

“Consider Carefully”

Acts 5:17-42

February 5, 2023

Read Acts 5:17-42

This is the Word of the LORD.

We continue the story of the early church in Acts. In chapters 3 and 4, Peter and John were detained, questioned, and dismissed after a miraculous healing in Jesus’ name. They were threatened and ordered not to proclaim in Jesus’ name anymore.

However, they went out, celebrated, and continued to proclaim the gospel and the power of the kingdom of God. The community of believers rejoiced and grew.

At the beginning of chapter 5, there was the curious story of Ananias and Sapphira, a couple whose lives ended when they told everyone they had given to God all the proceeds from a sale of land, but had actually withheld some for themselves. It is a great text for a stewardship Sunday: about the importance of worshiping God, and not lying to God by hypocritically pretending to give everything. There are two quick things to note about it: **first**, respect in others’ eyes is fleeting, respect in God’s eyes is eternal – choose to be true to God in all things. **Second**, what we offer is important. It is worship. Either we worship God and trust God’s sovereignty, or we hold onto things in an effort to be god over our own lives and provide for our security. One choice leads to life, one leads to death. Choose to trust God. Enough said.

After that episode, Luke went back to the growing conflict between the early church and the Jewish temple leaders. I want to draw your attention to two places: first, the experience of the apostles; and, second, Gamaliel’s speech to the leadership.

First, consider carefully the life of a disciple.

The joy of the message of hope was worth the cost of discipleship for the apostles. They were continuing in their mission to be witnesses to Jerusalem. They were persistent. This time, instead of just Peter and John, all of the apostles were arrested.

Last time, Peter and John were arrested in order to investigate the healing of the lame man. This time, as more signs and wonders of the kingdom were occurring – healings and deliverance from unclean spirits – all the apostles were arrested for violating the previous order to not preach in the power of “this name.” Luke, the author of Acts, observed that the apostles were bold, but other – newer – believers were afraid.

One commentator noted how the Temple leaders would not even speak the name “Jesus” because they thought it blasphemous; and then, in a parenthetical note, reflected ruefully how Christians in modern times do not speak his name either. We are cowed by our culture to stay away from saying “Jesus” because his name is described as divisive, exclusionary, or offensive. We are afraid because we feel like we would be as rejected. Or, when we do speak his name, we do so with a righteous judgmentalism – as if the name of Jesus were a weapon to be wielded to gain power over an opponent. We expect

rejection; thus, we approach conversations as if we are already in a righteous battle against those with whom we are speaking.

However, observe how Peter and the apostles proclaimed Jesus' name. They did so boldly and joyfully, because they knew the power of the kingdom of God the name of Jesus embodied. They did it in furtherance of the kingdom, not in diminishment of others. They did it as an expression of the goodness of God, not as a political vehicle to gain persuasive authority or an advantage in the immediate circumstances. They did not shy away from declaring what had happened – and by whom – but they did not do so in order to say, “We are better than you.” Rather, they said, “We were sinners like you and have been delivered by God’s grace in Jesus.”

That nuance was lost on the Temple authorities. It often will be by our world, too. In addition to charging the apostles with violating their order, the leaders also were concerned about being held responsible for Jesus’ blood.

Though the allegation of responsibility for killing Jesus was inflammatory (and accurate), it is important for us to recognize that the judgment proclaimed by the apostles against the temple leaders was – and is – the judgment proclaimed against *all* sin, including ours today. Jesus came to deal with sin – murder, theft, lying, lust, gossip, greed, whatever. Each one of us who has sinned is responsible for sending Jesus to the cross. It was scandalous to the Temple leaders, and it is scandalous for us today.

Preaching the gospel is scandalous. It is divisive. Every time I stand up, I am aware that the gospel message is going to be offensive to someone. Jesus’ death on the cross calls us all to account. I am a sinner. You are a sinner. We collectively and as a community are sinners. That’s not a happy message – but it is the truth.

The gospel stands as judgment against all sin, against all rebellion against God’s sovereignty and holiness. In short, what Jesus endured was the very tangible expression of God’s wrath against sin. That is the hard part of the gospel. The good news part of the gospel is that Jesus **DID** carry the weight of God’s wrath to the cross for those who receive him as Savior *and* Lord. “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

The gospel demands a choice because God demands a choice. Either we recognize our sinfulness and receive with joy the grace that God has given – or – we insist on our own goodness and righteousness. Those are the only two options. The apostles rejoiced in God’s grace and rejoiced in their suffering for that message; the temple leaders insisted upon their own righteousness and were frustrated by their impotence in dealing with the apostles.

Choosing God means to not choose something else. The first of the Ten Commandments is “You shall have no other god before me.” The testimony of Scripture is that there is no other God before the true and living God. There is no power above Him. Though the message is good news, it is not nice like ice cream: something that everyone likes. This is a difficult reality for many Christians because we want good news to be nice news.

