

The Apostles and the Council

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As we all know, however much we might want to change our lives to better serve God, making the actual changes is still quite difficult. After all, the devil is prepared to throw any number of obstacles into our path to keep us from following Jesus. Some of them are unique to particular spiritual problems, but we encounter others everywhere.

For instance, the devil makes widespread use of fear. We want to change, but he starts whispering in our ear about all the bad things that will happen if we do, so we allow fear to paralyze us. We could be afraid, for instance, of refusing to share in our friends' bad behavior because we think we'll lose our friends if we do. On the other end of the spectrum, we could be afraid of telling our co-workers about Jesus lest we become a workplace pariah.

This is not a new problem. The devil has always used fear against God's people, but when the righteous men of old turned to God to overcome their fears, they were able to succeed. From these stories, we can learn the importance of defeating fear in our lives as well. This morning, let's look in at the conflict between the apostles and the council.

The Conflict Begins

This entire story is contained in the fifth chapter of the book of Acts, so we're going to be confining our attentions this morning to the last three quarters of that text. In sequence, it first describes how the conflict begins. Read with me from Acts 5:12-21. The first portion of this passage addresses **THE REPUTATION** of the apostles and the disciples generally. There are two striking things about this description. The first is the boldness of these early Christians. Remember, back in Acts 4, Peter and the other apostles had been commanded by the Sanhedrin not to teach anything else about Jesus. How do they respond to that? The disciples continued gathering in Solomon's portico, which was part of the grounds of the temple, one of the most public places in the entire city of Jerusalem. There, they continued to teach and to confirm the word that they were proclaiming with many signs and wonders. In both what they said and what they did, the apostles were as defiant of the pressure on them to stay silent as they possibly could have been.

Today, thankfully, we are not opposed by the edicts of our government, but there is plenty of cultural pressure to conceal our lights regardless. People today don't want to hear the Bible truth about homosexuality. They don't want to hear that the rampant sexualization of our culture is an offense to God. If they're religious, they don't want to hear that their practices may not be in line with what the Bible teaches. However, if we are truly first-century Christians, we will face that pressure the way first-century Christians did—with boldness. We will repeat the truth without flinching, no matter the subject, and we will show by the righteous, loving lives we lead that we are truly servants of God.

Second, the apostles' boldness had a curious effect on the people. No outsiders started talking loudly about how wonderful the apostles were right there at Solomon's portico. However, they did remember what the apostles said and did, and the ultimate result of that was that many of them became believers too. In the same way, when we climb out on a limb for God, we shouldn't expect a rush of people eager to join us there. If it's hard for disciples to openly endorse what the Bible says, how hard would it be for those who aren't even Christians at all? However, even when we take a stand and everybody else stares at their shoes, we shouldn't think that the stand was wasted. People will remember that, people with good hearts will appreciate it, and it may well lead to them later choosing to come to the Lord.

From there, the text describes the many **MIRACLES OF HEALING** carried out by the apostles. These were no isolated, murky incidents. The text describes Peter and the rest healing many right there on the temple grounds, as openly as they possibly could. The power to heal was so strong with Peter that even his shadow falling on a sick person was enough to effect a cure. This has two results, one that is spelled out in the text and one that isn't. First, as the word spread about Peter's miraculous powers, people came from all over the Judean countryside to receive his help. Second, none of the enemies of the gospel, in the Sanhedrin or elsewhere, accuse Peter of trickery or fraud. They stay silent.

Today, none of us have the power to heal in miraculous ways. However, the textual evidence of these abilities in the first century is still important to our faith. Remember, the Bible isn't like the foundation myths of other religions. It isn't set in some shadowy, legendary time. Instead, Acts 5 is a chronicle of historical events that happened around 30 AD. Acts itself was probably composed about 65 AD, a time in which the story of the early days of the church was still a matter of common recollection. I don't remember things that happened 35 years ago, but many here do, and if some charismatic preacher started making claims about massive miracles of healing that he worked in 1978, many of the brethren here would be the first to rise up and contradict him. His claims would be discredited immediately.

However, in the case of Peter's miracles of healing, neither inside the text nor outside of it do we see anyone who was alive at the time claiming that they never happened. Why not? Other passages in Acts show that the enemies of the gospel did not hesitate to lie about early Christians if they thought they could get away with it. Here, their silence proves the opposite. Peter's miracles were so widely known to the people of Judea that they were incontestable. If the miracles that confirmed the word are genuine, then so too is the word itself, and our faith rests on firm foundations.

We might think that these genuine miracles of healing would cause even the Jewish leadership to follow Jesus. However, **THE HIGH PRIEST** thought differently. He and his allies reward the apostles for their good deeds by arresting them and throwing them in prison. From this, we learn an important lesson. People who don't want to hear the gospel will always be able to find an excuse not to listen. People who want to oppose the gospel will always find an excuse to oppose it, regardless of the truth of our statements and the righteousness of our conduct. That was true 2000 years ago, and it is true today. In other words, there is a sense in which our fears of the consequences of godliness are well founded. When we take a stand for Christ, some people are not going to like that, and they aren't going to like us. When that happens to us, it shouldn't alarm us. It should only remind us that opposition inevitably accompanies Christ.

