

What Are You Fighting For?

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Acts 5, verses 12. Verse 12, he says, 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 17, But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him, that is, the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy, they arrested the apostles, put them in public prison.

But during the night, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, Go and stand in the temple, and speak to the people all the words of this life.

[1 : 43] And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. It's the word of God. We get to dive into this morning.

Well, what would it take for you to punch me in the face? One of my friends said about me in high school, Well, it's one of those guys, you want to put your arm around him one second and punch him in the tooth the next.

You know, but what would it take for you to fight me? Maybe if I said something about your mama, because that was always what pushed things and escalated things when I was in high school. In the summer of 1804, Alexander Hamilton was wrestling with a similar question.

What would it take me to fight? Over the past several years, the hit musical, Hamilton, has kind of introduced people afresh to the remarkable life and tragic end of one of our founding fathers.

But that particular summer, Hamilton was challenged to a duel by the sitting vice president, Aaron Burr, and he didn't know what to do. He writes an apologia, which is just his defense on why he decided what he was going to do.

[3 : 00] He realized his religion risked or opposed dueling. So he was a Christian, and his religion opposed dueling. And he risked leaving his life without a husband and his children, obviously without a father.

So he didn't want to do it because of that. He also risked leaving his family without their home and without property because he wouldn't be allowed or he wouldn't be alive to maintain his standard of living.

And while he and Burr did go back and forth on political matters, he says he had no personal ill will towards him. He quotes, and I quote, I shall hazard much, I shall lose much, and can possibly gain nothing by a duel.

But, he concludes, honor demands it. Since Burr had challenged him, and he felt he was in the right, he felt he must defend his honor.

You know, if he duels and loses, his honor will be defended even in death. If he chooses not to duel, his honor will be lost forever.

[4 : 13] Now, we know history records the outcome. Hamilton loses and is shot dead by Aaron Burr, who happens to be the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, which is so interesting, one of the leaders of the Christian faith.

Now, none of us will be challenged to a duel today, but all of us are challenged daily to defend something. Will we defend our reputation and our honor? Will we care most and fight hardest for what others think? Avoid certain things and saying certain things because they're uncool, unfashionable, perhaps unwoke? Will we defend our money? You know, our money, it leads out to clenched fists and to tight fists, perhaps more quickly than anything else. Or will we just defend our right to choose what we want to do with our time and defend our freedom? In our text this morning, we find the apostles defending the Lord's honor. [5 : 17] They don't care what happens to them. They only care about obeying the call to defend the Lord and call people to life.

You know, in one sense, the Lord needs no defenders. You know, he who has all authority in heaven and on earth is not looking for a hand. But in another sense, he's the only person worth defending before those who oppose him and those who need to hear his gospel. Who will you defend? And where we're going today is honor God by proclaiming the gospel regardless of the cost. Honor God by proclaiming the gospel regardless of the cost. Point one is the gospel advances in power. The gospel advances in power. And if you remember, in chapter 2, the Spirit descends on Jerusalem and revival breaks out. You know, that's what we call Pentecost because that was the feast. And the apostles began to proclaim the gospel all throughout Jerusalem. So the gospel work and all of its work is centered in and only in Jerusalem at this moment. [6 : 22] And all sorts of things are going on. And that's what those chapters, chapters 2 through 6, are all about Jerusalem. And our text this morning gives us one last glimpse of what was happening there.

Look in verse 12a. He says, Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. You know, in chapter 3, Peter healed that lame man. Remember that? It got him into all sorts of trouble. It got them into prison the first time. Now, after being released and praying for more boldness, many other signs are occurring. Look at those verses down in 12. Many signs and wonders regularly done by the hands of the apostles. They even carry. Look down at verse 15. They even carried out the sick into the streets, laid them on cots and mats. They weren't just healed in the temple. They were healed everywhere in the streets that even Peter's shadow might fall on some of them. [7 : 22] And they be saved. The people around Jerusalem are being drawn in. They're hearing about this guy. And they're being drawn in, bringing sick. And those with unclean spirits. And that verse 16 concludes, And they were all healed. The point is, it looks to be emphatic. There's so much. Many regularly done. Even at least all healed. They're emphatic. So much is going on. Even later on, which we read, Peter and John are in a prison. And the angel of the Lord comes and opens the door. Well, the point of all this is that all these signs and wonders, they're not meant to point to Peter and John and what they're doing. They're pointing to the power of God in this community. God's at work in this ragtag group of apostles. And the signs are just that. They're just pointers. They're meant to be windows through which we see that God's doing a new thing. [8 : 22] And he's building a church. And the greatest wonder he's performing here is conversion. Luke emphasizes many signs and wonders in these five verses.