When I was growing up, I did not experience any real controversy regarding faith in Jesus Christ. Everyone I knew went to church. Our neighborhood growing up seemed to be half Roman Catholic, and half Presbyterian. We all went to church on Sunday morning, so that was never an issue. The practical outworking of theological differences seemed limited to Holy Week, when there was some discussion

about why the Mazzios and Finleys were not supposed to be playing ball in the back yard or making much noise on Good Friday between noon and 3:00 p.m. It was a time for quiet and contemplation. I remember my brother and some of the rest of us shrugging as if to say, “Well, okay, we can live with that. We will see you at 3:00.” I am not sure that counts as suffering for Jesus. As far as we were concerned as kids, we all believed; we just had different traditions.

When I thought of people “suffering for Jesus,” I pictured Christian missionaries going somewhere out there. I most often thought in terms of missionaries to Africa – doing amazing things for people in primitive circumstances. If there was suffering, I thought of it in terms of the lack of conveniences of modern life: electricity, supermarkets, cars, television...things like that. Surely no one would actually suffer – like flesh and blood kind of suffer – for their faith.

It made sense then because suffering was so far outside of my experience. My teachers in church were either my parents or kindly volunteers who were friends of my parents. When I learned, we had flannel board characters and pictures of a smiling Jesus, with a child on his lap. The disciples were smiling guys in robe costumes, walking alongside camels. The controversies seemed like skits to get across a moral point. In my head, it was all a great big play. In the end, after the credits rolled, the characters would get up, go share a Coke together and laugh about it all. I could not appreciate the cost of discipleship.

My understanding only really dawned on me as an adult. As I got involved in the church when I was out of my parents’ house, I began to realize that there were serious disputes about things that really matter. Maturing in faith means that there are times when we are aware of consequences for standing up for Jesus. It is not always comfortable – in fact, it is often downright painful.

The Old Testament gives us a vivid and accurate illustration of the life of faith. In Genesis 32, Jacob was alone at night and wrestled with a man. It must have been an epic battle – as are struggles of faith – because Jacob continued to cling to the man and grapple even after his hip had been put out of joint. He held on for a blessing, something that he valued more than the pain of a dislocated hip. Jacob received his blessing, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” Jacob prevailed, but walked away limping... and blessed.

Hardships and suffering are true for everyone – believer or not – but they look very different depending on your understanding of God’s call on your life. Are you trying to get everything out of life while you can – or – are you living eternally even now, glorifying God and enjoying him forever? The pressures and stresses of this world do not negate God’s claim on your life. Following Jesus puts you at odds with other value systems in our culture. For example:

- The message of hope in Jesus Christ means salvation cannot be bought. We cannot work enough to earn salvation. Tell that to the boss who insists you work long nights and weekends, when you are too tired to come to worship, to pray, and struggling to find time for your family.
- Following Jesus means that true abundance is not tied to material things. Tell that to the marketers and Wall Street – the people who claim you will be complete, happy, respected, and fulfilled if you have this one thing. To make the point: Valentine’s Day is coming up. Love is NOT jewelry or diamonds.
- Following Jesus means that “getting ahead” often means falling behind. Tell that to parents who are stressed about getting their kids into the best schools, the best programs, the best

activities because that is the only way the next generation can be “successful” – successful, that is, in terms that the world defines.

I could go on. Following Jesus often means making choices that are contrary to common sense or conventional wisdom. It means making choices that involve a real cost. It means making choices for which the only justification is if what we have seen and received is of such surpassing value that there really is no other choice. It is exactly what Peter said again to the leaders: “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

Consider carefully the cost of discipleship.

“Consider carefully,” was Gamaliel’s advice.

The speech of the well-respected Pharisee, Gamaliel, is oft quoted when we are not sure how to respond to some new development or claim. It is about discernment. “If it is of human origin, it will fail on its own; if it is from God, you cannot prevail against it.”

That is helpful advice if you are looking backwards. It is not particularly helpful going forward, unless you realize that not everyone is called to run in the same direction at the same time. If God calls **you** to go do something, it is wise to go do it. If you are evaluating whether God has called **someone else** to go do something, Gamaliel’s advice is well taken.

Gamaliel was a Pharisee. That actually matters here: it was the Sadducees who were taking the lead in trying to snuff out the apostles – literally. They were the majority party in the leadership, however, they could not proceed without at least some participation or agreement from the Pharisees. Without taking this comparison too far, Gamaliel held a position similar to that of Joe Manchin before the mid-terms; he was in a unique spot to sway the ultimate outcome one way or another.

Luke wrote that he was well respected by his peers; and this reputation is confirmed by sources outside the Bible. Gamaliel is often described as the rabbi’s rabbi. Grandson of a rabbinical legend, Gamaliel had established himself as the E.F. Hutton of the temple structure: when he spoke, people listened.

There is no indication that Gamaliel was a believer or even sympathetic to the apostles. His advice was practical, but it demonstrated a humility that is as valuable today as it was then: God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts; God’s ways different than our ways. Discernment often requires an evaluation of the fruit as opposed to a reaction to the claim. In other words, “let’s see how this plays out.” Though we think not, we should recognize the possibility that perhaps God *is* involved in this testimony.

