

Acts 5:12-42 - DiCicco

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Date: 24 May 2026

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[0:00] What does it mean to stand up for what is right? How do we do that? Because have you ever been around friends who are doing something you know is wrong?

! Do you know that feeling? How do I stand up for what I know is right? This is a question that everyone, at least maybe most people, will have to face at some point.

Whether you call yourself a Christian or not this morning, I think the passage we just read has something to teach us about this. Considering what is the most effective way to stand for truth when we are told to sit down.

How, why is it important for us to bring the truth to light when others can't see it? The passage we read was written by a man named Luke to a group of early Christians.

Who exactly his audience were, what exactly their circumstances are, we don't know. But Luke's audience, like Christians today, are trying to figure out how to hold two realities together.

[1:08] On the one hand, the eternal life that's given through trust in God. This life that we read is sealed by the presence of the Holy Spirit among God's people.

And the day-to-day lives lived alongside others who haven't heard or who don't trust in Jesus or what he has done.

And Luke tells this story to call God's people to confidence in the face of fear and obedience while living among neighbors who reject the claims and maybe even the people of Jesus.

Luke's audience, like us, is facing these two realities, trying to figure out how to hold them together.

And I think Luke frames this story in such a way to teach his people to witness in obedience to the word of life even when the threat of man commands silence.

Luke presents the power of the gospel in three moves. First, that the gospel overturns the expectations of this world. And it does this because, secondly, that the gospel teaches the truth about power.

[2:20] As a result, the gospel empowers endurance for the weak, for humans like you and me. And as we get closer, I want to encourage all of us here to live under the one who rules over all.

And that's something we can take away from this text this morning. Would you pray with me once more before we do this? Almighty God, by your spirit, would you open our eyes and ears to see your son and to hear your word that we might glorify your name in which we pray.

Amen. Okay, we've been going through Acts for a couple of weeks now. And the followers of Jesus have had, you know, after Acts chapter 2 in this great day, they've had what some might call a rocky start.

And Tad came up in chapter 3 and said, the honeymoon is over. And that seems to be the theme. We've had summaries of how well things are going.

But, I mean, just recap what's happened. The leaders of this group have been arrested. And the most powerful people in Jerusalem have commanded them not to speak about Jesus. So there's pressure from outside.

[3:38] And there are problems inside, too. We saw last week people wanting to deceive the apostles to be something they are not. But despite the problems, despite the pressures external and the threats internally, people around them recognize that God is doing something with these followers of Jesus.

And that drives two different reactions. I wonder if you caught this in the beginning of the reading today. On the one hand, Luke says, after this business with Ananias and Sapphira that Dave preached on last week, no one dared join them.

There was great fear on all the people, the passage before ours said. They had heard about the way God protects the purity and the integrity of worship among his new people.

It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. And so many would not dare to join them. But on the other hand, there's something going on over here. God is present among this people. And the power of God through his Holy Spirit is poured out to everyone who accepts this message and who trusts in this Jesus. And this is confirmed by all the signs and the wonders being done by the apostles.

[4:49] And word gets out. So on the one hand, we have no one dared to join them. And on the other hand, we have more than ever people were being added to their number because God is doing something among this people.

The gospel overturns the expectations of the world. Somehow this judgment leads to growth. Even the sick are healed.

There's a beautiful backwardsness to this community that we've touched on a couple of times. And as the number and influence of this little group grows, people are lining the streets so that they might see Peter, the leader of the apostles.

They hope that somehow even his shadow might fall on them because maybe that's all that they need to be healed of their diseases. The point is, this group has influence, which is spreading over the area.

People are coming from all the towns around Jerusalem to witness what God is doing in and through this people. There's a sense that God is doing something. This is not just a man-made movement.

[5:56] God is at work in this group of people. The apostles are living just like Jesus lived. This little summary reminds me a lot of the gospel of Luke.

It makes sense that they've seen the way he lived. They are witnesses to the fact that he rose from the dead. And they have been given the promise of eternal life. A promise that we said is sealed by the presence of the Holy Spirit, whose power is at work among them in order to proclaim the message of life.

And all who hear and receive this message of life are liberated. The message is simply that through Jesus, God has taken the consequences of sin on himself.