But places the greatest emphasis upon conversion. Look down in verse 14. He says, More than ever. I mean, that's kind of crazy. So 3,000 people were saved on Pentecost. But now it's more than ever. Believers were added to the Lord. Multitudes of both men and women were added to the Lord. Now, we churches get pretty silly adding up things. You know, we add up decisions. We add up commitments. We add up altar calls. We add up baptisms. We say it's not about the numbers. But we add them up and publish them for all to see. [9 : 26] But that's not what Luke is doing right here. Luke's telling us that many were added to the Lord. Many were brought to new life.

All the focus is upon God. In that little phrase. It's a passive phrase. So many were added, not by their decision, not by their altar call, not by their commitment.

They were added by the Lord to the Lord. Luke's describing conversion. Mark Dever. Talks about conversion this way.

Says, Scripture is clear in teaching that we are not all journeying toward God. Some having found him, others still seeking. Instead, Scripture presents us as needing to have our hearts replaced. Our minds transformed. Our spirits given life. We can do none of this for ourselves. The change each human needs, regardless of how we may outwardly appear, is so radical.

[10:26] So near our roots that only God can bring it about. We need God to convert us. You know, many say not all who wonder are lost.

The Bible says all are lost and many wonder. And we need God to convert us. And to add us to the number.

Conversion is the greatest wonder of all. And I just love the way Luke packs that in there. It reveals the most powerful gift. And the most powerful work God does.

New life. A more brilliant, more wonderful work than even creation itself.

Because it will pass away. Work of conversion will not. You know, there are a few more uncomfortable moments for a kid than picking teams in backyard football.

[11:24] Especially if you're unathletic like me. You know, the good people are picked. And then the good friends are picked. And then the remaining ones are reluctantly chosen.

You know, it's so funny. You pick one and one and one and one. And then you're kind of like, well, let's just split the masses now. You know, it's all a wash. They're all rubbish. And sometimes we can think conversions like this.

The Lord picks the good ones. He picks the ones next from, they're pretty good. Maybe they're from a good family. Or maybe they're just popular.

Well connected. And then he had to pick a few of the last ones. And that's where you come in. I've seen that line of thinking lead so many people to discouragement, depression, and despair.

But let me tell you, that could not be further from the truth. If you're a Christian this morning, it is not because God had a couple of pigs left. If you're a Christian this morning, it is because God came for you.

[12:33] God wants you. God likes you. God loves you. God added you to the number. And in that is meant to fill you with wonder. Martin Luther said, and we celebrated what he did this past week.

He said, when he was converted in the tower, if you know anything about that, in Germany. He said, I felt as though I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

Well, what did it feel like to you? Does it still fill your soul with wonder? Does it still move you to tears?

Have you moved on and begun to want something else from the Lord? You know, anytime our prayers are more defined by what we want from God than by what he has done.

Anytime our affections are unmoved in singing of the gospel songs like Before the Throne of God Above. Anytime our hearts are clouded with doubt. Anytime our Bible reading has grown stale.

[13:36] We have wonderful work to do. We have the work of going to recover and remember and return to the gospel. To what God has done away from what we are doing.

I love the way John Stott says it. The cross is the blazing fire at which the flame of our love is kindled. But we have to get near enough for its sparks to fall on us.

The cross, the flame of my love for God is not stirred up and kept going by my resolve. But by the cross.

And realizing what God has done in adding me to that number. Point two, the gospel advances with words.

Gospel advances with words. One writer a couple years ago asked 70 people at a Christian publishing convention or conference. A simple question.

[14:42] What is the gospel? And he said only one person of the 70 got the answer right biblically. But how would you define the gospel?

How would you answer that question? What's the gospel in your own words? I recently asked this question after the membership class. Taylor wrote me back a thousand words. So he used all of our words to answer that question.

But how would you answer it in your words? You know, the gospel is just a word that means good news. But what's the good news all about?

We often hear, we're told, believe this news and you won't be poor. You know, you see that maybe on TV or something like that. You'll prosper. If you give to God, you'll get from God.

And that's not the good news. Or believe this news and you'll never feel empty or alone. I can attest to that not being the good news. Let me promise you of that.

[15 : 41] Or sometimes we're told, believe this good news and you'll find purpose and meaning and happiness. And though I do think some of those things come, that's not the gospel.

I mean, that's not always true. I hate to break that to you. Or believe this news and life will go well with you. That's not the gospel either.

What is the gospel? You know, we're in a gospel-saturated area of the country. We're in the Bible belt, so to speak. And we're in an area that talks so much of the gospel that I think often has fumbled the meaning of it.

