

We can't stop witnessing because we must obey God



Acts 5:12-42

Bro Ricky Cunningham

Thursday at 12:43 p.m., my phone made that little ding and I knew I had a text message. I opened up my phone and here is what it said, "Your sweet daughter was a major blessing to my dad today and I cannot thank her enough." When you are a dad and you get a text like that, it is just awesome! Trying to read the motivation for the text, I figured that Jeanne's dad, Tim, had possibly been taken to the emergency room because I knew Kiki was working that day. Sure enough, when I texted Jeanne back she said Kiki had ministered to her dad today. I asked how he was doing and she said he wasn't doing well and the doctors were going to put him in hospice care. We spend several minutes texting back and forth. Let me tell you the rest of the story. It just so happened that Celisa and I were going to meet Kiki and Chad for supper. I couldn't wait until we sat down because normally Kiki can't talk about anyone she ministers to in the hospital because of privacy laws, but because Jeanne had told me about it

I could say, "Kiki, did you get to see Tim today?" She said, "Oh Dad, you're not going to believe this!" She said, "Dad, he witnessed to me! I told him I was a believer, but he just wouldn't stop. He asked me again in a different way, and I assured him that I was a believer." Then she said, "I had the mask on and I pulled it down just a little bit so he could see me, and to really convince him that I was a believer I said, 'Sir, my dad is Bro Ricky, my brother is Bro Kory, I didn't have a choice but to get saved!'" The next morning, Jeanne texted me and said they had moved her dad to the hospice house. She asked if I would agree with her in prayer that there would be an easy transition there. Late that afternoon, Tim went home to be with Jesus.

Can I ask you a question? If you were taken to the emergency room and hospice was being brought in, would the salvation of the person ministering to you be on your mind? When you die, will there be at least one person within the last twenty-four hours who you didn't know that you just had to share Christ with? Will that be said of you? I wonder how many of us, when it comes to our last few hours of life, that perhaps the only person who will be on our minds will be ourselves. You say, "But Bro Ricky, I'm dying..." We are all dying. Are we concerned about the possibility that there is someone we might be in the presence of – it might be at the hospital, at work, at a ballgame, or a grocery store, maybe someone in our family – yet it is not on our minds to engage them in the gospel? What a testimony for Tim! Imagine a little over twenty-four hours before you meet Christ, and you were concerned about the person who was taking care of you. I tell that story because it so fits the text we are going to teach.

Scripture

Acts 5:12-16

"Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them

on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.”

Verse 42: “And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.”

For the third time in five chapters, Luke is going to stop and give us a portrait of the early church. This portrait is in verses 12–16. Then he will continue to give other actions or activities of the church. Luke is trying to slow us down as we read this. He is trying to make sure that we just don't get so caught up in what the church is doing that we miss what the church actually is in their being.

Respect for the Anointed Leadership

Luke said many signs and wonders were regularly being done. This was common. Things like what just happened in the story before, a lame man being able to rise up and walk because Peter took him by the hand and healed him in the name of Jesus, were regularly being done by the hands of the apostles among the people. It was to the point that when the apostles gathered together in Solomon's portico (that big porch on the east side of the temple), people were backing off from them because they held them in high esteem. They were the only ones there. I have labored and labored with this because we are using 'they,' but it seems to me that because it is describing the signs and wonders done by the apostles that all twelve of the apostles were together in Solomon's portico. But the rest of the church kind of backs up a little bit. The reason they back up a little bit is because they hold them in such high esteem. If you hold someone in high esteem, why would you back up?

