

Holy Spirit + You = Awesome

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[0 : 00] Thank you so much for allowing me to be here with you. My name is Brian Wandel. I am a pastoral intern at Church of the Resurrection, a sister church of yours, as most of you know. It's so good to be among brothers and sisters in ministry. Our churches have collaborated over many things over the last eight years or so, as most of you know, and most recently, that will be in two weeks, many of you will be joining me and my family and a number of other people from Church of the Resurrection to start a new service, a new community of faith in the Brooklyn neighborhood at Archbishop Carroll High School. This is really exciting. We had a fantastic meeting this morning to iron out some details about how things are going to work, and it's going to be a powerful and exciting thing that happens. So thank you so much that we can do this together. I hope to connect with as many of you after the service as possible, but this is a good opportunity for you, Church of the Advent, and I guess myself as a representative of those from Church of the Resurrection, who are coming together for this work, as we have worked together so much over the years.

Sermon today. We're looking at Acts chapter 5, the passage that was read earlier, Acts chapter 5, 27 to 32, and the central message of this passage and of this sermon is a powerful one.

We must obey God rather than men. We must obey God rather than men. That's big, right? That's something you can put on a poster. That's something you can put on a bumper sticker. That's something that you can remind yourself of at the beginning of each day.

It's something that you can draw a lot from. It's something that makes me think of Martin Luther King Jr. in April of 1963, sitting in a Birmingham jail, arrested for his attempts to end segregation.

[2 : 14] And while he's there, after his arrest, his peers in the city, the white clergy from the city churches, had written a newspaper article telling him that he needed to stop, that he had gone too far, that segregation was bad, but come on, this is too much disturbing the peace.

And in response, Martin Luther King wrote his famous letter in which he said, essentially, we must obey God rather than men. Or, it makes me think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor from the 1930s who stood up to the Nazi evil that was going on in his country. While many of the Protestants joined with the state church, which was complicit with the Nazi evil, which refused to criticize it, Dietrich Bonhoeffer led a number, a small group of Christians who started a confessing church where they said, Christ is Lord, not the Fuhrer, but Christ is Lord. And in April, April of 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested in a plot to depose Hitler because he believed strongly enough that we must obey God rather than men. Or, it makes me think of Martin Luther in the 16th century, standing up for the gospel that he believed in, for the work that Christ had done, not only in his heart, but in so many Christians before, which had been stifled by centuries of a decaying, decrepit church that could no longer care for the souls of many millions of people. And in April, again April, it's a good month, it's a good month, April of 1521, at the Diet of Worms, in front of an emperor, in front of the prelates of the church, Martin Luther defended his stand. Here I stand, he said, I can do no other, so help me God. We must obey God rather than men. And the encouragement that I want to bring to you today, the encouragement that I want to share with you, is that the spirit that was in these powerful people, the spirit that was in them is the spirit that was in Peter and the apostles in this passage that we're reading, which is the spirit that is in us who trust in the power of Jesus. That is my encouragement. So take courage. Rally to Christ this night. We must obey God rather than men. Now, that's powerful. That's high talk. And let me assure you, by day I'm actually a mild-mannered accountant. I stand up giving you the religious message here, but by day I'm a mild-mannered accountant, and I hope you will spare me some mathematical eccentricity, which I've worked into my points. So we'll work through this passage to unpack this powerful statement, we must obey God rather than men. And here's how we're going to look at it.

First, God is greater than the world. Second, I am not greater than the world. And finally, here's the real algebra. Me plus the Holy Spirit equals awesome. I'm glad I caught you at that third point. You'll pay attention for the rest of the sermon. I can get into that. So break out your pocket calculators, and let's look at this passage. Acts 5, 27 to 32. So this is a funny passage because we're cutting right into the middle of a scene. So let's give a little bit of backdrop. Jesus of Nazareth preached and healed and went about Israel preaching the kingdom of God, telling people they needed to repent, but also that there was good news of healing and life for them. Jesus was crucified unjustly and raised from the dead by the power of God. He showed himself to many people and ascended to the right hand of God the

Father. And after this, the Holy Spirit comes down and falls on the apostles at Pentecost and all the believers at Pentecost. And suddenly they are empowered for an unbelievably successful ministry, continuing the work of Jesus in the world, telling people about the kingdom of God, telling them about the life that God wants to give them, if only they will die to sin. And this is where we come to here.

