

Catch and Release

Series: Fully Devoted Followers

Acts 5:17-42

Sunday, November 8, 2020

Before the days of streaming and on-demand media, people watched live TV. If your favorite program was on at 8:00 PM on Wednesday night, you needed to be in front of your TV at 8:00 PM on Wednesday night. Your only other option was to record your show on your VCR. But every once in a while, when you sat down to watch the tape, you would discover that the episode was one you had seen before. Back in those days, we called these *reruns*.

It might feel like our passage today is a rerun. The story goes something like this: the apostles preach the gospel, the apostles are arrested and stand trial for preaching the gospel, the apostles are released on the condition that they stop preaching the gospel, and then the apostles go back to preaching the gospel.

Sound familiar? With a few other details mixed in, that was the plot line we looked at two weeks ago. In Acts 4, the story centered on Peter and John whereas here in Acts 5 the story involves *all* of the apostles. The details differ but the basic storyline is the same. So why would Luke include this second story? Is this sermon going to be a *rerun*? Open up to Acts 5 and let's consider what Luke—and ultimately God—is saying to us in this passage. We'll begin the story in verse 17.

Up to this point, the response to the apostles' ministry had been mostly positive. In fact, we'll see next week when Pastor Jerry walks us through verses 12-16 of Acts 5, that God was doing amazing things through the apostles and that many people were coming to faith in Jesus. And yet, there was a group of religious leaders known as the Sadducees who were becoming increasingly upset over what was taking place in Jerusalem.

Their beef with the apostles was partly theological. The Sadducees rejected the apostles' teaching about the resurrection. Look back briefly at the apostles first encounter with the Sadducees in the previous chapter:

“The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 4:1-2, NIV).

The Sadducees believed that when a person dies, their soul dies along with their body. So you can imagine the conflict they had with the apostles. At the heart of the gospel message the apostles not only claimed that God raised Jesus from the dead, but as well all who trust in Jesus will one day be raised to new life.

But the main reason why the Sadducees were so upset was a bit more shallow. Luke notes that they were “*filled with jealousy*” (v. 17). Yes, the apostles’ teaching troubled the council, but so did the fact that the balance of power in Jerusalem was shifting. And so the apostles—all twelve this time—were arrested and thrown into prison. The Sadducees were sending a message: this is what happens to those who follow Jesus.

But that strategy backfired. God had other plans. That night, God sent an angel to rescue the apostles. In verse 19, the text says that the angel of the Lord opened the door and brought the apostles out. And the very next morning, Peter, John, and the others were back in business.

Meanwhile, when it came time to put the apostles on trial, the prison guards were unable to find the accused. What made matters worse was that there was no way to figure out *how* those twelve men managed to escape. According to the report in verse 23, the prison was still locked and there were no signs of a jailbreak.

Fortunately for the jailers, the apostles were not missing for very long. Luke notes in verse 25 that someone saw the apostles back in the temple teaching the people. They had not gone into hiding, instead, they boldly went back to the scene of the crime and started preaching about Jesus again.

What do we do with a text like this? How do we move from reading this passage to applying God’s word? I doubt that any of us are going to be arrested and thrown in jail anytime soon for preaching the gospel. But we should anticipate that as followers of Jesus, our convictions, our message, and our lifestyle will be met with confrontation. Even though this passage is all about opposition and persecution, I believe that there are three *encouragements* that we can take away from the text this morning and we’ve already seen the first.

The apostles faced opposition but they remained faithful to the Lord's commission (vv. 17-26). One of the highlights of this passage is the miraculous rescue from prison. This was so extraordinary that in verse 26 when the officers went to arrest the apostles once more, they did so with great caution. But alongside the extraordinary *miracle* don’t miss the ordinariness of the apostles’ *ministry*. In the face of opposition, the apostles remained faithful to the Lord’s commission.