This was Peter's first sermon at Pentecost, that through him, forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed. And all who trust in God's work to make them right are given eternal life.

They are liberated by this life. Life is given freely to those who will have it. And all who believe it are free to live, released by the resurrection from the heavy weight of their own sin or shame, even as we see freed from their sickness and suffering, here in the book of Acts through the apostles' hands.

[7:13] Who wouldn't want to live under the one who rules over all things? Let me just say, I've been encouraged as we've read through Acts these last few weeks at the community of Holy Covenant.

And I know I've said this a couple of times over the last few weeks, but I love the witness that your hospitality, your generosity, your joy is to one another and to others of the life that is among us.

The presence of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit, on display to each other and to our community. I'm looking forward to this year and what Dan called at our annual meeting last week, a year of faithful, ordinary growth, whatever that looks like.

So let's be encouraged by the apostles and their way of life, to keep living under God's rule, to live as his people, to live as those indwelt by his Spirit, to be a community that is somehow magnetic, even to people who don't know God.

Let's do this by following the apostles' example, living in obedience to the demands of the gospel. Let's keep working out what it means to have the Lord Jesus present among us each week as we gather for worship by his Holy Spirit.

[8:28] Let's keep living under the one who is over it all. If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian this morning, this is what it is about. I mean, ultimately, it's about being right with the one who rules over all.

It's a big claim the apostles make that we as a community make, not only to know what ultimate truth is, but how to be reconciled to that. But that is the claim.

It's the claim that gets the apostles in trouble. That's what happens in verse 17. The high priest rose up and all who are with him, these are those powerful guys that Dan talked about in the beginning of chapter 4.

These guys who told the disciples of Jesus not to teach about him anymore, not to use his name. And the apostles are teaching in Solomon's portico, this public space in the temple, and so they come and they take the apostles very publicly and throw them into the public prison. It's a little bit of a power move, right? The plan, I guess, was to let them sit in prison, squirm a little bit, and then deal with them in the morning. The people around Jerusalem are getting too captured by these Christians.

[9 : 38] Christians. That's something a little public humiliation can't take care of. Just nip this thing in the bud. Well, that's not exactly how it goes.

While the apostles are in prison, an angel shows up, he lets them out, and tells them to pick up where they left off, to go back to the temple, and keep proclaiming the word of this life. And that's what they do.

And in the morning, while this is happening, on the other side of the temple, the powerful are getting ready to throw down. And it's right there. That second half of verse 21 is a new paragraph in my Bible.

But you've got the high priests and all those with him, and they call this council, that the whole senate of the people of Israel are here. It's a big deal. And when they're ready, they tell the guards to go and get the prisoners.

And they sit back and they wait. But when the guards show up, it's not what they expect. I know it didn't look exactly the way I'm going to portray this, but I sort of picture the guards on their way back from the prison to the senate.

[10 : 45] Somewhere in between verse 21 and 22. Just trying to figure out who's going to tell this whole group of the most powerful people in Jerusalem what they've just found.

Maybe they draw straws or something. Maybe the guy who gets picked kind of peeks his head out around the corner and sees everybody milling around waiting for the prisoners to come in. And here's this whole council of the most powerful who've made a big show of imprisoning these 12 apostles, waiting to throw down when they actually step into the room.

But someone has to say something. And so, I don't know, one of the guards comes in and reports and says, well, we found the prison, which is a good start.

It's securely locked. The guards standing at the doors. But when we opened them, there was no one inside. And this shakes things up.

The 12 apostles who were imprisoned for their witness to the resurrection of Jesus, imprisoned for their witness to the empty tomb, are gone. They should be there, but they're not.

[11 : 49] The doors are locked, but no one is inside. And while this room panics, trying to figure out what exactly this is going to come to, someone else comes in and says, hey, don't worry, they didn't go far.

They're still in the temple. Not much of a jailbreak. They're teaching in that name again. And so they send for the apostles to bring them back, the big and powerful, trying to throw down again.

But did you notice that they don't seem as powerful as they did before? See, verse 26. They upgrade the soldier. They send the captain now to take in the apostles, but they are much more careful. They bring back the apostles, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

The gospel overturns the expectations of the world. In this show of power, God sucks all the power right away, right out of the council.