[7 : 25] After all this great success, the apostles are unjustly arrested, just like Jesus was unjustly crucified. And they're brought here before the Sanhedrin or the council, the ruling people of the city, made up of the religious rulers and the political rulers, who came together and said, they accused them. And this is where we get to the passage. The high priest then questioned them, saying, and here's the accusation, we strictly charged you not to teach in this name. Yet here you have filled Jerusalem with this teaching. Pretty open and shut case. Don't do X, you did X.

How could you not be more wrong? You have brought public disorder. Here we, the guardians of public order, charge you. We said, do not do it. And here you did it. There is a case here that makes a lot of sense by law. Intellectually, by the head, if someone is tempted to give into this and say, this is too much for me, there is something that you could satisfy yourself intellectually and said, ah, that's right.

They said not to teach, and here we taught. There was a disobedience. But there was something more going on with the council who rejects this message. They go on and they say, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us. So they reject this teaching because you don't do X and here you have done it. But they also know that their own hearts are in grave danger by what the apostles are doing. Let me give you an analogy, an example, from everyday life that you and I may share. Say you go out with your co-workers for a happy hour, and you are out, and you are talking with your co-workers and getting drinks, and your co-workers go on, and they are talking terrible things about your boss.

And they talk about how this boss has treated them poorly, but then they go on, and they talk about how this boss is not cleanly, how this boss has done various things inappropriately in certain relationships. They just go on and on and talk about things that may or may not be true about your boss.

And in that moment, you'll be tempted to be on the inside or to be on the outside. And you'll be tempted to add something to that conversation or to not be part of what's going on. And in that moment, you'll have a question about obeying God rather than men. And on the intellectual side, you could say to yourself, this has been a bad man.

[10 : 24] I can follow along. There is something to hang your hat on if you want to give in. But on the heart side, there is also a deeper aspect there. You know that your co-workers will not like it if you rain on their parade. You know that your co-workers may feel hurt or may reject you if you take a stand.

All right. We've started with something grand here. Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pages of a world history textbook. And here I am taking it small. However, I think you can understand this. Certainly, people like Martin Luther King did not just say, we must obey God rather than men when he was in a jail. He had gotten to that place because he was doing this day in and day out. And this is what I hope we can learn together today. All right. The response of Peter in the passage here. Peter and the apostles answer, we must obey God rather than men. And then he teases it out in three ways here. And here's the first way. He says, the God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging on a tree. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging on a tree. There was an ancient Jewish tradition going way back to the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, back toward the beginning, that had said that if a person is hanged on a tree, which is implicitly a lawbreaker, someone who is being executed, that person becomes a kind of curse.

Why? Because when their body comes down and falls on the ground, if you do not bury it quickly enough, it literally pollutes the ground in a certain way because it is so bad and so accursed. It is bringing something so bad among the people. So Peter is saying, first of all, you have tried to lay this heavy curse on Jesus. But not only that, you are the ones who have killed him. Now, did the high priest, did the council actually kill Jesus? Could they be convicted? Because an accusation is going back against them now. No, no, they didn't really do it. It was the Roman soldiers. They just, they sent him in a certain direction. They knew what was going on, but they were not the killers. Now, in our language, as in many others, there are many words for something like killing. If you want to say kill, you can say something like murder or slay or execute. I'm sorry for being a little over the top here, but you could even go further. And the word that Peter and the apostles use here is a little more intense. It's something more like, you laid your hands upon him. Your fingerprints are on that man.

His blood is under your fingernails. The accusation is that intense. How is it now? How is it that they could be so complicit that it is as if their very hands were the ones nailing Jesus to the cross?

[13:48] How is it? Now, what's underlying Peter's thought here, as he says this, is a deeper system the Bible testifies to. And there is a system that it talks about of behaviors, a system of bad to morally questionable behaviors that work together, that all work together in kind of a crazy knot. And they work together to exclude and to put down and to injure, to dehumanize, and sometimes to kill.

