

## **The Real Thing Week Three: “For What Do We Stand?”**

### **Scripture Passage Acts 5:12-29 (NRSV)**

<sup>12</sup> Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. <sup>13</sup> None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. <sup>14</sup> Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, <sup>15</sup> so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. <sup>16</sup> A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

<sup>17</sup> Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, <sup>18</sup> arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. <sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, <sup>20</sup> “Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.” <sup>21</sup> When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching.

When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. <sup>22</sup> But when the temple police went there, they did not find them in the prison; so they returned and reported, <sup>23</sup> “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” <sup>24</sup> Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on. <sup>25</sup> Then someone arrived and announced, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” <sup>26</sup> Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

<sup>27</sup> When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

### **Weekly Reading Passage**

#### **Without Ground under One’s Feet**

Have there ever been people in history who in their time, like us, had so little ground under their feet, people to whom every possible alternative open to them at the time appeared equally unbearable, senseless, and contrary to life? Have there been those who like us looked for the source of their strength beyond all those available alternatives? Were they looking entirely in what has passed away and in what is yet to come? And nevertheless, without being dreamers, did they await with calm and confidence the successful outcome of their endeavor? Or rather, facing a great historical turning point, and precisely because something genuinely new was coming to be that did not fit with the existing alternatives, did the responsible thinkers of another generation ever feel differently than we do today?

#### **Who Stands Firm?**

The huge masquerade of evil has thrown all ethical concepts into confusion. That evil should appear in the form of light, good deeds, historical necessity, social justice is absolutely bewildering for one coming from the world of ethical concepts that we have received. For the Christian who lives by the Bible, it is the very confirmation of the abysmal wickedness of evil.

The failure of “*the reasonable ones*”—those who think, with the best of intentions and in their naive misreading of reality, that with a bit of reason they can patch up a structure that has come out of joint—is apparent. With their ability to see impaired, they want to do justice on every side, only to be crushed by the colliding forces without having accomplished anything at all. Disappointed that the world is so unreasonable, they see themselves condemned to unproductiveness; they withdraw in resignation or helplessly fall victim to the stronger.

More devastating is the failure of all ethical *fanaticism*. The fanatic believes that he can meet the power of evil with the purity of a principle. But like the bull in the arena, he attacks the red cape rather than the person carrying it, grows tired, and suffers defeat. He traps himself in the insignificant and ends up in the trap of the cleverer one.

The man of *conscience* has no one but himself when resisting the superior might of predicaments that demand a decision. But the dimensions of the conflict wherein he must make his choices are such that, counseled and supported by nothing but his very own conscience, he is torn apart. The innumerable respectable and seductive disguises by which evil approaches him make his conscience fearful and unsure until he finally settles for a salvaged conscience instead of a good conscience, that is, until he deceives his own conscience in order not to despair. That a bad conscience may be stronger and more wholesome than a deceived one is something that the man whose sole support is his conscience can never comprehend.

The reliable path of *duty* seems to offer the escape from the bewildering plethora of possible decisions. Here, that which has been commanded is clutched as the most certain; the responsibility for what has been commanded lies with the one giving the command rather than the one who carries it out. However, duty is so circumscribed that there is never any room to venture that which rests wholly in one’s own responsibility, the action that alone strikes at the very core of evil and can overcome it. The man of duty will in the end have to do his duty also to the devil.

There is the one who determines to take a stand in the world by acting on his own *freedom*. He values the necessary action more highly than an untarnished conscience and reputation. He is prepared to sacrifice a barren principle to a fruitful compromise or a barren wisdom of mediocrity to fruitful radicalism. Such a one needs to take care that his freedom does not cause him to stumble. He will condone the bad in order to prevent the worse and in so doing no longer discern that the very thing that he seeks to avoid as worse might well be better. This is where the basic material of tragedy is to be found.

In flight from public discussion and examination, this or that person may well attain the sanctuary of private *virtuousness*. But he must close his eyes and mouth to the injustice around him. He can remain undefiled by the consequences of responsible action only by deceiving himself. In everything he does, that which he fails to do will leave him no peace. He will either perish from that restlessness or turn into the most hypocritical of all Pharisees.

Who stands firm? Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God’s question and call. Where are these responsible ones?

### **Civil Courage**

What really lies behind the lament about the lack of civil courage? In these years we have encountered much bravery and self-sacrifice but almost no civil courage anywhere, even among ourselves. Only an altogether naive psychology would trace this deficiency back simply to personal cowardice. The reasons behind this are quite different. In the course of a long history, we Germans have had to learn the need for obedience and the power thereof. We saw the meaning and greatness of our life in the subordination of all personal wishes and ideas under the commission that came to be ours. Our gaze was directed upward, not in slavish fear but in the free trust that beheld a career in the commission and a vocation in the career. The readiness to follow an order from “above” rather than one’s own discretion arises from and is part of the justified suspicion about

one's own heart. Who would contest that, in relation to obedience, commission, and career, the German has again and again accomplished the utmost in bravery and life commitment. But he safeguarded his freedom—where in the world was freedom spoken of more passionately than in Germany, from Luther to the philosophy of idealism? — by seeking to free himself from self-will in order to serve the whole: career and freedom were to him two sides of the same thing. However, in doing so he misjudged the world; he did not reckon with the fact that the readiness to subordinate and commit his life to the commission could be misused in the service of evil. When such misuse occurred, the exercise of the career itself became questionable, and all the basic moral concepts of the Germans were shaken. What became apparent was that Germans lacked still one decisive and fundamental idea: that of the need for the free, responsible action even against career and commission. In its place came the irresponsible lack of scruples, on the one hand, and self-tormenting scruples that never led to action, on the other. But civil courage can grow only from the free responsibility of the free man. Only today are Germans beginning to discover what free responsibility means. It is founded in a God who calls for the free venture of faith to responsible action and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the one who on account of such action becomes a sinner.

– From Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: Reader's Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015, pgs. 4-8. Used by permission from the publisher.

## Weekly Questions

1. In the section “Who Stands Firm?,” Bonhoeffer describes different ways people try to deal with evil. One type of response is the fanatic, who “believes that he can meet the power of evil with the purity of principle.” Why does “fanaticism” ultimately fail? Do you see this type of response to evil today?
2. Another way some people might respond to evil or injustice is to “[flee] from public discussion and examination.” We might choose to withdraw when injustice seems too overwhelming. Do you ever find yourself doing this or wanting to do this? Do you agree with Bonhoeffer that, in withdrawing, we ignore the injustice around us?
3. Bonhoeffer concludes that the responsible person is the one “whose life is to be nothing but a response to God’s question and call.” What does it mean to respond to God’s call? Can you think of a time when you’ve felt confident that you were doing what God wanted you to do, even the face of opposition?