

## Sermon 23, Which Way of Life Is Superior?, Acts 5:17-42

**Proposition:** Luke's juxtaposition of the apostles' gospel commitments and the Sanhedrin's rotten attitude emphasizes how Jesus gave the apostles superior beliefs and superior joy.

- I. The Apostles' Basic Commitments, vv. 29-32
  - A. Obedience to God, Not Men, v. 29
  - B. Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Repentance, Forgiveness, vv. 30-31
  - C. Human Witnesses, Divine Witness, v. 32
- II. The Sanhedrin's Basic Commitments, v. 33
  - A. Jealousy, v. 17
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- III. Both Sides Live Out Their Commitments, vv. 40-42
  - A. The Sanhedrin's Impotent Violence, v. 40
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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we looked last week at the Sanhedrin's comical bungling, which I compared to the 1960s TV show *Get Smart* for the hilarity of its ineptitude. This week, though, I want to dial in on the message that the apostles presented to the Sanhedrin, and contrast it to the Sanhedrin's baseline commitments. The contrast could not be more obvious — and the two different ways of life to which the two sets of basic commitments give rise are clearly set forth at the chapter's end. What we will see is that the apostles' gospel commitments are superior to the Sanhedrin's rotten attitude in just about every respect. That's because the apostles serve Jesus, and He is a better master than one's own ego.

#### I. The Apostles' Basic Commitments, vv. 29-32

In this four-verse speech, Peter sums up the core commitments and basic message of the Christian faith. Insofar as we stick to these basics, we can expect to see the same kind of success and growth for the church as the apostles saw. Insofar as we depart from these things and adopt instead the Sanhedrin's basic commitments, we can expect to see the church decline and people run from what we have to offer.

##### A. Obedience to God, Not Men, v. 29

The Christian approach starts with obedience to God, not men. That is the core principle here: God's commands are superior to any and all human commands. Now, the rest of the Bible makes clear that God's commands are not always opposed to human commands; far from it. Most of the time, you're going to obey God by obeying your parents, your state and local and national

officials, and your elders in the church. But there are times when the church gets deranged and out of whack, when your parents can be severely wrong, when the state abandons its commitment to the good and starts to push evil actions onto its citizens. In those situations — in any situation where a legitimate authority demands an illegitimate action — you and I must obey God rather than men. The high priest was the highest ecclesiastical officer in the Levitical system. His authority was comparable to that of the pope in the Roman Catholic system. And yet Peter and the other apostles are not afraid to blow him off when he tells them they may not teach in the name of Jesus. The fact of the matter is that God's authority trumps his.

Other easy cases spring to mind. Hitler says "Hate your neighbor and make sure that the state kills him." God says "Love your neighbor and give your own life to protect him from being murdered by the government." Pharaoh says "You may not go serve Yahweh." Yahweh says, "Let my people go that they may serve me."

In our era, perhaps the government will say "Send your daughters to our wars to fight and die like men." Perhaps the establishment will say "Call this man a woman." Perhaps the porn industry will say "Thou shalt commit adultery." Maybe your culture will say "Thou shalt accept the final and ultimate authority of feelings, the morality of sentiment, and the need for government to mandate that all sexual orientations be accepted as equally valid." In all of these cases, we have to say "We must obey God rather than men."

Human laws can and do come into conflict with divine law. Any time the law says to lie, to steal, to kill, or to assist the state in lying, stealing, or killing, you may not obey. In fact, you must not obey. The word of God is abundantly clear about that. Often the unlawful commands will relate to the first table of the law. Often the state will tell you that you must have another God before Yahweh, that you must take God's name in vain, that you must profane God's holy day. But there are times when the commands relate to the second table of the law, when you are told to dishonor father and mother, to kill, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet.

You and I need to know the Ten Commandments cold. You should be able to quote them all from memory, word-for-word. I'm not joking. If you agree with the apostles that we need to obey God rather than men, then you had better know what God commands — and what He doesn't command. You need to know the limits of Christian morality, the exact terms of the moral law. God doesn't command us in psychological terms — "Draw your boundaries. Care for yourself. Avoid toxic people." He commands us in frankly moral terms: "Don't lie. Don't steal. Don't kill." And so you need to know those moral terms and make your moral decisions in terms of them. You can translate the Bible's moral language into psychobabble with a fair degree of accuracy, but something will inevitably be lost. You need to learn to think in moral terms if you're going to obey God rather than men. And your ultimate commitment, like the apostles', needs to be "I will serve God." If your ultimate commitment is to avoid confrontation, to not get flogged, to keep your job, to maintain your relationship with so-and-so, then you have already decided not to obey God. You have decided to do whatever is necessary to honor your ultimate commitment. But the Christian's ultimate commitment, following the example of the apostles,

has to be to obey God rather than men. That means knowing what God wants and then, with a spine of steel, doing it.

