

We must obey God

Acts 5:17-42

Introduction

The last time I spoke, Peter and John were in jail - then questioned by the religious leaders. Last week Ian spoke about Ananias and Sapphira, how they had deceived the Holy Spirit and the catastrophic results that followed.

Today we read about the animosity toward the Apostles growing. In the opening chapters of Acts the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the church; God was with the people in power. For a time, they had appreciated popularity **‘enjoying the favour of all the people’** (Acts 2:47).

Now we begin to see that the disciples will go the way of the master; that the Christian life, though beautifully framed within the love of God and the fellowship of believers, will be blighted (or refined, if you prefer) by persecution.

How did they stand in the face of opposition, and where might we find strength when life isn't easy?

Persecution

They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. (Acts 5:18)

The early Christians were beginning to remodel society; their message of divine mercy based on the love and forgiveness of God in Jesus was transformative. A grass roots reformation of faith and life was happening.

Yet the leaders felt they had everything to lose at the hand of this new Jesus movement, therefore the leaders wrestled with the Apostles to take back power.

There is a sense in which when one has observed the behaviour of one threatened politician – gentile or Jew – one has seen them all. (Willimon)

The last thing the religious leaders wish to do is lose power. It felt like that with Jesus - so they killed him. Weeks have passed since Jesus' crucifixion and it feels like he is now incarnate in all his followers, it's like a community of 'little Christs for the leaders to deal with.

- Have you ever felt persecuted or oppressed by a power greater than yourself?

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Just as before when the Apostles were brought before the religious leaders, they stood strong.

Peter and the other apostles replied: ‘We must obey God rather than human beings!’ (Acts 5:29).

The apostles were being attacked from the front; it was clear, they were simply doing as God had instructed them.

Sometimes in life we are challenged in an obvious upfront manner. People may not like our faith stance, or an issue of justice that is important to us. The resulting battle may be obvious and we know that we just have to stick to the voice of conscience inside, God's Spirit and Word. Simply obey God.

The greater problem is the subtle arguments, the snake in the garden that says 'really'. The times when we are not sure are the times when we need others. Notice it was not Peter on his own, but Peter and the Apostles.

- How might we find strength to obey God, especially when we are unsure?

You may find yourselves fighting God

Let's pause for a moment and imagine ourselves in the shoes of the religious leaders, with the upstart 'new on the block' apostles. They brought something new that challenged the old. It's easy to point the finger at the religious leaders but there may have been times in my 20 years ministry when I was protective and unsure about what was happening.

Gamaliel, renowned Rabbi of that period, was a wise man. Talking about the apostles and the gospel he says, **'if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.'**

We must be careful to retain humility within our obedience to God; the religious leaders felt they were obeying God, yet they had begun to fight God as they fought the early church.

- How might we maintain openness to what God is doing in the world whilst believing devotedly in the calling he has placed on our own life?

Conclusion

Life isn't easy: being obedient during times of opposition is needful but it will be taxing. We ought also to consider how we might reflect on our disagreements with others just in case 'we' find ourselves 'fighting against God'.