

“An Unstoppable Movement”

Dear Friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we're in chapter five of the book of Acts. If you want to find that in your Bibles, you'll be able to follow along. We're in the third week of a series that will take us through a good part of the summer and all the way through this particular book.

It's a fascinating study, the Book of Acts, not only because it gives us a good picture of what it was like (back then) when the Church first started, but also because it helps us see what God wants for us today. In the descriptive accounts (in the Book of Acts), we find prescriptive lessons for life. As the events from the first century are described for us (in these chapters), they also prescribe for us how we are to live.

Today we're in chapter five. It's filled with lessons. In fact, if we wanted, we could build an entire series around this one chapter. (It's loaded.) Now, we're not doing that. We're going to deal with a few things that are there and keep moving.

Before we jump in, (however), there's an inherent assumption in this chapter (and in the chapters that follow) that I want to make sure we understand before we start. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that if you don't get a good hold on this basic assumption, you'll never make sense of these chapters. You'll never get it. It's that important.

So, here it is. Write it down on your bulletin (if you want to), because it's going to drive everything. Here's the assumption. The purpose of your life (as a Christian) is to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth. The purpose of your life as a Christian is to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth. (That's the assumption behind what's happening in these chapters.) That's why you're here.

The purpose of your life is not to attend church. The purpose of life is not to have a good marriage. The purpose of your life is not to build a strong family. The purpose of your life is not to be healthy, spiritually sound. That's not the purpose of your life. The purpose of your life is to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Now, obviously, those other things are all good, perhaps even (in some ways) essential. They enable the purpose to be accomplished. They support what you (and I) were created to do and to be. (Don't miss the point.) God wants all of those for your life and for mine, and more. (He really does.) But that's not the purpose of your life. Your life's purpose is greater, more far-reaching, it's eternal.

What I hope we'll be able to see (as we go through these chapters) is that when the advancement of the gospel to the ends of the earth becomes the purpose of your life, then nothing can stop you from accomplishing your purpose. Nothing can stop you. Because when the purpose of your life is aligned with God's purpose for your life, you cannot be stopped, because God cannot be stopped.

Robert Coleman, professor of discipleship and evangelism at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, in his book on disciple-making says this. He says, “World evangelism is the divinely ordered goal for all of us. Not only is it attainable. It is inevitable. Whether or not we believe it, someday the gospel of the kingdom will be heard to the ends of the earth. The God of the universe will not be defeated in his purpose.”

He goes on to say, (and listen carefully), he says, “Any activity not in step with God's design for human destiny is an exercise in futility. The sooner we realize this and align our ways with his, the sooner (our lives) will be relevant to eternity.” (end of quote)

I want to challenge us (here this morning) as individuals, as families, as couples, as a church, to give ourselves to that purpose, knowing that (as we do), there's ultimately nothing that can stop us.

Now, Satan will try to stop us from advancing God's kingdom. (We all know that.) He's doing that right now. Every day, he's doing everything he can to keep us from that purpose, to convince us there are more important things to give our time to, our energy to, our money to, our lives to than the advancement of the gospel.

He will distract us. He will seek to divide us. He'll turn us against each other, put us in conflict. He'll go after our marriages, after our health, after our families. He'll throw at us materialism and consumerism and try

to convince us they're things we need. He'll do everything he can to pull us away from that one basic purpose; everything he can.

What he cannot do and what he will not do is win the battle. God already won that in Jesus. On the cross, the victory became ours. The battle's already won. As a result, the church that could not be stopped in the first century is the church that cannot be stopped in the 21st century; not when that's the purpose that drives everything.

Now, with that basic assumption in mind, that the purpose of your life is to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth, let's take a look at chapter five. The chapter begins with the story of Ananias and Sapphira. (It was our first lesson today.) It's a powerful story. It's a challenging story. It's a story, if nothing else that gets your attention.

Now, we don't know much about this particular couple. The only mention is here in chapter five. They were believers. They were on board with what was happening. They were part of the early movement, and they have this piece of property, they sell it, take the proceeds from the sale and give it to the church. It's all sounds good.

