

Obey God Rather Than Man

Acts 5:27-42

Our text this morning contains a verse very familiar to most Christians, expressing a very deep and profound sense of commitment to God.

v.27 “We ought to obey God rather than men.”

It could be well translated, “We must obey God rather than men.” It is one of those universal, transcendent expressions of our overall duty and responsibility as Christians. It is an overarching obligation for all of us. We must obey God! Even when a man might challenge us not to do so. Even when a man exercising some form of legitimate, earthly authority might command us not to do so. “We must obey God rather than men.”

There is a context to that statement, of course, namely the restriction given to the apostles expressed in,

v.27 “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name?”

We saw that same thing earlier in,

Acts 4:18 “So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.”

That chapter began with these words,

Acts 4:1 “Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, 2 being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3 And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening.”

Upon their release from prison, the apostles were later re-

arrested.

Acts 5:17 “Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, 18 and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.”

The context is obvious. The apostles had the God-given responsibility to proclaim the name of Jesus, to proclaim the gospel of salvation in his name. And the Jewish and Roman rulers conspired together to forbid them from doing so. So, “We must obey God rather than men.”

That context is important, for I have heard this verse misused to justify a resistance to some particular governmental regulation or another, maybe even a regulation that goes beyond legitimate constitutional authority in our country. And I’ve heard careless believers speak rather rebelliously about their intention to disobey that regulation claiming their right to do so with this verse. Some, even their responsibility to do so. And we need to be careful, because we are to submit to civil authorities, as they are all instituted by God, and just because the civil authority imposes a restriction upon you that you believe to be unjust or unconstitutional, that doesn’t give you the right to disobey. Peter writes in,

1 Peter 1:13 “Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, 14 or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. 15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men— 16 as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. 17 Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.”

He goes to emphasize that the honor we owe to those in

authority is not limited by goodness or justice of those authorities.

1 Peter 3:18 “Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. 19 For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.”

In fact, Peter would continue,

1 Peter 3:20 “For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. 21 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 22 “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”; 23 who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously...”

So we don't have cause here to disobey our government simply on the basis of our own disagreement or sense of injustice. But we do have cause to disobey, indeed the duty to disobey, when we are forbidden to do what God has so clearly commanded; namely, to bear witness to Jesus the Messiah! And that duty to disobey is created by those who have truly made themselves enemies of the gospel. And what is so obvious in these chapters of the book of Acts is that...

I. ENEMIES OF THE GOSPEL MAKE THEMSELVES KNOWN.

Enemies of the gospel. Strong words. How else could we describe those who would command such a thing as I read,

v.28 “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name?”

Acts 4:18 “[They] commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.”

Those are enemies of the gospel. And they show forth their enmity by,

A. The abuse of earthly authority.

They had earthly authority. They occupied positions of authority. But what a wicked and ungodly use of that authority! They went beyond any legitimate exercise of it. They were overbearing, lording it over the apostles with their own ungodly motives made evident. They hated Jesus! They hated the name of Jesus. They hated the gospel of Jesus. So in their abusive determine, they “strictly commanded” the apostles not to teach in Jesus’ name. And they falsely accused the apostles of stirring up rebellion against them, as verse 28 continues,

v.28 “And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!”

“You are trying to incite an insurrection! You are trying to bring an end to the exercise of law and order, an end to democracy, as so many people clamor today with regard to political differences. But all of that in our text today makes plain that the real issue is...

B. The offense of Jesus’ name.

Jesus is the stumbling block! Jesus is the offense, the scandal. And what they hated about the apostles was not their religious views, per se, but that they talked about Jesus. They used his name.

“Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name?” In Jesus’ name. You “intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” Jesus’ blood. It’s all about Jesus, which demonstrates that the apostles had been wise in their own behavior, that there was nothing in them or in their behavior that brought offense. Jesus was the offense. As it will always be!

1 Cor. 1:22 “For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after

wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

1 Peter 2:6 “Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, “Behold, I lay in Zion A chief cornerstone, elect, precious, And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.” 7 Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone,” 8 and “A stone of stumbling And a rock of offense.” They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.”