The gospel is simply this. God is our creator and we're accountable to him. We've sinned against him and rejected his love and rule. Jesus Christ, one person that had come and stand in our place, came, received all the punishment in our place, removing forever our guilt before God.

And now we receive eternal life, forgiveness, and freedom by coming to Jesus. The point of that is the gospel is focused on our guilt before God.

[16 : 43] The gospel is focused on our guilt, not on our feelings. Not on our purpose. Not on our bank account. The gospel tells us the good news of all that God has done.

And that's what the apostles just get out there and preach. So we read that part right before they were in prison. But if you look down there in verse 30, it shows them preaching before the council.

And they said, You see what's going on there.

He's proclaiming, Peter's proclaiming before this council. He's saying, You are guilty. You killed him.

And he says, God raised him up. And now he says, You must respond to him. The gospel is not advice about what we must do to get right with God. The gospel is news about all that God has done to get right with us.

[17 : 48] And they just had to get the news out. Tim Keller talks about it like this. Advice is counsel about what you must do. News is a report about what has already been done.

Advice urges you to make something happen. News urges you to recognize something that has already happened and to respond to it. Advice says it's all up to you to act.

News says someone else has acted. And that's what captured these apostles. Someone else had acted. News had come.

And then they just had to get the word out. We remember in Acts 8, 1, where they're commanded to be witnesses in Judea and Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and all the way to the end of the earth. And this passage tells them how they're obeying that command. So throughout this passage, they say, We must obey God rather than man. We must obey God rather than man. And all the signs and wonders that are performing, all those things are simply trying to gather an audience where they can teach.

[18 : 54] Look down in verse 20. When they're in the prison, the angel says, Go and stand in the temple and speak to all the people the words of life. Verse 21. So when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

Verse 25. When they're no longer in prison and they're trying to figure out where they are. Someone says, Look, the men you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching.

Look down in verse 28. Verse 28. Again, this emphasis. We strictly charge you not to teach. Verse 42. After they released again, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

The point that threads through this passage is a commitment to teach. This is news and it must be shared. Go and stand. I love the way this angel says it. And speak to the people all the words of this life.

The gospel does not spread by doing good deeds. The gospel spreads by words that give life. St. Francis of Assisi.

[20 : 03] I think that's how you say it. Once said, Preach the gospel. Use words if necessary. You probably heard that phrase before. Now, there's several problems with that quote.

One is, there's no evidence he said it. Which, that's a problem. Second, there's no indication he lived by it. And third, it's just confusing.

Now, our gospel should certainly not be all talk. But if we do not talk, we aren't preaching the gospel. The gospel is good news that we must share with words.

I mean, that's what a witness does. No witness is called into the stand who says, I'm pleading the fifth. You know, I'm holding my tongue on this one, Judge. I mean, that's not a witness.

And if our understanding of evangelism does not include words, then we don't understand evangelism. You know, my neighbor is not going to come up to me and say, you don't cuss.

[21 : 06] Tell me the words of eternal life. My brother is not going to say, you stopped getting drunk. What must I do to be saved? My coworker is not going to say, you recycle and drink fair trade coffee.

How can I be reconciled to God? The gospel is a message that provokes a response, not a life that provokes a question. Do you see?

How can they call on him in whom they've never heard? How can they believe in him of whom they've never heard? I think, being faithful to this text, the Lord would ask us, do you share the gospel with words?

When was the last time you shared the gospel? It's so striking to me. You know, we can defend anything and everything, you know.

I defend the leftovers in our house sometimes if it's a really good meal, you know. We just defend that last cookie. And we're commanded in the same way the apostles were, to take the gospel to the end of the earth.

[22 : 22] That doesn't mean everything else in our lives is of no significance. I love the way Luther says it. After a shoemaker got saved, he says, what should I do now? Which I asked after I was converted to.

And he says, well, what do you do now? He says, I make shoes. Well, he says, well, make a good shoe. You know, like the point is not all of us to quit our job and just share the gospel.

But it must be shared from our lips. We must obey God and not men and honor God by proclaiming the gospel. What is one friend you would like to share the gospel with?

I hope you'll pause right now and write down their name or think of their name. What's one friend that you know does not know the Lord that you want to share the gospel with?

Peter and John were here. That's the testimonies they want to hear, right? They wouldn't want our commitment numbers or something like that. They want to hear, well, who are you sharing the gospel with?

[23 : 26] Now, I know. I'm a pastor. I've been a pastor for a while. I know prayer and evangelism are the two subjects that immediately bring conviction. So let me give you a few tips. Just learn what to share.

