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**Acts 5:17–42**, ESV, abridged.

*<sup>17</sup> The high priest rose up, and the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy <sup>18</sup> they arrested the apostles and put them in the prison. <sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, <sup>20</sup> “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”*

*The high priest came and sent to the prison to have them brought. <sup>22</sup> But the officers reported, <sup>23</sup> “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we found no one inside. <sup>25</sup> And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.” <sup>26</sup> Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.*

*<sup>27</sup> They set them before the council. The high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> 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.” <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Savior, to give repentance and forgiveness of sins.”*

*<sup>33</sup> They were enraged and wanted to kill them. <sup>34</sup> But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor, gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. <sup>35</sup> He said, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> So in the present case I tell you, let them alone, for if this plan is of man, it will fail; <sup>39</sup> but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” They took his advice, <sup>40</sup> and they beat the Apostles and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup> Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. <sup>42</sup> And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching that the Christ is Jesus.*

## **They did not cease teaching.**

In Acts, we hear what happens after Jesus is crucified, dies, rises from the dead and communicates with select people, and then ascends into Heaven. The Apostles, along with others, begin to spread the faith outward, starting from where the faith was born: the greater Jerusalem area. The story focuses to a large degree on Paul, the man who had persecuted Christians, and who is converted on the road to Damascus; he brings the teachings of Christ almost to the far reaches of their known world. Acts tells us how the message of Jesus Christ - the message of the New Covenant, salvation through faith, forgiveness, and love for all people – develops into a worldwide movement and a thriving Church. In verses 17 to 42 of Acts Chapter 5, we see the Sadducees reacting to the evangelical efforts of the Apostles. The Sadducees are important religious leaders: powerful merchants, high priests, and members of aristocratic families. They are enemies of Jesus and his message. They see him as a threat to their power base and as a perverter of their ancient faith. There is an undertone to this story that shows the power, not of the Sadducees, but of Jesus' message to the world. This is revealed through the actions of a powerful Pharisee named Gamaliel. The Pharisees were representatives of the common people, and they were powerful within local synagogues, whereas the Sadducees operated out of the main Temple in Jerusalem. We will see that this

Pharisee, who comes from far more modest roots than the Sadducees, understands the Jesus movement far better than the Sadducees.

At the opening of our story, the Sadducees have the Apostles arrested and placed in prison. We are told this: *But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said,* <sup>20</sup> *“Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”* God sends a messenger who frees the Apostles and tells them to do the boldest thing imaginable: to preach in the Temple. The Temple is the center of the Sadducees’ power. We see that God is symbolically showing that the followers of Christ are the true faith leaders of God’s people. Next: *The high priest came and sent to the prison to have them brought.* <sup>22</sup> *But the officers reported,* <sup>23</sup> *“We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we found no one inside.* <sup>25</sup> *And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.”* <sup>26</sup> *Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.* Notice that the Apostles could have taken off, but they went to the place where they would certainly be found: the Temple. When a captain and some officers are ordered to bring the Apostles to the Sadducees and the Pharisees, they do it very

gently, because they know that the people are on the Apostles' side, not theirs. This is another indication that a major spiritual powershift is underway.

Next, we see the leader of the Apostles explain why they must defy the Sadducees and the Pharisees: <sup>27</sup> *They set them before the council. The high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> 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."* <sup>29</sup> *But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Savior, to give repentance and forgiveness of sins."* Peter is saying that these so-called religious leaders are the ones who had a hand in Jesus' crucifixion, and in fact, the high priest acknowledges this by defensively saying that the people are being led to believe that the Sadducees and the Pharisees helped condemn Jesus. But Peter is not condemning them. Rather, he is saying that Jesus offers forgiveness of sins to anyone who repents. Peter is not threatening the religious leaders: he is telling the Sadducees and the Pharisees that they have an opportunity to cleanse themselves spiritually and follow Jesus. This is not a sarcastic offer: Peter is completely serious.

Now is when the relatively humble Pharisee named Gamaliel takes charge. <sup>33</sup> *They were enraged and wanted to kill them. <sup>34</sup> But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a*

teacher of the law held in honor, gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. <sup>35</sup> He said, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> So in the present case I tell you, let them alone, for if this plan is of man, it will fail; <sup>39</sup> but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" Gamaliel is trying to diplomatically diffuse this situation. He wants the traditional leaders of the people of God to retain their authority, and he wants to keep the people from rising up against them. He seems to understand that Jesus might be the real deal. He tells the council to be careful about what they do. He compares Jesus and the Apostles, along with their followers, to other revolutionary groups. He attempts to dismiss the threat of the Jesus movement by pointing out that other people, namely Theudas and Judas, were eventually killed and their followers then disappeared. They were in the end no threat at all. If they ignore the Apostles and their followers, the same thing will happen, he suggests. But he does point out, in a moderately threatening way, that if this new movement is truly being directed by

God, then the Pharisees and the Sadducees don't want to be going against the will of God. This speech would have greatly impacted the readers of the Book of Acts during the early days of the Church. Consider someone reading this during the year 200. They see that the movement has indeed endured, and in fact, the Church has grown tremendously by 200 A.D. On the other hand, by that time, the Temple had been destroyed and the Pharisees and Sadducees were completely out of business. Thus, even by the words of the enemies of Jesus, this means that the new faith is indeed being directed by God. By the way, the Judas being mentioned here is not the former Apostle. This is another man named Judas who led a revolt. There was a Theudas who also led a revolt, but this didn't happen until the year 44 – after this speech took place. There is a chance that this is a different Theudas, but most likely, Luke, the author of Acts, got his facts a bit confused when he wrote this.