Jesus is the stumbling block, for unbelievers! The name of Jesus is the offense, for non-Christians. And we should be careful, as the apostles obviously were, that they themselves shouldn’t become the issue or the story. The focus is upon Jesus, and when Jesus is proclaimed and his name identified the enemies of the gospel will make themselves known! And as we see here in Acts 5, that will often include,

C. Expressions of hatred and fury.

v.33 “When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them.”

Furious. Sometimes translated enraged. Or “cut to the quick.” Literally, it is “cut as with a saw.” Cut in half, obviously referring to be enraged or furious. It is a very strong word of severe displeasure and anger. Again, to make some reference to our current national political environment today, the word does refer to the sorts of divisions and disagreements we see today that are so deep-rooted and intensely personal, not mere political

disputes.

We see this reaction again in,

v.40 “And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.”

So the apostles were beaten, tortured we might interpret. Flogged, flayed, beaten likely with a whip, to the extreme, inflicting the stripes of a whip that would literally remove the skin. This was no minor altercation, but the expression of deep hatred and fury.

And in that context, we see nothing less than,

II. A BOLD COMMITMENT OF OBEDIENCE TO GOD.

The center point and climax of our text today.

v.29 “But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men.”

That is, of course,

A. A commitment to obey God no matter what the consequences.

Especially with reference to the proclamation of the gospel, which might well face opposition and even persecution. We must obey God, and God says this to his people,

Acts 1:12 “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

That responsibility begins with the apostles, as they would lay the foundation upon which the church would be built. It continues

to all those today whose responsibility it is to preach the gospel, especially in the formal work of the church which Jesus has established, such that the sixth vow I took upon my ordination was this: “Do you promise to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the gospel and the purity, the peace, and the unity of the church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto you on that account?”

That duty extends to all believers, all of God’s people, called to bear witness to the gospel with their own lives and “always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you,” as Peter writes in 1 Peter 3. The point is that we must not allow the opposition or persecution of men to silence to proclamation of the gospel! We must obey God, not men! We must be faithful to God, and if and when that faithfulness requires us to disobey the direct commandment or regulation of man, then so be it. And if it means that we might lose credibility or popularity within our culture, then so be it. We must remain faithful to God and to his word. Specifically with regard to,

B. A commitment to proclaim the truths of the gospel.

Notice how Peter and the other apostles describe that.

v.30 "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. 31 Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

In other words, reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection! That is the gospel, the central point upon which the whole gospel is founded. Jesus was put to death by sinful men. And God raised him from the dead. He died for our sins, satisfying the penalty and curse imposed by God himself as the punishment for our sins. Jesus paid it all! With his death. And he triumphed

over that sin by the power of his resurrection. And then his ascension, God exalting him to sit in the position of power and authority at the right hand of God himself. To be Prince and Savior. Prince or ruler, “leader” isn’t quite strong enough as a translation. The idea is the one who exercises authority on God’s behalf, as God. The prince of peace, as Jesus is sometimes called. And the savior, who saves us from the guilt and condemnation of our sins.

I’m amazed just going through those words in verse 30 and 31 at how much of the gospel is identified with so few words being used. The description of the gospel there is quite comprehensive, ending with reference to both repentance and forgiveness. Repentance means to turn away from sin, and correspondingly, to turn toward God. And here is it included in the very essence of the gospel. Such that it is proper to say that you can’t have true faith without repentance. You can’t express saving faith unless, in the faith, you confess the evil and wickedness of your own sin, and turn from it with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience. Faith and repentance can rightly be identified as opposite sides of the very same coin. They go together, inseparably. So the effect of the proclamation of the gospel is that God would “give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”

So however it is that you express the commitment of saving faith, whether you speak about accepting Christ or receiving Christ, or believing in his name, that saving response to the gospel on our part must include the expression of repentance. Our shorter catechism expresses it this way, “ Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.”

Proclaiming the truths of the gospel includes the call to repentance, that you express a grief and hatred of your sin and turn from it. Only then does the promise of forgiveness make sense,

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

That is our duty and responsibility of obedience to God, to proclaim that message of the gospel, summarized as I have already mentioned, by...

C. A commitment to be faithful witnesses of Jesus.

v.32 “And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

When threatened with severe opposition, when imprisoned and later beaten and whipped, that is the commitment expressed by the apostles, the commitment to bear witness of the truth of the gospel without hesitation or apology.

v.32 “And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

God certainly blessed that commitment, and so as we have seen so often before in these first five chapters of the book of Acts, we see again the...