However, **AN ANGEL** promptly rescues the apostles. He unbars the prison gates and ushers them out. However, he doesn't do so to protect their safety. Instead, he sends them right back to the same public place where they were arrested so that they could continue preaching. Here too, we shouldn't expect a precise re-enactment of the events of the first century in our lives, but we should remember that when God's people boldly serve Him today, He will be with them then too. He will protect us from the opponents of the gospel and of godly living. Of course, this protection won't be something he extends for our own sake. If God blesses us for our boldness, He will expect us to continue being bold. Overcoming fear can't be a one-time event for us. It has to be consistently evident throughout our lives.

Before the Council

The next portion of this story describes what happens to the apostles before the Council itself. We find it in Acts 5:21b-32. This will also help us to prepare our minds for the Lord's Supper. This section begins with a description of **THE HIGH PRIESTS' REACTION** to the apostles' disappearing act. There are few sections in the book of Acts that are funny, but this is one of them. Imagine the scene: Here, the entire Sanhedrin, the 70 foremost elders of the Jewish people, have assembled. In addition, it appears that another group, the senate of the sons of Israel, has also been called together for this occasion. This isn't just the High Council. This is the High Council plus. There are probably hundreds of Jews sitting together in a room, waiting for the lowly Galileans to be brought in and tried. They send the guard to fetch the prisoners, but a few minutes later, the officials return to sheepishly explain that the prisoners have somehow escaped a locked room. Suddenly, the machinery of the law comes to a screeching halt! We can easily envision the dumbfounded looks on the faces of these high officials, as they are confronted with something they can't understand or address.

This may well be the second reason why God sent the angel to rescue the apostles in the first place. It clearly wasn't to help them escape; after all, they return to this room in about fifteen minutes anyway. Instead, something else has to be going on. I think we've already seen the first reason. God wanted to make it clear to the apostles that it was their responsibility to preach the gospel, no matter what. Second, though, God wanted to discomfit the enemies of the gospel, to make them a little less sure of themselves than they otherwise would have been. This should remind us that having God on our side has effects that we see, but also some that we don't. Just as God blesses those who are for Him, He works against those who are against Him. Those who seek to keep us from being righteous, then, are going to face problems and pressures that we may never even find out about. We need to learn to trust in Him for that.

This leads, though, to a much lower-key **RE-APPREHENSION**. Much to their surprise, the Jewish leaders discover that the apostles are right back where they were yesterday when they were arrested, doing the same thing. This is certainly not typical behavior for escaped criminals! Once again, the captain of the guard goes after them, but what a difference a day makes! Back in v. 18, some translations say that the guardsmen had arrested the apostles, but the literal Greek here says that they "laid hands on" them. In other words, yesterday, the apostles had been bodily dragged into prison, a humiliating and perhaps even painful experience. This time, though, no such thing happens. Apparently, news of the apostles' inexplicable escape has filtered out among the people, and the guardsmen can tell that if they lay hands on again, a mob is going to stone them to death. Instead, they ask nicely, pretty please, and the apostles return with them.

Thankfully, people in the modern-day United States don't usually express their opinions so violently, but even today, there is still a measure of protection that comes with being known as people of God. If we are sincere about our faith, if we treat others as Jesus would treat them, if we do not taint our reputation with spitefulness or hypocrisy, people are generally going to respect us even if they don't agree with us. They will acknowledge our right to be what we are and not appreciate it if somebody else tries to mess with us. On the other hand, the reputation of the hypocritical and the disagreeable provides them with no protection. Righteousness is important for more reasons than the obvious.

Once the high priests have re-acquired their defendants, they issue **A COMMAND**. The text actually says that the high priest questions the apostles, but it doesn't repeat any of those questions. Instead, Luke cuts to the chase, when the high priest starts leveling accusations instead. He has two problems with what the apostles are doing. First, they are preaching Jesus as loudly as they can, even though the Sanhedrin has already ordered them not to. Second, they are attempting to bring the blood of Jesus on the heads of the Jewish leadership. This latter is the more interesting of the two accusations. For some reason, we think of the gospels and Acts as belonging to two distinct time periods, but in reality, the narratives of Luke and Acts actually overlap. This early in the narrative of Acts, the members of the Great Sanhedrin

are the same ones who condemned Jesus. The high priests are still Annas, Caiaphas, and the rest of the sons of Annas. When Peter and the others claim that God raised Jesus from the dead, then, they aren't mounting some abstract religious challenge. They are accusing the leaders of the Jewish nation of having conspired in the death of an innocent man. This is nothing less than a challenge of the legitimacy of the Sanhedrin to the spiritual leadership of the Jewish nation.

