

Words and Deeds: Be Bold, Be Strong
By Jason Huff
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Proverbs 28:1; Luke 11:5-13; Acts 4:23-31

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 4:23-31. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His Holy Word. “On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”

What does it mean to be bold? A lot of food is advertised as being “bold” – barbeque sauce, Chex Mix with a lot of Worcestershire sauce in it, craft beers. The coffee I buy for Compassion is labeled as “bold.” Bold foods tend to have a really tangy, noticeable flavor that can leave an aftertaste because they’re so strong. We think the same thing about bold people – they stand out, and often times, they’re the ones who actually get things done. But they can also leave a bitter taste if you get on their wrong side.

It used to be that bold was a synonym for “strong” and “courageous” and “daring.” We used to hold up those things as excellent. Not so much anymore. What it really is, we want our guy, the one who stands for us to be bold. We don’t like it when the other guy is bold. We have a bold president, which is why people either love him or hate him depending on where they stand on the issues. We are drawn to people who are unafraid of hard or difficult things. The question that gets asked is, are they bold or reckless? Fearless or just rash and brash? We live in a time when people are timid in person but bold online when no one is confronting them. Real boldness is courage under fire, when it really matters.

Today’s passage is not about boldness, but it’s a central feature of it. There’s a lot to learn here about the church and prayer and how God operates in our world, but there’s also the issue of boldness. Boldness is something the modern church needs, the ability to speak compassionately and truthfully and winsomely all at once. Talking to a church that has experienced a lot of persecution, the author of Hebrews writes, “We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and are saved.” Now is no time for the church to shrink back. Because for all the negative things we sometimes here, God is on the move, and we can join Him, and we’ll see how in a few minutes.

Starting with a reminder – in last week’s passage, Peter and John were arrested after healing a lame man and preaching about the resurrection in the name of Jesus. They spoke boldly to the Jewish council called the Sanhedrin, and because the council had nothing to say against them, they were released with strict warnings not to talk about Jesus anymore – a warning they immediately told the council they would have to dismiss, since they would always obey God rather than the threats of men.

“On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.” Now I don’t want to make too big a deal of this in case something was left out, but I find it fascinating that Peter and John’s first trip isn’t to the home where they’re staying; after their arrest, their first move isn’t to “freshen up.” It’s to go back to the church, back to their people, the people of Jesus.

For most of us, this would have been a harrowing situation. Peter and John have never been imprisoned before. The last time anyone got arrested was when Jesus was murdered. They’ve been threatened and told not to do the one thing they *must* do. But instead of taking a break, maybe getting away to the Sea of Galilee for a bit for a fishing trip or a stop back home to clear their heads, they go to the church. That’s ultimately because the church is home now. Those who believe in Jesus are their family. As Jesus said Himself, “All those who hear the Word of God and put it into practice are my mother and sisters and brothers.”

Is that our first response in hard times? When we’ve just gotten past a really rough time at work or experienced a tragedy in our personal lives, who do we turn to? Usually it’s family and close friends. And that’s not a bad response. But it also tells me that the church of Jesus is supposed to be something more.

This is not a “shame on you” moment; this is not, “oh, you haven’t turned to the people of God enough.” It’s more of a challenge and conviction moment for those of us who are Jesus followers. There aren’t enough churches where you can turn to the other people in the congregation and call them family. There aren’t enough churches where we feel safe sharing our darkest secrets and knowing we will find love and forgiveness. As the body of Christ, what might change if we cared enough for one another, we lived with one another enough, that when bad stuff got real, we naturally turned to our church family first? It’s a question to keep in the back of our minds. How can we be a church where everyone who comes in those doors knows that we are family and we take care of any who call upon the name of Jesus?

Moving on...Peter and John tell them about the warnings of the Jewish leaders. Things are about to get real. “When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.” Here’s the next big thing in this passage: *prayer for God’s will to be done is central to being the church of Jesus Christ*. I would be so bold as to say that where there is little or no prayer, there is no church. Jesus is our Savior and Lord. He is alive today. To talk to Him is as natural as breathing for the true church. As we heard a few weeks ago, there were only a few things that the church was dedicated about, and one was praying.

