

## ***Acts 5:17-42: Witnesses In Jerusalem III: Vs. Sanhedrin: Round Two!***

### ***Preface:***

Last week Bob guided us through an uncomfortable passage of Acts, but a powerful one. He invited us to consider what an authentic, Spirit-empowered community looks like, and challenged us to consider how deeply we engage with that community. The message is online if you want to get to it.

We're moving forward into the next scene in this story Luke's left us with. It comes with its own challenges and drama, as they all do. Let's pray, and then let's do a little set-up work for what we see today.

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Set Up: "Witnesses In Jerusalem"***

In terms of Luke's message, today's passage is the third of four scenes specifically showing the way the Church acts as Jesus' "witnesses to Jerusalem." We actually skipped past the second scene, on account of the snow day that we had a half-dozen weeks ago. We would have looked at a scene in which the Church

wrestles with the Sanhedrin.

Today, again, the Sanhedrin gets all up in the Church's business. The Sanhedrin was the leading council of the Sadducees, led by the Chief Priest. The Sadducees was one of Israel's major religious factions, which included the Pharisees that we hear so much about, as well as the Essenes who we never hear from at all, because they were a separatist group. The Sadducees' source of power and authority was the Temple and the Temple-system, and they were deeply influential and powerful in Jerusalem especially, but all Israel, too.

### ***Set Up: Brethren Things***

And I'm going to make reference, in a little bit, to two things ideas that are really Brethren ideas. Two things that are a part of our spiritual tradition, and influence the life of our congregation whether we even realize it.

The first of these things is a little phrase that helps us think about the relationship between the Holy Spirit, Scripture, and Jesus. Brethren have traditionally said that the Inner Word, that is, the Holy Spirit, helps us understand the Outer Word, that is, Scripture, so that we can conform to the image and testify to the truth of

the Living Word, that is, Jesus. It's a little bit of word-play! But the Spirit and Scripture work dynamically to help us keep faith with Jesus. This is expanded a bit on that insert in our bulletins.

Brethren have also deeply believed in something we'd call the "Hermeneutical Community." Hermeneutic is just a fancy word for interpretation. Hermeneutics is about interpreting things; biblical hermeneutics is about interpreting the Bible. And what we believe, whether or not we could clearly articulate it off the cuff is that it takes all of us, together, to interpret the Bible correctly. It's not just that one person's interpretation that matters, certainly not my interpretation that matters, but no one's interpretation can be completely tossed out the window if they are sincerely relying on the Inner Word and Outer Word, sincerely trying to keep faith with the Living Word. Now: We can't pool our ignorance and call it knowledge, our opinions on a passage don't equal valid interpretation. There are those among us who have studied context, history, language, tradition more than the rest of us. But its when we come together around Scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit, in our attempts to emulate and obey Jesus, that our interpretations are closest to the best they can be.

This is...just a principle. It's something we'll come back around to in a little bit.

### ***Set Up: Law-Breaking & Faith-Keeping***

And let me just lay out what we see today as simply as I can.

What we see today is what happens when God guides his followers in a way that brings them in conflict with civil authorities. Today's passage is about law-breaking and faith-keeping, law-breaking and faith-keeping. These things are not mutually exclusive. But in today's passage they are brought into conflict.

### ***The Scene: Hey, Jealousy.***

So. The party of the Sadducees are getting jealous of the Apostles and the Church, right? They're looking for a way to get the Apostles arrested, just like the Pharisees were looking for a way to arrest Jesus.

This shouldn't be surprising. Thousands of people have begun to detach themselves from the Sadducees. It's not an existential crisis, but it's frustrating. The Sadducees are realizing this new, young institution, this people-movement, it's not going play by their

structured rules, it doesn't respect the society they've created, oversee, and maintain. They are jealous and dismissive in equal measure.

So, because the Sadducees have both religious and civil power, they arrest the apostles, put them in jail. And this is key. They are able to shut up the Apostles, shut down the Apostles, because they can enforce their will on people. This new upstart community the Apostles lead is voluntary, not required. The High Priest and his ilk are used to requiring obedience, and punishing those who don't listen. But you can never stifle a volunteer community from the outside; it's like trying to make peace through violence.

### ***Release!***

"But during the night," we read, "An angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life." They go to sleep, get up, and do what they're told.

God, through an Angel, frees them and charges them to "tell people all about this new life." The old way of life the Sadducees oversee is one in which newness is a threat to be imprisoned. Change itself is a threat,

because change is a threat to the power these religious and political elites hold. The new life of the Apostles is one in which you do what God says, and don't fear any threat that comes your way, because no punishment is greater than God's power to save.

