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90 Day Challenge II: The Acts of the Holy Spirit
By the Spirit We Are Outspoken
Acts 5

Last month I took a trip down to Portland State University to help with a week of events being put on by some campus ministries there. As I interacted with those college students, I was reminded about one of my favorite things about working with that stage of life: they are all trying to work out what to do with their life. In the week I was there, I found myself often asking people: what do you want to do with your life? As I've reflected on that question, I wonder if there is a different version of the question—one that gets more at the heart of the issue. The question is, what are you willing to suffer for?

You see, we don't get anywhere in life without making sacrifices and suffering as a consequence. You have to suffer through longer work hours if you want to climb your way up the corporate ladder. You have to suffer through tough times in your marriage if you want a successful marriage. You have to suffer through the ups and downs of parenting if you want to be a successful parent. Everything requires some degree of suffering to attain. So perhaps the better question to help college students think about their future is, what are you willing to suffer for?

We've been journeying through the book of Acts—the story of Jesus' disciples after Jesus left them—these past few weeks and we will continue to do so throughout the summer. Each week we are reading a chapter and engaging with it different ways each day of the week as part of a 90 day challenge. We still have copies of the journal available if you would like them, and you can check out a blog post each week on the website. This week we have been reading chapter 5, and I've been wondering how the apostles would answer that question: what are you willing to suffer for? I'm going to tell you a story from Acts 5, and as I do I want you to think about the answer to that question... what were the apostles willing to suffer for?

Acts 5:29-32

But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead after you killed him by hanging him on a cross. Then God put him in the place of honor at his right hand as Prince and Savior. He did this so the people of Israel would repent of their sins and be forgiven. We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, who is given by God to those who obey him."

So what were the apostles willing to suffer for? They were willing to suffer so that they might proclaim the name of Jesus. In fact, it seems like nothing could stop them from speaking about Jesus! In the previous chapter we read about Peter and John being arrested and told by the Jewish elders not to speak the name of Jesus. So what do they do? Go back to the temple and start telling people about Jesus! Of course, they get arrested again, but this time it's not just Peter and John, but the other apostles too. But even that couldn't stop them speaking about Jesus, because in the middle of the night an angel comes along and breaks them out of prison. The angel tells them to go and speak to the people about Jesus.

So the next day, there they are... back in the Temple speaking about Jesus. The Jewish council comes and finds them, arrests them again, and then asks them, didn't we tell you to stop speaking about Jesus? So Peter and the apostles let rip, and instead of just defending themselves, they start telling the Jewish council all about Jesus now as well! The council is not happy, to say the least. In fact, they want to kill him! But, after a little discussion and the intervention of Gamaliel—the man who was the Apostle Paul's teacher—they instead have them beaten. Now this probably would have been the thirty-nine lashes—a horrific form of punishment involving being tied to a column and whipped 39 times in total, 26 of those on the back and 13 on the front. Typically the victims' flesh would be torn to shreds.

After this, the council orders the apostles not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. So what do the apostles do? Well, I don't know about you, but after that experience I might think twice about speaking the name of Jesus. And yet, the text says, "every day ... they continued to teach and preach this message: 'Jesus is the Messiah'". They had been arrested, threatened, arrested again, and then brutally flogged, and still they can't stop speaking about Jesus. What are the apostles willing to suffer for? They are willing to suffer so that they might proclaim the name of Jesus. They can't stop speaking about Jesus!

So what about us? What are we willing to suffer for? If you're here and you don't follow Jesus, what I'm about to say doesn't apply to you. But I want to ask, for the next 20 minutes or so if you would step inside the world of being a follower of Jesus and imagine what it would be like. What are we at Chapel Hill willing to suffer for? Well, sadly, for most followers of Jesus here at Chapel Hill, it's not the same thing as the apostles. Two years ago we surveyed our church and found out that only 23% of us regularly share our faith in Jesus with someone who doesn't believe in Him.