If you're like me, I have a habit of being worried and stressed. We get stressed out about where we're going to go for dinner! How are we going to pay the bills? How are we going to make ends meet? How am I going to get over my anger at my boss or my spouse? And those are important, but they aren't nearly as stressful as what the church just learned in this passage. The Jewish leadership is going to start gunning for them if they don't stop talking about Jesus. This is a nerve-wracking time. In the back of some minds, I don't wonder if they're starting to think – do we go underground? Do we stop talking about Jesus? What do we do?

They don't worry. They pray. They take it to the Lord. They are our example. Now we know we're supposed to pray; we've talked about that; I'm not going to be belabor that point. But notice what they do and don't pray for. Notice that they don't pray for the persecution to go away! Isn't that surprising? Their first thought is not, "Strike down the religious leaders so that won't bother us." It's not even, "Change their hearts so that they would not persecute us." It's "consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."

Their first thought is not about themselves or the preservation of their own lives. It's that Jesus might be glorified. They are praying that they might be used to make Jesus known. Remember how Jesus told us that those who tried to save their lives would lose them, but those who lose their lives for His sake would gain them? That's on full display here.

That's not to say that we shouldn't pray for safety or for an end to persecution. When we pray for Andrew every week and his safe release, that's good and right. But our best prayer was when we prayed that Andrew would speak with boldness about his faith and why he is in Turkey in the first place – to make Jesus known. And the awesome thing is, God granted that request. Even though Andrew still sits in prison, he has been an incredible witness to Jesus not only through his ministry, but in his testimony in front of the court that is wrongfully persecuting him.

So the next time you pray, pray for those around you who need healing. Pray for health and safety like we often do. But also lift up God's will in everything, and ask God for Him to work in you and through you – in you to remove everything that might hamper or dampen your witness, and through you to accomplish His purposes. Pray that God would give you whatever you need to be an effective disciple – whether that's boldness or a love of reading the Scriptures or a mind to understand them.

OK, moving on to another thought here. *The hatred of the world against the Lord is not new but a reality for believers to recognize.* In the prayer, they quote the Spirit speaking through David of how the nations rage and plot against God. They recite what happened to Jesus and how the rulers of their day conspired to bring Jesus down. They aren't saying these things to remind God but to remind themselves that all that God has proclaimed is true and shows itself to be true throughout the generations.

Why would they do this? Why would they say, "Yep, God, you were right – they hate you, they hate Jesus, and they hate us"? They are reminding themselves whose side they are on. They are reminding themselves what Jesus said in John 15:20 – "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." They are in the right no matter what the religious leaders say.

Here's the way I think about it: when I have someone upset at me, it's usually because I did something wrong or offensive. When my boss is frustrated with me about something, it's usually because I transposed some numbers or ran the wrong report. We get frustrated in our homes when someone neglects to do their jobs, whether that's feeding the pets or washing the dishes or doing the laundry. There are times when someone's angry with us for no good reason, but even then it's usually based on a misunderstanding. When someone's upset with me, I try to figure out, what did I do wrong? How can I change this thing I did?

But when it comes to telling people about Jesus, some people will hate us irrationally. It has always been that way and it always will be. Go onto Facebook and you'll find someone calling faithful Christians bigots on the wrong side of history and far worse. You'll find legislatures trying to use laws to clamp down on the rights of Christians to obey God – mostly on the West Coast more than here, to be fair, but it is happening. You'll see people spreading the worst kind of lies about Christians based on a few unfortunate experiences. And we wonder, did we do something wrong? Are we on the right side?

The truth is, people have always hated the truth of God. We all know John 3:16 – “For God loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” But the passage goes on to say that those who do not believe are already condemned, and here's why from verses 19-20: “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.” People reject God because He condemns their evil ways.