And if you're someone who wants to trust in God, you will be constantly asked to rationalize and use this system, this system of behaviors that among us all works together. You'll be asked to use it when it benefits you. Inflict pain, but avoid blame. Inflict pain, but avoid blame.

Because as much as this system hurts you, you can also use it. It is available to you. And the Bible has a name for this system. The Bible calls this the world. The world is what this is called. If you read some part of the pages in the Bible before and has said something negative about the world, perhaps you've had it in your mind that the God of the Bible does not like trees or cities or parks. In fact, let me assure you today, and you don't have to take my word for it, many could talk about this, and we can talk later, that the Bible has wonderful things to say about trees and parks and cities. But when it talks about the world, it is talking about a system of behaviors. For myself, I scoff. I avoid blame. I roll my eyes at my wife or my children. Sorry, Casey. I create just enough distance to make them hurt and to disburden myself of responsibility. Inflict pain, avoid blame.

[16:08] And it's at this point, when we see this in the world system, we must say that God is greater than the world. The work of God is greater than the world system. And so we must obey God rather than men, because God is greater than the world. When will we give up the usefulness of spite and jabbing little remarks? When will we give that up? Here's what the text says. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging on a tree. The very one that you tried to make a curse is the one that has been exalted by God as Jesus. When the risen Jesus exposes the world, when the risen Jesus exposes our little jabs and spite and world behaviors as unjust curses. Unjust curses.

This is what motivated Martin Luther King to say, segregation is not only politically and economically and sociologically unsound. It is morally wrong and sinful. It is an unjust curse placed upon people.

The world system avoids blame and inflicts pain. But God has raised Jesus to take away blame and to heal pain. And so we must obey God rather than men, because God is greater than the world through the resurrection of Jesus. So that's the first angle that we have here. Let's go on. Peter had said, we must obey God rather than men. He goes on here. He says, God exalted him as leader and savior to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. So we had just said that God the father raised Jesus from death to show that God's blessing is greater than killing. God's blessing is greater than gossip and a manipulative system. How is it greater? Well, that is what we're getting into here. How is it greater?

God exalted him as leader and savior to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. To all who are stuck in this system, to you and I who get stuck in these behavioral patterns that all work together, there is a way out. There is a way out and it is repentance and forgiveness. Because I am constantly invited into this one-upmanship, this hiding and blame avoidance. And at this point, we must say, I am not greater than the world. This is the essence of repentance. I am not greater than the world.

I am part of the problem. This is where Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when he was opposing the German state church that was going along with the Nazi regime, hoping, even the good people in there, hoping to outlast it, outlast the evil in some way, Bonhoeffer resisted and said, If you board the wrong train, it is no use running along the corridor in the opposite direction.

[20 : 07] You will never make it. But for us, the work of Jesus has given us a train that shows up right at our stop to take the right direction.

And the only thing that we can do to get on that train, the only thing that we can bring, the only thing that we can say for ourselves is, Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed by what we have done and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole hearts. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways.

Why? Because I am not greater than the world. We'll continue on here. Here's our third point. This is what you've been waiting for.

Why must we obey God rather than men? Here's the third point. Because we are witnesses to these things. The apostles go on. We are witnesses to these things. What thing is the resurrection and ascension of Jesus?

[21 : 27] And so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him. And obey here is basically like listen or follow.

To those who will be the Jesus followers, the Holy Spirit is given. There is a question that maybe has entered some of your minds.

Peter and the apostles, we had a gospel reading from the book of John where people who saw Jesus rise from the dead came around and they eventually not only believed, but again, we get to this passage in Acts, and they are filled with power.

And you might think to yourself, I could do that if I saw that. But you know what? I didn't. And this is hard for me to believe. It's hard for me to take this much courage and something that is so distant and so difficult to prove.

And I hear that. That is an important thought. Let me give an analogy here from a venerable textbook of psychology, the Disney Pixar movie Inside Out.