And I can totally relate. I remember back in high school being totally ashamed of my faith. I believed in Jesus, but I didn't want anyone to know about it. I was so desperate to be liked and included, that I thought it would probably be better if I didn't tell anyone about being a Christian. There were a few times I got found out. I remember sitting in our math class one day, and one of the guys I played rugby with turning to me and saying, "Hey, Ellis. I heard that you are a Christian. Is that

true?" Kind of sheepishly I said, "Yes" and then changed the subject. I was afraid of what they might think. I was afraid that they might not like me anymore.

You see, we followers of Jesus here at Chapel Hill today aren't on the whole like those early apostles. The apostles couldn't stop speaking about Jesus, we often can't even begin. And I understand it. I'm right there with you! We're scared. We're afraid we might say the wrong thing. We're afraid we might damage a relationship. We're afraid we might get excluded from a group. I get it. I experience the same emotions. I have the same fears.

But sometimes, I think we forget why we should even share about Jesus in the first place. So let's go back to the story and ask the apostles why they couldn't stop speaking about the name of Jesus. I want you to grab your Bibles, because right in the middle of the story, at verse 29, as the apostles were brought before the Jewish council, they were pretty much asked that question. The council said, "We told you not to speak about Jesus, but yet you keep on doing it. What is going on?" And Peter, always willing to speak in awkward situations gives a response. (v. 29)

"We must obey God rather than any human authority." Peter starts out by saying something they would all agree upon as Jews: we must obey God. But then he says something the Jewish council definitely wouldn't agree with him about. Peter gives them two reasons for why they keep speaking about Jesus. First: who Jesus is. Peter said (v. 30), "The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead after you killed him by hanging him on a cross. Then God put him in the place of honor at his right hand as Prince and Savior." Peter says, "We believe Jesus is someone of real significance because he is not dead—even though you killed him—because God raised him to life. And not only that, but God has put Jesus in this place of honor, in a preeminent place above all others as the ruler and savior of the world. We can't stop speaking about Jesus because of who he is." That's the first reason... who Jesus is.

And the second reason is what God offers through Jesus. Keep reading (v. 31) "He did this so the people of Israel would repent of their sins and be forgiven." God has done this because he wants his people to repent and be forgiven. He wants to restore his relationship to his people; he wants them to turn back to him. But not only does he want to restore the relationship, he also wants to give his people a gift... his Holy Spirit. Peter finishes (v. 32): "We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, who is given by God to those who obey him." God will give his Holy Spirit, to those who obey him. The second reason the apostles can't stop speaking about Jesus is because of what God offers through Jesus... restored relationship with himself.

Two reasons the apostles couldn't stop speaking about Jesus: (1) who Jesus is and (2) because of what God offers through him. (1) Jesus is alive and has been placed in the greatest position of honor by God, and (2) through Jesus, God is offering restored relationship to himself, and he is giving the gift of his Holy Spirit to

empower people to lead new, transformed lives. That is why the apostles can't stop speaking about Jesus.

But I'll be honest with you, sometimes I wonder if deep down I really believe Jesus can transform lives or if I really want Him to do it. Not that I don't intellectually assent to these ideas, but that I believe it to the core of my being and would risk everything for it. I question whether I believe it that deeply, because when I am faced with the decision about whether to share the name of Jesus or not, I often let fear get in the way.

There was a time only a couple of weeks ago that I was with a friend who doesn't follow Jesus and who was having a difficult time. As I was there I felt the Spirit prompting me to ask if they would like me to pray for them. But what did I do? I said to myself, "No way! They might think I'm weird, and then they might not want to be my friend anymore. I don't want to risk that!" And so I didn't offer to pray for them. I withheld Jesus—the one who has the power to overcome their difficulties—because I didn't want to suffer relational rejection. In the face of suffering social rejection, I chose social acceptance instead of offering my friend the thing they really needed... Jesus.

You see if I really believed, to the very core of my being, that Jesus is the Savior of the world, that through him God is restoring people to himself and radically transforming their lives, and if I really wanted Him to do that then it wouldn't matter what suffering I had to go through to share Jesus, I would do it. Do you know how I know that's true? Because we suffer for things all the time that we truly believe in and want.

