

Is The Word of the Cross Folly or the Power of God?

Introduction

Our passage today continues the account of the Apostles' arrest and trial. Their crime was preaching these truths; Jesus Christ is the long-awaited Messiah and the Jewish leadership is responsible for His murder. They also taught God has proven Jesus is the Christ through the miracle of the resurrection from the dead. Remember from last week that the Apostles were arrested and placed in a public prison and then sometime during the night an angel came and rescued them and gave them a message from God, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."^(Acts 5:20) Remember too, that it was the next morning when their trial was to begin that they could not be found in the prison but were found in the temple teaching the people that believing in Jesus Christ is the only way one can be made right with God. This teaching and the circumstances surrounding it, greatly challenged the authority of the Jewish leadership, they were angered by the apostles' teaching and they feared the people; for everyday more and more people were becoming believers in Jesus.

The **Key Theme** of the end of Acts chapter 5 is best articulated by the Apostle Paul and the prophet Isaiah, found in the first letter to the Corinthian Church, ¹⁸"**For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.**" ¹⁹For it is written, *in Isaiah (29:14)*

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’” (1 Corinthians 1:18-19)

This passage at the end of chapter 5 is for believers of every generation and especially for us today as we count the cost of following Jesus Christ. What will we do when we encounter trials as a result of speaking the name of Christ. We too must seek power from on high if we are to stand firm in the midst of persecution. I am not forecasting the coming times, but I do believe we are in the end times and time is growing short. I believe we are approaching a time when just speaking the name of Jesus and the truth of God will be viewed as offensive. We are already told it is a hate crime to speak against sin; especially the sins of homosexuality, gender reassignment, fornication, adultery and when it comes to our leaders; we are not to accuse them of lying and misusing tax funds, immoral behavior or stealing because they are in charge and whatever they do is right. We need to prepare ourselves so we can answer, what will we do in the midst of growing persecution? Here in our scripture passage is a wonderful example of normal everyday people captured by the glory of God and willing to do whatever is required to see the name of Jesus proclaimed to all the nations.

As many of you know, I love history and today will be a mixture of history and God’s Word in what I hope will give us a greater understanding of Acts chapter 5, verses 33 to 42.

The Wisdom Of God Is For Those Being Saved (vs. 29-34)

The Apostle’s words in Acts chapter 5 have an amazing effect on the listeners. The words about Jesus and His death and resurrection cause differing responses. Just prior to this morning’s passage we read, ²⁹“Peter and the apostles answered the Sanhedrin saying, ‘**We must obey God rather than men.**’” ³⁰The

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.**” The people and Sanhedrin responded very differently. Our passage beginning in verse 33 shows the response of the Sanhedrin or the ruling council made up of Pharisees and Sadducees, **“When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.”** Their thoughts were how dare these upstart uneducated men challenge the Council of the Sanhedrin!³⁴ **But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel (gam·al·ee·ale) meaning “my rewarder is God”, 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.** At this point the disciples found an unexpected ally in Gamaliel. He is the teacher under whom the Pharisee Saul, who later God changes into the Apostle Paul studied. (See Acts 22:3) By what Paul says in chapter 22 of Acts – there is a strong possibility Saul was at this hearing, observing and maybe even participating. It may very well be that in God’s providence He had a young Jewish Pharisee present to observe the strong resolve and zeal of the Apostles. Perhaps this was one event was used by God in Paul’s life to give him the same zeal when God saved him. God would save Saul, the most feared enemy of the church, to lead in the great expansion of the church. A lesson for us, is even when God’s people are persecuted, He is working at a thousand other wonderful things for His glory and we often do not see the fulness of what He is doing throughout the world; we see just our little piece of the world. Many of the Sanhedrin wanted to kill the Apostles, but Saul’s teacher wanted a different path as we will explore in a moment.

