

Join us, if you can, in reading this with your family and praying at 10:15 on Sunday, April 26, 2020.

## **Kingdom Advancement and Opposition**

Dear First Southern Baptist Church family,

Last week as we jumped back into Acts, we saw a snapshot of the perils of sin and the necessity for humble, honest church ministry towards one another. Even though Ananias and Sapphira are held up as warning, their example is sandwiched between two summary statements about the advancement of the gospel through the faithful witness of the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is all a part of the unfolding wisdom of Jesus in Acts 1:8 to send forth his people in the power of the Spirit to be witnesses to the gospel. What we're going to see as we look at Acts 5:12-42 this morning is that as the Kingdom of God continues to advance, so too does opposition to the gospel. In spite of this, we'll see that the advancement of God's Kingdom cannot be stopped. Look with me at Acts 5:12-42:

"12) Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. 13) None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. 14) And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, 15) so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. 16) The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed. 17) But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy 18) they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. 19) But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20) "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." 21) And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. 22) But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, 23) "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside." 24) Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. 25) And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people." 26) Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. 27) And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, 28) saying, "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." 29) But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. 30) The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. 31) God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32) And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

33) When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. 34) But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. 35) And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 36) For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four

hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37) After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. 38) So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; 39) but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, 40) and 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. 41) Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42) And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus."

To see the narrative flow of this passage, I'm going to break it into four narrative sections that we'll look at this morning. The first section in verses 12-16, is the third summary statement Luke records in Acts to give us a broad snapshot of what church life was like. The summary serves as the setting for the narrative that plays out in the next few verses. The summary at the end of chapter 4 showed us that the church was loving, serving, and caring for each other, specifically through sharing together that all their needs were met. Notice that this summary statement focuses on the continued miraculous signs and wonders done through the Spirit by the apostles. This shows that the apostles are continuing the ministry of Jesus in their witnessing. These miracles should be seen as an answer to the church's prayer for boldness and continued signs and wonders in Acts 4:29-30. The apostles are regularly out in Solomon's Portico, which is where Peter preached after healing the lame man in chapter 3, to share among the people and to preach about Jesus, demonstrating the truth of their testimony with miraculous signs and wonders through the Spirit. Though there is fear of the Jewish leaders opposing the church, verse 14 is clear that more and more people are repenting of their sin and believing in Jesus. The testimony and witness of the apostles, confirmed by signs and wonders, continued to spread throughout the city, spilling into the surrounding country. Peter's mission work is reflective of the ministry of Jesus as the influence and public integrity of the apostles continue to grow. So, here we see the church's mission continuing to grow and expand, but as we've seen previously, opposition to their ministry will continue to grow as well.

With the summary statement as the setting, notice the conflict and rising tension in verses 17-32. The Jewish leaders, primarily led by the high priest and the Sadducees, arrest the apostles. The text is clear that their motivation is primarily jealousy in verse 17. They see the apostles and ultimately Jesus as a threat to their power, popularity, and integrity. Though imprisoned, the apostles are supernaturally released by an angel in the night and encouraged to go out and continue to preach to all people the words of this Life. Consider the humorous irony, in verse 25, as the high priest and council are confounded by the disappearance of the apostles, only to find them in the temple doing the very thing they were arrested for in the first place. They're jealous of the apostles and afraid of losing influence with the people, and yet they are completely powerless to stop the apostles from bearing witness to Jesus. In the next verse we see how precarious and frustrating this situation is for the Jewish leaders. They want these apostles gone, yet the people of the city won't stand for it, yet. The high priest reminds the apostles that they were ordered, in chapter 4, not to teach in the name of Jesus. Interestingly, the high priest doesn't question them or even mention their miraculous escape, which may reflect the Jewish leader's humiliation at being thwarted by these simple, ordinary men. The implication of the high priest's words about bringing this man's blood on them, implies that the leaders think the apostles are trying to implicate or accuse the leaders of murder, as if they're motivation for preaching the gospel is to avenge the death of Jesus. Peter's response is clear. They don't want the leaders killed for the crucifixion of Jesus; rather, they want these men saved. Again, Peter reminded them that they must obey God rather than mere men, and then proceeded to lay out the claims of the gospel to them. Jesus was crucified, he died, and God raised him from the dead. He is exalted as Savior and Leader so that Israel might repent and receive forgiveness for their sins. The word "Leader" in verse 31 in Greek means prince, author, or chief leader, which paired with Savior is the same message of

Peter from Acts 2:36 that Jesus is both Lord and Savior. Here we see the tension as the Jewish council and the apostles fundamentally disagree over the person and work of Jesus.

The third section of the narrative shows us how the conflict comes to a climax and finds resolution in verses 33-40. The declaration that Jesus is the risen Lord, verified by the miraculous works of the Spirit of God, was a line in the sand for the Jewish leaders. Verse 33 is clear that they are intent on violence and wanted to sentence the apostles to death for disobeying the council's previous order; however, an unlikely voice of reason cools their blood. Gamaliel, who was the apostle Paul's teacher and a leading, respected Pharisee, suggested they simply let this fringe, splinter group fizzle out. He sighted two recent uprisings as evidence for the strength of his suggestion. Essentially, no one remembered Theudas, verse 36, or Judas of Galilee, verse 37. Why not just let these Jesus followers drift into obscurity like the followers of those other two movements which perished with their leader? Notice the interesting point he made in verses 38-39. If this is a merely human movement, it will fade; however, if this is of God, they might find themselves resisting and fighting against the Lord. He basically suggested that they just let God sort this situation out. Again, consider the irony of this whole situation. God was sorting this out by confirming the apostle's teaching with powerful signs of the Holy Spirit, including their miraculous release from prison that very day! The council took his advice and released the apostles after beating them and commanding them a second time not to speak in the name of Jesus. The word for "beat" in verse 40 could also be translated "flogged." It's unclear from the context if they were beaten or lashed, but the suffering inflicted on them is important as the narrative concludes and we look at the text's resolution.