Before we talk about the end of our story, I'd like to describe a conversation I had with someone several months ago. He was a weather-beaten man whom I came upon on the street in Denver. He was talking loudly, but politely to those around him. He was warning everyone to repent and to go before God and ask for forgiveness. He was saying that the more a person thinks they have done no wrong, the more wrong they have probably done. He said that the problem is that much of what Americans think is perfectly okay to do are in truth selfish, corrupt, and

sinful acts. Everything that I heard him say was perfectly sound Christian teaching. He told people that if God could forgive him, then God could forgive anyone. He said that he had led a very hedonistic life. Most everyone rushed past him, very deliberately not looking directly at him. Every now and then someone would pause for just a moment and look at him. He pointed at one young woman and asked her politely if she had any idea how many children might have mined the rare metals in her phone or sewn the designer clothing she was wearing. She shook her head no, with a bit of an amused look on her face. He said that simply due to his age, he was sure that he was more guilty than her, but that he had asked God to forgive him - and that God had done just that. He said that he knew that you couldn't live in America today and not take advantage of people, but that there was a lot we could do to help the people whom we are indirectly harming. He said that everybody, no matter where they live in the world or what they do for a living, does wrong things. This young woman nodded and said that she was sure he was right. She then tried to give him some money, but he refused it, saying that he was a computer programmer, earned a very good salary, and owned his own four-bedroom house. Then he started preaching at everyone who went by, telling them that rather than focusing on sin, the first step is simply to develop a relationship with God. Looking for forgiveness and figuring out how to be a better servant to

God and God's people would naturally come after that. And it would come naturally, he said, once they knew God. I stepped up to him, and he stopped his preaching long enough for me to tell him that his teaching was solid. He went back to preaching. A few seconds later, a man yelled at him, telling him to take his f-ing nonsense elsewhere. I gave the preacher a thumbs up. He smiled. I moved on.

Here is the end of our story: *They took his advice, <sup>40</sup> and they beat the Apostles and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup> Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. <sup>42</sup> And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching that the Christ is Jesus.* The council members follow the advice of Gamaliel. The Apostles were not simply let go: the council had the Apostle beaten, and then released them. They also ordered the Apostles not to preach anymore. On one hand, this sounds like a modest punishment, given that they could have been sentenced to death. However, the Greek word that is translated as "beat" means "flog"; in other words, the Apostles apparently received the notorious, brutal Roman punishment of thirty-nine lashes. So, when it says that they proceeded to go house to house preaching, as well as teaching in the Temple, this was presumably after a long period of physical recovery. Notice, though, that when they left the presence of the council, apparently very badly wounded,

bleeding and in great pain, they rejoiced at being worthy of suffering dishonor in the name of Jesus. Think about how crucial their faith was to their self-identity.

I'm sure that the man whom I saw preaching on the street has been treated with dishonor, at least in minor ways. But certainly, no one has flogged him until the muscles on his back were exposed. Our faith has survived for 2,000 years. Clearly, the Jesus movement is of God. Perhaps believers in Christ would be more willing to take risks and preach their faith if the risks were greater. When people simply look at us condescendingly, when they tell us we're fools who believe in myths, even if they only curse at us, rather than trying to have us imprisoned, executed, or flogged, it seems that we're not much of a threat to them. When we're tolerated but not persecuted the way the early believers were, it's too easy to cling to the values of those around us, so that we can be just like everyone else. It would be intriguing if the Church in the U.S. didn't have another revival, with a rapid growth in membership, until what we believe becomes so unpopular, so unacceptable that we really do become true martyrs again. Then we won't have any motive to compromise so that we can fit in well in society.

But for many of us the answer is far simpler. We're just shy. We see over and over in the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testament, that people see themselves primarily as people of God. The ancient believers saw their faith as the

core aspect of their lives. Back then, whatever your faith was, whether you were an Israelite or a pagan, it was normal for your faith to be the defining property of you as a person. So, they weren't shy about talking about it. We need to not see ourselves as primarily conservatives or liberals, or as teachers or firefighters, as athletes or couch potatoes. We need to do what the people of Jesus' day did: define ourselves by our faith. It needs to be our primary characteristic. Not the only way of defining ourselves – just the most important one. We're willing right now to have powerful debates about politics or professions or how we entertain ourselves on weekends. We must rediscover the importance of our faith to our personal identities, so that we're motivated to talk faith with people, to show them that a belief in God is the best way to live a joyous and satisfying life. Try to remember that your faith defines you as having been made in the image of God. In truth, you may remain shy, you may not become someone who can't cease teaching - but you will absolutely feel the presence of God more powerfully if you fully identify as a believer. Let yourself be the person you are. Please pray with me.

*God, let us rediscover the core of our identities as believers. Let us be like the ancient faithful who were so convinced that their love of God, their dedication to the ways of Christ, were so critical to their earthly and eternal lives that they were more than happy to suffer dishonor in the name of God. Amen.*