Back in Acts 1, the risen Jesus had enlisted the apostles to bear witness to his words and his works. They were told to preach the gospel beginning right there in Jerusalem. They obeyed, they preached, and they were arrested. And in prison they were reminded of their commission. They were told by the angel who rescued them to “*tell the people all about this new life*” (v. 20), a

life exclusively found in Jesus Christ. They were rescued, so they obeyed, they preached, and once again they faced opposition. But they remained faithful.

What made the apostles so resilient and so faithful to Christ? They were convinced of who Jesus was and of what he had done. They had to be. If these men were going to continue to “*stand in the temple courts...and tell the people all about this new life*” (v. 20), then they had better be convinced in the face of opposition and potentially their own death that Jesus was *indeed* the resurrection and the life. It would be foolish for anyone who *wasn't* completely convinced of the truth of the gospel to preach Christ and to face persecution.

Friends, opposition to the gospel may not look the same in your life as it did in the lives of the Twelve, but I promise you that it *will* come. Depending on your context it might be subtle or it might be overt, but it *will* come. For some Christians their very life may be threatened. Tonight, when we gather for *Second Sunday Prayer*, we will take some time to pray for the persecuted church. We will pray for brothers and sisters in Christ who live in parts of the world where Christian faith is violently opposed.

But for many of us, opposition to our faith will take other forms. It may be your job, your lifestyle, or your reputation that is at risk. Whatever form opposition takes, in order to stand firm you will need to stand on the truth of the gospel. Broad shoulders and thick skin will be of no help to you.

Luke's story continues in verse 27. The apostles were again brought before the council. The council reminded them of their crime in verse 28:

“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name... Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood” (v. 28, NIV).

That's what opposition is. It's an assertion of power. The dog barks so that you'll back off the lawn. Muscles are flexed so that you're intimidated. A threat is made so that you'll think twice. And if you haven't made up your mind ahead of time, it's likely that you will back off.

But Peter and the apostles held firm. Take a look at their response in verse 29:

“We must obey God rather than human beings” (v. 29, NIV).

As Peter spoke these words, the rest of the apostles were right there nodding their heads in agreement. But it's worth considering for a moment just what Peter meant by this. If we misunderstand the meaning, we may find ourselves trying to use this verse to justify any time we want to be free to break man's

rules. This verse is definitely not releasing us from *all* human authority. Peter himself would later write under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.” (1 Peter 2:13-14, NIV).

Remember, the apostles were told to not preach or teach *in the name of Jesus*. They were told not to bear witness to Christ, the very thing that Jesus commissioned them to do. The council had ordered them to stop teaching about the resurrection. They were banned from preaching the gospel.

But the apostles were resolved and said that they must obey God. They must preach Christ. Why? The explanation comes in verses 30-32. God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and exalted him to His own right hand. Jesus Christ is the Prince, the highest authority. He is the Savior, the one who opens the way of repentance and offers the forgiveness of sins. The apostles claimed to be witnesses to his resurrection. But so too was the Holy Spirit, the one who had now come and ushered in this new era of salvation. We *must* preach the gospel. We must obey God.

That brings us to our second encouragement from these verses: **The apostles faced intimidation but their resolve was rooted in the resurrection (vv. 27-32).**

We’re less than two months away from wrapping up 2020. Can I get an *amen*? How many of us are still keeping our 2020 New Year’s resolutions? How many of us didn’t bother to make resolutions?

Those who make resolutions tend to resolve to do what they *ought* to do, or they resolve to do what they would *like* to do. I *ought* to eat better and lose some weight. I *ought* to spend less time at the office and more time at home. That’s how we typically approach resolutions. The apostles, however, resolved to do what they *must* do. In this case, to give in to intimidation and to not preach Christ would have meant a rejection of the gospel.

But where did their resolve come from? Where did this group of former fishermen, tax collectors, and sinners find the strength to stand up to the religious elite of their day? They weren’t scholars. They had no theological training. They were ordinary men. They were weak.

