

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles

Week Five

Acts 4:18-5:11

Day One

18 Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. 20 For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." 21 After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. 22 For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

v. 18 – The chief priests called them back in, not to thank them for healing one of their flock, but to issue a directive to limit their freedom. That is what authoritarian leaders want to do—limit the freedom of God's people to do His will. The priests did not inquire how more people could benefit from this healing power. They had their appointments through Rome and they were afraid that they would lose their positions if they didn't control the people.

Of course God wasn't bound by their puny attempts to control Him. Jesus is the King and He will establish His kingdom now and in the future. Who intimidates you? Most of the time, it's so you won't speak or do God's will. What are you prepared to do about it?

vs. 19&20 - These verses highlight an important distinction between submission and obedience. The apostles submitted to the authorities. They didn't yell at them or say that the priests had no authority in this matter, for they did. The apostles had a good attitude, but they were not going to obey the priests because God was a higher authority; they needed to obey Him.

In essence the apostles said, "We submit to your authority just as Jesus did. You can beat us, imprison us or kill us, for you have that authority. But you don't have the authority to tell us to stop talking about God, so in that matter, we must disobey you with a submissive spirit." If you are working for someone and you disagree with how they are operating their business, you can communicate how you think it should be done. If they don't accept, then you must submit and do it the way they want or submit by resigning, recognizing that you cannot lead the opposition to their authority. Submission means that you accept the consequences when you obey a higher authority or your conscience. Submission doesn't allow you to backbite or complain.

What if a husband (to whom a wife must submit) tells her to do something immoral or that is contrary to what she knows God wants her to do? Should she obey?

Absolutely not! **Should she submit?** Absolutely! She can accept the repercussions for her obedience to God, but still obey God. **Does this make sense to you? Do you agree or disagree?** There is no doubt that submission very often involves obedience, but they aren't the same in every way. I can obey without submitting and submit without obeying.

vs. 21&22 – The priests were actually considering how to punish the disciples for healing a crippled man. This is how warped authoritarian leadership can get. Since they could not punish, they resorted to threats. Imagine God’s representatives resorting to threats and punishing those who did good deeds. That is how messed up leaders can become when they serve their own agendas and not God’s. Yet even authoritarian leaders must be conscious of the people’s wishes, and here the priests knew that they could not resist the apostles because the people were praising God.

It has always amazed me that the people were more spiritually in tune with the will of God than the leaders. Just because people follow doesn’t mean they are idiots or spiritual dolts. If you are a leader, do you treat people like they are? Who is your model for leadership? Genghis Khan? Jack Welch? Donald Trump? It should be Jesus and no one else.

Day Two

23 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. 24 When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. 25 You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One."

v. 23 – The apostles went straight to their “church” and gave a testimony. It is so important to share what God is doing in and through you, both for accountability and encouragement. **When was the last time you gave a testimony? How old is your most recent testimony? If its older than six months, then it may be time for a new story, don’t you think?**

v. 24 – Their testimony was so moving that the congregation was led to pray. That is an example of the powerful affect we are to have on one another as we tell people how God is using us. When they started their prayer, they gave testimony to the fact that their God, our God, made everything in the heaven and earth. They began with a statement of worship, acknowledging God’s sovereign power. How do you begin your times of prayer?

v. 25 – The apostles acknowledged that the Old Testament was inspired by the Holy Spirit, even though it was written by men and was often a recorded version of what they said. Having acknowledged God’s sovereignty, they now faced the fact that there are kings and rulers who try to ignore or escape the Lord’s rule. Here they quoted Psalm 2 and applied it to their situation with the chief priests. Since the Lord rules over all, the church knew that whatever people or leaders did to plot against the purpose of God was foolishness.

This was the basic message of the studies I did in Revelation. Whatever any antichrist does is useless, for it is destined to fail. Every “ism” will become a “wasm” for the Lord rules over everything and is victorious. This is a message of hope and victory and is the only message the Church can have and preach. I will never cower at the thought of some bogey-man antichrist. My God is all-powerful and sovereign. Period.

v. 26 – Psalm 2 predicted that the kings of the earth would gather to plan how they could resist the Lord’s rule, and this was just what the chief priests were doing. The rest of the Psalm reported how foolish and futile this position was, and the Church was relating this to the current threats of the chief priests. The Church was also acknowledging the supremacy of God’s rule over the chief priests, whom they had no intention of obeying in this matter. **Is there any earthly institution that you fear more than God? Your boss? Your pastor? Your government?** That’s not a good thing, for God has first claim over your life and loyalty. Submit to those leaders, but do it as unto the Lord; but don’t ever let them take the place of Jesus in your life.

