

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor  
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## Acts 5:33-42 “The Problem of Neutrality”

Intro. As you remember from chapter 4 of Acts, the apostles were told by the authorities to stop preaching and teaching about Jesus Christ. Peter and John responded that they had to obey God rather than men. So in spite of their threats, they kept on spreading the good news of Jesus Christ with the people. In fact, vv.12-16 of chapter 5 inform us that a multitude of believers was added to the church, and people were coming to hear about Jesus and be healed from miles around.

Then in v.17 we read that many of the religious leaders of Israel became filled with “indignation.” Actually, the original Greek (*zelos*) indicates that they were filled with “jealousy.” They became jealous of the spectacular success of the apostles, especially as we see in vv.15-16. So this time they arrested *all* of the apostles (v.18). But that night a miracle took place. An angel came to them during the night and let them out of prison. The prison guards didn’t even know they had escaped! (vv.22-23). In v.20 the apostles were commanded to keep on preaching the gospel, in spite of the opposition of their leaders. They did, and then the apostles were arrested yet again. Peter used that opportunity to preach to these leaders about Jesus Christ.

Now we come to our text of Scripture. And here we see that there were 3 different responses to the gospel: We see the enraged religious leaders (v. 33), the uncommitted Gamaliel (vv. 34-39), and the totally committed apostles (vv. 41-42). Perhaps the worst response is that of Gamaliel. He neither accepted nor rejected the gospel, but sought to be neutral. There was a time when I was much impressed with Gamaliel. I thought he made a great speech. As v.33 indicates, they were plotting to kill the apostles. It appears that he was a great help to them, and by God’s providence, He used Gamaliel to spare the lives of the apostles. But I have had a change of mind about Gamaliel. The fact is, Gamaliel decided to be neither for nor against. He took to the fence, and there he sits as the first of a long line of straddlers.

In this message we shall contrast Gamaliel’s uncommitted response to the apostles’ committed lives. These two responses relate to us. I doubt if anyone here is hostile against the gospel, so I will not deal with that type of response. But if you have been sitting back, not willing to make a definite faith commitment to Jesus Christ, then I hope you will especially listen this morning.

My first appeal to you is this:

### I. DON’T BE UNCOMMITTED LIKE GAMALIEL

The reason I have become less than impressed with Gamaliel is because of some serious mistakes he makes concerning Jesus Christ and the movement we now call Christianity:

A. He Made a False Comparison – In vv.36-37 Gamaliel says, “For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.” Yet there is no valid comparison to be made between Jesus Christ and men like Theudas and Judas of Galilee. Gamaliel tells us that Theudas evidently made some

Messianic claims for himself and attracted about 400 followers, probably claiming to be sent from God to deliver Israel from Roman oppression and taxation. We have no other certain information about this Theudas. But we know that many insurgent leaders arose in Palestine when Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., and Theudas may have been one of them. Well this man was no match for the might of Rome, and he was put to death. Judas is better known, and his followers became the Zealots. They were a group of people who were zealously opposed to the Roman Empire. They were the “freedom fighters” of their day who did not hesitate to use violence to further their political ends. But there is no valid comparison here because of three reasons:

1. Their Message Was Different - Jesus was not a political revolutionary. He was different from these others in that He stressed deliverance from sin, not from Roman oppression. He even told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight...” (John 18:36).

2. Their Manhood Was Different - They were sinners like everyone else. They did not have divine power. They did not die for the sins of others. They did not rise from the dead. But Jesus is different. He was no mere man. He lived a sinless life. He worked great miracles. He taught and preached as no other man. He died for others. He rose from the dead. There was no comparison. In the 1970’s rock musical Jesus Christ Superstar, Mary sang, “He’s just a man, just another man, and I’ve had so many men before.” Wrong! Later, when Paul preached, he did not try to convince his hearers that the gospel was a better answer to the world’s ills. He declared that it was the only answer. He said in 1 Tim. 2:5, “For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” Likewise, Peter said in Acts 4:12, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

3. Their Followers Were Different – Gamaliel was correct. The followers of Judas and Theudas did disperse after their leaders died. But the followers of Christ were different. Though His followers did disperse for a brief while at the time of His death, they came back together shortly thereafter. And instead of dispersing permanently, the number of His followers actually increased dramatically within a few short months. How do you explain the increase in spite of the death of Jesus, and in spite of the rejection of Jesus by the religious leaders? By Gamaliel’s own test, as stated in v.38, the movement Jesus began did not “come to nothing” upon His death. Not only that, but chapter 5 indicates that they were willing to risk their lives, defying all authorities to tell of their experience with the risen Christ. Surely they would not die for a lie.

