

**THE FELLOWSHIP:
FRACTURED & OPPOSED**
SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.



Catalog No. 20161016
Acts 5
6th Message
Paul Taylor
October 16, 2016

Acts 5

When I was in college, I took a class on failure. It was a fascinating study. How and when and why and where do things fail? As part of that class, we watched a video about the production of Boeing's newest plane, which at the time was the 777.

Boeing was testing the wings of the airplane. They knew the wings could handle the stress they needed to. What they wanted to find out was how much additional stress the wings could handle before they broke. In order to do this, Boeing had to build a huge testing facility. A large support in the middle of the building held down the body of the plane. Two adjustable winches attached to either wing and pulled upwards, a little bit at a time.

The video showed the wings being pulled higher and higher. As the angle of the bend increased, you could see everyone in the control room tense, just waiting for the first wing to snap. They were hoping that the wings would be able to withstand at least 150% of their designed load. The numbers ticked higher. 148. 149. 150. Everyone in the control room cheered. 151. 152. 153. 154.

Finally, both wings snapped. Metal shards flew everywhere, the whole plane rocked, and pieces of the brand new jet lay scattered over the facility floor. But the test results were great news: The wings had withstood over 150% of the designed load. But what was more impressive was that they had been engineered so precisely that they broke at exactly the same time and location on each wing.

Everything fails eventually. The only question is when and where.

This morning we're continuing our series called *SENT: Living the Mission of the Church* as we work our way through the book of Acts. Last week we took a little break from Acts to consider the issue of how faith intersects with politics. Today we're picking up in Acts 5.

We've been tracking the incredible story of the first group of Jesus followers. We saw them gather together and receive the Holy Spirit. We heard about this almost legendary period after 3,000 people came to faith in Jesus. Two weeks ago, we saw the apostles heal in the name of Jesus, but that event caused the first tension we've seen in Acts. Peter and John were arrested and questioned by the Jewish leaders.

This morning, we see those tensions deepen. The external pressure gets worse, but that's not all. Even things within the community start to get difficult. Everything isn't perfect anymore. Today we'll see the fellowship fractured and opposed.

As we watch this new community tested both from within and without, one question will be on our mind: When will it break? At what point will the pressure of internal conflict and external opposition become too much? When will that point of failure come? How much can they really take?

We face these same kinds of questions. We live in a culture that is skeptical of faith. The church as an institution is severely criticized, some of it deserved, some of it not. Within our community, we have issues of social integration and race and hurting marriages and strained friendships and broken families. If we are going to be sent, we have to make it through all the challenges we face.

This new group of Jesus followers hasn't really been sent yet. They are still in Jerusalem, still growing and learning as a community. Will they survive this period? Who will make sure they get through?

Will we survive? Will the pressures we face overwhelm us? Let's see what we can learn from the story in Acts 5.

The Fellowship Fractures

At the end Acts 4, there is another glowing summary of this new community, describing the group as being “of one heart and soul.” We are told that there “was not a needy person among them.” We are introduced to a new character: Barnabas. He’ll have a larger role later, but here we see him selling his property and giving all of the proceeds for the sake of this new community.

Acts 5 begins with a direct contrast to what comes before it. In contrast to Barnabas, we meet a man named Ananias who behaves very differently. Instead of the group being “of one heart and soul”, it is rocked by the first internal conflict.

Acts 5:1-5:

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and with his wife’s knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet. 3 But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.

This is a frightening story. Immediately after hearing about how great the community is, we hear about the first New Testament con artist. Ananias tries to act like he and his wife are doing what many others are doing in giving all their resources to the church. But Anias and his wife hold some back. And because of that, he is struck dead immediately. In the verses that follow, his wife arrives. She plays along with the deception that her husband began. And she, too, dies immediately.

The obvious question is: Why would God do this? Why strike someone dead for lying about how much he sold his property for?

Let’s start by pointing out a few things about this story. First of all, nobody had to sell their property. It was entirely a choice. Peter is clear that Ananias could have kept his property. He could have sold it and given half away. The issue was that he lied about it.

The new community was formed around faith in Jesus. They were “of one heart and soul.” We heard about the fellowship they experienced at the end of Acts 2. That Greek word “*koinonia*” that refers to deep and intimate connection in community. Ananias stomped all over that. He poisoned the *koinonia*. He fractured the fellowship.

At several points throughout Scripture, God chooses particular events in history to make an especially important point. In Numbers 16, we hear about a group of people led by Dathan and Abiram who refused to follow Moses. In response, the ground opened up and swallowed them. In Leviticus 10, we hear about the Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron. They tried to worship God with “unauthorized fire.” They were struck down. In Joshua 7, we hear about Achan, who kept some of the spoils from a battle that were supposed to be destroyed. In response, he was instructed to be stoned by the community.