Here is what I think...In the last lesson, we saw that great fear fell upon the church because Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead in the presence of the apostles. Whoa! When Kory was preaching last week, I couldn't help it, as a pastor I just had to think that be cool! Get this picture...I am standing at the pulpit, we are singing, and we are passing the offering plate. All of a

sudden, the Spirit of the Lord tells me to turn around, stop the service, and ask this man in the congregation, "Did you really tithe?" and he says, "I sure did." I say, "Are you sure?" He says, "I am," and then he just falls out in the floor – dead. All of our medical people then rush over there and try to bring life back to him, but he is dead. Do you think anybody else sitting here might be thinking...*I sure hope he doesn't ask me!* Honestly, there are just some things you don't want me to know about you, agreed? Can you imagine being in a church where the Holy Spirit actually let the leaders know that your motivation wasn't correct, and in front of everyone you drop dead? Cool! Cool! Cool! You are going to think real seriously next Sunday before you come back, right? When you ask somebody to come to church with you, they are going to say, "Oh! You go to that church where people die in the service!" Can't you just see me walking into Wal-Mart and everybody running to the other side of the store?

Kory said something else in the last lesson that caught my attention. As we study Acts, we are wrestling with what is descriptive versus prescriptive. There was a holiness in the first church. That holiness was upheld by the apostles as leaders of the church. You just sensed an anointing; therefore, there was a respect toward the leaders. I pray we have that at Hardin. One of our members has reminded me many times through the years that everything rises and falls on leadership. I take that seriously. Our other pastors take that seriously. As a leader in this church, as a member of this church, I pray you take this seriously.

I came to Hardin when I was twenty-two years of age. I had been here a couple of years and one of our deacons, Steve Poole, came up to me one Sunday to give me a Christmas bonus from the church. When he held it out to me, he gave me a little speech. He said, "Bro Ricky, if I was pastor of this church, I wouldn't do everything the way you are doing it." My heart started to sink. As a young pastor, I had heard of those pastor/deacon stories. My first church only had one deacon, a godly man, so I never had one of those experiences, but I was thinking I was getting ready to have one. After hesitating, Steve came back and said, "But the way God is blessing this church, you will never hear me say a word," and he never did.

Growth of the Church

Please pray that even when we, as Christians, don't always agree with everything our leaders are doing or teaching that it is still evident in their lives that they have an anointing of God's Spirit, so that we, as a congregation, respect them – because look at what follows in verse 14, "And more than ever..." (that caught my attention) "...believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women..." Do you remember the last time we had a count? We had five thousand men in the church. Now, the church is exploding with growth to the point that when Luke starts trying to add up the numbers, all he can say is there are a multitude of men and a multitude of women being added to the Lord. Is that not glorious! Wow!

Why is this anointing on the leadership of the church? Get this picture. Those first one hundred and twenty had Jesus as their pastor for about three and a half years. Even though Jesus poured Himself into those twelve, He ministered personally to a lot of people. And now, in the early days of the church, Jesus is suddenly gone and guess who your pastor is – it is Peter. How would you like to go from Jesus to Peter? Jesus to James? Jesus to John? Jesus to Matthew? There was an anointing on those apostles. They did signs and wonders more than ever! Guys, do you remember the day of Pentecost? Three thousand people were saved in one day. And now, "more than ever," more than three thousand are being added to the Lord!

What a picture of growth in the church because of this holiness, this respect, this awe in the church! It was to the point that, while people aren't approaching the apostles in Solomon's portico, they are bringing the sick on mats and cots out of the street. They are just hoping that when Peter passes by, his shadow would touch them. Luke doesn't tell us if anyone ever got healed by Peter's shadow – they were a very superstitious culture – but it reminds me of the time that lady couldn't actually get to Jesus and she said she thought if she could just touch the hem of His garment she would be healed. Imagine so respecting someone that even if you couldn't actually touch them, if you could just grab the edge of their coat when they pass by you would feel like you had been blessed! Imagine

what it must be like to so respect Peter (we are talking about Peter!) that if his shadow could just touch your loved one that loved one might be healed!

Witnessing as We Go – Here and There

Remember, the church was supposed to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth, but here, we don't see the apostles going to Judea like they are supposed to. They are now in Solomon's portico, still in the city of Jerusalem, and we are told people in the neighboring towns are also bringing their sick to Jerusalem because they want to be in the presence of the church. What a picture!

