

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
September 20, 2015

Lesson Text: Acts 5:27-29, 33-42
Lesson Title: Witnessing to the Truth

Introduction

After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the apostles and the early Christians knew they were in for severe persecution. The threat of personal injury for these dedicated followers of Christ was real. Was the Good News of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection urgent enough to risk bodily harm and death? Would the first Christians remain silent or boldly declare the gospel?

Acts 5 records a critical time in the life of the early church. On the positive side thousands of souls have been saved and the gospel of Jesus Christ is being boldly declared. On the negative side the church has just buried Ananias and Sapphira because of lying about their offering to the church. In spite of the opposition from without and the hypocrisy from within, the Lord continued to bless the apostles with great power (Acts 5:12). Sick folk were being healed and believers were being added to the Lord (Acts 5:14-16).

This outpouring of power upon the apostles resulted in indignation from the high priests and Sadducees (Acts 5:17). The apostles are locked up in jail for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 5:18). Peter and John had already been arrested, but now the whole band of the apostles are locked up. In a miraculous act of God on behalf of His gospel and His servants, an angel of the Lord was sent and opened the prison doors and set the apostles free (Acts 5:19). The angel spoke to them saying, *"Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life"* (Acts 5:20).

When the Jewish authorities were ready to hold court and show these apostles who was boss, they sent for them and found they were no longer in the jail (Acts 5:23). It puzzled the religious leaders as to how these men could have escaped and where they were (Acts 5:24). Before inquiry could be made as to their whereabouts, someone came and told them, *"Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people"* (Acts 5:25).

Witnessing to the Truth and Conflict with Authority (Acts 5:27-29)

Verse 27-28

"And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye

should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.”

The apostles were charged with flagrant violation of the council’s previous warning not to teach in Jesus’ name. In the eyes of their accusers, they had intentionally disregarded the warning. The apostles had been told to be silent but had continued to preach and teach the gospel. After the charge was stated, the rulers acknowledged, the apostles had “filled Jerusalem” with their “doctrine.” These bold witnesses had completely saturated Jerusalem with truth concerning Jesus Christ. What a great witness coming from a wicked council!

The apostles were also charged with trying “to bring this man’s blood upon us.” The rulers hated Jesus so much they refused to use His name. They referred to him as “this man.” This crowd was not ashamed to crucify Jesus, but they do not want to be reminded of their actions.

Verse 29

“Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.”

After listening to the charges and accusations, “Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.” The apostles took seriously their obedience to Christ’s command to be witnesses to him (Acts 1:8) and to take the Gospel to the world (Matthew 28:19). They viewed this charge from the council as more than a personal assault. They viewed it as a direct obstacle to the fulfillment of their obedience to Christ. Therefore, they took this entire proceeding to a new level: should they “obey God” or “men?”

The apostles decided on the spot: “We ought to obey God rather than men.” This decision would become a principle of life for these apostles and should be a principle of life for every believer.

Why should Christians obey God rather than men? First, God demands it. God had told them, “Go, stand and speak in the temple...” (Acts 5:20). If God is God, then we owe it to Him, to obey Him. Second, God deserves it. The Lord had opened doors for these apostles and set them free from prison (Acts 5:19). If anyone deserves our obedience, it is the Lord. Truly, “we ought to obey God rather than men.”

Application: The Sanhedrin had no authority to forbid the apostles to preach in the name of Jesus. When civil authorities seek to silence the proclamation of the gospel, they are overstepping their legitimate and God-given powers. Some governments simply will not allow the Gospel to be taught openly and publicly. In

response, Christians have defied such restrictions and over the course of history they have been punished, fined, persecuted and some even jailed or killed.

Witnessing to the Truth and Confession from Allies' (Acts 5:33-42)

Verse 33

“When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them.”

The apostles preached a mini-sermon in Acts 5:30-32 that was not well received by the council. The apostle's laid the blame for Christ's crucifixion at the feet of these religious leaders. What they did was criminal. They *“slew and hanged”* Jesus *“on a tree”* (Acts 5:30). They were the criminals, not the apostles!

“When they heard” the apostle's message and declaration of Christ's resurrection and exaltation, “they were cut to the heart.” The word “cut” literally means “to saw in half.” Convicting preaching results in violent reactions from those who reject the message of the cross. The Bible says, *“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart”* (Hebrews 4:12).

The intentions of the Sanhedrin was to “slay” or kill the apostles. The Apostle Paul would later face the same reaction for preaching Jesus (Acts 9:22-23). In his commentary on Acts, Doctor John Phillips writes, “The knife had gone deep. At this point in the Spirit's convicting work, a person either repents or reacts.” Obviously the Sanhedrin was reacting.

