



“We Must Obey God Rather Than Men”

Series: Acts - Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ

Acts 5:12-42

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This is truly a great text that we are looking at this morning for a number of reasons and I am excited for us to mine its riches. As we do that, I want to start by setting this text in its larger context of what Luke is doing as he writes these early chapters of Acts and then I want to ground it in its immediate context. Ok? So, first, think with me about the larger context. As you read these early chapters of Acts, there is a pattern that begins to emerge, a framework that Luke establishes as he presents these events. As we read Acts we see Luke alternating between a picture of the church by itself – a picture of the church gathered in fellowship with the Lord and with one another – and a then a picture of the church engaging the world around them.

Let me show you what I mean. In chapter 1, we see the church alone, after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, pouring through the Scriptures, praying together, filling up the number of apostles and waiting upon the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then in chapter 2, after the Holy Spirit has fallen in power, we see the church in the world, Peter fearlessly preaching to those who had crucified Christ and thousands converted and added to the church. At the end of chapter 2, Luke again returns to a description of the church gathered together, giving the classic description of the life of the church in verses 42-47. In chapter 3 through verse 22 of chapter 4, we see the church in the world again, filled with the Spirit, doing mercy ministry and always, always preaching Christ and for the first time we see opposition and persecution raise its ugly head as Peter and John are thrown in jail and later released. It’s in this context that Peter states clearly the inevitability of hostility between the world system in all of its forms and Christianity saying: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19–20, ESV) There can be no compromise between the gospel and the world. Starting in verse 23, the scene shifts again, this time to the church in prayer to the Sovereign Lord of Creation and a visible picture of the presence of God with His people who really and truly trust in Him: “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4:31, ESV)

This pattern that Luke establishes in the way that he records the events of Acts gives us good insight into the life of the church and the balance of the life of the people of God. Sometimes churches will swing too far in the direction of its own fellowship and becomes turned in on itself, losing sight of the fact that we are the only witness to the world, appointed by Christ to take the gospel into every corner of the earth. On the other hand, you have churches that will spend so much time outwardly focused and engaging the culture that they lose their grasp on the gospel, on Christ, on their identity, on worship, and on what is their true identity. Both extremes are wrong – there has to be a proper balance of worship, fellowship, and witness. Worship without witness is self-absorption; “ministry” without worship is mere humanitarianism. Do you see that? That is the broader context of Acts.

In the text that we are looking at today, the church is engaging the world again, and this engagement comes on the heels of God’s judgment on Ananias and Sapphira for the grave sin of spiritual hypocrisy and deception. It was heavy discipline from the Lord, a demonstration of His holiness and an unmistakable declaration of His expectation that His people be holy and honest before the Lord and one another. God hates hypocrisy. Great fear fell upon the church as a result of this judgment as even more, a sense of the vastness and significance of the holiness of God, the seriousness of what it means to be His people, and of what it means to worship Him and to be a faithful follower of Christ and a part of the church has come upon this community. So it is on the heels of this divine judgment that we see the

Power Of A Purified Church (12-16) Pick it up with me in verse 12: “Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.” (Acts 5:12–16, ESV)

There is no doubt that the church was shaken by the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira, and they must have wondered if God would remove His favor from them, and yet what we see is that the exact opposite happened. The Apostles continued their ministry in the temple and as a