Notice the response of the apostles and the resolution of the text in verses 41-42. Though the council tried to discourage them from continuing to spread the gospel, the apostles were not moved. Rather than being afraid, discouraged, and defeated, they left rejoicing. Consider how unexpected and odd their response was. They were overjoyed to have suffered the physical pain of beating/flogging as well as the humiliation that went with it. The text is clear that they rejoiced specifically to be dishonored for the name of Jesus. They were honored to be dishonored. They were glad to be counted worthy and to be able to suffer because of their intimate connection with Jesus. New Testament scholar Darrell Bock from Dallas Theological Seminary sums their response up in his commentary on Acts like this:

"In a strongly shame-honor-oriented society, to be dishonored normally would be considered shameful. 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. They hope that the shame might function as a deterrent and stop their preaching or at least persuade others not to heed them. 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. . . God is using them to present Jesus. Here is the exemplary attitude of the church, willing to preach Jesus and suffer for the honor."

In verse 42, that's what they went on doing. Much to the consternation of the Jewish leaders, they went everywhere in the city and continued to preach and teach that Jesus is both Lord and Christ. As we conclude, allow me to offer a few suggestions about how this passage applies to Christians today.

- 1) This passage should cause us to think about how we should respond to opposition to the gospel. Though they had been ordered to cease teaching and preaching in Jesus' name, the apostles were compelled by a higher authority and guided by a greater allegiance. They feared God more than any man. They desired to serve their Lord rather than men. However, they did so with great humility in the text. I'm concerned by the attitude that I see in evangelical Christians in 21<sup>st</sup> century America when it comes to how we handle opposition and respond to those who would oppose us. There is often an arrogance that is contemptuous of those Christ died for. The apostles desired their oppressors to hear the gospel and believe. They didn't shrink back from sharing with the Jewish council; however, they also didn't denigrate them. They sought to follow the example of Jesus who humbled himself to death, even death on a cross. I think too often we're

quick to follow Peter's example in the gospel of drawing our sword to strike the high priest's servant instead. The cause of the gospel is not helped by treating our enemies like enemies, but by loving our enemies as Jesus loved his enemies. Let us humbly trust the Lord to sort out our enemies while we speak plainly, honestly, and graciously to them about the loving-kindness of Christ.

- 2) We must wrestle with this because the Bible assures us that in this life we will face opposition. Though we may not be arrested, harassed, or beaten like the apostles in this text, our brothers and sisters around the world live in this reality daily. Christians must have a healthy theology of suffering because we will surely face a myriad of hostilities in this life. Between worldly opposition, the struggle against our own flesh, and the assaults of Satan, we will suffer for our allegiance to Christ. We must study the Scriptures and grow in vibrant prayer if we're to be rooted deep enough to withstand the trials of this life. That doesn't mean we're to enjoy suffering, but we should be able to rejoice in suffering as the apostles did. They didn't see their beating as a cause of shame, but an honor because they were counted worthy to be identified with Jesus. Prayerfully seek to grow in maturity that you might be able to endure opposition and suffering, should it come your way, with grace, humility, and solid hope in Christ.
- 3) Considering both of those points, in order to combat spiritual pride and endure the trials of this life, we must remember that our primary allegiance and devotion is to God above all. Our culture is constantly, everywhere and everyway, preaching a gospel of self. You are the most important person in the world. Your truth is most important. Your feelings are sacrosanct. You deserve the best. Friends, consider that a life guided by a primary allegiance to anything except God is a life of idolatry. All of us were enslaved by this type of self-seeking, self-serving, entitled worldview. We were all condemned in our sin. By the grace of God, we have been rescued from the dominion of sin and the sad kingdom of self and transferred to the Kingdom of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. You can set aside the tyranny of every other master, and take on the grace-filled, life-giving yoke of Christ by turning from your sin and casting all your cares, fears, anxieties, allegiances, and sins upon him. Trust in the goodness of the Lord in Christ Jesus, and follow him as he leads through all the hills and valleys of this life. He will not lead you astray, and you can have salvation, eternal life, and hope for the journey if you believe in him, today. This is why the apostles considered it joy to suffer for the gospel of Jesus. In it, they were shown to be in union with their Lord, their chief allegiance. We will not rejoice to suffer for the name of Jesus if we value anything else above the name of Jesus.
- 4) Finally, this passage is a reminder that the Kingdom of God cannot be stopped. No earthly fear will hinder its progress. No human opposition will slow its advance. No degree of vitriol, violence, or death can stop the spread of the gospel. The very gates of Hell are powerless to resist the might of our God. This is not the end of the church in Acts. It's not the last time the gospel is communicated. Two millennia later, we are still carrying out the mission of Jesus. Brothers and sisters, come what may, do not shrink back or hesitate to share the gospel of Jesus. Let the Spirit's power and wisdom guide your words and let the love of Christ compel you to speak everyday and everywhere. May our prayers, priorities, and desire be to see in our midst what we read in verse 14, that "more than ever believers were added to the Lord."

God bless you as you continue to walk with Jesus.

Sincerely,

Pastor Bryan McClelland  
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