How can you tell? How can you tell if someone has been raised up by God or is pursuing folly? How do you distinguish between the true church and a cult that leads astray?

The apostles clearly were emboldened and doing spectacular things. They were a sensation. Faith healers and charismatic leaders were known in Jesus’ time. They came and went. They were not a lot different than charlatans we see today. Gamaliel mentions two, but you know the type – people who are charismatic and say, “Come, follow me; worship me because I know the way!”

In our culture today, our lack of conviction regarding spiritual things makes us vulnerable to idolatry. We are susceptible to worshiping those who promise to produce for us what we want. That sort of pragmatism leads to idolatry: is God working for me? If not, I should move on to some sort of theological identity that does work for me. Idolatry is like addiction to nicotine; people will say, “I just want to try it. It will make me happy. It’s my life, so don’t judge me.” Soon, it becomes, “I don’t need it; I like it. I can quit any time I want.” There is plenty of spiritual nicotine – spirituality promising to make you happy: it is addictive, deadly, and hard to shake.

There is wisdom in Gamaliel’s speech to “consider carefully.” Be discerning. Do not just jump to conclusions. Evaluate the fruit. Gamaliel was absolutely correct that human endeavors will perish, but the things of God are lasting. There is the true and living God, and there are imposters.

In 1 John 4, the apostle wrote to the early church community, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.” Preachers, teachers, leaders – anyone whom you would follow – should be evaluated by this standard.

Gamaliel mentioned two illustrations of failed movements. So, what about the apostles’ lives and message? Here we are, two thousand years later, proclaiming Jesus, his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection as our hope. It is the message that has prevailed. In a world offering temporary satisfaction for fleeting desires, the apostles were declaring a message of eternal value. It strikes me that our presence here today is evidence of the hand of God at work in the midst of the apostles’ testimony.

I have told the story of my friend Harold Kurtz. You may recognize the last name – Caroline Kurtz is his daughter and we support her work with the Maji Development Corp. Harold was a missionary whose calling was to reach “unreached” people groups. One time he was at a conference with a man from a house-church in China – one of the persecuted congregations. The man said to Harold, “Do you know what is the problem in American churches? When you read Scripture, you go like this (reading from left to right.) When we read Scripture, we read it like this (up and down).” The churches in China are growing, what about the churches in the United States?

Saying “yes” to what Scripture teaches is the foundation under our church’s mission statement: opening the gospel to Carson City and beyond. God has placed us here, in this community, in this time, with this congregation, to be his witnesses and to declare – with boldness, power, and joy – the good news of the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ. If you have read the annual report we will be discussing at the annual meeting, you will have seen a number of examples of how we have experienced God leading us, using us, and showing us the power of that kingdom here and now.

Even so, as we look at our culture, we see that the church – those who are called and gathered *in Jesus’ name* – is falling into popular disfavor. The media is quick to report polling that charts the church’s decline. The number of “none’s” are growing – those not identifying any religious affiliation.

Whether it is outright rejection or the constant pull to be no so Christo-centric (Christ focused), we should not be surprised. It has been that way from the very beginning. Christians then and now are accused of being intolerant and exclusive. Efforts to hinder the proclamation of the gospel are increasing. However, Gamaliel’s word of discernment should also be a word of encouragement to us: “if

the plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, worldly powers will not be able to overthrow it – in that case, it may even be found fighting against God!”

Why would that be encouraging? Because we gather around this table. This table has been shared since Jesus celebrated it with his disciples so long ago. It has outlasted empires. It has outlasted attacks from the outside and corruption from inside the church. This table has outlasted church institutions, schisms, and scandals. It has outlasted periods of revival and decline. Why? Because it is the tangible expression of the gospel – the message – that prevails. It is the message of the kingdom, not the messengers, that has lasting power.

This meal remembers what Jesus accomplished for us: his incarnation, life, ministry, obedient walk to betrayal, denial, and suffering, his crucifixion, and execution for us. That is the hard part of the gospel – that all of it was necessary. But in this meal, we also remember the victory it shows: Christ risen from the grave, death unable to hold him, his ascension and exaltation – also for us. This meal has lasted because it is of God – and it will last until that day we celebrate it face to face with him in the ultimate realization of the kingdom of heaven.

Conclusion:

So, ‘consider carefully.’ It is good advice. Consider carefully the life of discipleship, aware that choosing to obey God often comes with a human cost. Consider carefully the things in which you place your trust – be discerning. But in all things, know this: God will prevail. And his plan is of such surpassing value and worth that all other things pale in comparison.

Amen.

Questions:

1. What is the cost of discipleship you have experienced? How have you experienced sharing the name of Jesus with others?
2. How do you evaluate whether something is from God or from man?
3. In what or whom do you find hope? How does that help you with the circumstances of daily life?