

Chapter 14: Obey God Rather than Men

Acts 5:17–42

In the previous section, we saw the responses of the people to the gospel. Some stayed away, but held the church in high esteem (Acts 5:13). Others flocked to Christ “more than ever,” including “multitudes of both men and women” (Acts 5:14). As the church ascends in influence and adherents, the religious leaders of Israel were “filled with jealousy” (v. 17) and then later “enraged” (v. 33) by the apostles, and they demanded that the apostles discontinue their ministry. Yet, the apostles never turned from an opportunity to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus. What gave them boldness to defy the commands and even the authority of the Sanhedrin? Quite simply, they sought the approval of Jesus above all things, since they knew that *God overturns the judgments of this world*.

Divine Command (Acts 5:17–26)

While the people of Jerusalem were divided between those who stayed away (yet held the Christians in high esteem) and those who were added to the Lord as new believers (Acts 5:13–14), the religious leaders had a very different reaction to the growth of Christianity: “But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison” (vv. 17–18). Back in Acts 4 when the Sanhedrin “charged [Peter and John] not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:18), they hoped to prevent further conversions. Yet, as “more than ever believers were added to the Lord” (Acts 5:14), they were “filled with jealousy”: “The word translated ‘jealousy’ can also mean *zeal*, and there may well have been an element of zeal in their determination to stamp out this growing messianic movement before its increasing popularity aroused the concern of the Roman authorities and led to severe reprisals.”¹

Importantly, Luke particularly notes that the high priest and the Sadducees were behind this fresh rush of persecution, which we may likely understand this by remembering that the “Sadducees have more to lose, since they control the council and have worked out a compromise with the Romans to share power. Any destabilizing element in the culture could threaten their control.”² As Calvin observes, “the fury of the wicked was kindled with these things, so that they raged sorer afresh....when as they are so little terrified with such evident power of God, that they run headlong more boldly, and with greater force, and bend all their force, as it were, to overthrow the very heaven.”³ This story, then, is instructive for two reasons: first, to remind us that the wicked will ever rage against the progress of the gospel in this world, and second, to remember “the knowledge of the gifts of God, whereby he testifieth that he is present with us, ought to encourage us, lest the fury and boldness of the wicked do terrify and dismay us. For this is no small comfort, when we know that

¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 165.

² Bock, *Acts*, 238.

³ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:207.

God is present with us.”⁴

In this passage, the presence of God appears that very night: “But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ‘Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life’” (vv. 19–20). Now, this passage does not teach us that the Lord always delivers his people out of trials by freeing them from the circumstances of prison. Even here, it is worth remembering that the Lord frees them not so that they might escape persecution altogether, but so that they can return to their gospel labors in order to stoke the Sadducees’ rage all the more.⁵ Thus, the apostles rose early next morning in order to return to public teaching as soon as possible, “at daybreak” (v. 21). Luke then narrates the humorous story about how the Sanhedrin convened in due time, and summoned the prisoners, but were “greatly perplexed” to learn that the apostles were not in the prisons (v. 24). When someone else reported that the people were “standing in the temple and teaching the people” (v. 25), “the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people” (v. 26). Luke has already given to us the reason for the temple officials’ fear of the people’s reaction: “the people held them in high esteem” (Acts 5:13).⁶ The apostles, rather than fleeing from further persecution, went voluntarily with the temple officials, and “they were willing to do so because the events of the night had convinced them once more that they were very much in God’s hands.”⁷ With each new wave of persecution, the apostles do not shrink back; rather, they become increasingly bold with every interaction.

Divine Authority (Acts 5:27–32)

When the temple officials bring the apostles before the council, the high priests accuses them of defying their previous instructions: “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us” (v. 28). Lenski observes that the high priest does not ask how they escaped from prison, which may be ironic: “It would have been a fine thing for him and for the other Sadducees, who did not believe in angels, to hear it attested by twelve witnesses

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:207.

⁵ “That is worth the marking, because we see many men, who, after they have escaped out of persecution, do afterwards keep silence, as if they had done their duty towards God, (and were no more to be troubled;) other some, also, do escape away by denying Christ; but the Lord doth deliver his children, not to the end they may cease off from the course which they have begun, but rather that they may be the more zealous afterward. The apostles might have objected, It is better to keep silence for a time, forasmuch as we cannot speak one word without danger; we are now apprehended for one only sermon, how much more shall the fury of our enemies be inflamed hereafter, if they shall see us make no end of speaking? But because they knew that they were to live and to die to the Lord, they do not refuse to do that which the Lord commanded; so we must always mark what function the Lord enjoineth us. There will many things meet us oftentimes, which may discourage us, unless being content with the commandment of God alone, we do our duty, committing the success to him.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:209–10.)

⁶ “Here we see the high esteem which the apostles enjoyed among the common people; it was highly dangerous to make a false move against them in the presence of the people.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 220–21.)

