

April 27, 2025

Acts 5:12, 19-31

This past week, Pope Francis died. Many people have asked me what I think about that. Many say he was a kind, humble, funny, gentle person. I'm sure he was. But as the Pope he claimed to be the highest teacher of God's truth to the world- whether that truth is popular or not. Jesus says in John 14, *"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no one comes to the Father except through me."* Jesus clearly taught that only by faith in him can we be saved. When Pope Francis was asked about this in Singapore, surrounded by Buddhists, he had a powerful opportunity to lovingly invite thousands of people to trust in Christ as their savior. Instead, he said, "All religions are a path to God." Is that what Jesus says? The Scriptures clearly tell us what kind of marriage is blessed and loved by God, and what is not. And Pope Francis put out a document encouraging Catholic priests to bless same-sex couples. In that document, Francis acknowledged that homosexuality is a sin, but that it would be okay for a priest to give that couple a generic blessing so they can feel good about church. Instead of encouraging priests to call people to repentance, show them the right way, and help them fight temptation, they can simply give a generic blessing so they don't have to risk being called "mean," or "unloving." You tell me. What would you call someone who knows the truth, but purposely speaks something different in order to avoid backlash, disapproval, loss of followers. The Bible has a word for that: Coward. Biblically speaking, being a coward is sinful- not being afraid, but refusing to do what is right because you're afraid of how it will affect you, that's cowardice, and in Revelation 21, when Jesus talks about Heaven and Hell, he says this: *"It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."*

I don't speak ill of the dead lightly. This is something we desperately need to learn well. Christians are not called to be cowards. We are called to be courageous, to do what's right and to speak the truth regardless of the consequences. And here today, we see that God doesn't just say, "Be Courageous," but through his Gospel changes cowards into courageous confessors- Christians who boldly confess, or speak the truth in the face of opposition and hatred, knowing that it may cost them their homes, their jobs, their comfort, their way of life, even their lives, and they do it joyfully. **The Gospel Changes Cowards into Confessors.**

When we look at the Gospel reading for today, would you possibly believe that the Peter and disciples in that upper room are the same Peter and disciples in this Acts reading? What if I told you that these events took place a few months apart? That a few months before this, Peter and the disciples fled like cowards, even when they swore they would stay by Jesus' side, at the first sign of trouble they ran away and Peter even swore to God that he had never met Jesus because a slave-girl asked him, "do you know that guy?" But now look at them- teaching and proclaiming

Jesus, and God is working powerfully through them to miraculously heal people- all in public. They very purposely go onto Solomon's Colonnade, which was a part of the Temple in Jerusalem where people would gather, and there they are, actively, boldly preaching about Jesus. Even when the most powerful people, the A-list celebrities in their culture, the chief priest and the sanhedrin, told them not to. Now here's a question you might be asking- who are sadducees? We talk about the Pharisees a lot- they were the religious leaders and bible teachers of Jesus' day, and they clashed a lot with Jesus. But they weren't the only Jewish religious teachers. Throughout the history of the Jewish people, different groups began to develop within the Jewish religious teachers, and two of the major ones were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees, in their theological beliefs, general disposition, and behavior, might be considered the theological "conservatives" of the day. They were very focused on morally righteous behavior, strict adherence to the Law, and they held firmly to the Old Testament- they believed all of it was the word of God- and so do we! The Sadducees, in their theological beliefs, their disposition and lifestyle, might be called the "liberals" of the day. The Chief priest and the Sanhedrin were mostly Sadducees, and they were seen as the religious and cultural leaders of the Jews. They were the elites. They were typically very wealthy, not so fiercely traditional, and they didn't recognize the majority of the Old Testament as God's Word- only the first five books of Moses. They seem to have been highly influenced by Greek philosophy, so they didn't believe in things like angels or demons, and they also didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead- those things were superstitions, not for sophisticated, educated men like them. But then some seemingly ordinary, uneducated men from up north in Galilee start appearing on the scene, boldly teaching about this man Jesus who had been crucified as a blasphemer months before, stating that he had risen from the dead! At first, they told these men to stop it, but they didn't listen. And now, they have crowds following them and listening to their every word instead of the Sadducees. And that's when they took action- they weren't worried about false teaching, they were mad that the people were listening to the disciples and not them. They throw them into jail- something that should shame them and probably get them to stop. And then the next day, they hear that those same disciples are in the temple courts again, and the jails are locked, secure, but empty. Clearly, something supernatural has occurred. They take the disciples, but are very careful how they do it because they don't want the people to not like them or stone them, and they again tell them to stop it. What is this? Cowardice? The Sadducees are cowards. They are afraid of losing their position of power and authority, they are afraid of the influence these disciples are gaining, they are afraid of the fact that something supernatural has happened, and they are afraid of the idea that they were responsible for Jesus' blood- even though they absolutely were. They were cowards in their teaching, their interactions with the disciples, and in their refusal to even consider what the disciples were saying, even though there was plenty of evidence to so support them, because of what the disciples were saying was true, they killed the Son of God, and they would have to repent for so, so, so much.