testimony that God was still indeed with them, regularly they performed signs and wonders by the power of the Holy Spirit that pointed to the presence of Christ with them, that pointed to God's authentication of them as His true messengers and servants. It was a powerful display, the healing of the sick and the freeing of those oppressed by demons – a testimony to the eternal power of Christ and the cross to heal men's souls and free them from the snare and power of Satan and sin, a testimony that Christ was present with His church and present with His Apostles. The effect was astonishing on the people of Jerusalem and those from towns around Jerusalem. Their esteem for the apostles grew. Peter, a man once crippled by fear and pride, was becoming recognized as a man transformed, a man under the anointing of God, a man powerful in the Lord, a man who spoke the true words of the Living God. So great was the esteem of the people that they brought sick in to the streets hoping that his shadow might fall upon them. Superstitious? Yes, but the presence of God with Peter was evident to everyone. They were deeply impressed with his words and his works and recognized him as man of God and an apostle of Christ and hoped that through close proximity to him they might be healed – not that he was laboring to craft this reputation. He was a man of God in reality first and in reputation only secondarily. Peter and these men were different from the religious men of Jerusalem, the pious and pompous priests. Their lives testified to the power of Christ and it begs the question – are we as conspicuous, obvious, striking to those in the world in our own submission and faith and communion with Christ and if not, why not?

I want us to see something else here. Luke says: None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women... They seem like two contradictory statements so how do we reconcile them? Well, here is what was going on. The display of God's holiness in judging Ananias and Sapphira and the display of His power through the apostles and their preaching of the Word of God, had two different effects. First, it had the effect of weeding out the half-hearted, the uncommitted, the hangers-on, the pseudo-religious, and the posers. If this is how the Holy God dealt with hypocrisy, and clearly by the works of the apostles He is a gloriously powerful God, it was enough to drive away the false professors and put the fear of God into them. It scared off all but the totally committed and had a purifying effect on the church.

And that purifying effect made the witness and the preaching of the church more and more powerful. As the church was purified, the power of the Holy Spirit was amplified, and multitudes of people – Luke stops trying to count – were justified through faith in Christ. And let me just say something about that; it was not the miracles that saved anyone. Miracles by themselves do not create faith. Scripture attests to this over and over. In the parable of the

rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, Jesus told of the man in Hades who said: “And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’” (Luke 16:27–31, ESV)

It is not miracles, signs and wonders that create faith, it is the hearing and believing of the Word of God. “For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:13–17, ESV) The emphasis in the rest of this text is on the preaching of the Word, and particularly on the preaching of Jesus Christ and Him crucified and risen from the dead.

This is true church growth, men and women added to the Lord, by the Lord, by His sovereign work, by conversion, by the preaching of the Word of God, by the sovereign outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as people are coming to receive Jesus Christ as Messiah, Lord, Savior, Prophet, Priest and King. It is all of God. It is no mystery, no program. The Apostles are living for Christ, loving Christ and people, preaching Christ, and men and women, the elect of God, are being drawn to Him.

And all of this serves as a catalyst for the main message of the sermon this morning. It is the backdrop for the increasing persecution of the church and the Holy Spirit wrought resolve and determined devotion of our fathers in the faith – a resolve and devotion that ought to mark us as well. People are being saved, the church is growing, the name of Christ is being preached and the high priest in Jerusalem and the Sadducees, the greater part of the Sanhedrin, are filled with fury and jealousy. And Luke records their

Opposition to Christ and the People of God (17-26) Luke writes: “But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.” (Acts 5:17–18, ESV) They “rose up” – they decided to take a stand, to do something to stop the spread of the Christ’s name, the growth of this movement they despised – fueled by jealousy, and they arrested the twelve and put them in prison. Jealous of whom? Jealous of what?

They were jealous of Christ, of His fame, of the preaching of His name. They thought they had gotten rid of Him when they conspired to put Him to death but His fame now was greater than it was when he was still alive in His flesh on this earth. They could not be rid of this man! They were jealous of the Apostles, irritated at the success of the church. They were angry that these men, whom they had already warned not to preach in “that name” were doing just that. They were envious of the Apostles and the esteem in which they were held – esteem that belonged to them! They were jealous because it was Jesus’ name that was being proclaimed by these men, these men who were preaching powerfully and working miracles in His Name, that name, and people were following them and their Jesus and not the Sanhedrin.