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, 167.

before the whole Sanhedrin and all the Pharisees who were in it, who did believe in angels, that an angel had opened the prison and had led them out.”⁸

Instead, the high priest focuses only on the ongoing teaching of the apostles, accusing them of seeking to bring Jesus’ “blood upon” them. Notice here how the issue is not *theological*, but *political* to these leaders. The issue for the high priest is not whether Jesus truly is God’s Son and whether he was raised from the dead. Rather, the issue is about the danger that this message poses for them. In this, the high priest is suggesting that their preaching is stirring up some kind of retribution against them, whether from God or from “a popular uprising, insinuating that the apostles are planning to turn the city against the Jewish leaders in some deliberate, perhaps violent action.”⁹ Ultimately, they remain unconcerned about the wrath of God against them—they are primarily concerned to deal with threats to their power and position!

With the same sentiment to what Peter had expressed in Acts 4:19, Peter (on behalf of the other apostles) answers, “We must obey God rather than men” (v. 29). Bock notes that the word translated as “must” (δεῖ; *dei*) “suggests a moral necessity for this obedience. God has claim on the apostles, and this has priority over any other group.”¹⁰ This principle identifies the limits of the authorities of all leaders, but especially spiritual leaders. On the one hand, God has indeed entrusted significant authorities to the officers in his church. That authority, however, is not a blank check for leaders to use as they please. Rather, God intends for the authority he has entrusted to leaders to be for the building up of his church, and not for tearing down (2 Cor. 13:10). In other words, God intends for the authority entrusted to officers in the church to be used to minister and to declare *his* authority from his Word. So, “if a faithful pastor do command or forbid out of the Word of God, it shall be in vain for men which are stubborn to object that we ought to obey God; for God will be heard by man.”¹¹ Yet, as Peter explains here, when those authorities infringe upon the authority of God, seeking to *prevent* God’s being heard by his people, then it is the right and obligation of God’s people to resist the usurpation of authority by such leaders.

Then, undeterred by the accusation of the high priest, Peter again charges the temple leaders with their crime: “The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree” (v. 30). That God reversed the actions of the religious leaders should be enough to strike terror into their hearts, as this message cut to the heart of the men of Judea on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:37). If this were not enough, however, Peter continues with a gospel promise of good news: “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (v. 31). Peter has previously used the term “Leader” in Acts 3:15, in the phrase translated by the ESV as “the *Author* of life.” The term “Savior,” however, has not yet arisen within the Book of Acts, and only appears once more (Acts 13:23).¹² Taken together, these two terms speak of Jesus’ authority over life and salvation. Although the leaders had sought to kill Jesus, their efforts were short-lived and only served to exalt Jesus to the highest possible authority over life itself. Finally, the apostles punctuate their testimony with a statement of their commission to declare such things: “And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (v.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 221.

⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, 311.

¹⁰ Bock, *Acts*, 246.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:214.

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, 170.

32). They bear witness to what they have seen, and, moreover, the Holy Spirit bears witness to those whom God has given the Spirit in salvation.

Divine Approval (Acts 5:33–42)

In contrast to the men of Judea at Pentecost who begged Peter for a remedy to save themselves from their terrible crime, the leaders respond with fury: “When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them” (v. 33). Indeed, there may be a clear contrast between those two groups, since the Judeans were “cut” (i.e., “pierced, stabbed”),¹³ to the heart, while these leaders were “sawn asunder.”¹⁴ In both cases, the response to the preaching of Peter appears as an imagery of “cutting” (i.e., of the heart). Here, though, their hearts were “sawn in two” in such a way that led them to rage against the apostles murderously: “Whence we gather that no reasons can prevail with the reprobate, to bring them unto the obedience of Christ...their fury was so untamed, and unbridled that they do rather go mad.”¹⁵ If their sensitivity lie in the possibility of uprising from the people against their efforts to “bring this man’s blood on them,” Peter’s words had not reassured them.

At this point, however, a Pharisees named Gamaliel stood up to calm the passions of the Sadducees.¹⁶ Gamaliel is well known historically in extra-biblical Jewish literature as one of the greatest disciples of Rabbi Hillel, and the Book of Acts later informs us that Saul of Tarsus had been educated at Gamaliel’s feet (Acts 22:3).¹⁷ On this occasion, he takes the posture of a voice of reason in vv. 35–39; however, evaluating the advice he gives is more complex than that. To be sure, he does speak a word of caution against rash action against these men, even conceding that they “might even be found opposing God” (v. 39). Furthermore, “There is much common sense in this position, for certain kinds of men—and movements—can safely be relied upon to hang themselves if they are given enough rope.”¹⁸

Ultimately, though, “Gamaliel does not call for an examination of the truthfulness of the apostolic claims. In the final analysis, his advice is fatalistic and flawed, because it does not take seriously the challenges presented by Peter (4:8–12, 19–20; 5:29–32).”¹⁹ Lenski writes, “Gamaliel belongs to that class of men whom the most convincing evidence does not convince....Gamaliel lacked one thing: the consciousness of sin. The veil of his Pharisaic work-righteousness blinded him to his guilt. Peter’s call to repentance did not move him to contribution. So this wise Jew continued in his folly.”²⁰ More than this, however, Gamaliel is also a man who does not sufficiently believe his own principles so as to take any action against those who had become (if his perspective were true)

¹³ Arndt et al., *BDAG*, 523.