I believe with all of my heart, and we will never back down from this, that we, in Hardin, are the uttermost parts of the earth! As we seek to partner in the work of God's Kingdom, we will start in Hardin and we will go to Marshall and Calloway counties, go to the region, go to the state, go to the nation. Ultimately, we are taking the gospel to as many places as we can, as a church. We will never back down from that. We will never debate here or there, we are going to do both. We are going to do here and there, and as many places in between here and there as we can. If you are new to Hardin and you aren't into that, you aren't going to like us. We still believe the church is involved in the Great Commission.

In this description of the early church, I see that from the reputation of the church and their holiness, and God working in their midst so that those on the outside knew God was with them, people from without wanted to get in on what was happening, and they came from other towns to be a part of this. Some of you here at Hardin come from other places, other towns, and the reason is because you saw God's life change in someone here and you had to come and check this place out. That should continue to happen. If a church really is a church, it will go out, and then those from without will come within as we live out the anointing of God. I could tell you stories of somebody getting saved because somebody else got saved, because somebody else got saved, because somebody else got saved...some of you here were in that chain of influence. Sunday used to be your day on the golf course or the lake. It used to be your personal day. You thought

nothing about coming to church. Then, one of your buddies got saved. You saw the life change in him, you saw him repent of sin, and all of his old habits were broken. The next thing you know, you started checking this place out. It was not because of Bro Ricky, it was not because of this church, it was because of the life change in your friend. We have baptized whole families over a period of years because of a life change in one person. As we see this, may the reason we are here burn in our hearts – we are here because of the gospel. We are here to be a witness. And God wants us to be a witness under the anointing of His Holy Spirit whom He has given us, and we are seeing this being lived out in the early church.

The Religious Leaders

Now, we are going to meet the religious leaders of the day. We are going to meet the high priest and his party, the Sadducees. We talked about the Sadducees a little bit previously. They were the party who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Yet Peter didn't back down, he didn't change his message, he didn't water it down; he said you killed Jesus, but God raised Him back alive. You have to remember that Israel was not a democracy. They were a theocracy. They supposedly lived under the laws of God. Just as we have parties politically, religiously they had parties. They had the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Sadducees based their interpretation of God solely on the first five books of the Bible. If you couldn't prove it in the first five books of the Bible, they didn't believe it. So they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead or in the supernatural, and they were the majority party. The minority party was the Pharisees. They believed in the resurrection of the dead and they believed in the supernatural. They believed that to earn a right relationship with God you kept all six hundred and thirteen of the laws of Moses. Imagine being ruled by religious leaders who do not believe in a resurrection of the dead or in the supernatural.

Apostles Arrested and Freed

The high priest and the Sadducees get upset and they are jealous of the apostles. Because they are jealous, they arrest the apostles and put them in the public prison. I think what this means is when you were put in the

public prison it was possible for people to go by and see that you are in prison. That would be embarrassing, wouldn't it? You are in prison and everybody who walks by knows you are in prison! So these twelve apostles get put in prison because the Sadducees are jealous. What is it about jealousy that makes us do what we do to other people? Usually when somebody is jealous of someone, they want what the other one has. That is why they are jealous. We don't look at that person and realize they have what they have because of who they are. Our jealousy doesn't cause us to want to be who they are so that we can have what they have; it causes us to want to stay the way we are and attack them for what they have. That is what jealousy does. Here are these religious leaders seeing a group who now have authority with the people, influencing the people, and because they are jealous of it, they arrest them and put them in public prison.