It takes the wind out of their sails. What started as a public power move ends in humiliation before the people as they walk back to the square and pick the apostles back up and ask them nicely if they wouldn't mind coming to the Senate.

[12 : 59] What was meant to silence the witness to the resurrection of Jesus puts a message in the mouth of the opposition, they're not here. It sounds a lot like what the angel told the women when they came to the tomb.

The followers of Jesus have been liberated by life, to proclaim the words of life. The gospel overturns the expectations of this world, and as the ones who live under, the one who rules over all, we really aren't surprised by this.

We aren't surprised because the gospel teaches us the truth about power. This is what we see in this next section from verse 27 to 32.

The Senate brings in the apostles and ignoring the elephant in the room, they say, we strictly charged you not to teach in this name. Can you see the look on the apostles' face as the council sort of tries to claw back some sort of leverage over them?

Hey, we told you to stop. Yeah, we remember. You put us in prison for it. How'd that go? The council puts their finger on part of the issue.

[14:09] They said, we told you not to speak in this name, yet here you are, filling Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood on us. I mean, they can't even say the name of Jesus.

This was the same council, or at least this room was filled with the same people that condemned Jesus to death. Aside from the fact that that was an illegal and fraudulent hearing that condemned Jesus, I don't think many people would have missed this fact.

I mean, these are the ones yelling, crucify him in front of the Romans. They try to clear themselves, but the Senate doth protest too much, methinks.

They are guilty. And the response of the apostles is similar to what Dan preached in chapter four. Back in chapter four, they said, whether it is right in the sight of God or not, to listen to you, you must judge.

But we cannot help but speak of what we have seen. In chapter four, Peter's response is a little calmer. Here, things have progressed. After being reminded by the powerful that they warned the apostles not to preach in this name, not to speak in the name of Jesus under threat of more imprisonment, Peter, maybe emboldened by the angel, says we must obey God rather than men.

[15:30] Peter doubles down. He meets this accusation from the Senate in the face. You want to put this man's blood on us? Peter says, well, the God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed, by hanging him on a tree.

Peter's upfront about the guilt of the council. But they do get something wrong. The apostles aren't trying to just smear them with the blood of Jesus because the message of the apostles is not that Jesus is dead, but that Jesus is alive.

If the power move of prison failed the way it had the night before, then that's nothing compared to the attempted power move of killing the leader of this movement who had a much greater jailbreak, who broke the chains of death.

They had killed Jesus. It had been confirmed with a spear in his side. It was carried out by Romans who definitely knew what they were doing when it came to killing people. No doubt, you killed Jesus, Peter wants to say, but God raised him.

That's the message. Forget the prison. The tomb is empty. We're not trying to smear you with blood. We are trying to tell you what happened after that. God raised Jesus, and then even more than that, he exalted him to an even higher place.

[16:49] We watched him be carried up to heaven, not in a chariot of fire like Elijah was in the Old Testament, but Jesus ascended on a cloud, more like the Son of Man from Daniel 7, this one who has all power and all authority and all dominion.

The apostles in the halls of power proclaim the truth about the power in the gospel. God has it. That's the end. So, of course, when the angel gives them a message from God to go and proclaim the words of this life, they obey God, not men.

His power rules over the senates. You charged us not to speak in his name, Peter says, but God told us to speak, and we know where the real power is. We must obey God rather than men.

For the audience of this book of Acts, the example of the apostles must have been encouraging. Those who are facing some social persecution or real imprisonment.

I mean, the apostles must have been an example, a reminder of the power of God. I mean, this is teaching theology through story.

[18:11] To live under the one who rules over all is liberating. Because God's people can witness in obedience to the word of life even when the threat of man commands silence.

Because God is the one who rules over all, the apostles have confidence to speak the truth, even to the most powerful. They are liberated by the life of Christ to be honest with the powers of this world. You can't touch us. Yes, you killed him, but that is the point. He was raised. And this isn't to soften the message.

Peter isn't saying this to get himself out because what he says next almost gets them killed. This is verse 32. We are witnesses to these things.

Yes, to your role in his death, but also to his resurrection. This is nothing new. This is what their message has been. This was the point of the last hearing.

[19 : 12] When they had healed a man who had been blind and begging publicly for 40 years. We are witnesses to what we have seen. And now you are too because you've seen the power on display. That was a different sermon.