¹⁴ Arndt et al., *BDAG*, 235.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:220–21.

¹⁶ Polhill reminds us of the political concerns of the Sadducees: “Some called for the death penalty, undoubtedly the Sadducees on the Council. Theologically they were not inclined to be convinced by Peter’s appeal to the resurrection, and politically Peter’s messianic message only served to further confirm that this was a dangerous, rabble-rousing group.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 170.)

¹⁷ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 124.

¹⁸ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 126.

¹⁹ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 224.

²⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 235.

troublers of Israel. Nevertheless, “the Lord...used his spurious wisdom to extend the great work that was going on in Jerusalem with full vigor.”²¹

While Gamaliel’s advice prevents the Sanhedrin from killing the apostles, this does not mean that the apostles emerge unscathed: “when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go” (v. 40). Although the council’s previous admonition to the apostles did not stop them from preaching and teaching in Jesus’ name, they issue their injunction once again. This time, however, they receive a brutal punishment that belies the brief description that their beating would have represented:

The flogging referred to was the customary punishment used as a warning not to persist in an offense. It consisted of thirty-nine lashes, often referred to as the forty less one (cf. 2 Cor 11:24). Based on the provision for forty stripes given in Deut 25:3, the practice had developed of only giving thirty-nine in the event of miscounting, preferring to err on the side of clemency rather than severity. It was still a cruel punishment. With bared chest and in a kneeling position, one was beaten with a tripled strap of calf hide across both chest and back, two on the back for each stripe across the chest. Men were known to have died from the ordeal.²²

Nevertheless, “they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (v. 41). Although such a beating would have been humiliating and shameful, the apostles rejoiced because they were “counted worthy” to suffer such a great “dishonor.”²³ Calvin draws attention to two things that the apostles understood: (1) “that which is counted amongst men most reproachful, excelleth in dignity and glory in the sight of God and his angels”; and (2) “we must use the greater diligence in thinking upon this sentence; that we are at this day made partakers of the sufferings of Christ, that we may be partakers of his glory.”²⁴

Far from ceasing their gospel ministry, “every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (v. 42). What an inspiration for us to continue pressing forward in ministry, even when the enemies of the church press against us: “Therefore, woe be to our daintiness, who, having suffered a little persecution, do by and by resign up the light to another, as if we were now old worn soldiers.”²⁵

²¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 232.

²² Polhill, *Acts*, 174.

²³ “In a strongly shame-honor-oriented society, to be dishonored normally would be considered shameful (BAGD 120; BDAG 148). The phrase ‘counted worthy to suffer dishonor’ is an oxymoron, a dishonor that is a cause for joy. The leaders beat them to produce shame....In the apostles’ view, however, being worthy to be a witness to the name of Jesus is a great honor and a cause for rejoicing.” (Bock, *Acts*, 252.)

²⁴ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:227.

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:228.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does the reaction of the Sadducees differ so greatly from the responses of the people (v. 17; cf. Acts 5:13–14)? What did the Sadducees hope to do by arresting the apostles (v. 18)? Why were the apostles willing to return to teaching about Jesus after they were released from prison (vv. 19–21)? Where were the temple officers unable to bring the apostles “by force” (v. 26)? Why were the apostles willing to return before the Sanhedrin voluntarily (v. 26)?
2. Why might the Sadducees have avoided asking the apostles about how they had escaped from the prison (vv. 27–28)? What do the Sadducees suggest by accusing the apostles of “intend[ing] to bring this man’s blood upon us” (v. 28)? Why didn’t the apostles follow the Sadducees’ rules (v. 29)? What stands out about how the apostles bear witness to the gospel of Jesus in vv. 30–32? What do they mean by “Leader” and “Savior” (v. 31)?
3. Compare the Sadducees, who were “cut asunder” (ESV: “enraged”; v. 33), with the men of Judea who were “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). How are they similar? How are they different? How should we evaluate Gamaliel’s counsel (vv. 34–39)? Is it principled? Does he seek the truth? How could the apostles rejoice after being beaten as they were (vv. 40–41)? On what basis could the apostles have returned directly into ceaseless ministry after they had suffered for Christ (v. 42)?
4. Think about the various rules that you encounter in life, many of which are in conflict. How often do you end up breaking a rule that is put upon you, whether for good or bad reasons? What leads you to admire or to disrespect the authority of a rule-giver? How might your admiration grow for the authority of Jesus Christ, as well as for the commandments he gives? How might God give you repentance for failing to obey him?