III. PROGRESS OF THE GOSPEL.

v.42 “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

Luke records for us a personal anecdote here with regard to Gamaliel. For the apostles, it is...

A. God’s protection through the wisdom of Gamaliel.

Humanly speaking, the apostles weren’t about the be

witnesses of the gospel by rebellion against the civil authorities. If and when they were imprisoned, they went to prison! They didn’t fight back, they didn’t resist the consequences of their disobedience. But they certainly benefitted from the blessings of God in many ways. We have a specific example here.

v.34-39

There is nothing here to indicate that Gamaliel was a believer, or that he was overtly seeking to help the apostles and the apostolic church. The implication seems to be that he is trying to protect the Jewish Romans leaders from the mistake of making this situation worse. And his wisdom really is wise, even from their perspective of unbelief. The essence of his advice is, “Don’t make the situation worse.” Don’t incite the crowds. I expect that he thought nothing would come of these rather unimpressive apostles, so his advice was simple, “Keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing.”

He certainly had some religious awareness of God, and added also,

v.39 “...but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.”

Whatever his motivation was, whatever he was actually thinking, which we don’t know, we do know this—God used his advice to bring protection and freedom to the apostles!

v.40 “And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.”

One more thought before we end, one more important thought that Luke sees fit to include in our narrative, and that is his reference to,

B. The joy of those sharing in Jesus' suffering.

v.41 "So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name."

There is much to say here, and I even considered studying this verse by itself in a separate sermon, but let me emphasize just a couple things here with regard to the apostles' approach to their suffering. And remember what that meant for them, being imprisoned, with no human guarantee of ever being released. And being beaten, flogged, with great physical pain and suffering. All of that suffering, of course, undeserved and completely unjust. And yet they rejoiced. Not flippantly or superficially, but in the depths of their soul, they rejoiced. With these words of explanation as the reason for their rejoicing, "that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name."

Counted worthy...to have fellowship with Christ. That is the joy, it is in their communion with Christ himself, and that communion is a privilege worthy of our joy! Even if it is a communion or fellowship with his sufferings.

Scripture consistently urges us to consider our suffering in this context, and, therefore, not to be unsettled by it. Too often we conclude quickly, and wrongly, that suffering always relates to God's displeasure or rebuke, that we did something wrong. Or it reflects God's abandonment or neglect, or even worse, either an absence of his power or of his goodness; or related to that, simply a manifestation of Satan's work apart from God. Thus, in all of those ways, sufferings becomes oppressive, burdensome, disheartening. Or worse.

But the apostles show none of those things. Instead, the awareness of their suffering brings them into fellowship with

Jesus himself. Peter would later write this,

1 Peter 4:12 "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified."

So it represents the very opposite of God's displeasure or neglect. Rather, "blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." Similarly,

Col. 1:24 "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church."

That verse simply astounds me, for in a very real sense, NOTHING is lacking in the afflictions of Christ. Nothing that has to do with our redemption, with the satisfaction of God's justice, his propitiation. Nothing is lacking in any of that. When Jesus finished his sufferings upon the cross, he cried out, "It is finished." And it was! All the suffering necessary for our redemption was finished and accomplished. But Paul still writes of that "what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ." He refers to the ongoing suffering throughout this age in which we gain fellowship and communion with Jesus by joining in his experience. We, in our flesh, in the suffering of our human flesh and life throughout this age, complete and bring to an final completion any and all suffering. But that suffering won't end until the end of the age, so that is what we are filling up in our flesh. That is what is lacking, what is not yet complete. The suffering we endure, in fellowship with Jesus, until the end of this age!

And that idea is so real for the apostles that they were “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.”

Here is the broader context for such joy, as Paul expresses it in,

Rom. 8:16 “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.”

This is no small matter, but at the very heart of what it means to live in this age, in this fallen world. As the gospel progresses, even today as it did in the days of the apostles, as the gospel is proclaimed and God continues to rescue and redeem his people, as we obey God rather than men, there will be suffering. And in that suffering, because of the fellowship it brings to us in Jesus’ own human suffering, there is the very real experience of suffering. And especially when that suffering comes to us in the form of opposition to the gospel, we can rejoice in this, that we, too, are counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.