The only trouble is that they don't give the whole selling price. They keep some of it for themselves, present the rest to the apostles, and move on as if everything is good.

Now, you heard the story. One at a time, Peter confronts them with their gift, asks if (what they gave) was the whole thing, and they each respond that it was. Before it's over, because of what they'd done, they both die. Immediately, they fall over and they're gone. In one of the most understated verses in the Bible (it says) "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about it. (You think?)

I've often thought that on our financial commitment Sundays, rather than sending out materials, doing the promotions, preaching sermons like we always do, instead, we should just read this text, take a moment to pray, and then hand out pledge cards.

What's going on? Of all the stories that could have been included in the Book of Acts, why does Luke include this one? And why (this one) right after what happens in chapter four?

Because what happens in chapter four? What happens in chapter four is that we've just seen the persecution of the church, Peter and John in prison, and it all ends up for the good. They get out. It can't be stopped. It keeps going. Why this story, and why at the beginning of chapter five?

Here's what I think and it goes back to the purpose of our lives. It was the same back then as it is today, and it's simple. The greatest hindrance to the advancement of the gospel will never be opposition from outside the church. The greatest hindrance to the advancement of the gospel will always be sin inside the church.

I think Luke put this story (where he did) as a caution to us to make sure we don't let anything inside the church hinder the advancement of the gospel outside the church. That's why I think it's here, so we don't let anything inside the church hinder the advancement of the gospel outside the church.

Just think about it, and we'll see it more clearly as the stories unfold (in this series), but every time there's opposition from the world, persecution of the church, the gospel moves forward, the church grows. It's only when troubles happen from within that it stops moving out.

And so, what's going on in the story? What's the trouble from within that causes the concern? Do you know what it is? It's not the fact that they kept some of the money for themselves. It's not the fact that they had a lot to give and failed to give it.

Do you know what the problem was back then? Don't you know what the problem is (too often) today? It's a failure to be honest. It's a failure to be real. Bottom line, it's a valuing of our spiritual appearance (before others) more than our spiritual authenticity (before God).

We need to make sure we understand what's going on in this story. It's easy to mix it up. This couple (as it says) had a piece of land and they sold it. It was their land. It was their property. They had the option of doing whatever they chose to do with what was theirs. Peter even said that.

Now, in the Book of Acts there are a number of stories of people who sold everything they had and gave it to the church. Powerful stories, inspiring stories, faith-filled accounts of people who had a lot and who gave a lot, and they did it because of Christ.

At the end of chapter two, it says they had "all things in common." At the end of chapter four, it's the same thing. There was tremendous sacrifice taking place. It's one of the reasons the church grew as it did. We need more of that today.

But this was not (as it's often portrayed) a Christian form of Communism. It wasn't. It was voluntary. It was not required. There were people in the Church who gave everything they had, and it was good. There were others who had given a lot, (shared what they had), but who still had things of their own, and that was good.

What was not good, and that's what's happening in this story, is that Ananias chooses to come before the apostles, lay the gift at their feet, and pretend that's what they had received for their land. It was the same with Sapphira. But it wasn't true. It wasn't real. What it was, was their own personal desire for a spiritual appearance (before others) outweighing their personal need for spiritual authenticity (before God).

The word used (for their deception) is the same word we use for embezzlement. They were taking something they had committed to someone else (in this case, to God) and kept it for themselves. They were pretending to be "fully in" when they really weren't. They wanted everyone to think that what they were doing with their lives was real, when it really wasn't. What they were doing, and that was their sin, was not only lying to the apostles and trying to deceive them, but lying and trying to deceive God.

Now, we could spend a lot of time with this story and dig in even deeper. As we said, it could be a series in itself. We're not going to do that. Suffice it to say that what God wants in our lives is that we commit our lives to him. Not in any deceptive kind of way. Not in a form that presents itself well, but isn't real. And certainly not in a way that is anything but honest and authentic and a true picture of the relationship we have with and the commitment we've made to Christ.

