

“IS THIS OF GOD OR NOT?”

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Scripture Texts: Acts 5:33-42

We are before the Sanhedrin, the senate and Supreme Court, the rulers, elders, scribes, lawyers, and chief priests.

These are the most important people in Israel. These are the most educated, the wealthiest, the people with the best upbringing and most advantages in life. These are the people who have the positions of power and influence, people who are looked up to, respected. These are the people the media listens to and looks to for answers. These are the people whose opinion matters. These are the people who are supposed to have the solutions to our world's problems.

Peter has just boldly proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus, he refused to submit to the court order to stop, and he had cut them to the heart with the charge that they had murdered the Messiah. The apostles had thrown down the gauntlet and defied the Sanhedrin's authority. Not exactly your “how to win friends and influence enemies” kind of speech.

Things are escalating. It started with theological annoyance then envy and jealousy and now we are at rage with murderous intent. They have moved from a verbal warning to a violent warning. Two things are driving this escalating conflict and response. The incredible growth of the church and the boldness of the apostles as they fill Jerusalem with their teaching.

By boldness we mean courage, conviction and clarity about sin and Jesus. Remember this as we move to consider the wisdom of Gamaliel and whether it really is wisdom.

The wisdom of Gamaliel?

Who is this Gamaliel? He seems different, rational, logical, not caught up in the frenzy of emotion. While the others were cut to the heart, he's cool and controlled. He's the voice of reason, tolerance, fair-mindedness. We are inclined to like this chap.

He is one of the most famous and revered of the Pharisees. His grandfather was the famous Rabbi Hillel who is quoted often in Jewish history and law. Rabbi Hillel formed the School of Hillel.

Gamaliel was a leader in the Sanhedrin, and a doctor of the law, meaning the OT Torah. He was one of few given the title of Rabban (our teacher). He had a reputation as a scholar, a man of wisdom and moderation, honor by all. Gamaliel was Paul's teacher and in fact Paul may have been a student of his at this time (Acts 22:3).

Gamaliel was a good man, a fair-minded man, a moral man, a religious man, perhaps even feared God, but he was not a Christian. He was a good pagan, but far from the truth.

Gamaliel exhibits the spirit of the age, the spirit of compromise. His speech fails to rise to the level of wisdom for several reasons.

First, he employees the *time* test, wait and see. But some errors and cults and false religions have been around for centuries and even longer. For example, Islam, Mormonism and Jehovah Witnesses.

Furthermore, God does not cause what is good and true and right to always prosper in the world's eyes. This is a most *unreliable* test of what is from God and what is not. Evil things seem at first to succeed and good things seem to fail, but behind them is the hidden providence of God.

The "whatever will be will be" do nothing approach is not wisdom and it is not leadership.

Second, Gamaliel's indifference in the face of eternal truth is not an option. There can be no neutrality about Jesus, either He is God or He is a liar. We are morally bound to determine the truth. "He who is not for me is against me."

To Gamaliel's shame he is comparing impostors and insurrectionist and murders to Jesus and His apostles who are only doing good.

He doesn't see what is absolutely unique about the apostles and how they are nothing like the men he compared them to. He is spiritually blind to the vast difference between some small time rabble-rousers and who Jesus is.

This is like people today who say that Christianity is just another religion like all the others, just another way to God and you should never suggest any difference, that would be intolerant and unchristian. They are blind to the utter uniqueness of Christ and therefore of Christianity.

Finally, Gamaliel's wisdom is *cowardice*, refusing to declare himself and take a side. This is a man who heard all about Jesus and everything He said and did, he was present at the trials, he knew about Pentecost, he knew the man in the temple who was healed, and the miraculous prison break, he heard and saw these uneducated yet transformed men, and his conscience is unmoved.

How can someone have such contact with spiritual realities and eternal truths and remain blind and deaf?

“A man who can come into contact with these things without expressing even an element of conviction or of disturbance, without being aware of his own need, is a man who is spiritually blind. Gamaliel was as blind as the raging colleagues on the Sanhedrin with him” (D.M. Lloyd-Jones).

He never wakes up to ask the personal questions. What is this thing, who are these people, what do they have I don't? Don't be like Gamaliel lacking courage, conviction and clarity.

Gamaliel misses the implication of part of his argument. He said once the leader died, the followers quickly lose enthusiasm and fizzle out. If Jesus is dead, why are his followers carrying on with such passion and power and authority?

With all his wisdom and education and titles and honors and oratorical and legal skills, Gamaliel can't figure out what to do with Jesus and those who proclaim His name. He approached Jesus as a matter open to debate, as a person about whom the jury is still out, as if he could be the judge of God.

This smooth talking lawyer and political opportunist, speaks of caution and balance and tolerance about something that is actually a matter of life and death.

This is not a man of moral courage, but of measured caution.

This is not a man of who loves the truth and is willing to die for it, this is a man calculating the consequences and timid with the truth.

“Do nothing” and “wait and see” are paths of reasoning that pave the way to destruction and hell.

When it comes to God and His Son and His Son's church, and the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, the Gospel and the cause of Christ and His kingdom on earth, don't be Gamaliel. Be Peter and the apostles.