When we consider this context, **PETER'S RESPONSE** becomes all the more impressive. He knows from personal experience that these men will not shrink from taking the blood of the innocent, but he defies them anyway. He will not obey them. Instead, he will continue preaching Christ: His murder at the hands of these very men, His resurrection, and His exaltation. Anybody who questions these things must reckon not only with the apostles but with the Holy Spirit, who has worked miracles to confirm the message that they were preaching. This isn't merely speaking truth to power. This is hurling truth in the face of power and daring the consequences.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's point our reflections in two main directions. First, let's consider the validity of the gospel narrative. Peter here is so sure that he has personally seen Jesus after He was raised from the dead that he is willing to invite immediate death to proclaim that message. This isn't the behavior of a deluded fool who doesn't know what to think. It's the behavior of a man who knows exactly what to think and is so sure of the promise of eternal life that he is willing to sacrifice his earthly life to attain it. We too can be sure that Jesus died and was raised, and that through Him we also can find forgiveness of our sins. Our faith in Him is not vain. It is valid.

Second, we claim to be first-century Christians like Peter was. Do we live like He did? Do our lives show his zeal, his determination to serve Christ regardless of consequences? Let's consider this as we partake.

Gamaliel's Speech

The final portion of the story is dominated by a speech made by a Council member named Gamaliel. We read about it and its consequences in Acts 5:33-42. The first subdivision in this text concerns **INITIAL REACTIONS** to Peter's fiery reply. The first reaction is hardly surprising, and it's probably the reaction that Peter was expecting. He knew the character of men like Annas and Caiaphas. He knew that if he replied to such men defiantly and contemptuously, they would probably want to kill him. Indeed, that's precisely what happens. Incidentally, the reason why the Romans removed Annas from the high priesthood in the first place, some twenty years before this, was that he took capital punishment into his own hands without consulting them first. He has a history of state violence. Here, it looks like history is about to repeat itself, that Peter and the other eleven, not Stephen, are about to become the first martyrs.

However, before the chief priests and the Sanhedrin start going for rocks, somebody else speaks up. This is Gamaliel, a noted Pharisee, none other than the teacher in the Law of one Saul of Tarsus. Apparently, he has enough political capital to stop the lynch mob before it really gets going. He accomplishes this by making a very reasonable suggestion: "Before we start killing these men, let's put them outside and talk a little bit about it first."

This leads into Gamaliel's discussion of **FALSE PROPHETS**. He cites two, both of whom appear, though in a different order, in the history of the Jewish chronicler Flavius Josephus. The first is Theudas, who, decades ago, claimed to be the Messiah, stirred up trouble, and was executed for it. The second is a man named Judas of Galilee, who, about the time Jesus was born, tried the same thing and was also killed for his rebellious tendencies. This points us to something that we're often only dimly aware of. Jesus was far from the only man who claimed to be the Messiah, and the very fact that pretender after pretender asserted that he was the Anointed One made preaching Jesus more difficult.

After he finishes his history lesson, Gamaliel points out **TWO POSSIBILITIES** for what might happen to the apostles and their gospel. His basic advice is to let them alone, and he explains it in this way: If these men are doing nothing more than preaching a gospel of their own devising, sooner or later they will destroy themselves, and they won't be our problem anymore. On the other hand, if they are from God (and Gamaliel is intellectually honest enough to concede the possibility), then even if we try to overthrow them, we cannot possibly succeed.

Even though Gamaliel does not appear to be speaking by inspiration here, his words are generally true. Anything that is of man will sooner or later fail, and only things that are of God will remain. This is important for us to remember, especially when the Lord's church appears to be under such attack and false teachers appear to be prospering. Ultimately, time is on the side of the righteous, not of the wicked. I can remember when I was a little kid living in New Jersey, and we lived about two miles away from the church building where we worshiped. On the way to the assembly every Sunday, we would drive by a denominational church building. It was much larger than our church building, and, at least in my five-year-old's estimation, a lot more impressive. It was made out of brick, it had big white pillars out front, and it had a high steeple. On Sunday mornings, there were a lot of cars in the parking lot. I'm pretty sure that at one point, I asked my parents why we didn't go to church there instead of where we went, which was much less impressive.

Today, I don't know how that particular denominational congregation is doing, but I know how the denomination overall is faring—in a word, miserably. They're losing all their young people, they're hemorrhaging members, and they appear locked in a death spiral from which there is no escape. By the time I depart this life, the same group that looked so impressive to me in my youth may not even exist at all.

In any event, the story concludes with **THE RESULT** of Gamaliel's wise words. Somewhat surprisingly, he is able to talk the chief priests down from their blood rage, and they agree to let the apostles go. Of course, these are still the same kind, thoughtful folks who murdered Jesus, so they flog the twelve innocent men before they release them. They warn them, again, not to preach Christ, and this time they really mean it! Peter and the rest respond to the abuse and the warning characteristically. They rejoice that they were found worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus, and they continue to proclaim Him to anyone who will listen.

When we are tempted to remain silent or inactive out of fear, this should be our final lesson. If we do speak up, if we do take a stand for righteousness, and that comes back to bite us in earthly terms, that's not a bad thing. It's a good thing. As with Peter and the apostles, Jesus has counted us worthy to suffer shame for Him. It's a sign that we're walking in His footsteps. Indeed, the Scripture reveals in 2 Timothy 3 that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. We shouldn't be discouraged by that. We should be encouraged to do as the apostles did, to be even more devoted to our Lord than we had been before.