But Peter says, We are witnesses and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him. When the Senate hears this, they are outraged and want to kill the apostles.

The easy inference, if God has given the Holy Spirit to those who obey him and you see stuff being done over here while you guys sit in your Senate, A, you don't have the Holy Spirit and B, you don't obey God.

The gospel overturns the expectations of the world because it teaches the truth about power. All power is God's and no human influence will help you if you do not obey him, Senate.

You have leverage here in Jerusalem but you don't have leverage in heaven. The apostles have been charged not to speak in the name of Jesus but they fire back with their own charge. We obey God, you do not.

[20 : 19] And this confidence to obey God even in the face of leaders comes because of the gospel itself, because of the resurrection. In the final scene of the story today, Luke shows how the gospel does this.

It shows how the gospel empowers endurance for those who are weak. The apostles have made their claim and then they're set aside while the Senate deliberates.

Despite the truth that God rules over all, there's real power in the Senate and the apostles are going to have to deal with that at some point, especially if Peter's in charge of making the defense.

Without what happens next, these 12 will be killed but a man stands up, Gamaliel, because he's so well respected that the Senate falls to silence again.

And this is one of those speeches in Acts. Tad pointed these out a few weeks ago. It's not one of the big speeches, but Tad pointed out at major moments and by major characters, speeches are made that teach us key points about the theology of Acts.

And at a fairly major moment, Luke chooses an interesting character, an enemy of the truth, to teach truth to us. What Gamaliel does is he points out two failed revolutions in Jewish history.

[21 : 42] of the first revolution led by a man named Theodos. We don't know much historically, but an early Jewish historian writing about 40 or 50 years after this Senate was convened, Josephus, he tells us about Judas the Galilean.

See, Judas led a rebellion against the Romans because of the taxes that they were imposing. And that tracks with what Luke puts here. He says, Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census. The government takes the census so they can tax the people. Well, Judas didn't want any of that. He was so influential that Josephus, this historian, calls him the author of the fourth sect of Judaism.

You had the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and then all the guys who followed this Judas guy. So he was influential in Judaism. This sect was very much like the Pharisees in its theology except that they were very much against the Romans.

They claimed that God is the only ruler and Lord. And because of that, we're not paying taxes. And they did a lot of things to try and get some money back and it's very interesting.

[22 : 56] You can read it for yourself. But because they believe that God is the only ruler and Lord, because they disagreed with Roman occupation, they resisted the Romans.

They didn't fear death or punishment because of their hope and trust in God. Sounds a little bit familiar. And so what Gamaliel points out is even if these guys are standing here telling us something about their hope in God and they don't fear the punishment we are going to give them, we've seen this before.

Theodos and his followers, they were killed, they were scattered. Even the sons of Judas of Galilee, the second revolutionary, were crucified. Gamaliel brings these two up to make the point that we read in verse 38.

This is what he tells them. He says, 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 to be opposing God. What an encouraging message for those who follow Jesus from the lips of one of the enemies of those who follow Jesus.

[24 : 10] Gamaliel stands up, ends up persuading the Senate. He's not a fool. You can imagine him saying, We all saw or maybe we didn't see what happened when we imprisoned the Twelve.

So what do we think is going on? And he uses the Apostle's logic on the Senate. Did you notice that? That if God is on our side, on the side of the Senate, we don't have anything to worry about. Luke paints Gamaliel in a pretty positive light.

And one thing we see throughout Acts is that Luke doesn't let Christians paint with a really broad brush. In one important sense, he does. There are those who trust in Christ and who hold to the promise of eternal life and those who do not.

And this distinction drives the whole book, the proclamation of this word of life, the obedience of the apostles and the followers of Jesus to the command to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. But in terms of how we characterize people, especially those outside the community, Luke doesn't let us paint with such broad and stark brush strokes.

[25 : 22] Even the enemies of the gospel, even the enemies of the apostles are not all bad. In fact, they want the same thing. They want to honor God. They want to stand up for what is right.

Luke doesn't shy away from putting a good light on the enemies of the apostles. They get some things right even if they get a lot of things wrong. I think this is instructive for us.

We should have this same instinct. People oppose Christianity for all sorts of reasons today. And as Christians, we have confidence in the truth which should liberate us to be honest about others.