[22 : 44] Those of you with children under five or six may have seen it, or maybe you are an amateur personality theorist. Either way, the way the movie works is that there is a girl that the movie follows around and abstracts out what's going on in her head.

And as she goes through her life, she experiences things, and when she experiences something, a memory forms. It looks in the movie like a crystal bowling ball that comes down.

And it forms a memory that is deposited in her. And it's something that can be projected out onto her mind she can see later on. And the really important memories are the core memories. And those are the ones that are really saved.

And they're not just important because you remember a core memory again and again. They're really important because they form the basis for personality.

In the movie, they call them the islands of personality. And so the girl has these core memories of playing hockey, and that forms a part of her personality that identifies with hockey or with fun or family.

[23 : 53] And this is the analogy. That for those who would receive it, for those who would ask for it, the Holy Spirit, God's Holy Spirit, imports into us a core memory that we did not previously have.

God's Holy Spirit will import into us a core memory of Jesus' resurrection and ascension that we did not previously have because the Holy Spirit, too, was a witness to those things many years ago.

And so the Holy Spirit will give to us faith and repentance and courage so that we can obey God rather than men.

This is how Martin Luther put it back in the Reformation. Before we can enjoy Jesus' work for us, the Holy Spirit comes and communicates it to the heart, enabling us to believe and say, I, too, am one who shall have the blessing.

Again, Martin Luther said, before we can enjoy Jesus' work for us, the Holy Spirit comes and communicates it to the heart, enabling us to believe and say, I, too, am one who shall have the blessing.

[25 : 23] Because the Holy Spirit is able to import that core memory of Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension, his work for us to form a new part of our own personality, to have courage and trust in Jesus.

And with this new core memory in place, Martin Luther could stand and so can you and I and say that we must obey God rather than men because me plus the Holy Spirit equals awesome. It really is amazing because what we are talking about here is not just a system of doctrines. What we are talking about here is not just something that we do together and we kind of convince each other of.

If you are here and you are unsure of all of this, all of this stuff, these songs, if you are unsure of these songs that other people around you are singing and all of this stuff that we are doing, if you don't know what you think about all of that, let me encourage you that if you want out of the world system of jabbing behaviors that are constantly tying together in a knot that you cannot get out of, if you admit that only God, only God's blessing is greater than that world system, then you will do more than just make a decision.

You will do more than attend church on Sundays. You will do more in these things. You will get God's Holy Spirit.

[27 : 08] This is part of the essence of our faith, that it is God's Holy Spirit who will come to us. And if you do believe, let me remind you that you can say that we must obey God rather than men because God's Holy Spirit has come in you.

Please, let me encourage you of that. And we have this, we have this as a witness within ourselves, a core memory that we remember, but God in his wonderful plan has placed that core memory not only in our own heads, but in many other places as well.

These passages that we're reading, this is also a place where the core memory of the Holy Spirit resides, the core memory of Jesus' death and resurrection.

A foundation for our personality in Jesus to have faith and courage is in these pages and it is also in places like the Eucharist that we will come toward in a few minutes.

Listen to the words. When you receive it, think of what you are doing and receive it as a testimony to what Jesus has done.

[28 : 27] Or, it is simply us together, we who have decided we are not greater than the world and we need Jesus.

This, this is the same core memory that we all share together. It is the same Holy Spirit. and so we can have God through and with each other and we can have courage through and with each other. So, you know, perhaps we should modify this point that we plus the Holy Spirit equals awesome. It really is amazing.

So, so please, let me, let me encourage you, you who have joined me here today, let me encourage you that the Holy Spirit that was in Peter and the apostles is the same Holy Spirit who is in Martin Luther King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther back at the Reformation who is the same Holy Spirit who is in us.

It is the same. Let me encourage you, after all, it is April, which is a good month to obey God rather than men. Please pray with me.

[29 : 51] Oh God of power and strength and courage, you have done what is necessary. You have done what is necessary to pull us out of behaviors that trap us and hurt us and you have brought us the repentance, the train that is necessary to get us back to the right place.

Fill us anew with your Holy Spirit so that we can have courage in you. Amen.