So we have seen that Gamaliel made a false comparison. Now let us see that:

B. He Suggested a False Criterion – Gamaliel said in vv. 38-39, “And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.” Essentially Gamaliel is saying, “If this movement is not of God, it will fail. If it succeeds, it must be of God.” His advice consists of typical, simplistic Pharisaic teaching. They said that God is sovereign. He is over all. The rabbis believed that “men may disobey God, but His will would triumph notwithstanding.” They also believed that He rewards righteousness with success, and He punishes wickedness with failure. They believed that prosperity was a sign of God’s favor, and poverty and sickness was a sign of God’s displeasure.

Now on the one hand his statement has proven to be ultimately true. All efforts to defeat and destroy Christianity have failed because as Paul said, “If God be for us who can be against us.” But let’s examine this way of thinking a little closer:

1. Is the Criterion of Failure Valid? – In the last of v.38 Gamaliel said, “for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing.” According to the viewpoint of His time, Jesus at one point appeared to be a failure. During the latter days of His life, the number of His regular followers decreased greatly. By the time of His death He had at best only several hundred followers. Then, He died in disgrace, the death of a criminal, and His followers were scattered. His enemies thought that the death of Jesus was proof-positive that He was an imposter. But does that mean He was not from God? No!

Illustration: Some of our early missionaries like Carey, Luther Rice, Adoniram Judson, etc. spent years in the mission field before winning the first person to faith in Jesus Christ. But does that mean that God was not with them? No. Just because something fails does not mean that God did not mean or will for it to succeed. Just because I fail to win someone to Jesus Christ does not mean that God did not will for that someone to be saved.

If we followed Gamaliel’s criterion of success, I would have abolished our Friday morning prayer meeting. For years we only had 4-6 that came. Then we had a surge and we averaged at least 12 for several years. Now we have 7-9. Jesus did not quit when “many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more” (John 6:66). Just because a preacher, missionary, or church is not having numerical success does not mean they are not being faithful to God.

2. What About the Criterion of Success? – He said in v.39, “if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it....” While that is ultimately true, it can take many years before the ultimate outcome will be revealed. Yet should we follow a movement because it appears to be successful? Communism was successful for about 60 years. Until the 1980’s it was on the march, gaining more and more ground in our world. It still has a grip on the most populous nation on earth. But is it of God? No! They deny that God even exists! The Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are successful in gaining new converts. Are they of God? No, because they contradict the fundamental truths of the gospel. What about Islam? It has grown to about 1 billion followers. Is it of God? No! Today we have churches that do just about anything to draw crowds. They leave out the half of the Bible that unbelievers find offensive. But crowds and majority opinion are not valid criteria for judging something to be of God or right. In I Jn. 4:5-6 John wrote that the world will gladly listen to false teachers. But the world will not listen to a true preacher of the gospel. The false teachers may have numerical and monetary success in the eyes of the world, but that doesn’t mean they are of God.

Now in eternity it is true that evil will fail, and the right will prevail. Empires built by the design of men, regardless of their power and glory, invariably crumble and come to naught. In eternity right will win and the saints of God will reign with our victorious Savior. But you can’t wait for eternity to decide which side to get on! You can’t wait until you are about to die to decide about Jesus Christ. The man who postpones taking his stand for Jesus Christ until he sees how the gospel movement succeeds will live and die with Gamaliel. And for a church to adopt Gamaliel’s philosophy would require neutralism on every issue until success became evident. This would arrest all progress for a church, nation, family, or individual.

Since Gamaliel made a false comparison, and since he suggested a false criterion, we can expect what the outcome would be:

C. He Arrived at a False Conclusion – He said in v.38, “And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone....” He is saying, “Let’s not pass judgment on them now. Let’s just wait and see.” His suggestion was that of indecision.