Before we examine the Sanhedrin, let’s examine how did the people respond. Turn back in your Bible a few pages to chapter 2 and see the way in

which the Gospel creates new life, ³⁶ “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” ³⁷ Now **when they heard this they were cut to the heart**, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ Again, here in Chapter 2, Luke uses very similar language to describe the event following Pentecost as he does in chapter 5. The people heard Peter’s sermon about Jesus being the Messiah and God’s Son. They were confronted with their sin and the fact that they each were responsible for Jesus’ death. The people reacted to what they heard with deep sorrow or as verse 37 says, “**they were cut to the heart**” and they cried out for mercy asking Peter and the Apostles, “**Brothers, what shall we do?**” Peter responds saying to the people, ³⁸ “... **Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**” The result, of Peter’s words and the power of the Holy Spirit was about 3000 souls were added to God’s kingdom and Christ’s Church. After Pentecost people continued to come to faith in Jesus and the number of believers was rapidly increasing. So here in our text today, we have the same message continuing to be preached by the same apostle but with differing responses, “**When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.**” ³⁴ **But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel (gam·al·ee·ale), 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.”**

The Word of God Is Folly For Those Who Are Perishing

Since Pentecost the apostles preached the same message, Jesus Christ is risen and alive proving He is the Son of God. Many people heard and responded with saving faith. On the other hand, the Pharisees and Sadducees responded out of fear of man and lack of faith in the Creator God they were only give lip-service to.

Their behavior is common for those who have their sin exposed when it threatens their position and power.

The Gospel is God's words of truth and God's truth convicts sinful hearts; it exposes the lie of life lived in the world under the influence of the evil one. The Gospel exposes the truth people are living without God. The Gospel also warns us of the consequences; people will be held responsible, my beloved, we are accountable for our actions. Some people hear with their ears and soul and are cut to the heart and repent. But others, when confronted with the truth of putting to death the One that God has gloried and exalted as the Messiah, the Christ, their sinful hearts are hardened. The Sanhedrin thought they had heard the last of this usurper Jesus and His followers, they thought they had solved their problem by murdering Jesus. Yet, here before their council stands Peter and the Apostles telling them the opposite is truth; they would be held accountable to God. This is an outrageous claim for those who control Israel and think they can also control people's access to God. Their love of the world and their service to the evil one brings hatred that is violent enough to again want to commit the sin of murder. Their hearts remain hearts of stone. On the other hand, Paul the Pharisee and a student of Gamaliel (**gam·al·ee·ale**) whom God transforms into an apostle comes to understand God's truth. How? Jesus transforms his heart to a heart of spiritual flesh. I love the inspired words God gives to Paul, ¹⁸ **“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.** ¹⁹ For it is written, *in Isaiah 29:14* ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ **For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what**

we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ **but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.** ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) What an amazing transformation God does in Saul’s heart and he becomes Paul and what amazing words of life God gives to Paul and gives to each of us.

The Gospel does as God has purposed, it saves those He calls and transforms their souls but it hardens the hearts of unbelievers. The message of the crucified, risen and exalted Savior is an offense to those who do not believe. So, in this way we can say that the Gospel went out and it accomplished the purpose for which it is sent for both those God calls to saving faith and those who reject Him.

The Pharisees and Sadducees are confronted once again with the truth that they killed Jesus, God’s Son, the Messiah. Yet the amazing thing is, and undoubtedly this is the part of the message that annoyed them the most, they were told that same Jesus whom they put to death was their Prince and their Lord and could be their Savior but they are damned by rejecting the Christ that God send for the salvation of mankind. Peter is clear, even though these men of the Sanhedrin were responsible for delivering up Jesus to be crucified, they still may find forgiveness and salvation in Him as Peter makes clear in verse 31, **“God exalted Jesus at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”** So, Peter tells the men of the Sanhedrin, God has good news for you, you may have salvation through Christ! Jesus’ death is sufficient for all sinners – even for those who put to death the Prince of Glory. But instead of hearing this good news and humbling their hearts, and putting their faith in Jesus, they heard the good news, hardened their hearts with hatred seeking to kill the

messengers of Jesus the Son and God the Father. Yet, in spite of their hatred and rage, the point is clear, the Gospel did its work.

