

Acts 5:17-42

Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, 'Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.' When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching.

When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the temple police went there, they did not find them in the prison; so they returned and reported, 'We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.' Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on. Then someone arrived and announced, 'Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!' Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.' But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.'

When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, 'Fellow-Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!'

They were convinced by him, and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

The religious leaders should not have been surprised.

These followers of Jesus had already been arrested back at the beginning of Acts 4, that we spoke about two week ago, for teaching in the temple about Jesus and his resurrection. The leaders had already heard Peter and John, speaking for all the apostles, say that they would not stop speaking about such things. It should not have been a surprise that the apostles continued to preach and teach in the temple. It should not have been a surprise that the High Priest had them arrested again.

I'll admit that the leaders had an excuse for being surprised that the apostles were out of prison. They might not have anticipated an angel breaking these criminals out of jail.

But, other than that, this is like the movie *Groundhog Day*. The same things keep happening, again and again.<sup>1</sup>

The religious leaders make the same accusations against the apostles that they had made before. They seem to be frustrated that their authority is not being respected,<sup>2</sup> and that their repeated demands are not being obeyed. You may know, or know of, someone who expects that their every command will bring unquestioning obedience. They tend not to like it when someone else is getting all the attention.

They have tried to quash this message of Jesus and about Jesus, first with a cross and then with jail cells. But what the apostles are saying has gone viral in Jerusalem – everyone has heard it. They may or may not believe it, but everybody has heard it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Groundhog Day* (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Illustration of Eric Cartman, from the television series *South Park*, removed because too few of my congregation would get the reference.

The apostles claim that they are acting on behalf of God, and their mandate outweighs what the priests say. It is literally the high priest's job to speak for God and to act for God. To them, the apostles claiming to speak for God, while disobeying the priests, is offensive.

What seems to bother the religious leaders the most, though, is in their last line, when they accuse the apostles of trying to pin Jesus' death on them.

Of course, they are guilty. They did orchestrate Jesus' death at the hands of the Roman authorities. That makes them all the more desperate to avoid being blamed for it.

They seem to assume that the apostles are looking for revenge against them. That tells you a lot more about them than it does about the apostles. Had someone did to them what had been done to the apostles, they would have been looking for revenge. Their wanting to kill the apostles is not just because they are jealous, or they're offended. They're also acting in self-defense against the apostles' revenge that they're sure is coming.

But there is no revenge coming. John 3:17, the second half of the most famous verse in the Bible, says that, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The apostles aren't looking for revenge. They're proclaiming God's message of love and grace and mercy.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ means navigating the world between the Kingdom's vision of the world, where God's will is done, as it is in Heaven, and the vision of the world being pursued by the other powers we run into in everyday life. There are always alternative visions of the world, and alternative agendas.

Peter says that the Church will obey God rather than any human authority. That claim has sustained the church's faithful witness in many times and places where political and military powers demanded to be first priority. From the Roman Empire to Nazi Germany. But it's not always that easy, or that simple.

When there are many visions of the world, past, present, and future, most issues have at least two sides claiming to have God on their side. How do we know when we are serving God, and when we are projecting our own desires, prejudices, and politics onto God?

The first test is from the Christian writer Anne Lamott. "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." If you are convinced that God hates all the people you don't like, or all the people you're scared of, then you need to stop. Stop and re-evaluate whether what you're worshipping is consistent with the message of God's love.

Then look at what God does in sending Jesus into the world. "For God so loved the whole cosmos..." Jesus promises and creates life, not death. Freedom, not slavery. Repentance and forgiveness, not vengeance. Jesus does this not for a few people, but for everybody. Is what you're being asked to say or do consistent with that?

I know that it sounds like I'm being political, and I guess I am. Because politics is about power, the gospel is political. But the gospel is not partisan. God is not a Republican or a Democrat. Jesus is not a Republican or a Democrat.

Jesus is Jesus. Neither political party is perfectly on Jesus' side, because both political parties are human inventions.

So, yes, we as Christians do sometimes get to say that “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” But, if we want to say that, this is what God is saying.

God loves the whole cosmos. We should, no, we must love God with everything we’ve got, and love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves.

And they’re all our neighbors. Even those people we’d rather weren’t our neighbors. Even our enemies. Even the people we see as being opposed to the will of God.

Obedying God is not easier than obeying human authority. It’s more difficult, and often more complicated to figure out.

It often means giving up things. Revenge for a slight. That perfect snarky response. What we think of as “our rights.”

Sometimes obeying God will get us in trouble. Saints from Peter and Paul to Martin Luther King could testify to that.

But it’s worth it.

Because it’s how we get to most fully experience God’s amazing love.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.