Their resolve was rooted in the gospel itself. Their decision to preach Christ in spite of intimidation was rooted in the resurrection. Those who grasp the gospel understand that we come to Christ in weakness and in full dependence

on him. We cannot save ourselves and we cannot do anything in our own strength. Jesus himself told his disciples,

“*Apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5, NIV).

So let’s get practical. Who intimidates you? Who is the one person that scares you to death when you think about bringing up spiritual things? Who do you find hardest to talk with about your walk with Jesus? These people might not oppose you, but they sure do intimidate you. So what do you think you need to overcome this intimidation? More knowledge? More education? Greater spiritual maturity? What you really need is to embrace your weakness and to root your resolve in Jesus’s resurrection.

That’s all the apostles had going for them. That’s all they needed. Yes, knowledge, skill, and maturity have their place, but our power does not come from these things. What makes us think that *anything* we bring to the table would give us greater power than the power of the risen Christ in us?

Writing to Christians in the city of Corinth, the Apostle Paul said of his weaknesses and feelings of intimidation,

“And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5, NIV).

The final encouragement we see in this passage comes at the story’s end. **The apostles faced suffering but they rejoiced at the honor of suffering for Christ (vv. 33-42).**

In response to the apostles doubling down on obedience to God, Luke says in verse 33 that the council was so enraged that they aimed to put the apostles to death. That’s what happened to Jesus. When his enemies realized they couldn’t get him to stop teaching, their next move was to silence him—permanently. Who knows what the council would have done had it not been for one of the Pharisees.

“When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the

Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God”” (vv. 33-39, NIV).

Gamaliel was a well respected religious leader at that time. His advice to the council was to let this thing play itself out. These little rebellious religious groups were fairly commonplace. Gamaliel noted two examples and pointed to the fact that both situations turned out to be nothing. In other words, perhaps the apostles were simply another one of these fringe groups that would rise up and then fall away. In the end, the council took Gamaliel’s advice.

It’s true that the things of God will ultimately prevail. Jesus is building his church and not even hell itself will overthrow it. But the powers of hell and the devil himself are sure going to try.

In verse 40, the apostles were finally released and again were told to shut down their ministry, but not without first trying to further intimidate the apostles with a severe beating. The Twelve were not just beaten, they were flogged.

Most likely, the apostles experienced the punishment known as the forty lashes minus one. Thirty-nine times these men were whipped with a leather strap across the back and chest. As they were beaten and likely crying out in pain, they may have realized that they were receiving the very same flogging that Jesus had received.

This was a beating intended to make the apostles think twice about continuing their ministry. It did make them think, and they did continue. Look at how Luke says they responded in the last two verses of this passage:

“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah” (vv. 41-42, NIV).

They left the council beaten and bloody but with joy in their hearts. Don’t misunderstand—in no way did they take pleasure in their punishment. There was nothing enjoyable about their suffering. Their joy came from knowing they had been fully obedient to Christ, and suffering as his witness only confirmed that.

I can’t tell you how or when you will experience suffering for the name of Jesus, but I can promise that you will. And if your joy is tied to how you feel, then when pain comes your way, your joy will disappear. But if your joy is tied to the

gospel and to obeying the Lord, you will see the honor that comes with being dishonored for his name. You will be able to rejoice in your suffering. And when suffering intensifies and it becomes harder to hold on to joy, bring to mind how Jesus embraced suffering for our sake. Hebrews 12:2 tells us to,

“[Look] to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

What do we do with a passage like Acts 5? I hope that in looking to the apostle's experience of opposition, intimidation, and suffering, we will be encouraged by God's word this morning, encourage to remain faithful to the Lord's commission, to root or resolve in the resurrection, and to rejoice at the honor of suffering for Christ. It wasn't easy for the apostles to live and minister in the face of threats to gospel. And it won't always be easy for us to continue as Jesus' disciples. But the Lord is worthy and the reward is great. May we be encouraged and equipped for discipleship as the apostles were in the days of the early church.