

What Obedience Demands (Acts 5:17-42 ESV) | Acts: Loyal to Jesus

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Faith Evangelical Free Church

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17 But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy 18 they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”

21 And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

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. 22 But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, 23 “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.” 24 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.

25 And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.” 26 Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, 28 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.

”29 But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. 30 The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

33 When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. 34 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. 35 And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 36 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. 37 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.

38 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; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” So they took his advice, 40 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.

41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

“We must obey God rather than men” is the marquee declaration of this passage.

It just sounds cool, doesn't it? It's bold. It's brave. It grabs your attention. It quite honestly seems like something someone might say right before an epic fight. *“We must obey God rather than men...so what are you going to do about it?”*

It's pretty easy to read this verse with an “us against the world” sort of mentality behind it. Here is where I draw my line, and I'll shake my fist against anyone who dares try and make me move it. A great many bumper stickers, t-shirts, and inspirational posters pluck v29 from Acts 5 and market it as a rallying cry to this or that hill all really good Christians ought to be ready to die on.

But this morning I'd like us to consider whether *“we must obey God rather than men ”* is better understood not as a call to action, but instead as ***a humble confession and open invitation.***

Because when we look closely, the focus of this passage is not division or disagreement. **It's obedience.** Acts 5:17-42 isn't a case study on how to righteously pick a fight with people that oppose us. It shouldn't lead us to ask ourselves, *“who does obedience to God set me against?”*

Instead, the question we need to be considering is this: ***“what does obedience to God demand of me in every situation and circumstance of my life?”***

What does it really mean to obey God, and follow Jesus, with our everyday decisions and our reactions to opposition? How might our lives change if we strive for total and absolute obedience in everything we do and say?

What does obedience to God demand of me in every situation and circumstance of my life?

With this key question in mind, let's look back over this passage together.

So far in the Book of Acts, we've seen Christianity (as it would come to be known) grow from a small gathering of followers who had been with Jesus before his death and resurrection, into a movement of thousands who believe Jesus to be the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit, the leaders of the church at this time, known as the apostles, have been capable of amazing things: teaching with great power and authority, healing people of their sicknesses, and even freeing people from the torment of evil spirits. By all accounts, something marvelous and incredible was taking place. Jesus, through the commission of his followers and by the power of His Gospel, was gathering up and adding to His people. He was building the Church. And nothing seemed able to slow it down or stand in its way.

The mood changes dramatically when the narrative shifts from the apostles and general public to instead focus on the leaders of Israel:

17 But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy 18 they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.

Acts 5 (ESV)

Israel's chief religious leader, and the members of his theological/political party (the Sadducees), become jealous of the success and popularity of these uneducated yet inexplicably confident preachers of Jesus' message.

They've already clashed with these men once, back in 4:1-22. Peter and John had been commanded to stop teaching about Jesus, and warned about what might happen if they refused to quit. But that hadn't worked, and with every passing day the Sadducees felt their authority and control over the people being challenged and chipped away. So, they rounded up a bunch of the apostles, arrested them, and threw them into a "public prison" (meaning the arrest and incarceration happened in such a way that it was obvious and splashy – the Sadducees made a big scene in order to demonstrate their still formidable authority).

Which, in all honesty, makes v19 a little bit funny:

19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out...

Acts 5 (ESV)

What the Sadducees had hoped would be a great display of their power and control ends up being a minor and temporary inconvenience to the people of God and the unstoppable Gospel of Christ that they proclaim. The angel of the Lord simply opens the doors and leads apostles to their freedom...

...right until they get outside. It turns out, the angel was sent with both a mission and a message. With the jailbreak complete, we find out the escapees have work to do. The angel said to them,

20 "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."

Acts 5 (ESV)

Let that sink in. Realize what is being asked of these men. They had just been arrested for doing what the angel said God wants them to do again. The very understandably human thing to do would be to run. Hide. Go to ground. Let things cool down and resume the work of ministry when the leaders of Israel had moved on to other problems.

And yet, the angel's command from God couldn't be clearer: Stay, and do not flee. Go back and pick up where you left off. Go stand in the temple, in the very place where your persecutors believe they have the most power and influence, and tell everyone about "this Life" – meaning the everlasting life of forgiveness and salvation found only through faith in Jesus Christ.

And now, put yourself in the place of these apostles, and ask yourself the question: ***"what does obedience to God demand of me in this situation and this circumstance?"***

Could they trust God enough to put themselves in clear and obvious danger? Did they believe that obedience to God and the preaching of the Gospel was worth whatever might happen by going back?

Would they stand in the temple, teach the people, heal the sick, free the captive, and share the good news of salvation, all the while knowing it could very well be the last thing they ever do on this earth?

21 And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

Acts 5 (ESV)

The apostles were back at the temple in the very first moment they could get in. In the 1st century Jews would gather at dawn for one of their fixed daily prayer times. The apostles weren't showing up early in hopes of beating the crowds. They got there so they could be sure to be heard by everyone. They answered the question, "***what does obedience to God demand of us***" by doing exactly as the angel of the Lord had commanded them. They went back to the place of the greatest danger because they believed obedience to God was worth the cost.