See, we might have been just talking about the gospel. And you're like, I don't know how I would explain the gospel. Well, that's okay. You've got some great things to learn.

And it's a wonderful thing. If I believe this gospel, then I want to understand it so that I can share it, so that I can learn what to say. I remember I was raised in the church, was not a believer.

I remember being with my brother at his bachelor party on a beach real late at night. I was with a friend of his, also raised in the church.

And I didn't know where they were at with the Lord. I was not living close to my brother at that time. And I shared the gospel much like John Piper does. And I was talking to my brother and his best friend right before he gets married.

[24 : 30] And I said, you know, is Jesus your Lord? And he said, yes. I said, is Jesus your Savior? And he said, yes. I said, is Jesus your treasure?

And he said, I don't know. I said, brother, and you might not understand the gospel completely. Because the gospel is like that man who had a field and went and sold all that he had to buy that field.

There's no such thing as an unsold out Christian. And I got to share the gospel with him. Say, brother, I'm glad you have some belief in him.

But I think he wants to be your treasure. I'll never forget. Sometimes that's all it takes to get into the gospel in the South. And so there's so many ways you can learn to share it.

And I could go on and on here, but I won't. And learn when to share it. I remember meeting with a guy, talking to a guy that I met just kind of randomly. I was walking around campus at UT.

[25 : 37] And I asked him out for coffee to see if I could get to know him better. Needless to say, he didn't know what I meant by that. And he's like, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah.

So maybe don't do that line. But learn how to share with someone without being weird. You know, we Christians can be really weird. But greet people. It's true.

Greet people. You know, Athens is a wonderful place to greet people because you see the same people all over the place. So just greet them. Get to know them. Be kind to them. If they're your neighbors, then you've got to shoo in.

They're right there. Try not to annoy them too much because they're going to live next to you.

Befriend them. Talk to them. Find out what they enjoy. You know, I had a friend that used to walk around, and he would take off his watch when he was in public so he could always ask somebody what time it was.

The point was he began a conversation. Now, he's not a salesman trying to make a sale. He's a person trying to make friends. And I was with him ordering a pizza one night. He took off his watch on the way in, asked the waitress what time it was.

[26 : 45] And before I knew it, he'd shared the gospel with her. It was so incredible. I mean, I just often try to comment on somebody's clothing. I was at Athens Regional the other night. And I'm not sharing these because I'm all over or anything like that, but just trying to be faithful at this Head Start picnic the other night, and somebody's wearing a hat.

I couldn't figure out any other way to go in on it. So I said, hey, you like that team? I forget who it was. Next thing I know, I sat down next to him and got to say, what's your spiritual background? You know, what's your life like? What was hard for you? I got to share with him. You know, so begin by sharing with him. I think I would say begin getting acquainted with pushing through the pain line. You know, it will always be a temptation to keep conversations superficial, to keep family and friendships superficial because of the fear of man. But it's a snare, and we'll miss out on the joy of witnessing.

I don't know about you, but I never walked away from a conversation regretting that I shared. But I've walked away from a lot of them regretting that I didn't. You know, I think that's what's going on.

[27 : 56] The gospel is news to be shared. You know, sometimes unbelievers are better evangelists than we are because if they believe in recycling, they're going to let us all know about it. You know, if they believe in this certain movie, they're going to let us all know about it.

If they're doing this certain thing, they're going to let us all know about it. Well, we should be the same way. Not coercing people because we're blown away by what God has done and the privilege of sharing this news.

Third, the gospel advances through suffering. The gospel advances through suffering. All who honor God by proclaiming the gospel will suffer.

Look at verse 41, chapter 5, there at the end. This is one of those verses that in Acts, it's just a head scratcher. You know, after being imprisoned a second time and being beaten, verse 41 says, They left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

Now that's crazy, right? Certifiably insane type stuff. They were rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name.

[29 : 10] They were suffering for someone or something else. They were suffering for the name of Jesus Christ. In the same way Jesus suffered for others, so they are suffering for him.

Now, what's this mean? I think the point is they were experiencing dishonor, shame, and ridicule because of their allegiance to Jesus. And all the dishonor, shame, and ridicule was directed at Jesus, but landed on him and on them.

It was against him, but it landed on them. They were sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Now, in one sense, Christ suffered completely alone. He suffered once for sins, all alone, as he only sacrificed for sins. But in another sense, we must share in his sufferings.

Now, you think, how and why and what? The point is, as we advance the gospel and build this church, as we do this faithfully, year after year, we'll face opposition, pain, and suffering for who we are as followers of Christ and how we're seeking to live.