### ***Trial!***

The Sanhedrin gathers. They call for the Apostles. They are going to try them for blasphemy, most likely, with all parliament in attendance. And its dramatic, because we know: They ain't there! They're out in the Temple, preaching, teaching people about "this new way of life" like they were told to do. They usher the Apostles in, but gently, because they already know they've lost the crowd's allegiance. The High Priest--the most powerful Israelite, but whose power entirely rests in his role. And they're accused of two things: Spreading Jesus' teaching, and blaming the priestly class for Jesus' death. Both of these things are bad for the Sanhedrin's power and influence, right? But they're shocked that the Apostles won't listen to them:

***27 The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. 28 "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet***

***you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."***

***Conflict:***

***29 Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings! 30 The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. 31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. 32 We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."***

There's a reason that they are furious. Peter is saying to them, the governing religious body of Israel, that they are not just wrong when it comes to doctrine, theology, life itself, but they are so fundamentally wrong that they're faithless. They are the ones blaspheming; they are the ones who don't get it. Peter and the rest accuse the High Priest and Sanhedrin of killing Jesus, and then they use a whole pile of language to say that This Jesus who they killed was God, .

And to call Jesus Prince and Savior, as the NIV puts it now, is...clever. We're more familiar with "Lord and Savior." We could in this moment say "Emperor and Savior," though, and that would get at what Peter is doing right here.

These titles--Lord and Savior--were, in greek, titles that the Roman ruler took for himself. The emperor claimed to be "Emperor and Savior." And what Peter is saying, rhetorically, is that while the Apostles serve Jesus, who is not only God but also their emperor--the one they have to show ultimate loyalty too. While this what's true of them, the Sanhedrin is actually beholden to Rome. The Sanhedrin has sold their souls to the Roman Emperor. They don't simply not worship God anymore, they haven't simply killed the Messiah, but they have become tools and puppets of the occupying army, the empire that hung all those people up on crosses outside the city, Jesus including. In fact, by saying that "you killed Jesus by hanging him on a cross," Peter is pointing out that they use the weapons the Romans have offered them. So of course, the next line we read is this:

***33 When [the Sanhedrin] heard this, they were***



***furious and wanted to put them to death.***

Of course they do. Peter has said they've betrayed God, and they've betrayed Israel. They've become emperor worshippers, and use Rome's military might. They don't care about faithfulness, about God, they care about maintaining their party power, the Temple's importance, and what's a little murder to keep a sacred institution continuing. The Apostles remember, though, Jesus saying "every stone of this thing is coming down." Their identities have no basis in the faithless, murderous institutions that the priests have rooted themselves in.

There is no room for dialogue between these two groups, right? Do we see that? There is a fundamental difference in worldview, perspective, mode, and loyalty to God, here.

***Wait It Out:***

Gamaliel, a law teacher who everyone loves gets up, and basically says, "Let it ride." Let's not kill them. Religious activists come and go. "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.”

For Luke, this is a gimme, you know? One more bit of evidence the Church was right, and the Sanhedrin wrong. They don't stop fighting the Apostles, of course, because the Church only becomes more of an existential threat as time goes by. And of course, this makes sense...they are fighting against God, and have been since they partnered with Rome to kill the Messiah. Luke uses the scene as one more way to say the Apostles were in the right. Gamaliel is pretty quotable, though.

And we read this:

***God Rather Than Man:***

***40 His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.***

***41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 42 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.***

To break the law is to receive whatever punishment the law doles out. That's just the way things work. For these disciples, it was to be flogged--whipped with spiked lashes. But even after it, they totally ignore what the authorities tell them. I think it's kind of hilariously bold and inspiring. They get flogged, and, we read, the authorities "order them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go." And then we read, "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."

They aren't scared of more punishment. They are going to obey God rather than people. In fact, they are going to be a part of a community with a new honor system entirely. To be jailed and publicly flogged would be to lose reputation in a society in which reputation was everything.

But the Apostles realize they don't serve Caesar, and God is more than they thought God was. They have a Lord and Savior who sits at God's right hand, Jesus the Messiah, and he has set about re-establishing his

Kingdom on earth. They are citizens of an alternative society, a new Kingdom. In that society, honor and shame get flipped upside down.

The Sanhedrin deals in shame, their society deals in shame; but when the Apostles are shamed for Jesus' sake, it turns into honor. Jesus just...subverts it, flips it around, puts out the Sanhedrin's power with the pride and affection he offers those who suffer in solidarity with him for no reason other than they resist evil, and obey him.

### ***Summary:***

In today's passage the Apostles speak to what I have come to take as a basic principle of Christian behavior. We must obey God rather than people. Their obedience to God puts them in conflict with obedience to the religious and civil authorities, both. Because of course, they are one and the same. Peter shames the Sanhedrin by pointing out their collusion with the Roman occupiers and their abandonment of God. They try to shame Peter and the Apostles by flogging them publicly. But the Church transforms that shame into honor.

