

We Must Obey God

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LUKE/ACTS

You've heard me say this before.

In order to understand any passage from the Bible you need to understand that passage in the context of the passages that surround it.

This is especially true when it comes to the book of Acts.

So, it's going to take me a while before I get to our Scripture reading this morning.

I need to fill you in on what's been happening before this passage.

Some of you may not know this, but the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same author, Luke. Some teachers think that we should put Luke and Acts together in our Bible and read them as a kind of two volume set. That might not be a bad idea.

The book of Acts is (as Paul Harvey may have put it) the "rest of the story". Acts answers this question, "What difference did the resurrection make in the lives of Jesus' disciples? How did they change?"

You may remember that in the Gospel of Luke Jesus is always on his way to Jerusalem. Each action points toward the cross and the resurrection.

The drama begins in Jerusalem, but before long the action will soon move to Judea and Samaria and then to the "ends of the earth."

PETER'S FIRST SERMON

The risen Christ addresses his disciples for the final time. He tells the disciples that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and that they will be His witnesses.

And then Jesus ascends into heaven.

The Holy Spirit does indeed come upon the disciples, and they begin preaching the gospel in Jerusalem. And surprise, surprise, Peter is the first evangelist.

Peter, the one who denied his Lord three times, is now inspired by the Holy Spirit to preach a powerful sermon. And the point of his sermon is to convict the people of their sin and cause them to repent.

He tells them that the Scriptures bear witness to the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus was full of power and glory.
Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

And then he tells the crowd,
“When you shouted “give us Barnabas” instead of “give us Jesus” you contributed to his crucifixion. The Son of God came to earth and you killed him.

But, he didn’t stay dead.
God raised him from the dead,
and before he ascended into heaven he told us to preach this message throughout the world.

The one you crucified now sits at the throne of God.”

The people believed Peter’s message and were horrified. They were “cut to the quick,” and asked,
“What can we do?”

Peter told them,
“Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus.
Your sins will be forgiven, and the Holy Spirit will come upon you.”

Three thousand souls were baptized that day and filled with the Spirit of Christ.

A THREAT TO THE AUTHORITIES

And immediately their presence was felt in Jerusalem.

They ate together.
They shared their worldly goods with each other.

And here's the kicker.
Every day they met together in the Temple telling others about Jesus.
Their numbers grew substantially.
They were, as we might put it, a movement.

Put yourself in the shoes of the religious authorities.
They brought Jesus to Pilate and asked that he be crucified.

Reluctantly he went along.

But, not long after Jesus was crucified the political and religious authorities began to hear a troubling rumor. People said that Jesus was not dead. The tomb was empty. No one had an explanation.

If that wasn't troubling enough, now Jesus' apostles show up on the front porch of the Temple preaching. Thousands join them *every day*.

And what are they preaching?
That Jesus who was crucified has been raised from the dead. And not only that, his Spirit is in every one of those who decide to follow him.

The religious and political leaders thought that they could get rid of Jesus by crucifying him.
But, now it looks like their problem is bigger than ever.

It gets worse.

Not only do the disciples continue to preach the gospel to more and more people.
They begin to heal people.

A man who was lame from birth is healed in the name of Jesus.

And there were scads of witnesses to this fact.

THE FIRST CONFRONTATION

So, what do the religious leaders do?
Just what you would expect them to do.
They round up the ringleaders of this dangerous cult and put them in jail.

I bet that stopped them in their tracks. Right?
Well, not exactly.

Five thousand more joined the Jesus movement even as the temple police marched Peter and John off to jail.

Things were getting out of hand.

The next day the religious leaders asked Peter and John how they managed to heal this man.

“By what power or by what name did you do this.”

And they said,
“We did this in the name of Jesus, the one whom you crucified and the one whom God raised from the dead.”

The religious leaders can't deny the healing.
Too many people saw it for themselves.
So they decide just to threaten the disciples.