Human Understanding Is Not Necessarily Spiritual Wisdom

Hatred strong enough to commit murder again is in the hearts of the Sanhedrin when Gamaliel (**gam·al·ee·ale**) steps forward to seek human path to peace. Taking up our passage in verse 35, Gamaliel speaks to the Sanhedrin, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men.”³⁶ For before these days Theudas (**thyoo·das**) 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.” Let me give a little background; Jesus warned about false messiahs in Mark 13:6. Both Jesus and Theudas were put to death by the Romans; Theudas, a false messiah who sought fame and power for himself stayed dead, but Jesus, God’s Messiah and Son rose from the grave to live eternally. Gamaliel continues in verse 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.” Gamaliel is **not** referring to Judas Iscariot the only disciple of Jesus not from Galilee and whom the Bible identifies by his town of origin; Iscariot or Kerieth was a town located south of Jerusalem in Judea. However, the Judas Gamaliel is referring to is from Galilee. This is the same Judas who is referred to by Josephus in both his Jewish War and his Antiquities writings. Judas started a major rebellion in protest of the census under of Quirinius (**koo·ray·nee·os**) the Roman Governor over Syria and Judea in 6 or 7 A.D. The governor undertook the census for purposes of taxation. Josephus does not record how he died, but Gamaliel referred to his being killed and all his followers being scattered. Although the original rebellion under Judas was stifled by the Romans, such was not the case with the general movement

begun by Judas. According to Josephus, Judas laid the foundations of the Zealot movement within Judaism, a movement that would grow to such proportions that in less than twenty-five years after Gamaliel's speech, it would initiate all-out war with the Romans.

Gamaliel is seeking a peaceful path forward this conflict, continuing in verse 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.” It appears on the surface this is sound political advice, but let's examine a little deeper.

Gamaliel's logic is presented in 2 points. First, Theudas, the false messiah was killed and no one follows him any longer. So, too it will be of Jesus if He is just a man. Secondly, came Judas the Galilean and Zealot and he too perished and his followers were scattered. We can see his logic goes like this, we have killed their Leader, this would-be Messiah named Jesus. Now without their Leader, this whole thing will probably fizzle out in a few months or so.

The flaw, however, in the Sanhedrin's thinking is that Jesus is dead and gone. The Gospel on the other hand teaches this crucified Savior is alive and well, seated at the right hand of God and everyone will someday give an account for their actions, including us and including these Jews who plotted and carried out the murder of Jesus. Only one approach can be true and because of their hard hearts they do not see God's truth.

On the surface, Gamaliel's advice may seem wise, but we must not be fooled by his approach. His approach is one that gives no concern to objective truth, the issues that the Apostles brought up were not considered. The way to test whether a

movement is from God or not - is not to wait and see what happens to those followers but to validate or disqualify their teaching by placing it alongside the Scriptures. After all, this man is called a teacher of the Law. So, it is clear his solution is a political one not a truth seeking one from Scripture.

There also, is no objective observation. The Gospel is completely dismissed and anger and man's pride replace Scripture. On the other hand, there are those people who are quite respectful and tolerant who appear on the surface to be silent believers, but the reality is they no more believe than the most violent aggressor. Satan is very subtle and he really does not care what kind of an unbeliever a person is as long as one rejects Christ and His gospel.

Did you notice there is no mention of the Gospel message they just heard from Peter. They avoid the truth of the Gospel. The truth, that they crucified Jesus did not affect them in the least. Their concern was to maintain their power over the temple and the people and they do not even consider the truth presented by the Apostles. Their minds were made up already, this message of God's Gospel truth is folly to them and not even worthy of their consideration. We must never test the truth of God by taking a 'let's-wait-and-see' approach. There are religious movements around today that are just as old as Christianity, some even older. Whether something continues or does not continue is not the criteria for whether it is from God or not. We must evaluate everything by the truth of God.