Verse 34-35

“Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space; And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men.”

According to Bible history, “Gamaliel” was the grandson of a man named Hillel who presided over the Sanhedrin during the reign of Tiberias, the reign of Caligual, and the reign of Claudius. The Apostle Paul, one of the best educated men of his day, studied under the teaching of “Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3).

Because “Gamaliel” was “a doctor of the law” and had a great “reputation” among “all the people,” the Sanhedrin could not ignore his advice, even though his words were opposed to their intentions of slaying the apostles.

There is no evidence to suggest that “Gamaliel” was a believer or sympathetic to the preaching of the apostles. Notwithstanding, he was used of God at this critical moment in the history of the church and the lives of the apostles to preserve their lives and deliver them from the evil intentions of the Sanhedrin.

Gamaliel “commanded to put the apostles forth a little space.” That means the apostles were taken outside before Gamaliel said what he had to say to the council.

“And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men.” He is cautioning the council concerning their intentions of putting these men to death. He addressed them as “Ye men of Israel.” He did not call them Sadducees or Pharisees, but “men of Israel.” By using that title, it identified them as the people to whom God had promised the Messiah; and then he gave them reasons why they should think twice about what they were about to do.

Verse 36

“For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought.”

Gamaliel’s point in what he says to the Sanhedrin is that pretenders will be “brought to nought,” or exposed and brought to nothing. He names a man with whom they were familiar, “Theudas,” and reminds them how he “boasting himself to be somebody” had a following of “about four hundred” people but was eventually “slain.” “All” that “obeyed him” and followed him “were scattered, and brought to nought.” His movement and following quickly moved off the scene.

Verse 37

“After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed.”

Gamaliel’s mentions another man named “Judas of Galilee.” “Judas of Galilee” came on the scene “in the day of the taxing,” which could possibly mean he arrived at or about the same time of the birth of Christ. Commenting on that possibility, Doctor Oliver B. Greene writes, “In Judas coming on the scene in the day of the taxing we see how the devil does his best to counterfeit everything God has done down through the history of man.”

This “Judas of Galilee” could have possibly had a larger following than “Theudas.” He “drew away much people after him.” But his end was like Theudas, “he also perished,” and “all” who followed him “were dispersed.”

Verse 38-39

“And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.”

Using these two former false leaders as example, “Gamaliel” spoke, “Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.” Remember, there is no evidence Gamaliel was a believer or that he was primarily interested in helping the apostles. His intention was to protect the interest of these religious leaders and his particular standing among them. What is amazing is that God can use even his enemies to accomplish His will.

Application: Do not be afraid to witness to the truth. God will take care of you!

Verse 40

“And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.”

The Sanhedrin “agreed” or heeded Gamaliel’s advice not to slay the apostles, but they were not totally in agreement with him concerning letting them walk away; so they called them back in and “beat them” and “commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus.” After the beating and the commanding, they “let them go.”

Through the providence of God, Peter and John and the apostles were literally snatched from the jaws of death by the intervention of a man named Gamaliel. This was an act of God because God was not finished with these men. There was much more truth to be proclaimed from these dedicated servants of our Lord.

Verse 41

“And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.”

The attitude of the apostles is both amazing and humbling. Just a few months earlier these men had deserted our Lord when He was arrested, tried, and

crucified. Now, they depart from “the council” where they have been beaten, “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.” Jesus had said to them, “*Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you*” (Matthew 5:11-12).

The disgraceful treatment of the apostles at the hands of the religious leaders did not discourage them. They left “rejoicing” that they had been “counted worthy” to suffer such punishment for Jesus sake.

Question: What can the world do with Christians with this type of attitude and reaction to persecution?

Verse 42

“And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.”

The preaching, teaching, and rejoicing was not a once in a while thing for these apostles. “Daily” they were “in the temple” and “in every house,” teaching and preaching “Jesus Christ.” Their witness of truth was both *public* and *private*. Whether in the “temple” or in the privacy of a “house,” Jesus Christ was the theme of their message.

Conclusion

The issue that resulted in the persecution of the apostles was the preaching of Jesus Christ and His resurrection. Jesus Christ is still the issue today. If the governments of the world could have their way, the message of the cross would be silenced. If Christians are faithful and obedient to the Great Commission, we will keep telling the story of Jesus Christ.

What would it take to silence you? Would a tongue lashing do it? Would a threat to lose your job be the final straw for you? Who among us today could survive a beating? These are not easy questions for us to answer. But for the apostles, their answer was already established. They chose to be witnesses to the truth no matter the consequences.

Amen.