When you go home today, ask yourself honestly where you are in your relationship with Jesus. Ask yourself if the commitment you've made (in your life) truly represents the thankfulness you have (in your heart) for what he has done for you.

If it does and it's where it needs to be, then keep it going, ramp it up. If it's not, then change what needs to be changed; figure it out. Get real. Make it happen. But don't pretend you can go half-in and make it look like you're fully onboard, and live as if that's OK. It's not OK, because it's not why you were created and what the purpose of your life is all about.

The purpose of your life (as a follower of Jesus) is to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth. If there's anything there, let's clean it up, make it real, figure out what needs to change, and it'll happen; and (it'll happen) not because we've made the change, but because what God is doing in this world cannot be stopped, and that'll never change.

If you look further into chapter five, (and there are a couple of things I want to mention before we close), in verse seventeen, it begins a section that is not much different from what was happening in chapter four. Peter and (some of the other apostles) are arrested and put in jail. An angel of the Lord comes and lets them out, they end up (the next day) teaching in the temple, and that's when they're brought to stand on trial before the Sanhedrin, the religious high court.

The section I want us to see is this conversation that involves one of the leaders, a man named Gamaliel, a Pharisee (it says), highly respected. Peter had just finished his testimony. He had charged the religious leaders with the death of Jesus. They were the ones (he said) who had nailed the Son of God to a tree. The Promised Messiah had been killed because of them. (And it says) "They were furious, wanted put the apostles to death."

Do you remember what Gamaliel argued? (Do you remember what he said?) Speaking about the apostles and about this movement that was built around the person of Jesus, (he said) and he was right, "If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. (If all this is is a movement made up by men, it'll never last.) But if it is from God, if God is the one that's behind it, then it's unstoppable. You'll not be able to stop it. And (not only that) he said, but you'll find yourself fighting not only against men, but also against God."

It says "His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in, had them flogged, ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then let them go."

That's the first story I want you to see: this encounter with Gamaliel, a wise man, a learned man, one who knew (ultimately) what was at stake. The second is what happens right at the end, at the close of the chapter, beginning in verse 41. This is after the trial, after they had been flogged, after everything that could have been done (to slow them down) had been done, listen to what it says.

It says, "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." (And then it says), "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ." Day after day, in the temple

courts, and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and preaching about the one who will never be stopped.

As we move deeper into this study of the Book of Acts, we're going to see a pattern (repeating itself) over and over again. We're going to see how they kept on preaching and teaching about Jesus, how they never stopped proclaiming what God had done (for them) in Christ. The only things that slowed them down were those things that happened from within that got in the way. But as they figured those things out (and we're still figuring those things out), they got out of the way and let it happen, and it did.

We're also going to see a pattern develop (with them) that I pray will continue to develop with us. They did two things on a regular basis. They gathered in the temple, and they met together from house to house. They gathered in the temple, and they met together from house to house.

We're going to see that in these next few weeks. (It's a pattern that was clear in the early church.) We're going to be pushing that in the months ahead. (It's a pattern that needs to be developed today.)

Commit to those two things, gathering in the temple (right here) and living out your faith from house to house (out there), and you'll be part of a movement that will never be stopped, one that will become (because it is) the purpose of your life. And when the purpose of your life is aligned with God's purpose for your life, you cannot be stopped, because God cannot be stopped.

Let's pray. Almighty God, we give you thanks for the way in which you have called us in Jesus and for the ways in which your saving message, in him, has drawn us closer to you. We thank you for this place and for the chance we have, each week, to come together to be encouraged in our faith and strengthened in our witness. We ask for your Spirit to be with us as we work at being authentic, as we let go of those things that would pull us away from you. Help us, Lord, to make your purpose our purpose, and to be fully on board with what you are doing in the world. Give us the faith we need to see beyond the cares and concerns of this life, that our lives might have an impact for eternity...in Jesus' name. Amen.