My point is not that you should all leave here today and find the most dangerous place you can to tell people about Jesus. What I want you to see is the depth of the apostles' commitment and how high the stakes are when it comes to asking and answering the question, "***what does obedience to God demand of me in this situation and this circumstance?***"

In this situation and circumstance, it demanded these believers sacrifice their freedom and put their own lives on the line.

Is it possible the same would ever be asked of us? If we were to apply this principle of total obedience to God to things like our opportunities, our resources, our freedoms, or even our rights... what sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel might be demanded of us? What power might we lose? What privileges might we set aside so we can better love and serve our neighbor?

Are we ready, as they were, to make those sacrifices today?

We need to take this kind of obedience seriously. This is not a simple thought exercise or theological debate.

Obedience to God – even costly, shocking obedience – is the norm, not the outlier, of every Christian life.

While the apostles are at the temple teaching, the high priest and the Sadducees are somewhere else, getting ready to put on a big show. In 5:21b-26, we find out that they've gathered not just their own faction, but the full Sanhedrin – the assembly of all Israel's elders and leaders. Their plan is to bring out the arrested apostles and break them under the full power of the council. They might have been thinking that this would be their opportunity to stop this Jesus movement and reestablish their unchallenged authority.

So... imagine their shock (and embarrassment, confusion, anger and maybe even their fear) when the officers of the jail return empty handed and only able to report that they have no idea where the prisoners have gone. The doors were locked, the guards were standing by... but the apostles were nowhere to be found.

And then, while everyone is standing around “*wondering what this might lead to*” (v24), some random guy shows up and basically says, “oh hey, you looking for those guys you very publicly arrested last night for teaching stuff you didn’t like? Yeah...they are back at it. In the temple. Still teaching all that stuff you don’t like.”

I have to imagine there was a bit of confused scrambling at this point, but eventually the council sends some guards to recapture the mysteriously freed troublemakers:

26 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 (ESV)

There is another opportunity for us to reflect on our key question here. The apostles are, at this point, getting to be quite popular with the people. So much so that instead of being arrested, this time they get the “we need you to please come with us” treatment, because the tension at the temple is tangible enough to make the officers of Israel’s highest court think twice before using force to get their way.

Now, we’re not told anything about the apostles' reaction to being “brought in” once again. But it’s interesting to notice that instead of inciting the crowds and stirring up a possibly deadly conflict and rebellion, they went peaceably. They left the safety of their supporters to end up instead surrounded by their persecutors.

Why would they do this? What did obedience to God demand of them in this situation?

Maybe they remembered that Christ’s way of handling one’s enemies is with humility, not hostility. That Jesus’ teaching was not to throw the first punch, but instead to be ready to turn the other cheek. Maybe they remembered that their mission was not to start a fight, but instead to “*be [Jesus’] witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*”

When we feel pressured or cornered, when we’re confronted by our enemies but we know that with the right words we might set off a mob fueled by righteous indignation that would take our side and fight to keep us free...maybe we ought to take a page from the apostles book and really consider what obedience to God would demand we do.

We are not rioters. We are not ruled by our anger or our rage. We are peacemakers. We are the meek, the humble, the gentle and lowly of heart. That doesn't mean we roll over and accept every injustice. It means our way of seeking to right wrongs and proclaim truth *had better not resemble the way the world would do it*. Obedience to God demands something better. As we will see, it demands dependence on a wholly different sort of power and strength.

So, the apostles are led away and presented once again as prisoners to Israel’s elite.

27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, 28 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.

The high priest accuses the apostles of two things: (1) they had disobeyed the council's previous orders to stop teaching in Jesus' name, and (2) they were blaming these leaders for Jesus' death. It is interesting to notice that these "questions" (which are really accusations) do not seem to be presented as a means of getting at the truth. The Sanhedrin hasn't dragged these men in here to consider all the facts and evidence. They are more concerned with the defense of their own reputation and authority.

The exact opposite is true of the apostles. They aren't concerned at all about their reputation or authority. They don't believe their power or position is particularly important. But they do care deeply about the truth. And so, in defense of their faith and in obedience to God's command (go back and keep preaching, no matter what), they step forward:

"29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. 30 The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

Acts 5 (ESV)

Peter's answer to the first accusation is pretty straightforward. Why did they disobey the Sanhedrin's previous order to stop teaching about Jesus? *"We must obey God rather than men."* In this instance, obedience to God demanded they disobey the order (essentially, the law) of their governing body. For Peter and the apostles, and so for us too, the will of God must be followed no matter the rules of men.