Take sides, declare your vote, stand with Jesus and all He stands for. Don't flinch at the cross. Don't be ashamed to say you love Jesus. Don't take the things of Christ lightly. Don't think of worshipping Him as just one more thing you should do in a busy week.

The joy of persecution?

Beat them. That's too mild. They received what is called the 40 lashings minus one. Jewish law allowed a maximum of 40 lashes in severe criminal cases. So, in order not to break this law, they would only give 39 in case they miscounted. A whip of leather strips with small chunks of metal or glass embedded so that chunks of flesh would be ripped off, even internal organs exposed.

This is an extremely serious and brutal punishment, people often died from it. It was meant to teach a lesson in the strongest way possible. I can't emphasize enough the severe pain from deep wounds. We are talking about months of painful healing without stitches or pain medicine. No doubt infections and scars.

Don't think for a second, they didn't suffer. They are humans with nerve endings.

Which is why what follows is all the more staggering. Not only were they completely undeterred in their determination to **continue preaching** and proclaiming the name of Jesus, but they were filled with a **spiritual joy** that God considered them worthy to suffer for Christ and for His Gospel.

Acts 5:41 They left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

They responded to their horrible suffering with joy. The Christian response to suffering is joy. How counter-intuitive is that?

They felt it was an honor to suffer for Christ, to experience what He experienced and to show their loyalty. They were honored to be dishonored, blessed to be disgraced.

Peter experienced and lived out the Scripture he later wrote about "rejoicing in suffering."

I Peter 4:12-13 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Romans 5:3-4 We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

Jesus changed their view of death, from fear to anticipation of being with Jesus. Death held no terror for them. The sting of death is gone.

One reason we can have joy is because we know our God and what He does with suffering and how it advances the Gospel and builds the church and leads to salvation. No matter what others may take from us, they cannot take our faith and our salvation and our Savior and our future and our hope. Suffering always backfires on Satan when God's people draw nearer to God.

Hebrews 10:32-34 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

Their joy is grounded in God. Joy in sovereignty of God, joy in goodness of God, joy in the presence of God, joy in future with God. This joy gives contentment in each and every circumstance.

Implications and application.

Next Sunday is International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

[Ill. Church in Albania, fighting unjust corruption, injustice.]

Satan has never ceased his all-out attempt to destroy the church and stop the Gospel through persecution. Don't let Satan take your voice. What would it take to silence us?

This evening we will sing the great Reformation hymn written by Martin Luther:

“Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also / The body they may kill.” Really? Take all my stuff, even take my life. To what degree would we really be willing to suffer? How much would we be willing to give up? Could we endure what our brothers and sisters all over the world are suffering, in North Korea, in Iran, in the Middle East, in parts of Africa?

Would we be willing to sacrifice our reputation, our social standing, our career advancement, our academic progress or acceptance?

Brothers and sisters, beware of the idol of comfort and ease and the desire for a trouble free, pain free life. Beware the weakness of our flesh and spirit, that we are so quick to avoid any pain or conflict or shame for the sake of the Gospel.

We are too quick to quit the battle, or conclude we are doing something wrong if trouble comes.

Teach your children and grandchildren that this is a fallen and suffering world that is under the sovereign control of a loving and good God. He sent His Son to suffer and He can make our suffering good as well. Teach your children self-denial, delayed gratification and contentment.

But remember our kids won't believe it if we don't model it. Living with humility, grace, and joy. Let them see you walk with a limp and joyfully.

Is this of God or not?

Is this of God or not is a good question. We should ask that a lot. What should Gamaliel have done to answer that question? What should we do to know what is of God?

First, he should have called them to pray, to inquire of God as leaders did over and over in the OT. They should have honored God as God by asking God.

Second, he should have had them search the Scriptures. He was a scribe, a scholar, an expert in the Torah. What do the Scriptures say? Remember when Jesus was with the two men on the road to Emmaus, how He explained to them all that the Scripture revealed about the Christ, the Messiah of God. Jesus is promised and pointed to on almost every page of the OT.

The best way to find the will of God is to follow the will of God He has already given us.

Third, seek wise and godly counsel. Gamaliel should be giving it when he really shrinks back and doesn't commit, just takes a wait and see attitude.

Fourth, he should have looked for evidence of God's divine providence and intervention. He should have had them look into the prison break, what happened, how did it happen, they should have interview the apostles. And what about all the signs and wonders, all the manifestations of the power of the Holy Spirit confirming the power and authority of the apostles. Where is God at work?

Fifth, can I do this as an expression of my love for God and my desire to walk in His will and ways? Think of how many of our plans and decision might be affected or changed by starting there.

Can I do this and love God at the same time? Can I say this out loud and love God at the same time? Can I go to this place or do this thing or make this plan and love God? Think of how much sin we would avoid if we asked this first.

If someone else saw me doing this or heard me saying this would they say it was consistent with my profession of faith that I love God?

Is this of God or not? Test it, don't just punt the ball down the field and wait and see. Don't be Gamaliel, be Peter.

Prayer:

Holy Father, thank you for the courageous men and women throughout the history of the church who choose to obey God rather than man, no matter what the cost and that they rejoiced at the honor given them to suffer for Jesus Christ. Give us that faith and that courage and that joy, for surely it can only come from you.