Take going to war for example. Not something I've personally experienced, but it entails a large amount of suffering for something you believe in...men and women laying their lives down for their country because they believe in the cause. Or take childbirth—again, it's not something I've personally experienced—I'm told it entails great suffering, that the level of pain is like nothing else. And yet, women persist on having babies. They know the suffering is there, but yet they see that the suffering is worth it because they so desperately want children. All the agony and the pain of labor and the weeks of recovery are worth it because you get the joy of a child.

You see, deep down, we are totally willing to suffer for something we truly believe in or desire. We can even find joy in being counted worthy to suffer for something. That's exactly what we see in the apostles after they were beaten. (verse 41) "...they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name." And so if we really believed deep down who Jesus is and what God can do in people's lives through Him, we would count it a privilege to suffer for him, just like the apostles. If we really believed Jesus could transform lives, we wouldn't let any fear get in our way. But the reality is... I don't think we really believe deep within our beings like the apostles did.

So why don't we believe it? I think it's because we don't see it happening in our lives and the lives of those around us. Go back to verse 32. Peter says, "We are witness to these things." The apostles believed this stuff because they had seen it themselves. A couple of months ago they were scared and running as Jesus was being crucified; Peter wouldn't even say that he knew Jesus when he was questioned. But what happened? Their lives were transformed by the Holy Spirit.

And how did the apostles receive this gift of the Holy Spirit? How did they receive this transformational power of the Spirit at work in their lives, confirming that Jesus really is who he said he is and that his name does have the power to save? Well, carry on reading what Peter says in verse 32. Right after he said, "...we are witnesses to these things," he says, "and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." The apostles received the Spirit because they obeyed God. When they stepped out in faith and obedience to God, the Spirit came and amazing things happened. When they obeyed Jesus and waited in Jerusalem, the Spirit came like a rushing wind and 3,000 people turned to follow Jesus. When Peter obeyed Jesus' call to heal the sick and told the lame man to get up and walk, the Spirit came and healed him so he could walk again. When the apostles made the decision to obey God, they received the Spirit and the Spirit did amazing things through them.

I spend so much of my life looking to myself to get things done, trying to control everything, not obeying God but obeying myself. But for one week last month, as I traveled down to Portland State University with a team from this church to share about Jesus with students there, I said, "God, I will do whatever you want. I'll obey you. Spirit fill me and lead me." One day a young woman came to one of our lunchtime talks, kind of peeked in through the door, looking like she was going to come in until one of our team felt the Spirit asking them to speak to her. So they stepped out, and encouraged her that she should come in and sit down and listen. So she did.

After the talk, I turned to her to asked her what she thought. She told me that she had been worried about coming in because she didn't like conservative Christians, but that it wasn't like that. She began sharing about her strict Catholic upbringing and how she felt hurt by the church. As she did so I felt the Spirit prompt me to ask her, "How would you describe your faith?" At that moment a wave of emotion came over her, and she began uncontrollably crying. She poured out her heart and desire of a return to the faith she once had. All I had asked was "How would you describe your faith?" But because I was obedient to God's prompting something amazing happened; the Holy Spirit showed up and transformed that young woman's life.

When we step out in obedience and are willing to share Jesus with someone, the Holy Spirit shows up and does amazing things. We may not always see it, but the Spirit is at work transforming. And when we let fear get in the way of the truth that Jesus transforms lives, we see fewer lives transformed. The apostles were willing to suffer imprisonment and flogging because they were so convinced that Jesus

transforms lives, and they saw thousands upon thousands of lives transformed by the Holy Spirit.

So if you are here today and you are a follower of Jesus, I want to ask you, "Are you willing to step out and risk suffering for the name of Jesus, so that Jesus might transform the lives of those around you?" Because he can, and he wants to use you to do it. Are you willing? His Spirit will empower you. But will you risk it? Will you be outspoken?

And if you are here today and you aren't a follow of Jesus, I want to ask you, "Do you want the life transformation that Jesus can offer? Do you want to know what it means to live in relationship with the one who created you? To have him live inside of you by His Spirit and empower you to be the person he designed you to be?" Because it's only in the name of Jesus where that can happen. Do you want that?