We don't need to win every argument. God has already won. We don't need to paint others with such a broad brush that anyone who doesn't know the truth of the gospel gets painted in the worst light possible or is wrong about everything.

because there is an instinct in our culture not Holy Covenant but in our context in America to paint the other in harsh light.

[26 : 33] Luke does the opposite. He's clear they want to kill the apostles but in showing us why they want to kill the apostles he points out something good. They value something good.

They also want to live under the one who rules over all. And they think they're doing it by defending not just their power but the purity of the worship that has been handed down to them.

The Senate is wanting to protect what they think as the people of God from errant teaching like these other revolutionaries. But where the message of the gospel changes everything is that it overturns the expectations of the world.

It's actually what Gamaliel points out that God will not be overthrown. This gives Christians the confidence to follow in Jesus' footsteps. It's what gives them confidence to say we must obey God rather than men.

Because God rules over all we can live under him even in the face of those who have power in this life. Because the gospel teaches the truth about power we don't have to fear the powerful.

[27 : 42] You might imprison us but God can let us out. And this kind of confidence in God has fueled Christians for thousands of years. Fueled rebellions and all sorts of things against oppressive leaders or tyrant kings.

Christians have suffered for the gospel for a long time. This passage has also been used to empower civil disobedience to encourage those who stand up for what they believe is right. but without the gospel taking this instinct which often means not obeying God but whatever I believe God to be saying not man without the gospel there's nothing to separate that kind of disobedience or rebellion from these other revolutionaries.

Because there's an important end to our story that makes it distinctly Christian. Gamaliel convinces the senate that if the apostles really are from God they won't be overthrown and the senate says okay well if we can't beat them at least we can beat them.

It's there in verse 40 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. The apostles left rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

[29 : 04] The apostles were in the weak position politically. And through the gospel they had confidence to stand before the powers in Jerusalem. And it wasn't until the last blow had fallen until I don't know who it was Matthias maybe got the last kick from one of the guards and they were pushed out the door that the apostles knew that they weren't going to die.

For these twelve who were following in the footsteps of Jesus they had every right to expect the real power that this world holds to bring real consequences. What makes this end a distinctly Christian end to our story is that the apostles stand up for themselves not as revolutionaries but as witnesses to truth.

They had seen the resurrected Jesus the one imprisoned by death held behind a stone tomb they had seen him raised to life.

he had given them this message his followers then released by the resurrection and supported by the spirit of God were called to obedience and confidence. Obedience to live under the authority of Jesus the way he lived on earth obedience even in the face of those who oppose a message like this this message of life but they were given confidence that even if they follow Jesus to the point of death there is no power over the one who rules over all.

there is no power over the one who can defeat even death and so how do we stand up for what is right? I think our story is instructive it is by obedience to God and not man that much is clear.

[30 : 53] As God's people we are liberated by life given confidence in the face of any threat standing on the truth of the gospel witness the best way to stand up when we are told to sit down is like the apostles to be honest to be honest with the senate to be honest the way Luke was honest about them that we can have confidence in the truth of the gospel so that we don't have to paint others in a worse light than is true we can recognize where the impulse of some to stand up for what they believe is right is a good impulse which is a good thing because then we don't have to convince people that truth exists we just have to witness to the truth as we witness to the truth others come to know it and then confident of the truth we can be honest about the good instincts of any opposition the gospel empowers endurance for the weak because of the resurrection they can stand before the senate and bear whatever penalty they give even if it is death which is what makes this distinctly Christian that we know the one who holds the power and because we do you can kill us we may not be as socially weak as these apostles today but we can see where our faith might work against us it's not bonus points to be a Christian there are different ways that that works out in each one of our lives but the gospel empowers our endurance and our obedience to Christ because it teaches us the truth about power that God is over all and so we can live in obedience confident in the gospel that overturns the expectations of the world because if Jesus has been raised from the dead because if we like this early community have been given the Holy Spirit because if the presence and the power of God is among us today just as it was then and it is if we really have been liberated by life then how should we live when we live under the one who rules over all things in obedience and confidence let's pray well God almighty we do thank you for your word and we ask that it would be fruitful as we leave this place would you be with us as we gather around your table teach us Lord to love one another and to love you we ask in Christ's name

Amen so