All of these examples involve significant disobedience from God’s command. Dramatic action was taken to highlight the gravity of each act.

That’s exactly what is happening in Acts 5. It’s a parallel story to show that this new community is parallel to the chosen people of the Old Testament. This newly established *koinonia* built around Jesus is just as important as the worship of God during the times before Jesus. It’s very significant when someone fractures the fellowship.

Wouldn’t you agree? You know how it feels when someone betrays a group that you’re a part of. If you’re a follower of Jesus, you probably know how it feels when someone from within the community of faith hurts you. Other Christ followers don’t always act like you wish they would. You’ve been disappointed. You’ve been hurt by those people with whom you are supposed to be “of one heart and soul.”

What do we do with that?

In addition to being personally hurt by others within the church, we’ve seen the church as an organization hurt people throughout history. We’ve seen women undervalued by the church for centuries. There have been actual theological debates about whether the image of God only resided in men. We’ve seen questionable alliances with political movements on both sides. We’ve seen forced ethnic segregation. We’ve seen the powerful abuse the vulnerable. Sexual abuse. Emotional abuse. Spiritual abuse. When confronted, we’ve seen those in power lie and cover it up.

As much as we wish this weren't so, this is a truth that is all too familiar. Fellowships fracture.

Once again: What do we do about it?

This story in Acts 5:1-5 helps us. God makes an example out of Ananias and Sapphira to show us that their sin is a big deal to him. But there's another lesson for us as well.

Look back at what Peter says. He accuses Ananias by saying the following, "You have not lied to man but to God." The issue is not even so much that Ananias hurt the people of the community, though that is certainly a part of it. The issue is that he lied to God. The offense was against God first, not the community.

And what happens? God steps in to take care of the situation. When Ananias tries to dupe the community, God intervenes. God delivers justice against the one who fractured the fellowship of Christ.

Here is the point being made: This newly formed group isn't on its own. There is someone else involved who will step in. God sees what is going on. God can be trusted to bring justice. If you've ever been hurt by a Christ follower, or seen a Christian organization hurt other people, this is a huge relief. You need to know this.

If this was just a normal group of people—men and women who had decided to hang out together—what do you do when the group has problems? There is nowhere to turn. If we are just a group of people and I start to abuse my authority, what would you do? Where would you find justice?

But we are not just a group of people. When we hurt each other; when we are hurt by someone else; when we witness the church hurting an individual or an entire group of people, we can take assurance in the fact that the real offended party is God. The greater injustice is not within the kingdom of man, but within the kingdom of God. And the king is watching. He is present. And he will act.

That's not to say that God will always act immediately or in exactly the way that we want him to act. He doesn't normally strike people dead. But the early church needed this dramatic example, so that for centuries we could take comfort in the knowledge this is the God's kingdom. You can't just get away with stuff. God sees.

That realization is kind of a scary thing. That's why verse 5 reports that "great fear came upon all who heard of it." That same phrase is repeated in verse 11, "great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things."

In fact, Acts 5:11 is the first time we hear this community described as an "*ekklesia*", the Greek word that we translate as church. The first time they are described as a church is when we hear how afraid they are. This fear is a kind of reverence. A recognition that this is the real deal. This is about God, the creator of the universe. When this community violates its mission, God sees. God acts. God brings justice.

God's Work Continues

This struggle seems to have shaken up the new community a bit. But immediately after this story, we have another summary that describes the state of affairs.

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. 13 None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. 14 And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, 15 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. 16 The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

It's another impressive description. That makes this the third similar kind of report in the space of 4 chapters. We keep hearing these reports of what this group was like. And they are all very similar. Once again we hear about "signs and wonders." Once again we hear that they were "all together." Once again we hear that their numbers were consistently growing.

But this report includes a unique phrase. We read in verse 13 that "none of the rest dared join them." There is a lot of debate about what this is describing. Who are "the rest?" Is it the other followers, so that only the apostles were in Solomon's Portico? That doesn't make sense if it says that they were all there. Is it the nonbelievers? That doesn't make sense if new people were being added to their number.

It's a confusing phrase. I'm not even sure that we can definitively know what the reference is. But it is clear that something was amiss. There was some tension or concern or division in the group. This is the first of the three reports where everything isn't described in a positive light.