Well, that sounds noble. But how on earth do you get there? How can you defy the might of an entire-nation state, arrayed against you with all the forces of money, power, techno-surveillance, and police dogs? The answer is that in your own strength you never will. Persons can't fight institutions. You have as much chance of beating the EPA, or the Justice Department, as Peter had of getting a temple demolition permit from the City of Jerusalem building office. Chinese Christians have as much chance of hiding their activities from the apparatus of the State Administration for Religious Affairs as you do of hiding your phone's movements from Google.

So why bother? Why fight City Hall? Why give this stuff about obeying God rather than men when men's forces can and will make you submit?

### **B. Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Repentance, Forgiveness, vv. 30-31**

The answer lies in the gospel that Peter goes on to proclaim. The reason we obey God rather than men is because the God of our Fathers raised up Jesus. That is, God brought Him into this world and made Him stand. Jesus lived through the Father's power. And you know what? You can't fight the massive human forces arrayed against you. But God the Father can. He sent His Messiah into the world. He sent His very own Son to become what He was not — a man. This is the God that the fathers of the Jewish people worshipped. He sent His Son, whose name was Jesus.

Peter thus mentions the Incarnation. He swiftly moves to the crucifixion. Why obey God rather than men? Ultimately, because Jesus did. And yes, He was killed.

I was talking once to a Presbyterian whose wife is Eastern Orthodox — Slovenian, or something like that. I said to him, "You know, there was actually one Calvinist patriarch of the Orthodox churches."

"Oh, yeah?" said my Presbyterian friend. "What happened to him?"

"They assassinated him," I said.

"Figures," he said. This man knows a few things about how people who don't fit are handled in the Balkans.

Anyway, Jesus fared like a Calvinist trying to run the Orthodox church. He obeyed God rather than men, and paid the ultimate price.

But next comes the part of the story that tells us why we must obey God rather than men. It's because God raised Him from the dead. That's why we obey God rather than men — because Jesus is alive! That means that whatever human beings can throw at us, the ultimate punishment they can dispense is death. But God can overcome death. He overcame His Son's death, exalting Him to His right hand as leader and Savior. That's who we follow when we obey God instead of men. We know that our leader, our Savior, cannot be stopped by any human agency.

We also have two other things that give us a moral force in our ability to stand up to human overreach. Those repentance — the ability to turn from sin to God — and forgiveness — God no longer holding our sins against us, but instead taking away our liability to punishment.

This message is powerful stuff. The Sanhedrin could not offer repentance and forgiveness. If you offended them, that was it. If you offended the gods they worshipped, they couldn't help you. There was no forgiveness.

Do you live as though you believe in forgiveness? Have you forgiven anyone who's done something horrible to you? Or do you still hold it against him? Peter was committed to repentance — people turning away from sin — and to forgiveness — people having their sins taken away by God Himself.

That's why we obey God rather than men. Whatever forces the state can line up, it cannot offer either repentance or forgiveness. It can offer penitentiaries, but it cannot offer forgiveness. It can't take away your sin and guilt. Jesus can, because He came to earth, was crucified, rose from the dead, and is now exalted to God's right hand, from which He showers repentance and forgiveness on everyone who will receive them. However, Peter emphasizes here that the repentance is first and foremost for Israel. The very people he's talking to, who claim to be official representatives of Israel, need to turn from their sin. That's what he's saying by emphasizing the gift of repentance to them.

### **C. Human Witnesses, Divine Witness, v. 32**

Peter finishes his list of the apostles' basic commitments by appealing to himself, the other 11 apostles, and the Holy Spirit as witnesses. He insists that they have all seen the reality of what they're describing. It's not a guess; it's not hearsay. It is confirmed under oath by thirteen trustworthy witnesses, one of whom is a person of Holy Trinity. He adds that the Holy Spirit is God's gift to everyone who obeys Him — a not-so-subtle hint that the temple leadership lacks the Spirit and therefore have no claim to be people who obey God.