Day Three

27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. 28 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. 29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. 30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

v. 27 – Yes, Herod met with Jesus, but Pilate sent Jesus to Him as a courtesy, since Jesus was from Galilee, area of Herod’s jurisdiction. But Pilate bore the brunt of the judgment. The prayer mentioned that there were four conspirators: Pilate, Herod, the Gentiles and the people of Israel. So the kings did plot together as predicted in Psalm 2. They thought they were successful, only to have Jesus come back from the dead. And now He was healing cripples in public areas. They were finding out what the Psalm also predicted: That plotting against God and His anointed was foolishness! And it is still foolish to do so today—that is the main message of Revelation (see my Revelation studies at http://www.purposequest.com/bible_studies.htm).

v. 28 – The Lord had decided this beforehand, so each party was simply fulfilling God’s will as it pertained to His Son. We have encountered this question and it is this: if God decided all this beforehand, did the participants operate in free will or were they simply puppets in some cosmic show? The answer has been the same every time we’ve asked it: The participants did so willingly. God did not violate their freewill, but gave them a choice. Joseph of Arimathea did not agree with the Sanhedrin’s decision, so the council weren’t just manipulated from on high. Pilate’s wife sent him a warning not to have anything to do with Jesus. John the Baptist preached to Herod and warned him to repent. Every participant had been warned, yet they willingly proceeded to condemn Jesus. Yet their actions were preordained by God. This is an example of God’s sovereign power that in no way violates man’s ability to choose. Praise the Lord!

v. 29 – The disciples knew that they had all been threatened through Peter and John, so they prayed that God would give them boldness in the face of persecution and opposition. They had a mission from God and they were not to be deterred. **How are you doing on your mission? Do you know what it is? Are you being opposed? How are you handling your opposition? Are you intimidated? Fearful?**

v. 30 – They weren't looking to conduct secret crusades or campaigns. They wanted signs and wonders, not for entertainment, but as a proof that the Jesus whom they preached was alive and able to perform miracles through them, just as He had performed Himself on earth. These men and women wanted to advertise the name of Jesus in every way possible and welcomed God's intervention through miracles and healing. They disciples knew that it was all about Jesus, and not about them. Oh, that we would apply this principle today.

Day Four

31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. 32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. 34 There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

v. 31 – God was so pleased with their prayer and they were so united and fervent that the building shook. If you have a prayer group that can pray and shake a building, you want them praying as often as possible! You don't want them sweeping floors or parking cars. And God immediately answered their prayer, not just through the building tremor, but by filling them with the Holy Spirit so they could speak boldly. Speaking God's word isn't a matter of study; it's a matter of infilling and Holy Spirit fire. **Do you get answers to prayer like this? Do you pray prayers like this?**

v. 32 – The was the secret of the apostles' success: They were one. There is power in unity, just as Jesus had promised:

"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:19-20).

We need ministry teams not just to take advantage of the variety of gifts and ministries, but also because of the power they release in prayer. When a team gathers to work and pray, there is one extra member, and it is Jesus! **Do you have Jesus on your team? Are you using Him effectively? Are you using one another effectively? Are you even a member of a team?**

The disciples were so immersed in God's work and ways that their possessions no longer had a hold on them. Do you own your stuff or does your stuff own you? This was not a communistic system, as some have implied, for we don't see that anyone was forced to give up their goods. They chose to do so, because their passion was so strong for Jesus—not for building a community. Their community was a result of following Jesus and was a means to an end, not the end itself. The end was total obedience to Christ. Does this make sense to you? Do you agree or disagree?

v. 33 – God continued to answer their prayer and gave them great power to testify about Jesus. There was great grace on them all. What a great description! Do you have grace on you? Why or why not? Can people see it? Feel it? Sense it? What are the results of this grace? How does it benefit others? How can you increase the grace level?

vs. 34&35 – Once again, these verses don't represent a bias against private property. The disciples sold what they had as others had a need. At no time, did we see Jesus or the apostles preaching against ownership. But they did preach helping your fellow believers and this is what the disciples were doing. There was no mandate, however, that all believers had to sell what they owned. This was done willingly and with purpose—to meet the needs of brothers and sisters.

Yet there is no question that a spirit of generosity came over the believers. They were so enamored with God that they had less need for their possessions and savings. They had put their trust in God totally and now were simply following through with their commitment to Jesus. They sold what they had and allowed the apostles to oversee the distribution of the proceeds. The disciples did such an effective job of giving that no one had any needs among them.

Oh that the modern church would act in the same manner. The needy didn't have to ask; those who had knew who had a financial need. **Do people have to ask you for help, or are you sensitive enough (and close enough) to the saints around you to anticipate and meet a need?**

Day Five

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. 5:1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

v. 36 – I never knew Barnabas' "real" name until a few years ago. I never paid attention, nor did I think it important. I knew him as Barnabas but never stopped to think that Barnabas was his nickname assigned him by the apostles. I doubt seriously if you get a nickname like "son of encouragement" unless you are consumed with that activity. I have often taught that this was an indication of Joseph's purpose; I then ask audiences, **"What should your nickname be? What activity do people associate with you?"**

What are consumes your time and effort?" The answers to those questions are clues to your life purpose.

v. 37 – Here we see Barnabas doing what he did best: encourage. This time he sold some property (Levites weren't to own property, so he was simply going back to his Old Testament "roots") and brought the proceeds for the apostles to distribute to the needy. In everything he did, Barnabas encouraged people. Purpose isn't always about what you do; it's the essence of who you are. People often ask, "can my purpose change?" My answer is always no, but how they express their purpose can change. Barnabas could encourage by giving, preaching, teaching, pastoring or just talking to someone. Those were all different activities, but they brought the same result to anyone who he touched—he was always encouraging. **What is the essence of your being, of all your activity?**

vs. 1&2 – Luke contrasted Barnabas' story with that of a couple named Ananias and Sapphira. Like Barnabas, they also sold a field with the intent to help the poor. But instead of giving the entire amount of the sale, they kept some back for themselves and only pretended that they were giving the entire amount.