I think this next part is humorous. I love the Bible; this is just so God! There is a group of people who do not believe in the supernatural – they do not believe in angels. They have just put twelve apostles in the public prison. So guess what God does...He has an angel appear in the night and release them! Do you find that humorous? ☺ Think about this! The next morning the Sanhedrin court gets together, gets the whole senate together, the majority and the minority party, and the high priest tells the whole group about arresting these guys. He sends the captain of the guard to the prison to bring the apostles out so they can interrogate them. When the captain goes to the public prison, the guards are there, the door is locked, but there are no prisoners. Does this story sound familiar? Do you remember when Jesus died? The Jews go to the authorities and tell them Jesus was a deceiver who said He was going to rise from the dead and His disciples might try to steal His body, so they decide to put a guard at the tomb and seal it. That couldn't keep Jesus in, could it?

Now, here are the apostles in prison with a guard who did not go to sleep, and an angel of the Lord opened the door, unlocks the gate, leads them out, and nobody knows it. Maybe they had an invisibility cloak, I don't know! – But the next thing you know they are out of prison and the guards don't have a clue about what happened. The next day when the authorities come, they see the prisoners are gone so they go back and tell the

Sanhedrin. They tell them they didn't know what happened, how the guards were there and hadn't gone to sleep, and how the door was locked but the apostles were gone. The Sanhedrin was perplexed! They started thinking about how that could have happened, and then somebody came to them and said the prisoners were now in the temple teaching about Jesus! For see, when the angel released them, the angel told them to go back to the temple and teach about Jesus, except they called Him the Way of Life. I don't know about you, but if I had just been arrested for doing something, I don't know how quickly I would want to rush back and do it again. But these guys immediately go back to the temple and begin to teach.

Apostles Return to the Temple | The Sanhedrin Interrogation

So the high priest sends the captain of the temple guard to go get them. The Bible says he goes to get them but not by force. He was afraid the people would stone him. The captain is going to go *ask* them if they would come back. Yeah! Do you have this picture? The police are going to the criminal who had just been arrested and then somehow freed, but he is not going to get out the handcuffs. He is just going to ask nicely – *Would you mind following me? The Sanhedrin council would like to talk to you guys about what happened.* – I know what some of you would do. You would say there is no way you are going back there! Not Peter, James, John, and the other apostles. They follow these guys back! Now these twelve guys are standing before the whole supreme court and they are going to get interrogated.

The apostles are going to be asked two things. Number one: Didn't we charge you not to teach and preach in this name again? Notice they don't say Jesus, they say in this name. Number two: Are you trying to make His blood be on us? I find that amazing. When Jesus was being tried and the trial was over, He stood before Pilate. Pilate tells the people he can find no fault in this man, but they wanted Barabbas released and Jesus crucified. Pilate washes his hands, telling the Sanhedrin and the Jewish people that Jesus' blood was not on him, and they say let His blood be on us and our children! (You aren't going to like me saying this, but the blood of Jesus *is* on their hands.) Now, here we are a few years later and the council is

acting like it is not their fault, and they are upset with the apostles because they won't quit telling the story, the intricate details of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ!

Peter Answers Candidly

Peter, God bless him, is going to answer. Do you remember the last time they were before the council? They were told not to teach or preach in the name, and Peter said I am leaving it up to you to judge whether it is right or wrong for us to listen to God. Not this time. This time, Peter says we must obey God and not men, and then he tells why. I want you to hear this...this is the heart of apostolic preaching. If you take all of the sermons of the apostles that are recorded in the book of Acts, this is the heart of it. The Holy Spirit led Luke to capture and pen it for us. This should be the heart of it even today, in my opinion. Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus..." Peter is identifying God as the God of their fathers, those patriarchal fathers who were revealed in the first five law books of Moses. He is the God who raised Jesus. Peter will not compromise the message of the gospel. He is talking to a group of people who do not believe in a resurrection, but Peter will not back down. He believing God raised Jesus from the dead. You and I must believe this, that God raised Jesus from the dead! That is the heart of our message, amen!