### ***When?***

I think a basic question that today's passage leaves us with is this: When?

When?

When are we supposed to obey God rather than people? Under what circumstances is law-breaking for the sake of faith-keeping something we are supposed to do? If we take Peter's words and the Apostles example here as a model for us, which I do. When are we supposed to obey God rather than people? Break laws in order to keep faith?

This isn't easy to figure out. For some of us, we're basically oriented toward obedience to civil authorities, predisposed to accept law as basically a positive thing most of the time. For some of us, we're basically oriented toward suspicion, predisposed to think of law as basically a tool of mass oppression. Actually, most of us have no examined perspective at all, we just go with the flow. Live.

Which is what these Apostles were doing before they were punished unjustly, right?

And I have no definite answer to this "When?"

question. Even Peter himself writes, in a New Testament letter, about the importance of submitting to authorities for the sake of your own honor. And yet here we see him practicing the opposite of what he preaches there. If anything, that and other biblical evidence makes me think the whole “submitting” itself is contextual, and that Christians must claim the freedom to break the law in order to keep the faith.

And yet...there are, at least, parameters to this.

### ***Obeying God:***

Peter and the Apostles are very specifically in today's scene obeying God. An angel freed them from their imprisonment and said “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.” They're simply doing what they were told by God, rather than what they were told by people. This is important. We should take Peter's advice in his first letter to “Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but instead live as servants of God.”

Unless you're not sharing--and I really wish you would--we don't often hear from angels. But we are inheritors of those Brethren resources that I mentioned

earlier, and so we're not without resources.

### ***Brethren Resources: Innies & Outies***

On the one hand, we have Scripture, its example to Jesus' way of life, and the Spirit's internal guidance as to how and when to keep faith with Jesus. Christians don't get to steal stuff, bribe people, murder just because, you know? We're constantly called to improvise Jesus' way of life in the middle of our context. And whether or not we get the direct command that Peter and the Apostles received, we have Jesus' commands, which are many. We've talked about the more difficult of these in the past, and the way they conflict, often, with what our society around us tells us to just roll with. So while we may not be invited by angels to explicitly do something today, tomorrow, the next day, we are explicitly told by Christ that we can't do nothing. We are actors, agents, people who don't just roll with the world as it is, but confront it, and at times break its rules for Jesus' sake. If we are reading Scripture, if we are drawing near to the Spirit, and if we care at all about becoming like Jesus, I think most of us will find ourselves someday having to choose between faith-keeping or law-keeping. Years ago my homiletics professor told the class, "I hope you all get arrested for something holy

someday.” Weird Christian blessing to give, but not without biblical precedent.

Or without Brethren precedent. Land was stolen, people were imprisoned. The early Brethren movement was marked with religiously-motivated civil oppression, and the church chose law-breaking in order to keep faith. To break the law is receive the law’s punishment, whether or not that punishment is “fair.”

We need to rely on the inner word of the Spirit, and the outer word of Scripture, as we try to trust, believe, and emulate the living Word of God.

***Resources: Each Other:***

And in answering the question “When?” “When should we break laws in order to keep faith?” We need to remember that we are a part of a hermeneutical community. We can’t interpret Scripture without the perspectives of each other, and I don’t think we can interpret our own lives, our experiences, without the help of each other, either.

To approximate truth takes all of us; to discern when to obey God rather than human beings actually takes



human beings who have God alive in them.

When we come to a moment in which society is telling us to do something, and we become nearly convinced that both the Inner Word of the Spirit, and the Outer Word of Scripture say that to do whatever society tells us is to reject the Living Word, Jesus, then our last step is to take the growing burden of conviction to the Church, to each other, and invite the wisdom and counsel of each other.

We do something like what Gamaliel did in offering his counsel, only when we do it, we aren't just a gimme for someone else's story; we're an example of faithfulness. And, look, someday our wisdom and counsel may be called upon by another person. If we're not drawing close to Scripture and the Spirit, if we're ignoring Jesus' example, our advice is going to be terrible.

***Today:***

This is today's passage. "We must obey God rather than human beings." This is what lingers.

Are some of us doing the opposite? Probably only we would know. If we follow Christ with all of ourselves,

Spirit and Scripture guided, there will come a moment when we have to break step with society. Faith keeping may require law-breaking, and there's nothing romantic or adventurous about that. What we have to do is ensure that what we honor most is faithfulness to Jesus, that our priorities are shaped by the words--living, inner, and outer--that surround us, and that we value the wisdom and counsel our community has to offer us. If, in the end, our obedience to God calls for a rejection of something lesser, then so be it.

Today's passage may not linger. It's not full of lessons. But it's pervaded by a basic principle: Our allegiance lies with God. What we follow, keep, or obey is always a matter of faith.