

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE HONOR OF BEING DISHONORED

Acts 5:12-42

Last Sunday, we saw in Acts 5:1-11 what happened to a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira, when they plotted to deceive not only the leaders of the church in Jerusalem but the Holy Spirit Himself (if that were possible) by lying about how much money they had gotten from the sale of some property. They claimed that they had given all the money from the sale to the church, to be used to help anyone in need. But secretly, they kept some of the money for themselves. When Peter confronted them with their deception, and gave both Ananias and Sapphira the opportunity to repent and tell the truth, they refused. And they paid a heavy price for their deceit. God took their lives, first Ananias and then Sapphira a few hours later, right on the spot. Which showed everyone who heard about it that God really does take sin seriously, and He is “not to be trifled with” (Acts 5:11, *The Message*).

Dramatic events continued to unfold in the life of the New Testament church, as we see in the remainder of Acts 5. I encourage you to open your Bible to Acts 5, and to keep it open as we look together at what God was doing in and through the lives of Simon Peter and the other apostles.

We begin at verse 12 today, though I am not going to read the entire passage. Verses 12-16 describe “miraculous signs and wonders” done by the apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit. These extraordinary signs of God’s power accompanied their witness to Christ, and confirmed the truth of their message. As a result, verse 14 says, more and more men and women came to faith in Christ and became part of the church. Those who were sick or tormented by the devil received healing. The power of God was working through Peter in such an amazing way that, when even Peter’s shadow fell on the sick, they were healed (5:15). It wasn’t Peter’s shadow that healed them. It was the power of God working through Peter in an extraordinary way.

God was on the move. The gospel was getting out. The church was growing. Lives were being changed. The sick were being healed. Then trouble arose. Again, look at verses 17-32.

UNDER ARREST

As you can tell, the chief priest and his supporters didn’t like what was going on. They didn’t like what Peter and the rest of the apostles were doing. They were jealous of the apostles’ power and their popularity with the people. So they had the apostles arrested and thrown into jail. This was not the first arrest for Peter and John. In the previous chapter (Acts 4), they had been arrested, put in jail, hauled into court, and ordered to stop teaching and preaching in the name of Jesus. This time it was all the apostles.

During the night, while they were in jail, an angel sent from God came to their rescue, and led them out of jail (5:19), which is not unlike what would happen to Peter on a later occasion, in

Acts 12, when Herod Agrippa put him in jail and intended to put him to death. But an angel of the Lord, a servant-messenger sent from God, led Peter out of the prison and rescued him from the evil clutches of Herod. We'll talk about what happened in Acts 12 another time.

What I want you to see here is what the apostles did after their release from jail. The angel who rescued them told them in verse 20 to go back to the temple courts and to openly preach the gospel message to everyone who would listen. But wouldn't that be dangerous? Wouldn't that just get them in trouble again? Wouldn't they just get arrested again? Or worse?

As it turns out, that is what happened. They did get arrested again. But the apostles were men of obedience and courage. Infused with the Holy Spirit, they were "promptly obedient" (5:21, *The Message*) to the orders they had been given. They exercised their courage muscle once again.

They willfully disobeyed the Jewish Council, which had told Peter and John not to speak again in the name of Jesus (4:17), in order to obey the angel of the Lord who told them to go out and speak "the full message of this new life" (5:21).

Like Jesus Himself, they showed that they were men of courage. And their courage honored God.

After the temple police arrested them again (5:26), the apostles were brought in before the Council (Sanhedrin) and charged with disobeying the Council's orders to stop speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus (5:27-28). "We told you not to teach in this name anymore," the high priest said, "but you keep on doing it. You're making us look bad by blaming us for this man's death. Stop it!"

Then Peter and the other apostles spoke up. Don't you love what Peter said? Don't you admire his courage and boldness? It is almost exactly the same thing Peter and John said the first time they appeared before the Council in Acts 4:19-20. Back then they said: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." Jesus had so changed their lives and everything in their world that they couldn't *not* talk about Him. They couldn't *not* tell others about Him.

Let's pause here for a moment. I think that is the kind of fire, the kind of passion, the kind of contagious enthusiasm for Jesus and the gospel that God wants us to have. Have you got it? If not, why don't we begin to ask God for it each day? Why don't we ask God each day to fill us with such a fire and passion and joy in Him that we can't *not* tell others about Jesus and His love? Will you do it?

Here is Peter, again, standing before the Council, cool, calm, and collected (in the power of the Holy Spirit). And he states this guiding principle in verse 29 as succinctly as he can: "We must obey God rather than men." Not only were Peter and the rest of the apostles men of courage. They were men of conviction, too. They knew what they believed, and they weren't about to let a little heat from the Jewish leaders get to them.

This kind of thing may not happen to us very often. Maybe it has never happened to you. Maybe it never will. But if it does happen to any of us, if we ever find ourselves in a situation where we must choose between obeying God and obeying someone in a position of authority, we've got to do what Peter and the apostles did. We've got to choose to obey God. It doesn't mean that we intentionally go out and provoke some kind of confrontation with those in authority. But if we have to choose, we have to choose God.

St. John Chrysostom, one of the church fathers from the 4th century, said: "We must not mind insulting men, if by respecting them we offend God." He is not saying that we should go out of our way to insult anyone, or to be offensive in our conduct as followers of Christ. But if we face a choice between offending God and angering others, we must choose to obey and honor God.