But if you look at what Peter says, he's telling the Sadducees, "We're not afraid of you, and you don't need to be afraid either." Peter says, "We must obey God rather than men." God told us to preach, he told us to teach about Jesus. God told us to be honest about what we've seen, and that's exactly what we're doing. And Peter is completely honest, "You killed him." He's right! The High Priest and the powerful Jewish religious leaders were the ones who demanded that Jesus be sentenced to death even though he did nothing wrong! But look at what he says next- the "God of our Fathers raised him to life..." and "that he has made Jesus the Prince." That word there for "prince" is a fascinating, powerful word. The Greek word, *archegos* is often translated into different English words, which means it's a hard word to translate. Once, it's translated as "author"- as in Jesus is the "author" of salvation. It means the "founding leader" or the "pioneer," the one who starts something brand new. Peter is convicting them- "you killed the one who rules the heavens, you murdered the God you claim to worship." But then look at what Peter says, "He's also a savior, who will grant repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins." Peter is preaching what we would call, "Law" and "Gospel." And it applies to you and me as well. If someone were to ask, "who killed Jesus," I would say, "me! And you!" You and I were part of the reason he had to die. It was our rebellion, our sin, our selfishness that put him on the cross! In fact, it was also our cowardice- all the times when we should have done the right, should have spoken up, should have been honest, should have been brave, but failed because we were selfish, Jesus had to die for that because the cowards aren't included in God's house- and for us to brought in, Jesus had to be kicked out- and he was. And after he paid that price, he rose and because his sacrifice was so perfect, paying for everything, all who repent and believe in Jesus will have every single sin, every flaw, every evil, even the worst things you've done, all forgiven. That is the message of Jesus, look how Peter is preaching that to his enemies. He's not just disrespecting his authorities, he's trying to save them! The disciples were cowards, and when they saw Jesus alive, forgiving their sins, they became courageous, bold, confessors, preachers of the truth, and they knew that even if they died for it, nothing could separate them from God and the resurrection he had in store for them. That's what changed them, and that's what changes you and me.

Because if you are a Christian, how could you be a coward? If God declares you to be his child, he promises you glory and joy and everlasting love all because of what Christ did- who cares what others think about you! What can they do to you? Sure, they can cause tremendous pain- but they can't take away what God has already given you. Be courageous- by confessing the truth of God's Word in both word and action. Notice, Peter wasn't being disrespectful- he was being honest and earnestly trying to get the members of the Sanhedrin to trust in Jesus so they could share his joy. He knew he might die for it, but it would be worth it. That's what courage is: doing and saying the truth because you believe it's worth it. It doesn't take courage to be obnoxious or combative or rude. But to lovingly call someone to repent of something, showing them why it's wrong, and admitting you're a sinner too, and pointing them to a God who forgives, that takes courage. It doesn't take courage to talk behind people's back, or explode at

them, or get even with your spouse. It takes a lot of courage to be genuinely happy for people when they get blessed more than you, to speak well of people behind their back, and to forgive those who hurt you when they repent- that's courage. To be honest in the workplace, your spouse, or your friends even if it means you look bad, that takes courage. And yes, it takes a lot of courage to stand with God's Word and be honest with your friends, colleagues, loved ones, family members on every issue knowing that you might be called hateful, ignorant, exclusive, foolish, or whatever name they could throw at you. To that, I would say, "Is Jesus hateful, ignorant, exclusive, or foolish?" Then neither is his word, and I don't need to hide it. Has Jesus' kingdom fallen yet? No, and neither has his Word- although it's been ruthlessly attacked for 2000 years, it still stands. And what if you lose friends, lose relationships, lose a promotion, lose respect from people? Then you stand with the multitude around the world who have lost their homes, their families, their freedom, and their lives, and the disciples who after this conversation were publicly whipped and then rejoiced that they were worthy of suffering for Jesus. Tertullian, an ancient Church father at a time when Christians were being brutally punished by the Roman empire for not worshipping the emperor, wrote this to his government: *"The more we are mowed down by you, the more we grow. The blood of Christians is the seed of the Church."* Christians at their best boldly believe and confess and live the truth of Scripture, and two things always happen. Firstly, they get punished for it. But secondly, people come into God's family, often because they see Christians courageously confessing and think, "how can I be like that?" Christ has risen, Christ has conquered, Christ has made you his own. Be courageous. Amen.