

Acts

Part 13 – “We Must Obey God”

Acts 5:12-32

Main Idea: Through the means of His apostle's obedience God continues to grow His church in the face of increased opposition.

The apostles have already been arrested once and threatened to stop preaching about the risen Jesus (4:1-3). Upon their release they continued doing the very thing that landed them in prison in the first place. This is not because they are mavericks making up the rules as they go along. Rather, their disobedience to the religious and civil authorities was simply a function of their determination to obey God no matter the cost.

In the transition between the sad events concerning Ananias and Saphira (5:1-11) and the apostle's second imprisonment Luke points out that the crowds dared not join them (5:13). It seems odd at first given the abundance of miraculous signs and thousands of conversions. Yet it makes perfect sense given two realities 1) The gospel is hard for many to believe. In fact Paul tells us that for many it is foolishness and a fragrance of death. 2) The people were already beginning to see that following this Jesus was a costly thing. The fate of Ananias and Saphira was proof that God was no tame deity willing to ignore sin. What is more, even the men faithfully proclaiming the risen Jesus were paying a price.

The central imperative and thematic center of this passage is Peter's words in verse 29 – “We must obey God rather than men.”

1. The Freedom of Obeying God.

- Vv. 17-18

Luke tells us that the Sadducees were moved by jealousy to arrest the apostles. They were held in a “the public prison.” This was a highly visible humiliation. Later Paul and Silas would be beaten publicly (16:37). However, the public arrest and imprisonment of the apostles was God's means to further confound the officials' efforts to stamp out the preaching of the gospel.

- Vv. 19-21

An angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison and released the captive apostles. They are not released for the sake of personal safety but that they may continue obeying God by preaching the gospel. They are freed to do that which God commands.

- Outside of Christ humanity is bound over to sin, unable to obey God. In Romans 3 Paul describes well the spiritual condition of the unregenerate:

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”
(Vv.10-12)

“The Lord loves to rescue his servants in the darkest hour of night.” - Dennis Johnson

- In Christ however we are liberated to obey God. What was once beyond our spiritual capacity now becomes the very thing in which we delight. The freedom given the apostles from their jail cell pales in comparison to the freedom they have to obey God.

2. The Provision for Obeying God.

God provides everything necessary for his people to obey him. We see this evidenced in the ministry of the apostles who, once cowardly, are now boldly obeying the command of Jesus to go make disciples. In the present passage we can discern at least three specific components of the Lord's provision for the apostle's obedience.

a) The Miracles

- Vv. 12-16

In order to confirm their authority to preach the gospel the Holy Spirit continues to perform miracles through the apostles. So many people were being healed and delivered from unclean spirits that crowds were even gathering in hopes that Peter's shadow would pass over the afflicted. There is no evidence in the text that anyone was actually healed by Peter's shadow. The point is that the apostles were so well established as legitimate miracle workers that large crowds flocked to them.

b) The Message

- Vv. 20-21, 29-31

From beginning to end the ministry of apostles was primarily one of preaching and instruction. Central to Acts is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to advance the gospel into the world through the apostles. Boldness to preach the gospel was the repeated evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence with them.

In verse 20 the angel releases the apostles from prison in order that they may "speak to the people all the words of this Life." What a beautiful way of describing the gospel: "the words of this Life." When they are brought once again before the religious rulers the apostles proclaim that very message of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus (29-32). God gave to his apostles precisely what he has given to his church today: The living message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was then and is still now the power of God unto salvation for all who believe.

c) The Courage

- Verse 29 is the hub of the entire text: "We must obey God rather than men." These are not the words of one who finds joy in defying civil or religious authorities. Rather Peter gives words to the driving ethic of the Christian life: Allegiance to God trumps all others. For this, courage is required.

"God work done God's way will never lack God's supply." – Hudson Taylor

3. The Cost of Obeying God.

- Vv. 21-28

We are beginning to see a theme that will continue throughout Acts: Growing opposition against the apostles from the religious and civil authorities. In Acts 5 the temple authorities are confounded by the miraculous deliverance of the apostles from jail. They are equally confounded by the fact that these same men continue to do that which landed them in jail to begin with. The apostles continued obedience to God and the religious rulers' growing frustration will result in increased persecution.

4. The Blessings of Obeying God.

- Vs. 32 – "And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

However much obedience to God cost them, the apostles found that the blessings outweighed the cost. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit – His mediation of Jesus' presence, His empowering, His comfort – was far sweeter than the bitterness of persecution.