Well what kind of suggestion was it? Was it honest doubt? Not really. Based on the Greek language, Gamaliel is leaning in the direction of believing in Christ. In vv. 38 & 39 we see two “if”

clauses: if (*ean*) this be of men, and if (*ei*) this be of God. In the Greek, there are two different words for “if”. The first is an “if” of possibility. In effect he is saying, “This might be of men only.” The second “if” is an “if” of assumption and is often translated “since.” He could be saying, “Since this seems to be of God.” Evidently, he considered it more likely that God was truly involved in the life of Christ and the apostles. He had to have been impressed by the miracles that were done through the apostles, including their miraculous deliverance from prison. Thus, some believe that Gamaliel was a secret believer in Jesus, at least on some level. But there is no excuse for what little doubt He expressed. I believe that in his heart of hearts he knew that Christianity was true. And this was not a time for “ifs.” The purpose of the Sanhedrin was to judge. Could not they have honestly judged the claims of Christ and His apostles and come to a commitment either for or against the apostles? They had the works of Christ; miracles which they had investigated and could not disapprove (include vv. 12, 15-16, 19); prophecies fulfilled; the great evidences for the resurrection (v.30) confirmed by eyewitnesses who were standing before them. They had the coming and witness of the Holy Spirit (v.32). Doubt and neutrality was a comfortable position for Gamaliel, but it was the wrong decision. We seem to prefer to be neutral about things, especially in the face of opposition. Or, we prefer to be no more than leaning toward a certain position. Have you noticed the way many politicians don’t want to take a position on abortion? They will say that they are personally against it, but they do not believe in forcing their morals on others. Too many are just not willing to make a commitment to something. It’s not enough to just lean toward a belief in Christ. Haven’t you heard and read that He demands total commitment? We are to take up our cross and follow Him.

D. He Failed to Heed the Command of God’s Word – Gamaliel knew what Elijah said in 1 Kings 18:21, “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” Likewise, Jesus said, “He that is not with me is against me” (Mt. 12:30). Gamaliel should have heeded the words of Christ and the ancient prophet and said, “Brethren, these men are right. Let us turn to God, too, and accept His blessed Son.”

Do you think Gamaliel ever trusted in Christ as Savior? Some believe that he ultimately became a Christian. Paul was his student at one time, and he probably witnessed to him if Gamaliel was still living when Paul returned to Jerusalem as a Christian. Perhaps he could have even been Luke’s informant.<sup>1</sup> However, I’m afraid that he went to the grave, trying to straddle the fence between belief and unbelief. But at the final judgment God will not be indecisive. You can be neutral about Jesus Christ but God will not be neutral about your eternal destiny. You will either go to heaven or to hell based on your commitment to Jesus Christ. The prophecy of Revelation makes it clear that if your name is not in the Lamb’s book of life, then hell is your destiny!

So don’t be indecisive like Gamaliel. Instead, let me show you who you should be like:

## II. BE COMMITTED LIKE THE APOSTLES

Oh, what a contrast we see in the apostles. They had settled the question of who Jesus is; they had settled the issue of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus had told them to preach the gospel

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastical tradition has supposed that Gamaliel embraced the Christian faith, and remained a member of the Sanhedrin for the purpose of secretly helping his fellow-Christians (cf. *Recognitions of Clement*, I, lxxv, lxxvi). According to Photius, he was baptized by St. Peter and St. John, together with his son and with Nicodemus.” However, some scholars consider the traditions to be spurious, and the *Recognitions of Clement* was not actually written by Clement, but was passed off in the 4<sup>th</sup> century as written by him.

to every creature, to be witnesses unto Him, and to make disciples. In v.20 the angel delivered a message from God that they were to keep on preaching and teaching the gospel. Here we see that they were still committed to obeying Christ above men. In v.42 we read, “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” In spite of the threats of punishment that had been carried out, they stuck to their commitment of obeying God rather than men. Though they did preach, the primary emphasis is on their sharing the gospel through teaching, which is mentioned four times in this chapter (vv.21, 25, 28, 42). No doubt the focus of their teaching was Jesus: His death and resurrection as reflected in vv.30-32. The fact that Jesus was “murdered by hanging on a tree” is a reference to Deuteronomy 21:23 (cf. 1 Peter 2:24; Galatians 3:13). He also proclaimed in the last of v.31 that repentance is required for forgiveness. No gospel presentation is complete if we leave out repentance. So may God help us follow their example and not get sidetracked on other issues.