When I first became a believer, this story always struck me as cruel. I thought they were struck down because they kept some of the money back. That, of course, wasn't the case. They were struck down because they lied and misrepresented what they were doing. They wanted to be perceived as generous, willing to give it all. They wanted to impress others as selfless while actually being selfish. They wanted everyone to think they were totally "sold out" for the cause, but they weren't there in reality. The money was theirs to do with as they wished. Instead of saying "We are giving most of the sale proceeds to the poor," they said, "See how generous we are. We sold a field and are giving all the proceeds to the poor."

Day Six

3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. 6 Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

v. 3 – But Peter knew what they were doing and confronted them. How could he know? The Holy Spirit had to show or tell him; there was no other way. And Peter attributed this scheme to Satan himself. Just because you and I call on the name of the Lord doesn't mean that we can't be under the influence of the evil one. That is why Jesus taught us to pray and say, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." We have a propensity for evil all our lives. We refer to Adam's sin as the fall of man, and it was quite a steep and long fall. Sin infects us like a virus that can recur and flare up at any time. Remember what John wrote:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives (1 John 1:8-10).

We are all capable of doing what this couple did. If we don't do it, it is by the grace of God and not through our own righteousness.

v. 4 – This couple lied to God because they lied to the Church. The Church is God's representative on earth, although we don't always represent Him well. But when this couple tried to defraud the church, not of money, but of integrity, Peter saw that it was a serious crime. God knows everything. To try and hide from Him by pretending to be someone we aren't is futile. That is why confession is so important. The word "confess" means to "agree." When we do what John urged us to do in the verses above, we agree with God about who we are and God forgives and purifies. Are you misrepresenting yourself in any area of life? Are you lying to God about who you are, your motives or what you want to do? God already knows the truth. If you confess or agree with that truth, then God will help you and give you grace. If not, He will resist you, because you are pretending to already be the person He wants to make you.

v. 5 – This story took place to teach us the seriousness of misrepresenting ourselves to the Church to impress someone. Fortunately, not everyone who lies to God is struck down on the spot. But this story shows us the high priority that we must put on being honest and transparent. Ananias dropped dead and great fear came on all the Church. The people saw firsthand that they were dealing with God and not just flesh and blood. This is why we must be careful in all our dealings with God's people. God is watching and how we treat the Church is how we would treat God.

v. 6 – The young men came forward and buried Ananias. I am not sure why they didn't notify his family or even his wife. But perhaps they wanted to dispose of this man's body who had come under such a judgment of God. But it is also as if the earth needed to be rid of this man's memory and remains because of what he did. You can see why there was great fear on all the people. Fear comes on me as I read this as well. Is there anything for which you need to repent? I suggest you do so today.

Day Seven

7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." 9 Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." 10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

vs. 7&8 – Now the other half of the conspirators came in but Sapphira was unaware that her husband was dead. So Peter asked her a simple question about the price of the land and she reiterated the fictitious price she had established with her husband. With one question, Peter exposed her collusion in the sin.

v. 9 – Peter, having all the evidence he needed, now confronted her with her sin. She had no time to repent for her end was near. We never know when our last breath will be, so we need to act accordingly. This woman had no time to put her affairs in order, no time to mourn her husband, and no time to reflect on what she had done with her life. Her time was up and Peter knew it. Did Peter condemn her to death? I don't think so. I think he was simply carrying out the sentence that God had issued.

vs. 10&11 – The church had two burials that day. Great fear was not only on the church but also anyone outside the church who heard about the events. So much for “seeker-friendly” church services! I think this story would have prevented some people from joining the disciples.

God isn't as interested in making people feel good about themselves as they are. Yet God isn't mean-spirited. This couple conspired to misrepresent themselves to God and the church. Obviously God takes that very seriously. The Church should be the depository of truth and justice. Peter didn't carry out his personal wishes in this case; he was simply a judge on God's behalf. Peter didn't look the other way because these people were making a large donation, as some organizations and churches do. He looked into their hearts and delivered God's sentence.

I don't wish this story to be repeated, but I do wish that the same kind of fear would be on the Church today as then. But that is too much for me to hope for. In the end, all I can do is try to establish and maintain that kind of fear in my own life. How about you? Will you join me? Will you work to be truthful to God and His people and not misrepresent where you are? If we do that, we will be the Church of Jesus and He can send us places to judge other situations because we have learned to judge ourselves and to question our own virtue.