So when we are attacked for telling the truth about God, we should examine ourselves. Are we being wholly truthful? Is it our message that is offensive, or something we've added to the message? Do people not like us because we are misrepresenting Christ, or do people not like the truth that we stand for? We're never going to get this just right, but we can know that opposition to the truth of God is natural. We won't back down just because the truth can hurt. Because the truth is like a surgeon's scalpel – it's painful, but it cuts away the disease of sin.

Now to the part we started with – boldness. They prayed, “Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”

Here's our final thought, one of encouragement for us when we understand it: *Everything we need as disciples, including boldness, comes from God and not through ourselves or our own strength.* The early Christians did speak with boldness, in direct defiance of the orders from the Sanhedrin. They proclaimed Jesus without fear, as we'll see in the weeks ahead. It happened when the Holy Spirit filled them. They all went out and proclaimed the great salvation of Jesus just as Peter and John had done.

They didn't do it in their own strength, though, and they didn't even try. I was a little surprised when I looked closely at this passage that the church didn't pray to be bold. They prayed for enabling from God to be bold. Some translations say "grant your servants boldness" or "give your servants boldness." Most often the word in Greek here, *didomi*, means "give." The boldness the disciples pray for comes from God, is granted by God, is His to give.

We have a critical error in much of our modern theology, and that is the idea that we can try harder. We learn it not in church but in school and at our homes. We all have a little streak of laziness in us about something. Some of us were lazy in school, or with our chores or playing an instrument or even our job. Or maybe we just weren't very good at something. Foreign languages are one of my greatest challenges – I've never been able to master one completely. And the answer to get better at most of these is practice...hard work. Effort improves a lot of things in life...working out makes you stronger, reading good books makes you a better thinker, doing lots of math either makes you an engineer, an accountant, or crazy.

There are social skills that can become habits with practice, too. We teach our kids to hold the door for others, to say "please" and "thank you," to get along with others, to be kind in general, to serve others. And yet these social skills aren't really about being Christian; they're about trying to get along in society. You can do all those things and believe whatever you want.

But the fruits of the Spirit are something else entirely. Being truly loving, joyful, patient, kind, good, self-controlled? Being bold to share our faith? Doing those things that sound like commands for Christians from the lips of Jesus and Paul? There's a reason why trying harder doesn't work. These aren't naturally inherent traits. Some people are nicer than others; some are friendlier; some are harder-working. But the fruits of the Spirit require the Spirit. The work of the Spirit requires Him to be active.

We don't need to *try harder* to be Christians. We need to *be* Christians. Christians pray and ask that the Spirit provide leadership, guidance, and the traits we need to be obedient and effective. Christians ask from Jesus and receive. Christians live in ways the world doesn't understand because they aren't human; they're divine.

You want to know how these folks who prayed this prayer set the world on fire? It wasn't because they were trained public speakers or born kind, compassionate, and loving. It's not because they were naturally bold people. It was because they asked God to enable them to be bold for Him, and He did it. They still did hard work; they still went out praising and teaching and sharing. But it was granted to them by God. The world was set on fire because the early church prayed that God would do His work in and through them.

Do you want your life to matter? Do you want to make a real difference, one that will last forever? Ask God to grant you the skills you need to accomplish His will. Ask Him to get you out of the way and His Holy Spirit center stage. He can and will do it! As my friend comedian Derrick Tennant says, "It's simple. It's not easy." It is not an issue of trying. It's an issue of asking and being obedient, of receiving from the Lord and using what we receive. That's all it is.

This week, and for the weeks to come, let's think on these things and how it might change our prayer life and change us if we were to come into it all considering God's will first. If we put prayer at the forefront of our life, if we share our lives together as part of the church, praying together, if we recognize that the tools we need are not ours by practice but by gifting by the Holy Spirit we can ask for, if we stick with it even when the world comes up against us? I can hardly wait to see what the Spirit is going to be doing through you and me.