The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira have changed the group. Everything isn't terrible. It's just that something is a little bit off. But great things continue to happen. In fact, the reputation of this group is growing. Now, people are coming from the neighboring towns. The buzz surrounding these Jesus followers is growing.

Does this ever happen to you where you're having a good day and then something happens? An email comes in with bad news. Or a project has a complication. Or a friend hurts you. Something tarnishes your day. And everything else is affected. What started out good now seems completely ruined by whatever happened.

Our tendency is to think in black or white. Things are either okay or they aren't. But here is a church reeling from the dramatic events of two members betraying them and being killed for it. And God is still using them. In big, powerful, growing, surprising ways. God's work continues.

Even when things get uncertain, God keeps working. Tension or doubt or worry or internal conflict. None of that blocks the work of God. The kingdom can still thrive even when we aren't completely okay.

That truth is so important for us as a church to understand. If we are going to be sent, there can be a temptation toward thinking that we need to reach a certain level before we are ready to be sent. We can't reach out until things inside are at least this good. We aren't really ready to look at things external yet.

But once again we are reminded that this whole endeavor is not simply a human effort. We are not just a group of people, limited by our time and energy and emotional health. We are indwelt as a community by the Spirit of the Living God. Reaching the world is his mission. And he can use us no matter what.

Of course that doesn't mean that we ignore internal concerns. The New Testament is clear that learning to live in community is a huge part of the Gospel taking root in our lives. This community is formed around Christ. As we learn to love each other, Christ becomes formed in us. That is incredibly important. But it's a continual process. And the work of God doesn't wait for it to reach a certain level.

Maybe you're waiting on something before you feel God can use you. Maybe you feel you have to get your devotional routine or your Bible reading or your prayer life in shape before you can volunteer.

I'll tell you: Nothing will improve your prayer life or your dependence on God like stepping out in faith. We'll be talking about efforts for Beautiful Day in a few weeks. Perhaps you might volunteer there. There are opportunities for mission trips or small groups at the church, or ways to contribute to missionaries on the field. There are times when you need to focus on healing or growth. But there are other times when you need to get involved and trust that God will work despite your uncertainties or inadequacies.

The Fellowship is Opposed

The chapter begins with tension from within the community. Next we see the community continue in abundant fruitfulness despite that tension. But in the final part of the chapter, we see a conflict develop with the world around them. They no longer have favor with everyone. In fact, just as the buzz is increasing, so is the hostility.

Acts 5:17-21a:

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy 18 they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." 21 And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

Things are getting more heated. In the last scene, they were arrested and questioned. Here they are thrown into a public prison and then put on trial. The opposition is increasing, so God steps in to intervene supernaturally. Just as internal tension won't hinder God's plans, neither will external pressure.

In the midst of all this, the apostles seem fearless. Arrested, jailed, interrogated—it doesn't matter. As soon as they were miraculously released from prison, they went straight back to the temple and began to teach again. It looks like their prayer for boldness from Acts 4 has been answered. They are brave and faithful.

At the trial, Peter's defense of their actions is one of the best summaries of what it means to be sent.

Acts 5:29-32:

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. 30 The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

Peter's first statement is probably an allusion to a famous Greek saying. In the 4th century BC, Socrates is quoted as saying the same thing. When the government tried to stop him from teaching his philosophy, he is recorded as having said, "Men of Athens, I honour and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy."¹

So when Peter says, "we must obey God rather than men," it would be like one of us quoting "Give me liberty or give me death" to a modern court. This was an honored idea in Greek culture. It's the same idea we've been talking about. This is a God thing, not a man thing.

But Peter makes it clear that his obedience to God is very different from Socrates. He isn't teaching his own ideas of philosophy. He is simply relating something that God has done in the world.

First, "the God of our fathers raised Jesus." All of this is essentially about the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is alive. That is the life-changing truth that must be proclaimed to the world.

Second, "God exalted him as Leader and Savior to give repentance and forgiveness." This is the heart of the Gospel. Jesus is alive so that you and I can turn aside from the darkness that would otherwise enslave us. We can repent and be forgiven and be welcomed into the kingdom of God with Jesus as our Lord.

There it is. Peter is proclaiming the truth of the Gospel as simply as possible. The Gospel is what God has done. He has raised Jesus from the dead. He has offered forgiveness from sin and life in his family to any who believe.

Finally Peter says, "we are witnesses to these things." His role in proclaiming the Gospel is simply to make known what God has done. We don't actually *do* anything. We are only called to talk about what God has done. That's what it means to be a witness. We've seen something. We simply tell others what we've seen.

This entire chapter is telling us that this is about God, not man. When you lie to the community, you lie to God. When the community has tension, God still works because it's his work, not yours. When the world opposes you, you can't stop because God is a higher authority than anyone else.

Finally, this idea reaches its climax. In a surprising twist, it isn't Peter or one of the apostles that says it, but one of the Jewish leaders. As they are deliberating what to do, read what one of them concludes.

Acts 5:38-40:

So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, 40 and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The speaker in these verses is a Jewish rabbi named Gamaliel. If that name sounds vaguely familiar to some of you, it should. Gamaliel was responsible for training a young rabbi named Saul who eventually became known as Paul and who wrote most of the New Testament.

Gamaliel suggests a simple "wait and see" attitude. If this is the work of men, it will die out on its own. But if it is the work of God, then we don't want to be fighting it. We like this man. He isn't convinced by the apostles preaching about Jesus. But at least he wants to be on the same side as God. He's just not yet sure which side that is.

Gamaliel says it perfectly. Is this whole thing about God or people? Is the God of the universe really in this?

You can see how this would be incredibly important for the church that first read this book in AD 80 to know. Were they just following in the footsteps of some brilliant people who happened to be in the right place at the right time? Or were they taking part in the very work of God in the world?

Isn't this the question that lies at the core of our own doubts about faith? Don't you wonder this sometimes? You're here, sitting in church, listening to me talk about the Bible. Don't you wonder how you got here? Don't you sometimes think that it's just because you happened to grow up in church? Or you accidentally ran into someone who was a Christian, and it just happened to make sense to you at a time in your life when you needed to believe something? Maybe you think this thing is worthwhile for some helpful moral lessons, but you don't expect that *God* is really involved.

Don't you have the same question as Gamaliel? Is this about God or about people? What is really going on here?

Maybe this book is for us. Maybe we need to remember this. Maybe we aren't sure. Maybe we've forgotten. Maybe we're still deciding. Whatever the case: This is all we really need to know. God is in this. Jesus is alive.

Look at it. Look at how the message of Jesus has changed the world. Death and Repentance. Reconciliation and Resurrection. Forgiveness and Love. Look at how those who follow Jesus have brought their passion for justice and righteousness to every corner of the earth. Look at how suffering has been relieved; how lives have been transformed; how communities have been brought together. All of this is the work of God, not the work of men.

Gamaliel was absolutely right. If this plan or this undertaking were "of man", then it would have failed a long ago. But I am here to say to you, and this text is here to remind us again and again of one simple truth: This is not of man, but of God. God is in this. Jesus is alive.

God is the one who makes us a community. He is the one that brings justice for the hurt and the abused. He is the one that brings fruit even when we don't know what we are doing. And he is the one who has kept his movement alive and growing for thousands of years.

God has raised Jesus from the dead. God has offered life in his name. We are sent out from here. But not to do anything on our own. Simply to be witnesses to what God has done.

This is of God. Not of man.

Conclusion

As a college student, I was clearly struck by the video I saw of a Boeing 777 being stretched to the point of failure. The design, planning, and manufacture of something on a scale like that is incredibly complex. What an example of precision engineering: to withstand over 150% of the strain it was designed for. And when it fails—to do so at the same exact spot on each wing.

It is incredible what a group of intelligent and devoted people can do when they work together. But no matter how impressive their accomplishment, it will fail. The only question is when and where.

Not so with the work of God. This morning we've seen this new community of Jesus followers challenged by internal pressure. We've seen the tension that a dramatic betrayal caused. We've seen pressure from the outside increase and hostility escalate. But in the midst of that pressure, God was still at work.

And because of that, this group of young followers became convinced that God was truly working in their midst. Read the last few verses of Acts 5.

Acts 5:41-42:

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

These apostles were grateful that they were able to experience dishonor, because it made it that much clearer to them that all of this was of God. Only God's work could survive so much stress.

If this were of man, they would have given up. If this were of man, Ananias and Sapphira would have gotten away with their deceit. If this were of man, we would not be here two thousand years later.

This truth sustained the church a generation later. And this truth sustains us, fifty generations later. We need to know that no matter what pressures the kingdom of Jesus Christ on earth faces, it will not fail. We are not sent to perfectly engineer a church that will withstand any pressure. We are sent to proclaim what God has done in history, in the world, and in our lives.

We teach and preach one simple fact. It is what keeps us together and sends us out. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is alive. In him is forgiveness and life. May we be convinced of this truth and never cease to proclaim it to the world.

Endnotes

- ¹ Plato. "Apology". Translated by Benjamin Jowett. 1891.
Wikisource. [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Apology_\(Plato\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Apology_(Plato))