They tell them, “If you say any more about Jesus you'll be in hot water with us.”

But, these Spirit inspired disciples weren't backing down. Peter said, “I'd rather be in hot water with you than be in hot water with God. So, no thanks. We'll just keep on preaching.”

ALL THE APOSTLES JAILED

And so the apostles kept on preaching right on the front porch of the Temple. People kept joining them, and the healing increased by leaps and bounds.

They were bringing the sick out into the street and folks with all kinds of illness were coming in from the countryside to be healed.

And all of them were cured.

Nobody was paying much attention to the religious leaders anymore. They were all coming to hear the preaching of the apostles and be healed.

So, what did the religious leaders do out of jealousy? They had the Temple police round up *all* the apostles and put them in jail.

But, the apostles didn't even stay in jail for one night. An angel of the Lord opened up the prison doors in the middle of the night and said,

“Go preach in the Temple.”

So, early the next morning the disciples were preaching on the front porch of the Temple.

Meanwhile the religious leaders send the Temple police to get the apostles from their prison cell. The cell doors are locked, but the apostles are nowhere to be found.

Empty tombs. Empty cells.
People getting healed all over the place.
Somebody in the religious council shouted,
“What's going on here?”

About that time somebody came in the room and said, “Do you remember those guys you put in jail?
Well, they're out on the front porch of the Temple preaching again!”

And so the Keystone Cops from the Temple go to rearrest the apostles. But, this time they are a bit more gentle in their approach.

You see, the crowds are getting even bigger, and they were afraid they might even get stoned if they were too harsh.

So, once again the apostles appear before the religious leaders. And that's where we pick up our lesson for today. In Acts 5:27-32 we read,

Acts 5:27 When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, **28** 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." **29** But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. **30** The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. **31** God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. **32** And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

A CALL FOR REPENTANCE

The high priest wanted to know why they kept defying their orders. He questioned all of the apostles about this. And they all gave the same answer,

"We must obey God rather than any human authority."

More than that, they also told the religious leaders what they had said earlier.

"You bear some responsibility for the death of Jesus.
You killed him by hanging him on a tree.

But, it didn't work out as you thought it would.
Instead of being cursed God raised Jesus.

He exalted him as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

That last phrase is very important.

The purpose of Jesus' death and resurrection is not to condemn people.

The purpose of Jesus' death and resurrection is to bring repentance and forgiveness to God's people.

The religious leaders were right in a way.

The blood of Jesus was upon them.
But, through that blood they could, like all of us, receive forgiveness for their sins.

The crowd that first shouted for Jesus' crucifixion received forgiveness after they repented of their sins and were baptized. They were some of the first members of the early church.

The same could have been true for the religious leaders.

But, most of the them were blind to that possibility.
They were too worried about their own political futures.

They were only interested in preserving their positions of power and their tenuous truce with the occupying Roman force.

WE MUST OBEY GOD

Politics often trumps true religion doesn't it?
We often put our trust in human authority.
We think that if our candidate wins, then things will be all right.

And the "human authority" is all too eager to take up that mantle of power and privilege.
They claim to be the answer to all our problems and the savior of our country.

But, we don't believe that.
We believe that there's is only one savior, and he is not a Democrat or a Republican!

Notice again what the apostles told the human authorities.

"We must obey God instead of human authorities."

God's ways are not our ways.

The ways of God in Christ run counter to the ways of the world.

REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

And the key difference between the ways of the world and God's way can be summarized by two words: repentance and forgiveness.

These are the two words that form the basis for the Christian community. These are the two words that make it possible for us to live in the Spirit of Christ.

Notice that in verse 30 Peter emphasizes the religious leaders' role in the crucifixion of Jesus. But, in the very next verse (31) he offers the possibility of repentance and forgiveness.