We must actively dig into the Word of God and examine it for ourselves. Luke has told us that this Pharisee was "[a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people](#)". He was an expert in the Scriptures. He was a Bible academic. He was the Old Testament Scripture Answer Man and the best he came up with is; Let's wait and see what happens? They should have been pouring over their Bibles,

checking the Old Testament and comparing the Words of Christ and the Apostles to Scripture to see if what they were saying was true or not.

Truth of Jesus Christ is the dividing line - believers are called to live by God's Truth. Legitimacy is not determined by how long something has existed but by truth. Not the truth of men that changes with the times, centuries and with politics but the unchanging and eternal truth of God.

Gamaliel and the others were unconverted. It makes absolutely no difference if one is adamantly opposed to the Gospel or if one very kindly rejects it. Regardless of their method of rejection, the truth is, [“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing.”](#) (1 Corinthians 1:18) Paul is clear as to the reason this is true.

Salvation is of the Lord. Every human being enters this life in the perishing category. We are dead in sin. When God moves as He did so mightily at Pentecost, the result is about 3000 souls were taken from the perishing category and placed in the being saved category. They move from perishing to salvation as the result of their heart being deeply cut by the exposure of their sin, they were spiritually awakened and understood their guilt, so they repented and believed in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. For you and for me and for anyone to be brought out of the eternally perishing category into the eternally saved category they must believe with their mind, heart and soul that Jesus is the Christ and they belong to Him and are to live for His glory.

Spiritual Wisdom Births Zeal For Christ

We come to the conclusion of this passage and what God wants us to understand through the writing of Luke. The Sanhedrin takes Gamaliel's advice,

reading at verse 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.”

The Apostles were then severely beaten by the Jews. The custom is put forth in Deuteronomy chapter 25, ³“Forty stripes may be given him, but not more.” In order to avoid possibly of accidentally breaking this command, the Jews would only give a criminal 39 lashes. It is therefore believed, just like their Master Jesus, each apostle was given 39 lashes and then charged not to speak anymore in the name of Jesus. We learned last week from Peter that they were compelled by God to speak in the name of Jesus for believing in His name brought the wonderful words of eternal life. Peter tells these Jews that the Apostles must obey God rather than man. They count the lashes a trophy of their faith in God and their loyalty to Jesus and His Gospel as verse 41 states, “Then the *Apostles* left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.” Once again, the plans of the Leaders are frustrated. What they intended for dishonor, namely the public arrest, incarceration and flogging, proved to be counted as honor by the Apostles. Many of the people observed the honor of the Apostles and the dishonor of the Sanhedrin and more people gave their lives to Christ.

The Jewish leaders command the Apostles to not speak anymore in the name Jesus. So, the Sanhedrin had them flogged and they counted themselves worthy to suffer dishonor for the name Jesus the Christ. Is not it amazing how the sovereignty of God works? People rage and plot in vain and God is in the heavens

shaking His head that they will not open their hearts to truth. God's will is the only unchanging force in the universe. His decree will always triumph.

The Apostles remembered and took to heart and lived the teachings of Jesus once they had been indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In Luke's Gospel Account, chapter 12, Jesus instructed, "to his disciples first, **'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.** ² Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ³ Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops. ⁴ I tell you, my friends, **do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.** ⁵ But I will warn you whom to fear: **fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!**" (vs. 1-5)

The Apostles went right back to doing what the earthly authorities commanded them not to do. Why? Because they were command by a higher authority to continue to preach the Good News with all boldness in and around the temple. They truly were taken captive by the glory of God and were filled with zeal for their Savior Jesus Christ, obeying God rather than men was their battle cry and it was also how they lived. By their faith lived out, many came to Jesus.

The Gospel is a message of the power of God and the wisdom of God and the truth of God; it is the message of the cross. ¹⁸ "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18) May the Word of the Lord give us wisdom and may the Holy Spirit give us God's strength of unwavering faith to live for the glory of God and may we serve our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ with great zeal! Amen!