

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

"But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and said: ... 'Keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!'"
(Acts 5:34, 38-39).

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

The Sanhedrin greatly feared a political upheaval. They assumed any person calling himself the messiah would be a national liberator. Although, Christ's apostles were not preaching about any national liberation. Instead, the apostles were preaching the forgiveness of sins, but the Sanhedrin weren't listening – this ruling council of the Jews had their ears clogged to the truth. And for the Sadducees on the council, they were quite comfortable with the way things were.

And after Peter and the apostles spoke to the Sanhedrin, this ruling council became enraged and wanted to kill them. But then Gamaliel spoke.

Now, Gamaliel was a respected Pharisee who had the ear of the Sanhedrin, including the Sadducees. He was the most-prominent rabbi of that time and one of the greatest of all antiquity. And he wasn't just a rabbi. He was the rabbi for rabbis as Gamaliel was given the title "rabban" – a master rabbi. So, when Gamaliel spoke, everyone who had ears to hear listened to his words.

Gamaliel was also wise. And he remembered the past. He could recall uprisings, the cult of personalities and the religious zealots. He knew his history and he also knew human nature. He recalled Theudas and Judas the Galilean. They thought they were somebody, but they ended up being nobodies when they died. They each claimed to be the messiah, but when they died, their disciples fell away.

Even if this phrase didn't exist in his time, Gamaliel would have understood "cut off the head and the body will die."

So, Gamaliel knew not to get too overly excited with the many who became followers of Jesus of Nazareth. He thought, there is no reason to get the Romans upset over what could be nothing. So, Gamaliel said to the Sanhedrin, *“Just let it go. If this is of man, these apostles of Jesus of Nazareth will just fall away. If this is of God, then you might be found opposing God. Just let them go.”*

Spoiler alert: It’s all true, to which Gamaliel’s own prized student Paul would soon find out! *Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!*

God’s promise to Abraham now continues with all those who have faith in the promised Messiah now revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, by faith in Jesus, we receive all of Yahweh’s promises. We are declared His true children of Israel.

So, today, nearly two-thousand years later, we know the rest of the story. We know that the apostles’ preaching, teaching and healing was of God. These apostles of Jesus, who were seen by others as uneducated, common men (Acts 4:13), preached with boldness and performed miracles. And through this ragtag group of apostles, many came to believe the truth that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messiah.

Something had surely changed with these apostles. In today’s Gospel lesson from John 20, we heard that they were hiding behind locked doors in great fear. The thing is, they were hiding from an invisible enemy. They weren’t coming. It is likely that the Sanhedrin thought this threat was now over. Jesus is dead. They cut the head off the body. They believed that Jesus died just like those other messiah impostors.

But as the apostles were hiding in great fear, Jesus came. Jesus appeared. Despite the doors being padlocked and the windows barred shut, Jesus appeared. He appeared and said to His faithless apostles: ***“Peace be with you”*** (John 20:19, 21). All of a sudden, His faithless apostles – *with the exception of Thomas, who was not there* – were restored to faith. They believed! *Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!*

A week later, Thomas famously said, after seeing and touching Jesus: ***“My Lord and my God”*** (John 20:28). They all believed! They all were restored to faith! They all touched and saw the resurrected Lord! *Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!*

But they still had some work to do. Some work that God had to do to them. For prior to the Lord’s bodily ascension, they asked Jesus: ***“Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”*** (Acts 1:6). They were still confused about the Lord’s mission. They believed in Him, but they were still confused.

Then came Pentecost. The Holy Spirit gave them full remembrance to everything that had happened. They now became bold. They could not keep silent. They could no longer hide from invisible enemies. They spoke.

But now things changed. For as they preached, taught, and healed in Jesus' name, this saying of Jesus came to pass: ***“Remember the Word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you”*** (John 15:20). For so they did. Persecution came to them.

In Acts 4, we read that Peter and John were arrested by the Sanhedrin and were told to stop preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but they would not and could not as they continued to speak of what they had seen and heard in Jesus. The Holy Spirit gave them the boldness to speak the truth of the Gospel.

The good news of Jesus, His forgiveness of sins, could not be quenched and thanks be to God for that! Only God could have done this!

Today's text from Acts 5 follows another arrest of the apostles by the Sanhedrin. This time, it wasn't just Peter and John, but the Twelve. They were all arrested for preaching the Gospel. And during that night, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out. And what did these apostles do? They immediately entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach about Jesus!

That next morning, when the officers of the Sanhedrin came to bring the apostles to the ruling council, they found a secure prison but with no apostles. Soon, it was realized that the apostles were preaching the Gospel of Jesus at the temple. And they were rounded up again and brought to the Sanhedrin. The high priest said to them: ***“We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us”*** (Acts 5:28).

The high priest was in fear of the Romans showing their power as he believed this Jesus was a political figure.

But Peter and the apostles answered: ***“We must obey God rather than men”*** (Acts 5:29). This famous verse has been misused and taken out of context countless times. So, what are these apostles saying?

Remember the context. These words are in response to the command to stop preaching Jesus Christ. In fact, Peter and John had already responded practically the same way in Acts 4 when they were commanded to stop preaching Jesus saying: ***“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard”*** (Acts 4:19).

And as Christians, as followers of Christ, this is not something that we can choose to opt out of. We cannot come up with any excuse in saying this is not one of my gifts. You see, the proclamation of the gospel to the lost is so critical. It is so critical that there should be nothing to stop us from doing it. Not governments. Not crowds. Not any hostile response. Not even the threat of death itself. There is no excuse. This is what the First Century Christians understood. They never lost sight of their calling to be Christ’s witnesses. With the Holy Spirit indwelling in them, their zeal resulted in explosive growth!

So, what often stops you? It’s not any threat from the government. Here in America, we really don’t have the threat of death because of Christ’s Word. But rather, the problem is – *us*. It’s about our comfort level. It’s our desire to not offend.

Something truly changed with these apostles. Christ changed them. He changed them through the work of the Holy Spirit indwelling in them. This is what God does. He undertakes the saving and transforms sinners. He has also transformed you through Word and Sacrament!

Despite the Sanhedrin rejecting Jesus and being responsible for His death, Jesus hung on the tree for them. Jesus died, rose and is now exalted at God’s right hand to which He gives to the penitent: the forgiveness of sins, to you, to me, and to the Sanhedrin.

Today, we are all beneficiaries of Christ working through the confession of Peter and John and the other apostles, and to the many faithful who came after them, including Luther in bringing the Church back to the Gospel and to the faithful in your family tree before you. By the work of the Holy Spirit, they were captured by God’s Word to speak His truth and deliver God’s forgiveness to all those with ears to hear – *including you*, so that – *you* – the hearer would come to true faith in Jesus Christ.

May the Lord strengthen you and give you perseverance as He works in you with His boldness to speak His Word of forgiveness in your various God-given vocations as you show His love, ultimately the forgiveness of sins, to your family, to your friends and whoever you meet on life’s journey!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +