

Faithful
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Acts 5:25-42

There is an old saying: *“No good deed goes...(what?)”* **What does that mean?** It’s pretty cynical isn’t it? It’s also somewhat factual. The saying implies we should not stick our neck out to do good; for fear of getting it chopped off. On the other hand, the saying also implies that sometimes even with good motives we might not be sticking our neck out but our “nose in.” In a sense there is also a biblical principle at work here.

In Matthew 5:10–12 (ESV) in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told us: ¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

How is what Jesus told us different than the old saying, “No good deed goes unpunished?” He didn’t say “good deeds.” What is Jesus telling us?

The first persecution that came against the New Testament church was at the hands of the same religious leaders who had Jesus put to death. In Acts 4 we they gave Peter and John a stern warning to STOP preaching in the name of Jesus. This only made the apostles bolder and more determined. That escalated the persecution from just threatening, to LIFE-threatening.

Here’s some context from chapter four that shows how the Holy Spirit was moving and how the religious leaders were incensed by it:

- 5:12 tells us: “many signs and wonders” were regularly happening and “many believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”
- The people began to lay sick people on cots and mats so the when Peter came by even his shadow might fall on them and heal them (5:15).

- But the high priest and the Sadducees “rose up, filled with jealousy” and they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.
- During the night an angel opened the prison doors and said, “Go back to the temple and start preaching again!” And the apostles did just that.
- When the high priest sent for them the guards were perplexed to find the doors locked; the guards in place; and the apostles missing.

Acts 5:25–35 (ESV)

²⁵ And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.” ²⁶ Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”

²⁹ 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.”

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.

- The religious leaders were not longer just making threats. They were making plans --- for an execution of all twelve apostles!
- Verse twenty-eight: **What do the words “this name” tell you?**
- Wiersbe: “He would not even use the name of Jesus Christ, but instead said “this name” and “this Man’s blood,” lest by speaking His name he would defile his lips or bring down the wrath of God (see John 15:21).” ¹
- Verse twenty-nine is the big idea of this whole passage. **What is it?**
- A true follower of Christ has no choice in the matter (see 4:20); when it comes to being a witness for Jesus, “we must obey God rather than men.”

- **What does scripture tell us about submission to government?**

Romans 13:1–7 (ESV) Paul wrote:

Submission to the Authorities

13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. **2** Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. **3** For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, **4** for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. **5** Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. **6** For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. **7** Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

1 Peter 2:13–17 (ESV) the very same apostle Peter in today's incident wrote:

Submission to Authority

13 Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, **14** or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. **15** For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. **16** Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. **17** Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

- **Why was the situation in Acts five different than the verses above?**
- Let's pick up our story. Just as the Sanhedrin is ready to kill the apostles, one of their own speaks up.

³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. ³⁵ And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men.

- Gamaliel then shared historical examples of uprising of religious fanatics that ultimately died out. He continued:

Acts 5:38–42 (ESV)

³⁸ 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. ⁴¹ 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.

- God used Gamaliel, one of the persecutors of the apostles, to spare their lives for a time. Talk about a God-ordained twist in this story!
- Think of what would have happened if all twelve of Jesus’ apostles had been executed just weeks after the resurrection.
- **What does this passage indicate about Gamaliel’s influence?**
- In a sense Gamaliel was a “good guy” in this incident. But don’t get the impression he was coming over to the side of the apostles in his faith.
- **What was his motivation for intervening?** Look at verse 39: Even if he wasn’t moved to believing the gospel, **what did Gamaliel understand?**
- One commentator: Gamaliel, “...spoke not from sympathy for the church, but from insight into God’s sovereign working on earth (cf. v. 39).²
- Why is Gamaliel’s theory (“If it is of God you can’t stop it”) NOT always true? Stott: “To be sure, in the long run what is from God will triumph, and what is merely human (let alone diabolical) will not. Nevertheless, in the shorter run evil plans sometimes

succeed, while good ones conceived in accordance with the will of God sometimes fail. So the Gamaliel principle is not a reliable index to what is from God and what is not."³

- It's possible that our lives could be threatened for claiming faith in Christ. **What kinds of persecution are more likely for most believers today?**
- **What examples do we see in the actions of state governments lately?**
- **What about the complicated case of Kim Davis?** Here's John Piper's take: <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-kim-davis-right-to-refuse-marriage-licenses>
- **What is the personal lesson for you and me this week?**

What's the Takeaway?

Tertullian (a.d. 160–220) was one of early defenders of the faith. Next to Augustine, he was perhaps the greatest Western theologian of the early church.⁴

Tertullian, addressing the rulers of the Roman Empire, cried out: *'Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust... The more you mow us down, the more we grow; the seed is the blood of Christians.'*⁵

- The apostle Peter wrote his first letter to believers who were dispersed because of persecution. As Nero was literally burning Christians for torch-light, Here is what Peter told them (and us):

1 Peter 3:14–16 (ESV)

¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

1 Peter 4:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

1 Peter 4:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

- Issues of conviction on the job (for example: florists; bakers; court clerks) are complex (do I go to jail or just quit my job?) They require much prayer to decide when government has overstepped and when to engage in “civil disobedience.”
- Three things are more clear-cut from this lesson:
 - o Followers of Christ must bear witness to the gospel and what Jesus has done for us. As Peter said in Acts 4:20 (ESV): “...*we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*”
 - o When our Christian witness brings persecution it’s also clear that a believer should follow the teaching in Acts 5:29: “*We must obey God rather than men.*”
 - o If we are obedient in this way, we can lean on what Jesus promised in Matthew 5: “*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven...*”

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 425). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

² Toussaint, S. D. (1985). Acts. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 366). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

³ The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series) by John Stott © 1990

⁴ Grenz, S., Guretzki, D., & Nordling, C. F. (1999). In *Pocket dictionary of theological terms* (p. 112). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁵ The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series) by John Stott © 1990