I want to point out a few truths about their commitment which are examples for us:

A. The Depth of Their Commitment - In v.42 we read they were teaching and preaching “daily.” They were constantly sharing the good news. They were consistently sharing the good news, both “in the temple, and in every house.” Furthermore, they were sharing completely. In v.28 even the enemies of Jesus Christ acknowledged, “you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine....”

What is your level of commitment to the Lord? Quite a few professing Christians don’t even attend church with any regularity. Others attend church services regularly, but do little else. Others are more committed, for they also give generously in support of the Lord’s work. Others are at least committed to spending time in prayer and Bible reading each day. Others are more committed in that they also participate in our Sunday and Wednesday evening programs. Some spend several hours each week in service to the Lord. May the Lord help us to be more complete in our obedience to the gospel.

It before you make a commitment to the Lord, consider:

B. The Cost of this Commitment – We see here an illustration of the fact that being fully committed to Christ can be costly, which is why too many are not committed to Christ. Notice that the Council did not see fit to follow Gamaliel’s advice completely, for he counseled that they let the apostles alone. Instead, v.40 indicates that they beat them, probably with a rod. They threatened them with punishment in chapter 4, and here they carried out their threat here in chapter 5. I can assure you that the punishment they received was very painful. While Gamaliel sat comfortably in his seat, the apostles were beaten for their commitment to Christ.

So here we see that a commitment to Jesus Christ will often cost you something or very much. Jesus spoke much of the cost of discipleship. He said in Mt. 16:24, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” The cross was an instrument of inflicting shame, suffering, and death. How many of us are truly willing to take up that kind of cross to follow Jesus?

When I became a committed follower of Jesus Christ at the age of 17, it cost me my friends and a girlfriend ended our relationship. I gave up a good-paying summer job at the paper mill to serve in a mission church in a poor section of Dallas, TX. Following God’s call meant that Cheryl and I had to leave our parents behind to serve God in Minnesota and Virginia, and it cost my sons a regular relationship with their grandparents. But that is nothing compared to the price the apostles and many missionaries have had to pay.

A well-known song calls us to be willing to pay the price of commitment:

Must Jesus bear the cross alone, And all the world go free?  
No, there's a cross for everyone, And there's a cross for me.

What can I do to thank Jesus for suffering and dying for me? I suppose the best I can offer is to suffer for Him. This is the highest expression of thanks that we can give to Jesus. But we see in our text that if we pay the price of discipleship that will lead to:

C. The Reward of this Commitment – Yes, any sacrifice of Jesus Christ will be rewarded. In v.41 we read, “So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.” Can you imagine that? They had just been beaten. And instead of going out sad and depressed about how much they had suffered, they went out rejoicing! The religious leaders could take away their freedom and comfort, but they couldn't take away their joy. They rejoiced that their suffering allowed them to demonstrate their loyalty to Christ. So they were able to rejoice even in the midst of their suffering. Wouldn't you like to have joy, even in the midst of physical suffering? And that joy can compensate for the pain.

I remember the time I had a very sore infected toe. But when I started to preach, and when I was filled with the Holy Spirit and joy, I did not even notice the pain any longer. The only problem was that as soon as I quit preaching my toe started hurting again! God has His ways of compensating for any suffering we endure for Him.

But Jesus offers us a more lasting reward in Heaven. He said in Mt. 5:11-12, “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven....” Yes, there is a cost for a total commitment to Jesus Christ, but the reward from God will more than compensate for it. It is worth it to be absolutely committed to Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: The gospel calls for decision. Neutrality should not be considered an option. Isn't it time for some of you to get off the fence, and make a commitment to Jesus Christ? The call of the gospel is to respond to God's voice today. 2 Cor. 6:2 says, “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (Cf. also Heb. 3:7, 15; 4:7). Isn't it time for some of you to follow the Lord in baptism or faithful church membership? Christian, have you committed your moral life to the Lord? Are you truly committed to serving Him? Are you committed to being a witness for Jesus Christ like these apostles? I encourage you not to be neutral about Jesus but committed to Him. He was absolutely committed to you.

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); Vance Havner, *Hearts Afire: Light on Successful Soul Winning* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1952), 139-148; H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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