So the Sanhedrin do the only thing than men can do when they are not on the side of truth – attempt to silence and intimidate the Apostles by throwing them into jail. That is the way they are going to stop the spread of this gospel of Christ and His church. Can you hear God laughing? I’m not being irreverent here. Do you hear Him laughing, because He is. “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”” (Psalm 2:1–6, ESV) God has set His Christ on the throne of the heavenly Jerusalem. Is it any wonder that His name would be proclaimed in power in the earthly Jerusalem as well?

The Apostles are thrown in jail and God responds. “But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.” (Acts 5:19–21a, ESV) Grasp the beauty of the divine irony here. The Sadducees did not even believe in angels and God sends an angel to bring the Apostles out of jail. This is epic! Not only that, but the angel commissions them -- “Go and

stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” He doesn’t set them free so they can run and hide. He sends them right back to the temple to preach the words of this Life – the words of Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life. That’s what Christianity is – it’s Christ, it’s a life, not a set of beliefs, not a moral code, but a Life – Life, all of Life, found in Christ alone. The language used by the angel has the sense of command to steadfastness and dogged determination; to hold their ground, stand firm, and deliver the message. They waste no time in going to the temple and being about the Father’s business.

And now is when the impotence and the ineptitude of the Sanhedrin are put on full display. They are in control of nothing. Luke records: “Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.” Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to.” (Acts 5:21–24, ESV) They are all together now and they are really going to let the Apostles have it. They get all their ducks in a row and send for the prisoners...and the prison is empty. They have vanished! What in the world is going on? What is going to happen next? How are they ever going to deal with this issue once and for all? Certainly someone let them out of jail, secreted them away and they will never find them. Not quite. As they are sitting there perplexed, Luke says: “And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.” Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.” (Acts 5:25–26, ESV) This is like the Keystone cops but it is about to get deadly serious. The imagined might of the Sanhedrin is about to be met by

Holy Spirit Wrought Resolve (27-39) Look at verse 27: “And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”” (Acts 5:27–28, ESV) The Sanhedrin is doing its best to flex its muscle and intimidate the Apostles into silence but in reality, it is an unknowing admission of their own impotence and powerlessness before the purposes of God. “We told you not to do this. We warned you and here you are teaching in this name, filling Jerusalem with that name, trying to bring that man’s blood on us.” Trying nothing! The blood of Christ was on their head and they knew it. They stirred up the crowd at Jesus’ trial and led them in saying: “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25, ESV) It was on their heads

and they refused to repent, refused to acknowledge their guilt and the preaching of the Apostles was tantamount to an indictment of them before the throne of God and in the eyes of the people. They are getting ready to let the hammer drop, working to the crescendo of their accusation of the Apostles when Peter, boldly speaks.

“But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29, ESV) The Sanhedrin were impressed with themselves, thought themselves mighty rulers, powerful men, a force to be reckoned, had an exaggerated idea of their own importance and power and the Apostles were not impressed. With and with one sentence Peter says in essence “You think too much of yourselves. We must obey God not mere men!” Peter states clearly the firm resolve of the Apostles.

Peter does not mince words. He simply states the truth. Look at what he says in verses 30-32. Take it phrase by phrase. He gives the Sanhedrin a dose of reality: The God of our fathers raised Jesus...the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who is, He raised up Jesus to be the Messiah, to be King over His people, sending Him into the world in human flesh, to be the Lord of His people. Whom you killed by hanging him on a tree...you rejected Him, hated Him, despised Him, falsely accused Him and killed him on a tree supposing to render Him accursed before God but what you meant for evil, God meant for good and orchestrated that death as the satisfaction for His peoples sins. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior...God exalted Him by raising Him from the dead, exalting Him and giving to Him the highest place of authority, making Him Leader, the Trailblazer, the Prince of Life, the Only Savior of sinners. To give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins...He’s the one who grants repentance unto life, who frees our will to turn from sin and be saved from the wrath to come, who alone can give forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him...we have experienced Him and His glory, are His ambassadors in this earth, recipients of His grace, witnesses in word and in deed and so is the Spirit of God who has sealed us to Him and witnesses through us as we obey the Living God.