It's worth noting that this was not something Peter did lightly. He wasn't anti-establishment. He would later make this pretty clear in a letter we have preserved as 1 Peter:

13 Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, 14 or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

1 Peter 2 (ESV)

Peter understood that normally, all things being equal, obeying earthly governments is generally a good thing to do. They serve a purpose and are, ultimately, established by and answerable to God. Yes, there will be times when they fail at their task. So there will be times when we must refuse to participate in injustice and accept the consequences of our disobedience. That's why in our question, *"what does obedience to God demand of me"*, we add, *"in this situation and this circumstance?"*. We have to handle our problems with authority with care, wisdom, and sober judgment.

The world may not understand what you do or why you do it. People may even become angry because of your allegiance to God's way of doing things. What the apostles model, what the Bible teaches, and what God expects is this: *even when you're misunderstood, you still obey God's way.*

However...notice what the apostles choose to do with the opportunity their commitment to obedience creates. They don't pat themselves on the back. They don't declare themselves better than Israel's leaders, or sing the praises of their moral superiority. They don't even make demands for special treatment or their release.

In the midst of all this tension, conflict, and danger...*Peter and the apostles seize the moment and preach the Gospel to people who need to hear it.*

Acts 5:30-32 is a wonderfully rich, concise, brilliant confession of the Christian faith. God raised Jesus, put him in the place of all glory and power, in order to offer us the gifts of repentance and forgiveness of our sins, which is confirmed by the Holy Spirit and the testimony of those who choose to believe and obey. Amen, Peter. Amen.

But what I want to be sure we catch here is this: Peter and the apostles share the Gospel in the hopes of bringing salvation to people *who by every earthly measure are their enemies*. They aren't having a friendly theological discussion with some guys they bumped into at the coffee shop. They are testifying to men who are jealous, confused, angry, and just looking for an excuse to lash out. But for Peter and his friends, obedience to God demanded that they *"speak to the people all the words of this Life"*, this Gospel...including sharing it with their captors, their oppressors, and their persecutors.

"What does obedience to God demand of me in this situation and this circumstance?" is not a question to idly ask. It will challenge you in ways you can't imagine. It may very well lead you to places you don't really want to be. But it's worth it. Because the Gospel truly is worth any cost. Knowing God, following Christ, being filled by the Spirit, and having a purpose in this life to share all of this with everyone we meet – it is greater than anything else you can imagine. Obedience to God demands we be all in. And I hope and pray that's how you treat your faith. *Be all in, at all times, and in every moment.*

The Sanhedrin's response to the apostles' testimony is outrage. They are ready to kill them on the spot. It is only the intervention of a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a highly respected teacher and member of the council, that spares the apostles' lives that day. He argues that if what these men say is true, and that God is really with them in their teaching and preaching and miracle working, then there is nothing the Sanhedrin can do to stop it.

This seems to calm everyone down, but only a little. The apostles are brought back in, commanded once again to stop teaching about Jesus, and flogged. (And to be clear, flogging was very bad and extremely gruesome. It involved being struck or whipped twice on the back and once on the front, up to 39 times. People often died of shock and blood loss.) They were then released. Bloodied and broken, they returned to their homes.

The passage ends with this incredible testimony:

41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 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 (ESV)

What does obedience to God demand of us? That we keep going. That we draw strength from what we know to be true and find joy even in the most heinous of suffering for the sake of the Gospel. That nothing stops us from continuing on, every day, never ceasing to teach and preach that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

It has become my practice to ask myself “***what does obedience to God demand of me in this situation and this circumstance?***” in every area of my life, with every difficult decision I make, or when working to resist temptation or repent from sin.

What does obedience to God demand of me as a husband or as a father? How might the way I love my wife or lead my family change if I considered my actions in light of what God expects of me?

What does obedience to God demand of me when I am tired and spent and done talking to people for the day (and as an introvert, I reach this point pretty much every day) but I also know that my neighbor is out working on his lawn and could use someone to ask how he’s doing? Or that my friend really needs someone to check in and speak a few words of truth?

What does obedience to God demand of me when I want to be selfish, when I crave giving into desire, or when I am so angry I can’t see the humanity and image bearing reality of the person I believe is wrong?

These are all hard questions born from hard circumstances. Obedience is rarely easy. But taking the time and working out the discipline to ask myself, “what must I do to obey God now?” is a necessary part of living a Christian life. We’ve got to do this work. We’ve got to seek out obedience.

So, this week, join me in asking yourself, “***What does obedience to God demand of me in this situation and this circumstance?***”

What does obedience to God demand of your time, your resources, your gifts, or your finances?

What does obedience to God demand of your treatment of others, your willingness to forgive, or need to confess your own wrongdoing?

What does obedience to God demand of us all in relation to our sin? Our darkest habits? Our most shameful and anguished addictions?

Don't be surprised if the answer isn't immediately clear. Take the time to think about it. Take the time to pray about it. Take the time to get this right.

May the Lord bless you with wisdom, clarity, and confidence as you seek to answer “***What does obedience to God demand of me in this situation and this circumstance?***” in all you say and do.