

*Words and Deeds: Just Can't Stop*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Psalm 118:19-29; Matthew 10:17-22; Acts 4:1-22*

Our final Scripture reading comes from Acts 4:1-22. May God bless the reading of His holy and perfect Word. “The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand. The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name." Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.”

Have you ever been encouraged by something that should have landed you on your face? You know what I mean if you've ever seen a kid go sailing off on a bike for the first time, have a crash landing with a scraped knee, and they hop up with a big smile on their face saying, “That was awesome!” Maybe a job closing turned into a much better opportunity or got you out of a nasty situation. Your movie sold out and you wind up going to something else that turns into a favorite. The situation was bad, but you come out of it with your head held high. That's the situation with today's passage. It looks bad for Peter and John at first. This marks the first time any of the apostles are arrested for sharing about Jesus. But it turns around in a hurry, and the whole situation winds up encouraging – for the early church and for us.

Peter and John have healed a man, lame since birth, and Peter preaches to those who gather around to find out what happened. He explains what Jesus did and how his audience can know the peace and refreshment of knowing Jesus and being a part of His Kingdom. The crowd is moved by his words and the healing of this man they all knew begged at the temple gates.

So what gets the authorities involved? This time, it's not the Pharisees, Jesus' arch-enemies, but the Sadducees. The apostles were teaching and preaching about the resurrection of the dead. They are teaching that because of Jesus, all people will one day be resurrected, some to everlasting life and some to everlasting destruction.

Now this set the Sadducees off. The Sadducees held that only the first five books of the Bible were Scripture. They disregarded the rest, which meant they denied ideas like the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees believed that this life was all there is, and they lived like it. They were the power brokers and "old money" families. They negotiated with Roman authorities for power and pulled Israel back from the brink of war with the empire for decades.

Luke mentions that Annas the high priest was there, along with Caiaphas and other men from his family. Annas hadn't been high priest for twenty years; Caiaphas his son-in-law was the high priest when Jesus was crucified. But this was the kind of power Annas and his family had. Annas was like The Godfather; everyone knew and respected and feared him.

And the resurrection of the dead went against all their interests. If there was life after death, then their power meant nothing. If this life would be judged in an afterlife, making friends with the Romans rather than steering Israel towards righteousness would be a serious problem. Their entire value system was based on this world and not the next. No wonder they found Peter's preaching a problem. Yet his arrest doesn't stop the Jesus movement; it grows.

So the next morning, the religious authorities come together to have a hearing of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling authority that officially seated seventy top scholars. Sadducees, Pharisees, priests, scribes, rabbis, you name it, anyone with some weight, some pull. And they start questioning: "By what power or name did you do this?" And Peter turns it into a sermon – it's Jesus, of course! The man you crucified and God raised from the dead! He quotes from the Old Testament about the cornerstone that is Jesus. And he preaches about the exclusivity of Christ – if you're going to be saved from sin and death and hell, it's got to be through Jesus – there is no other name, no other salvation to call upon. We have one hope, and that is in Him.

This sets the authorities back on their heels. They were expecting a weak defense, an "I didn't do it," a "well, you see, sir," an excuse. Instead, Peter gives them the full-on power of God in Jesus Christ. This is not going how they planned. They have nothing they can say in the face of Peter and John. The council is intimidating; the most esteemed "religious" folk in all of Israel are here. Yet they are amazed at Peter and John's courage. They have the authority here, not the council. And they are unschooled! Men who have studied Scripture all their lives can't answer their claims. To top it all off, the man who was healed is right there with them!

The Sanhedrin realizes they can't do anything. The proof of the miracle is in front of them, and they all know it. They'll lose the support of the people if they punish Peter and John, but they can't let this Jesus talk go on or they'll lose their power. So they call them back in and say, "Don't talk about Jesus anymore." Peter and John are like, "We can't help but speak the truth. Obey God or obey you? It doesn't seem like a hard choice." The council threatens them, but they let them go. Peter and John have them on the ropes.

Peter and John's situation is an encouragement for us to live out faith in front of others. At first we might focus on the negative – Peter and John are imprisoned for doing a miracle! And we can't expect that our lives lived out faithfully for Jesus are going to be just sunshine and kittens. There will be struggles and temptations and, potentially, rejections and persecutions. But so much outweighs those. And I'm going to talk about those elements first.

First – *You don't have to be educated to lead people to Jesus. You just have to have spent time with Jesus.* Peter is a fisherman. He's brash and bold; he has a big mouth, and in the past his actions didn't always match his words. Mark's gospel sounds like Peter. Everything is immediate. The Greek is rough. Peter's letters in the New Testament don't sound like Paul, the top student of his day who was headed to a seat on the Sanhedrin himself. They sound like a fisherman who's been touched by Jesus. And yet that fisherman stymied the top seventy religious authorities of Israel. That fisherman spoke and 5,000 men joined the Jesus-followers.

It doesn't take a Ph.D. to share Jesus. It doesn't take knowing the Bible forwards and backwards and upside down. If we could only share Jesus once we knew enough to be completely satisfied, we'd never share Him at all. All it takes is spending time with Him. It's as simple as being in the Word of God and praying to God regularly.

Now it's going to take time; you can't spend a minute doing devotions and a minute in prayer and expect to be confident in your faith. But if you set aside time to really be with Jesus, you'll grow more and more confident of what He's done in your life and what He can do for others. You'll be more aware of His presence with you daily. And you'll become more thoughtful about how His grace could affect those around you in their lives.

And the second encouragement grows out of the first: *there is no legitimate defense against the gospel properly preached in the power of God.* Can you imagine giving a presentation to the seventy top experts in anything? Imagine trying to talk about computing with Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, or the military with Patton and McArthur, or Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig about baseball. Now imagine the room full of every expert you can imagine on that subject. And after your conversation, all of them leave the room floored at your expertise.