Peter is saying in essence, “How could we possibly listen to you? How could we give our allegiance to you and disobey Yahweh, God of Israel, Christ His Son our Prince and Savior, and obey mere men such as you? When it comes to our souls and the allegiance of our hearts, and the commands of our God and King, you have no jurisdiction over us! What you ask is impossible.” This was the resolve of the Apostles, the mind of the Apostles. Are we so bold, so

resolved regarding Christ's Lordship? Are we so quick to testify to Christ, to remain faithful, to be resolved in our souls in the face of opposition imagined or real? Charles Spurgeon says: But we are so gentle and quiet, we do not use strong language about other people's opinions; but let them go to hell out of charity to them. We are not at all fanatical. We would not wish to save any sinner who does not particularly wish to be saved. Neither would we thrust our opinions upon them, though we know they are being lost for lack of the knowledge of Christ crucified. Do not drive away your existence upon baser ends, but count the glory of Christ to be the only object worthy of your manhood's strength, the spread of the truth the only pursuit worthy of your mental powers. Spend and be spent in your Master's service.

When you are gripped by God your King, by Christ your Prince, by the gospel of grace – really gripped and mastered and owned by Him – the joy, the delight, the gratitude and the resolve – yes, the resolve – that it gives your soul is like no other. When you know where you stand and with whom you stand, it makes the rest of life come into crystal clear focus and it did for these disciples. We must obey God! Let me ask you. Are you resolved? Do you know where you stand? On what have you established your life? Of what are you truly resolved?

Let us once and for all abandon the notion that following Christ can be assimilated into a life of dwelling at peace with and falling in line with a world and human wisdom that is run on illusions, filled with deceptions, predicated on lies, and which hates God. There is no dwelling at peace with sin in the world or in ourselves, no truce with wickedness external or internal, and no bowing to another authority that stands in direct opposition to the explicit commands of God. Following Christ, living in His name, preaching in His name will bring opposition. Now I want you to see that the Apostles were not deliberately offensive in their resolve. They did not resort to name calling or acting like petulant children. They willingly came before the Sanhedrin when they were arrested. But neither were they sheepish or apologetic. They spoke the truth, stood on the truth, lived the truth, and were resolved to be faithful to Christ whatever may come. They had no fear when they stood before the Sanhedrin, no fear to speak on God's behalf. They were resolved that God was with them, that their lives matched their profession and that they had the truth of God that set men and women free from sin and death, the truth of God that commands the souls of men. And they could not be silent. Are you as resolved?

The response of the Sanhedrin was predictable. "When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. Of course they did. It worked so well for them before with Jesus. Still, they realize they have no other option, no other way to control these zealots for Christ. So they

begin to make their plans to kill the Apostles. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. Gamaliel gives them a little history lesson about a couple of insurrections in Israel’s past and then he comes to his point. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (Acts 5:33–39, ESV)

So many people have looked at Gamaliel’s words here as filled with wisdom and an axiomatic principle of life. And in one way they are. In the ultimate sense, only that which is of God will succeed and what is of man will come to nothing, God will ultimately prevail – that is true. But Gamaliel’s advice here is shallow and it lacks real substance in this case. There have been plenty of movements and purposes of men and not of God that have had success in this age – Islam, Mormonism, Catholicism, Humanism, etc. They have all enjoyed a long run on the human stage. This is not an unalterable truth. Evil does not always come to nothing and good does not always prosper on every occasion. I have found that sometimes men who should take action will allow themselves to avoid taking the action they should take by quoting this verse to placate their conscience and here it is no difference. This isn’t great wisdom on the part of Gamaliel but instead is an excuse to avoid what is plainly before them, a clever way to turn a blind eye and not deal with the truth that is staring them in the face.