Peter goes on to say, "...whom you killed by hanging on a tree." Peter's defense attorney would be saying – *Shhh. Peter, be nice! Quit saying that! Your life is in these men's hands!* – But Peter reminded them the reason God raised Jesus from the dead was because they had killed Him. They didn't just kill Him, they hung Him on a tree! Why is that important? Because in those law books it said cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. When the Sanhedrin enticed and petitioned the Roman authority to crucify Him, they were cursing Him. They were saying He was cursed by God. And Peter is saying the blood of the man you cursed is on your hands!

God is not going to let them get away from this. First, it was "The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed..." and now he says, "God exalted Him at His right hand." The Sanhedrin knew what the right hand of

God was. That was the seat of authority, the seat of the Messiah. Peter is boldly saying that Jesus is the Messiah and God has exalted Him to the right hand of God as leader and Savior. Some bibles say prince and Savior.

This word, prince, is the Greek word, Archegos. It literally means a champion, in today's culture, hero. We live in a hero culture, do we not? We ask people all the time who their hero is. It depends on what your love is in life, but you want to be like your hero. I love this and I hope Crider doesn't mind me telling this, but Crider's hero is Giannis Antetokounmpo. He is about 6'11. He takes two steps from half court and dunks. Crider likes basketball. So if you drive by their house, Crider's basketball goal has a trampoline beside it, about eight feet tall. Crider gets on the trampoline and in two steps and he dunks it. Why? He has a hero, Giannis. Finn...Giannis is not his hero. Steph Curry is his hero. He shoots shots from the other side of the house to be like Steph.

Peter said God raised Jesus after they killed Him and exalted Him as our champion, our hero. Let me ask you this question. How many of us in the church today are trying to emulate the life of Jesus because He is your champion? Let me be real serious with you, as well as myself. How often do we get in that situation at work where we feel frustrated? Are the words coming out of our mouth words that honor Jesus? When we have that little disagreement at home with our spouse, is our desire to emulate Jesus because He is our champion? Are you running your business like Jesus would run a business? Are you coaching the kids like Jesus would coach the kids? Men, are you loving your wives like Christ loved His wife? Are you wives loving your husbands like Christ submitted to God? Let me be real here. Every one of us has a worldwide platform today. It is called social media and most of you use it. If I got on your Facebook page, would I see a devoted follower of Christ who is trying to emulate Jesus Christ, or would I see you and your flesh?

We are Christians. God raised Jesus after they killed Him and God exalted Him so He could be our champion! He has the full authority to speak on all elements of our lives because He is Creator, not just Redeemer. He is our Savior! He went ahead of us so that we could live our lives, so that we could follow Him, and in all situations be like Him. In order for us to follow,

He had to be Savior because we had to be redeemed. There was something that held us in bondage, and that was called sin; and it is not an enemy from without, it's an enemy from within. Many of us need to quit giving Satan credit for what we are blaming on him and just admit that what we are really wrestling with is our unredeemed flesh.

The Heart of Apostolic Preaching

Jesus died on that cross and God raised Him from the dead so we could be rescued from sin. Peter makes it plain to the Sanhedrin council. He said it was "...to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." I have to point this out because it is the heart of apostolic preaching, and it must be the heart of the church today. The reason God raised Jesus and exalted Him was to give repentance to Israel. Israel, nor sinners, has the ability to repent on their own. No one who is dead in sin can turn from a life of sin and trust in Jesus Christ on their own. It is not possible. The only reason a sinner has that ability is because of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Do you understand that? We can take no credit for our salvation. Even the repentance has been given to us as a gift from God based on the finished work of His Son! He wanted Israel to repent. Why did He want Israel to repent? It was so that they could be forgiven of sins! Forgiven means to be released from and it removed. You remove it so you can release somebody from something. Why did God raise Jesus from the dead? Why did Jesus die? It was so you and I could be set free from sin.