This is not the first time Peter has made this point. In Peter's first sermon after the coming of the Holy Spirit Peter said to the crowd,

"I know that you acted in ignorance, *as did also your rulers* ... repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." (Acts 3:17-19)

Peter was not preaching this message of repentance from a position of strength.

Peter denied his Lord and ran away when the going got rough.

But, through his encounters with the risen Christ and the coming of the Spirit, Peter learned firsthand the power of repentance and forgiveness.

And he preached that word even to those that were persecuting him.

We live in a world where talk of repentance and forgiveness is often taken as a sign of weakness. But, in the Christian community we believe that repentance and forgiveness are a source of power and hope.

As long as we blame other people for what is wrong in this world we will be on the path that leads to destruction.

But, when we recognize that Peter was right, that *we* are the ones who crucified Christ, then we have hope.

The Bible tells us that he died for our sins.
But, he was raised for our salvation.
(cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3; Romans 4:24-25)

NEW LIFE

What is our response to this?
We repent, receive forgiveness and go in a new direction.

When we baptize people we say that their life is just beginning.

They have been born again.
They have been baptized into a new way of life based upon God's grace.

Some say that we don't have miracles in the church any more.

I do admit that the miraculous healing power of Jesus and the early church seems to have been unique. (Although I would also add that there are medical professionals who see their work as an extension of Christ's love. I think that's a wonderful way to think about it, and we do still talk about medical miracles.)

But, the greatest miracle still occurs ever day.
It is the miracle of changed lives.
It is the miracle of people who are transformed by the power of God's grace.

The apostles told the religious authorities that they had been witnesses to the power of God in Christ. They knew his friendship and forgiveness. They had seen the risen Christ.

But their witness was now being multiplied by the power of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit was continuing to witness to the grace of God through the miracle of lives changed.

That's still going on.

When the Spirit of God is in us, we too are witnesses to the power of God in Christ. And because we have witnessed personally what it means to be

forgiven and freed to live in a new way, it is impossible for us to go along with the ways of the world.

When human authorities call us in and demand that we go along with the ways of fear and compromise, we are called to say,

“Sorry. We must obey God and not you. We will not give in to intimidation or fear. We believe God has called us to preach repentance and forgiveness in Christ Jesus.”

ANGER

Sadly, for many the message of repentance and forgiveness does not seem like such good news. Many do not see the need to repent and therefore they do not see the need to receive forgiveness.

If we think that we do not need repentance and forgiveness, then we will respond to the gospel with anger.

We learn in the Scripture that follows our lesson for today that this is precisely the response of the religious leaders. In fact they got so angry that they wanted to kill the apostles.

And they would have killed them had it not been for the timely intervention of a man named Gamaliel. He advised the religious leaders to leave the apostles alone.

If what they were doing was of human origin, eventually it would fade away. But, if what they were doing was of divine origin, then watch out! They could find themselves fighting against God! (Acts 5:33-42)

The religious leaders were convinced by this argument, sort of. They let the apostles go, but not before they flogged them.

This was the kind of beating that killed some people, but in the topsy turvy world of the kingdom the apostles once again respond in an unexpected way.

They “rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the name (of Jesus).”

Their suffering mirrored the suffering of Jesus, and they found hope in that. For once they began to understand what it meant to take up a cross and follow Jesus.

CHANGED BY THE RESURRECTION

This passage proclaims the message of the resurrection and is quite appropriate for the second Sunday after Easter.

But, it proclaims something more.

It proclaims the power of the resurrection to raise God's adopted sons and daughters to new life.

Jesus' formerly timid disciples boldly proclaim the gospel before some of the same people who conspired with the Romans to crucify Jesus.

And in their own way they even say with their Lord,
"Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

Do we have the courage to obey God instead of human authority? Do we have the courage to proclaim the possibility of repentance and forgiveness even to our enemies?

On our own we can't do this.

But, I'm here to tell you that resurrection power is still available.

And if His Spirit is in us, nothing is impossible.

Amen.