When local magistrates in England in the 17th century sentenced John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, to prison unless he promised to stop preaching, Bunyan refused, declaring that he would remain in prison until moss grew on his eyelids rather than fail to do what God had commanded him to do. Like Peter and the apostles, Bunyan was a man of godly conviction.

God wants us to be people of conviction, too, and to show the world that obeying God is more important than obeying men. Even if there is a cost involved.

The apostles were men of courage. They were men of conviction. They were also men with a mission. They were on a mission from God, as Peter said in verse 32, to give witness to what God had done in the person and work of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostles were not alone in their witness, for the Holy Spirit was with them to confirm the truth of their witness.

What was true for Peter and the others is also true for us. We are not alone in *our* witness to Christ and His saving love. You are not alone in *your* witness. The Holy Spirit is with us to confirm our witness. The results of our witness are up to Him. The Holy Spirit is the one who brings unbelievers to saving faith in Christ. You and I can't make anyone believe in Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can do it. But the Spirit uses *our* witness, just as He used Peter and the others, to bring people to Jesus. So let Him use you.

As you can see in verse 33, the Council got really ticked off at Peter and the apostles. They were absolutely furious and wanted to kill them on the spot. But then, in verses 34-39, the most respected member of the Council took the floor. Gamaliel was a Pharisee and a highly esteemed expert in the Jewish law. He was the grandson of the famous rabbi Hillel. A young man named Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul) had been one of Gamaliel's students. When Gamaliel talked, people listened – including the other members of the Council.

Gamaliel spoke of two earlier movements which threatened the stability of the status quo, both of which eventually came to nothing. In the case of the Jesus movement, Gamaliel urged

the Council to be careful. He counseled the Council to take a hands-off, wait-and-see approach, lest they find themselves fighting against God Himself.

The Council took Gamaliel's advice. Look at verses 40-42, where we see the conclusion of the story.

THE OUTCOME

Verse 40 tells us what the Council did: They beat the apostles with whips. Probably they gave them the infamous 39 lashes. They ordered them again not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Then they let them go. I'm sure they hoped the punishment they inflicted on the apostles would be enough to deter them from defying the Council's orders ever again.

But notice how the apostles responded (5:41-42). They praised God for the privilege of suffering disgrace for the name of Jesus. They rejoiced that they had been given the honor of being dishonored for the sake of Jesus. And they defied the directive of the Council. Every day, in the temple courts and in homes, they kept on teaching and preaching the message of the gospel. They never let up. Not even for a moment.

THE HONOR OF BEING DISHONORED

Have you ever given thanks to God for the honor of being dishonored? That is not the kind of honor most of us want. It is an honor to receive an Oscar, or an Emmy, or a Tony, or a Grammy award. It is an honor to be inducted into the baseball or football or basketball hall of fame. It is an honor to be awarded the Nobel prize. Or the Pulitzer. Or to be honored by the Kennedy Center. Or to make the Honor Roll at school.

There are many honors we would love to receive. But the honor of being dishonored is not usually among them. This is one of the things that is so remarkable about the apostles and the New Testament church. They actually rejoiced in their persecution, the way Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:11-12a). It says in *The Message*: "Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me."

It is, I think, the blessing nobody wants. I'd rather not have it. But Peter and the apostles embraced it and rejoiced in it. So have millions of Christian believers in the past 2,000 years who have experienced persecution for the sake of Christ. And we know it is still happening in many places and nations around the world.

Maybe you have already experienced it in some way, even if "persecution" is too strong a word. Maybe you have had the privilege of suffering some kind of loss or discrimination or rejection because of your allegiance to Christ. It happens in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways to Christian students on a lot of university campuses. Maybe the time will come when

each of us, in one way or another, is given the honor of being dishonored for the sake of Jesus. When it does, ask God for the grace to receive it as an honor, as the apostles did.

NO HONOR IN ACTING DISHONORABLY

But please understand this: There is no honor in being dishonored if you act dishonorably. Like you, I suspect, I am relieved that Pastor Terry Jones in Gainesville, FL, finally changed his mind and abandoned his plan to have a Koran-burning party yesterday on the anniversary of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. It was a bad idea from the start. It was a dishonorable plan. Even though it did not actually take place, it has been interpreted by the Muslim world as an act of hatred and contempt toward Islam. It has done serious damage to the reputation of the church, the Christian, and the teachings of Jesus. Pastor Jones' plan to publicly burn the Koran contradicted the command of Jesus to love our neighbors (Matthew 22:39), and to treat others with the same kind of courtesy, respect and kindness with which we ourselves want to be treated (Matthew 7:12). It did nothing to promote the message of the gospel or the love of Jesus for sinners.

Peter himself reminds us in 1 Peter 3:15-16 that we are always to be prepared to stand up for our faith and give an answer to anyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope we have in Christ. But, he continues, we are to do it with gentleness and respect, always with the utmost courtesy, keeping a clear conscience, so that anyone who speaks maliciously against our good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. If we act dishonorably, we bring shame not only upon ourselves but on the name of Jesus. If we engage in bad behavior, in foolish, unloving behavior, and people speak disapprovingly, we deserve it.

I'm glad Pastor Jones and his flock did not follow through on their plan. Unfortunately, in the plan itself and all the publicity it generated, they brought dishonor on the name of Jesus. If they think otherwise, I believe they are badly mistaken.

It is an honor to be dishonored for the name of Jesus. But there is no honor in being dishonored if you act dishonorably.

In the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, let's live every moment of our lives in a way that brings honor and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, let it be so.

Amen? Amen.