples, who were carrying out miracles frequently (Acts 5:12). Combet-Gallard suggested that the incident served as an example and warning to the Christians that God sees the people's motivations.

What is the tie between Ananias and Sapphira's actions and Peter's response? Luke's account may leave out some of the story, or Peter knew what Ananias and Sapphira were thinking. I make this claim because the passage never states how Peter

knew the pair held back part of the funds. Furthermore, nothing in the passage says why offering only part of the money was unacceptable. Peter's explanation in verse 4 indicated that the couple could have kept part or all of the proceeds of their property sale. The only problem appears to be that they pretended they had brought all the proceeds from the sale (Acts 5:3-4). According to Duncan and Derrett (1971), Sapphira may have had a marital right to the property that could withstand the donation. Why would Ananias and Sapphira claim to donate more than they did? Ascough (2000) expressed that they must have been motivated by "something they would gain through the lie" (p. 93).

One possible reason for their behavior was the cultural notion of benefaction. Ascough (2000) described the phenomenon and selected this theme as the best explanation for the events that unfolded. Rather than being seen merely as donors, if Ananias and Sapphira wanted the believers to see them as benefactors, the pressure was heavy to perform. Much like a donor today might get a building or hospital wing named in their honor, a benefactor in New Testament times would have received honor that would have built their reputation. Husbands and wives could both receive such rewards. Ascough suggested Luke had a benefactor in Theophilus (Acts 1:1; Luke 1:3). According to deSilva (2004), the practice was prevalent in a society that held few wealthy individuals. Recipients of the benefactor's favor would advertise the donation publicly, and a pecking order was common (deSilva, 2004). The honor bestowed on benefactors encouraged others to join in and receive honor, including for the support of voluntary organizations (Ascough, 2000). In light of these practices, lying about a donation would have presented as especially heinous when societal expectations of support and honor hinged on the proper execution of financial aid.

Two other passages on offerings to God deserve attention here. As written in Luke 21:1-4, Jesus saw a woman put everything she had into the temple offering. Although the amount was small, Jesus said it represented what she had, not just what she could afford to give. Jesus compared the significance of the widow's offering to the far more considerable sums that wealthy attendees were placing into the offering box. Also, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called on His followers to give quietly, unlike hypocrites who trumpeted their giving. Quiet giving would gain a reward from the Father instead of from people (Matthew 6:1-4). Jesus turned the concept of benefactors on its head in Luke 22:24-27 while describing the leader as a servant (Ascough, 2000). But the events in Acts 4:33-37 do not indicate quiet giving. Instead, they appear to be public enough that the members knew about people giving, befitting the benefactor model. Yet, Ascough (2000) described the early Christians' model as different because distributions were by need instead of an exchange of funds for honor (Acts 4:35).

### **Data - Emotional Intelligence in Acts 5:1-11**

There are factors of the five traits to observe within the pericope when comparing the elements of emotional intelligence and the events of Acts 5:1-11. First is self-awareness. Peter was exercising responsibility as he led in the early church. He knew himself, his movement, and the Holy Spirit's presence, as evidenced by his passionate speeches at Pentecost (Acts 2) and before the religious leaders (Acts 4). In contrast,

Ananias and Sapphira probably did not recognize their motivations and may not have worked through their feelings about the donation they made. If they did carefully examine their priorities in the matter, their conclusions were not based on a realistic assessment of the early church's environment as portrayed in Acts 4.

Regarding self-regulation, Peter expressed some emotion, perhaps disbelief, when he asked Ananias, "How is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Acts 5:3). He logically reviewed the facts with Ananias, describing how the sold property belonged to Ananias and Sapphira before their act. "Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Acts 5:4). He appeared to have controlled his emotions, even when he questioned Sapphira later. "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Acts 5:8). However, the text does not relay the tone or volume of voice to describe the emotional environment. There is no indication that either Ananias or Sapphira lacked self-regulation during the incident. Their responses to Peter's questions are presented as matter-of-fact, as Sapphira answered, "Yes,...that is the price" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Acts 5:8). Acts 5:2 related that the couple had arranged their story beforehand so their rehearsal probably helped them respond alike and easily. "With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Acts 5:5).

The trait of motivation within emotional intelligence aims at self-improvement. Peter's motivation appeared to be for truth and the community's improvement, while Ananias and Sapphira's seemed to focus on self-aggrandizement. It could be said that they sought to be benefactors and thus improve their situation, in which case, they were seeking self-improvement, though they were misguided.

In the case of empathy, Peter seemed regretful about the lie the couple told and appeared to have some empathy for their situation, saying, "What made you think of doing such a thing?" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Acts 5:4). There is no evidence that Ananias and Sapphira exercised empathy in the proceedings. Sapphira did not have the opportunity to express any empathy or sympathy for her deceased husband before she passed away, as the Scripture says, "About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Acts 5:7).

Finally, in the domain of social skill, Peter had much recent experience speaking in public and garnering support via the Holy Spirit from his speeches before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4 and the crowds in Acts 2 and 3. Again, there is no indication that Ananias and Sapphira exercised any social skill. The text does not relate any of their previous interactions with the Christian community to offer clues about this topic.



## Application

Peter and the early church were thrust into their situation by the death of Jesus. Peter had spent time with the supreme example of emotional intelligence, as Jesus taught him and the other disciples in depth. Ananias and Sapphira did not share this experience. In this passage, Peter was the best example of employing emotional intelligence. In contrast to Ananias and Sapphira, Peter had the appropriate motivation to find the truth and lead in obedience to God. He had the benefit of unparalleled experience with Jesus to develop the attributes of emotional intelligence.

## Conclusion

Adults involved in organizations may have to sign agreements or operate within engagement parameters, but they are not likely to have contract language requiring them to employ emotional intelligence. Yet, expectations may still exist. Oswald et al. (2015) indicated that being disconnected from one's emotions is not uncommon. They emphasized that a person cannot master something they do not recognize. As leaders, each interaction and case in an organization may differ, and the preparation for each could be extensive or minute. However, employing the elements of emotional intelligence and purposefully learning to perfect that craft will help leaders get the best performance from their teams, regardless of the environment.

Peter's development of emotional intelligence skills under Jesus and as a leader in the early church were precursors to his example in Acts 5:1-11. An investment in emotional intelligence training should pay dividends. Dustman (2018) recommended such training for Christian colleges, and Goleman (2020) laid out proposed steps to teach elements of it to children. Further study that shows the impacts of attention to emotional intelligence development and suitable training methods would help to advance the concept.

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