I think if we could pick one picture of what it means to be a sinner, it means that you are self-centered – life is about you. That is what being saved is about, you being set free from being self-centered. The older I get the more I struggle to be around self-centered people. I have to be, but I don't like to be. Self-centered people are only about self. I walk away sometimes thinking how in the world could that have been said, or how in the world could that have been done. How? It is because you are totally consumed with self. There is no thought of what your words or actions just did to that other person. In that moment, you were totally absorbed with self, and that is what we have been freed from! This ought to happen outside the walls of this building, but it should not happen with those of us who gather inside these walls! If Covid did anything, it revealed in all of us

those areas where we are all about us. I am confessing too. Hear me...this Covid pandemic would not have happened had God not allowed it, and some of us totally forgot about spreading the gospel in the last year and a half. We were only focused on ourselves and our way of life, rather than the life of Christ and what God has called us to do.

See, Peter said we have to obey God. We aren't going to obey men and the reason is because we are His witnesses, we are witnesses to these things. What things? The Jewish leaders killed Jesus, God raised Him, and God exalted Him. He is the hero, He is the Savior, and the apostles are the witnesses. Can I ask you a question? Does God have a witness in you? Are you a witness?

The Council's Decision

Peter said the Holy Spirit is a witness also. It wasn't easy to be a witness to those religious leaders because they got mad, they got enraged, and they wanted to kill them. The worst thing that would probably happen to you and me is somebody will get mad at us. They won't be our friend. They will think we are radical or fanatical. We are His witnesses, so the question is can Jesus get a witness tomorrow? Can He get a witness this afternoon, somebody who will stand up and witness about Jesus, even to someone who might be jealous of you? Even to someone who might misunderstand you? Even to someone you might not be comfortable witnessing to?

Luke says a Pharisee named Gamaliel (from the minority party) stood up and said let's don't kill these guys. Let's back off and ask them to dismiss them. So they dismiss the twelve apostles and have a private, secret meeting. In the meeting, Gamaliel gives two examples. He says if these guys are like the last two guys who rose up and got a following, they won't last very long, so let's not kill them. Then, he said we also don't need to kill them because if these guys are of God, we can't stop it; and if they are of God and we try to stop it we would be opposing God, so let's let them go. So they let them go. The Bible says they accepted his advice.

Now, I can't make Gamaliel a hero here. The reason is because he was the teacher of Israel and he had the honor of the people. He was a Pharisee, so he knew there was a resurrection of the dead. He knew there were

angels. He knew there was a promise of a coming Messiah, and he should have seen, as Nicodemus did, that Jesus was the Messiah. Even though he was more moral than the Sanhedrin, he was still indifferent. Yes, he kept them from being killed, but he allowed them to be beaten. Beaten, here, means they were flogged. They were stripped of their outer garments and tied to a hitching post. With a long leather whip that had three throngs of leather embedded with jagged rock, jagged glass, and jagged metal, they were flogged twice on the back and once on the chest in thirteen different sessions. They stripped the hide off of the apostles. To be beaten like this was to be beaten to within an inch of your life!

The Apostles Rejoice and Continue to Witness

After they flogged the apostles and told them not to mention the name again, they release them. I don't know about you, but I would be mad. I'm in a theocracy and these are my religious leaders, and look at what they have just done to me! But what did these guys do? They didn't get angry; they rejoiced. They rejoiced! They go back to where the people are and they literally have no skin on their backs and chests, and they were rejoicing! Why? Because they suffered, suffered because of Christ, and they felt worthy to suffer for Him because they did the right thing! It wasn't about them; it was about Him. I just have to ask you this question. Is your life about you, or is your life about Him? Because their lives were about Him, the last verse says, "And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus." Wow! It was just part of who they were. They witnessed.

I want to close with this thought. I do not believe my daughter was the first person that Jeanne's dad, Tim, had witnessed to. I don't believe you come to the end of your life and go into the emergency room, know you are dying, and be worried about your nurse for the first time in your life. I believe that had to have been part of his life. He was a witness. We are all witnesses. What do witnesses do? They witness. Are you witnessing? If you are not witnessing, we are not witnessing, and we have been called to witness.