That's what happens here. No one was more qualified to refute these two than the Sanhedrin. Yet they can't. Not only do Peter and John know Scripture and defend Jesus brilliantly, their proof stands beside them after 40 years lame. The Sanhedrin commands, they threaten, but they have nothing legitimate to say in the face of the truth that Jesus is the long-awaited Savior. Those who preach Jesus have power and authority in the face of intimidation. All the Sanhedrin can do is promise retribution if Peter and John disobey. But they have no words that can topple the gospel.

I think that's our central fear – we don't want to get into an argument about faith, especially one we think we can't win. And people make forceful arguments against belief, saying that logic disproves God or science disproves God. But those are really just excuses. Just like the Sanhedrin, people today choose not to believe because they don't like the thought of losing their own power. They don't like the thought that they have an authority over them that has ultimate say over right and wrong, that someone can tell them what true morality is, someone that can call them out on their failings.

But the truth is, the gospel is always going to reach the people God empowers it to reach. God's Word never returns void; it does exactly what it is supposed to do. Some people hear it and reject it; others accept it and believe in Jesus' name for forgiveness. People can tell themselves whatever they want to defend their reasons for not believing, but none of them holds real weight. If there were legitimate reasons not to believe in Jesus, the Sanhedrin would have found them, but they didn't. It didn't make them believe, it just meant that they had no legitimate defense for their unbelief.

The vast majority of people we meet have no defense against the gospel at all except the hardness of their hearts. They haven't given much thought to God at all. They might try some excuse not to believe, but the power of God will shine through to those God is going to save. Don't be afraid to talk about God. There is nothing someone can say that will disprove what you know about Him. Nobody can erase the truth of His word and His promises to us. If they don't believe, that's not on you. But if they do believe, their coming to Christ will be through you, and Christ will reward you for the faithfulness that led to their conversion. So be encouraged!

And we need that encouragement, because we must preach the truth that *there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved*. The Sanhedrin thought that they knew God; they thought they were in God's Kingdom because they were law-abiding Jews, people of the covenant. But they were offended to learn that they were only saved through the name of Jesus, God's son, the cornerstone, the Messiah they had rejected.

This is the chief objection we get to Jesus – not even a defense against Him, but the question of why Him only? Why not by following the religions of the Buddha or the Krishna or Mohammed or a thousand other gurus? We think that God respects a sincere effort. The problem is that a sincerely wrong effort is still wrong. I may sincerely believe that the train to Chicago will get me to Tokyo, but that train just doesn't go there. You can't forge a relationship with the God of the universe through following the guidance of someone who doesn't know Him. We need Jesus because He alone has seen the Father; He alone can lead us to the Father.

Is that exclusive? Yes. Is it unfair? No. God doesn't have to provide sinners with any path to Himself. The question is not why Jesus is the only way; the question should be, why did God give people like us who commit treason against Him any way at all to approach Him? Why are we so blessed that God would give traitors any means to come to Him, and to be called His sons and daughters? God has given us one way, so we follow that one way.

Is it bigoted or judgmental? Absolutely not. The best way I could think of it this week was this: sometimes you go to a museum and you see cars that have been restored. Lovely cars, beautiful cars, not a nick or scratch, polished to a high gloss. They're gorgeous to look at and to sit in. There's just one problem – there's nothing under the hood. They aren't going anywhere.

That's the way most other religions are. They have a few beautiful things about them; some people who practice them have taught some things that are good and true because they align with what Christ taught. But there's nothing under the hood. They won't get you where you want to go. They can't. No other religion teaches that salvation is a free gift we cannot earn but receive solely by the grace of God. None of them teach that we are helpless and in need of God's rescue. So they cannot save us. They cannot lead us to Christ, through whom we receive the grace of God.

We love people who practice them, but we pray for them because they are lost. That upsets a lot of people who want to think that any sincere person will wind up in heaven, but it's just not true. We cannot please people and still preach that Jesus is the only way to the Father, which He said Himself.

This leads us to the question of the morning: *will you obey God or fear men?* Peter and John were pretty blunt – we just can't stop talking about Jesus. We can't help talking about what we've seen and heard. You can threaten us all you want, but now it's in our blood – in our hearts, in our souls. It doesn't really matter what you do to us because to obey God is the only thing that matters.

I think the thing that keeps us from sharing our faith is fear...fear of what people might think of us, of rejection, of losing friends, of losing our reputation or our job. And you know what? It is hard. Throughout school, most of us learned the game of fitting in, of not rocking the boat. Talking about faith rocks the boat. It makes us feel like the odd man out. Remember how we said that the church does her work best when we are together? It's because we know then that it's not true; we aren't the only ones who believe.

But wanting to fit in doesn't override the fact that God calls us to live in such a way that our faith will come up. Not everyone's called to be a preacher like Peter; not everyone's going to have a chance to share their faith every day. But it will happen. If you're a Christian, somebody someday, whether it's your child or your parent or your co-worker, somebody's going to ask you about it.

And the time to decide how you are going to react is now. Not in the moment, not in the situation where nerves are firing and your brain starts to put you in "fight or flight" mode. To obey, you have to be ready. You have to stay in the Word, stay in prayer, participate in worship, be bathed in the faith. So that when you are called to obey, it's not a sudden question mark but a continuation of what you've already been doing.

Be encouraged. In the midst of trial, Peter and John showed the power of God as they continued to share Jesus boldly. And that power wasn't just for them. With the Holy Spirit working in us, we can be as they were – because we just can't stop talking about Jesus.