[30 : 29] Paul puts it in Galatians 6. I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. They were marks meant for him, but they land on me. It was said of the early church by Stephen Neal.

He says, Every Christian in the early church knew that sooner or later, he might have to testify to his faith at the cost of his life.

In earlier records, what we find is calm, dignified, decorous behavior, cool courage in the face of torment, courtesy towards enemies, and a joyful acceptance of suffering as the way appointed by the Lord to lead to his heavenly kingdom.

That's astonishing. What we find when we read those accounts is calm, dignified, cool courage, joyful acceptance.

[31 : 41] You know, it's not just the apostles or the persecuted or martyrs who share Christ's sufferings. It's you. It's the way you walk through the loneliness of singleness without complaining and continue to love others unlike you.

It's the way you endure the death of your mom without giving up and show compassion to others. It's the way you remain calm when coworkers and family mentors make snide remarks about your faith and your commitment to building the church.

It's the way you slog through the anguish of motherhood, not of laundry or of diapers, but of anxiety about the souls of your children.

It's the way you don't run away but keep pressing forward. I mean, the point is that the gospel is carried forward not by a bunch of people blinged out talking about God's blessings. The gospel is carried forward by a bunch of people who have looked pain in the eye, still have scars and are calmly pressing on.

Now, last week, Kanye West, or a couple weeks ago, Kanye West was converted. At least that's the word on the streets.

[33 : 06] He put out this album which is totally great. First time I listened to it on Spotify, it was not in a playlist of its own, so after that album, it jumped to some of his other songs, so don't do that or you'll run and cut it off.

But he has one song with this prayer and we have the words for you. Tempted to sing it, but I want. This is the hook. This is the chorus. Use this gospel for protection.

This is a hard road to heaven. We call on your blessings. In the Father, we put our faith. King of the kingdom, our demons are trembling.

Holy angels defending in the Father, we put our faith. Use this gospel to protect us, to carry forward, walk forward, to rest in those.

I actually do commend that album to you. I think it's pretty hidden in my opinion. So suffering always follows the gospel, but the suffering gives way to joy and lasting fruit.

[34 : 15] Look down there at 41 again. They left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy. You know, I think the point is if they suffer, the way they're thinking is if they suffer, they must be one of his own.

Instead of thinking if they suffer, what's wrong? If they suffer, why is this happening? What are good things happening to bad people? If they suffer, they must be one of his children because he suffered.

If the shepherd of the sheep suffered, how are the sheep not going to suffer? If the servant or the master suffered, how are not his servants and their suffering gives way to joy and lasting fruit as it always does?

It's a hard road as Kanye says to heaven but it's the way of Jesus. It's the way of life for us and all who will follow.

You know, in the middle of the 1800s, the gospel came to an Indian tribe in Assam, India. You probably heard this story but a certain young man, a certain man named Naksung was converted along with his family and the chief of the village came to the man in the city square.

[35 : 35] He confessed faith in Jesus Christ and so the tribal chief gathered the community called him to renounce his faith in Jesus Christ and he refuses to renounce.

He says, I have decided to follow Jesus Christ. I've decided to follow him. There before his eyes at the threat of his two children losing his life, he says, I decided to follow and then his two children were killed.

The tribal chief kept going. You know, they began to threaten his wife and said, if you don't renounce your faith in Jesus Christ, she too will be killed and he said, though none join me, though

none go with me, still I will follow.

before his eyes, his wife struck dead. Finally, he said, all right, your own life is on the line.

Renounce Jesus Christ. He says, the world behind me and the cross before me. that's not talking about the cross of Jesus Christ. Talk about his own cross. The world behind me, the cross before me.

[37 : 06] The story goes that this chief, after killing him, executing him, was so struck by his faith that he humbled himself and became a Christian.

Gave his life to Christ. The rest of the tribes did too. I mean, and the surrounding tribes, this whole tribe was rescued because of this man's faith.

Praise the Lord. Lord, you know, like I said, most of us are not going to be challenged to a duel this afternoon. Most of our lives will not be on the line in the same way.

But we can imitate him and we can imitate Paul or Peter. Paul we can imitate too, but we didn't talk about him today.

We can imitate Peter in following Jesus Christ with this type of resolve to honor God by proclaiming this gospel. So we're going to stand, if you would stand with me, we're going to sing this, I have decided to follow Christ together.

[38 : 19] Let me pray for us. Father in heaven, I thank you for this day. Lord, I pray that you would help us to be disciples in this community who share the gospel with words.

and even on this Sunday where we pray for and remember the persecuted church, that we would press forward with the same resolve to follow you, to proclaim your gospel regardless of the cost.

Pray for that help. In Jesus' name, amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.