They were guilty of Christ’s murder and were supposed to be the spiritual leaders of the nation, so for the sake of their own souls, they needed to wrestle with the implications of what was taking place before their very eyes. If God did really raise Christ from the dead, if these men really were preaching and working miracles in the power of the Holy Spirit, if Christ’s death truly did pay the penalty of sin and God really did exalt Him as Prince and Savior, if He alone gives repentance and forgiveness of sins, then they were lost, dead in their sins and they had a much greater problem than jealousy -- they already were enemies of God. Avoiding the issue does not allow you to avoid the consequences. This is not great wisdom by Gamaliel, it’s spiritual laziness.

Gamaliel's advice prevailed in this case...well, almost. The Sanhedrin elects to first beat these men before releasing them and in this last scene we see clearly portrayed before us the determined devotion of the Apostles.

Determined Devotion (39-42) Luke says: So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go." (Acts 5:39-40, ESV) Before letting the Apostles free, they beat them, that is in all likelihood they were whipped with 39 lashes and sent away with another warning. They had hoped to send the Apostles away terrified, downcast, and silent. But it did not turn out that way at all. They did not silently slink away to tend their wounds. Luke says: "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name." (Acts 5:41, ESV) I want you to think about that. They just took a beating. 39 lashes, bleeding and sore, they are rejoicing. You could probably have followed them into the streets of Jerusalem by following the trail of blood and they are rejoicing; rejoicing for suffering for the sake of the name of Christ. But that's not all. "And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus." (Acts 5:42, ESV) They didn't quit. They kept it up.

What is it that drives these men to such fearless faithfulness in the face of real and increasing persecution? What makes someone endure that, makes them rejoice and go back to the same thing that got them beaten in the first place. It's their love of Jesus. They're gripped by the love of Jesus for them. Their hearts and souls are convinced of Christ's love for them and they love Him in return. Deep in their souls they know that all their sins, though they be red like crimson, in Jesus Christ they're as white as snow. Christ had made them His own, rescued them and brought them into His eternal kingdom. You didn't need to teach these men to evangelize. You didn't need to give these men a system. Their love of Jesus drove them, in the temple and from house to house, to teach and to preach that Jesus is the Christ. This is Christianity --whole-souled commitment to Christ. Christ was everything to them and to have Him and exalt Him was worth anything any suffering at all.

It seems to take such a long time for us to realize that when we were called to follow Christ we were also called to suffer. Paul wrote: "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake," (Philippians 1:29, ESV)

None of us has ever suffered like these men did, but listen opposition, difficulties, heartaches, rejection, sufferings that are specifically related to devotion to Christ – they are unavoidable. But when suffering is considered a privilege, devotion to Christ does not wane – it grows greater and deeper.

No doubt, these men were amazing men, but they were only men. This resolve, this determined devotion, these are not things of the past, relics from a bygone golden age of Christianity – they are to be ours today. This is the stuff of faithful and true Christianity – not perfection – but resolve and determined devotion to the One who resolved to love us in eternity past, to devote Himself to our redemption at the cost of His own life, and has determined to remain devoted to us for all of eternity with an unchanging and steadfast love. Their hearts were aflame with love for Christ. They felt a holy urge toward obedience and to speak of Jesus and the Life. The mark of a true Christian is not perfection, but consecration, dedication and devotion to Christ. A faithful Christian is not someone without faults, but someone who has resolved in His heart to give himself given without reserve to God knowing that whatever suffering that may bring is far short of the gain that is found in Christ. Are you so resolved? Are you so devoted? Has Christ fully captured and have you willingly surrendered your mind, affections, and will?

I want to close this sermon this morning with a quote from an English theologian of the 17th century William Law. Not everything that he said was of worth, but this nugget surely is. He said: “If you stop and ask yourself why you are not so devoted as the (early) Christians, your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it.” Beloved, let us set our hearts to intend it, for Jesus our Leader and Savior is worth it.

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