This is a pretty intense speech. It is a four-verse summary, as I said, of the apostles' basic commitments. And it ought to continue to serve as the key points we stand for in the contemporary church. We have a lot of other things — doctrinal statements, books of church order, habits and practices and a lingo all our own — but ideally, they all exist to serve these basic commitments to obeying God, proclaiming Jesus, and walking by the Spirit, through whom we gain firsthand knowledge of Jesus.

Did you see the Trinitarian structure of Peter's speech, as I just outlined it? He started with God, moved to Jesus, and concluded with the Spirit.

And that's why we obey God rather than men: Because of the Trinity, Incarnation, Resurrection, forgiveness, repentance, and witness of the apostles. Human beings have way more power than individual Christians do. But God has way more power than all human institutions put together.

## **II. The Sanhedrin's Basic Commitments, v. 33**

Well, Luke juxtaposes the apostles' commitments, as outlined in Peter's speech, with the Sanhedrin's commitments, as outlined in their actions.

### **A. Jealousy, v. 17**

The first thing they're dedicated to is jealousy. That's why the high priest rose up. The Sadducees and every other ally the high priest had were insanely jealous of the apostles' power. They hated

the fact that people were getting healed by these upstart religious teachers. And so they were jealous. Have you ever been jealous or envious? This is the sin of sorrow at another's good. Rather than rejoicing in the good the apostles were doing, the high priest & co. hated it and were angry about it.

Have you been upset that another church is converting people and we're not? That a friend is making more money than you? That your children are outshining you in some particular talent or activity? That one of your employees is better than you at a particular work task? Brothers and sisters, jealousy did not die with the high priest in the first century! It is still all over the church. Don't let envy poison this church, or your family.

### **B. Victimhood, v. 28**

They hated that the teaching of the apostles was making them look bad. They knew that they were going to get the reputation of Christ-killers from Peter's preaching. After all, he says it in sermon after sermon: "You killed Jesus." You don't have to be particularly bright to recognize that the New Testament tells us that the Jewish establishment was the main reason Jesus got killed. And the Sanhedrin take that and play the victim card with it. "We are wonderful spotless people and you are slanderously accusing us of murder!"

It's the same thing in the church today, by the way, folks. A group comes along and says "We need to be a lot more welcoming to gay people and make sure that they know our church is queer-affirming." We say "You need to stop trying to violate the seventh commandment."

And immediately they howl "Slander! We can hardly believe how horribly we are being misrepresented by these supposedly God-fearing but actually hypocritical 'conservatives' who are so harsh and unloving!"

Brothers and sisters, if someone is howling "Slander!", take a moment to look the situation over. Is something genuinely false and harmful being said? Or is the group upset just because someone had the temerity to tell the truth? The Jewish establishment really did crucify Jesus. Peter just said so openly, and when he did, that same establishment played the victim like nobody's business.

And you know what? Victimhood is alive and well in the church today, as healthy and spry as it ever was in the church of Peter's day. We feel that we are victims of the culture wars; that we are victims of the liberals; that we are victims of the cults, or the sins of broad evangelicalism, or of our fellow Christians within the same church who aren't living up to our standards. We love that self-righteous feeling of being a victim. Don't go there! You won't find the apostles playing the victim card; you mustn't either.

### **C. Homicidal Rage, v. 33**

Oh, yes, homicidal rage, being ready to kill people who challenged them, was another core commitment of the temple leadership. Do you get this angry? Do you secretly fantasize about killing those who confront you — or, more healthily, just think about them dying and how nice that would be? Don't tell you you've never daydreamed about so-and-so just getting a brain aneurysm and dying. I know you have. I have too. Brothers and sisters, that's not right. It's something God hates. The Christian way is the way of forgiveness — not revenge and hatred.

#### **D. Not Wanting to Fight God, v. 39**

Now, the temple leaders did have one commitment that was sort of good. They didn't want to fight God. Of course, they refused to admit that standing against Jesus Christ and His followers was standing against God. But when they heard Gamaliel suggest that hypothetically, if they were fighting God, that would be bad, they agreed.

But they wanted to think that they could avoid fighting God without facing the evidence of the twelve apostles who were eyewitnesses of everything Jesus did. Brothers and sisters, you can't be committed to not fighting God and also refuse to investigate what God really wants and really says.

#### **III. Both Sides Live Out Their Commitments, vv. 40-42**

Well, the passage ends with both sides enacting their commitments.

##### **A. The Sanhedrin's Impotent Violence, v. 40**

The Sanhedrin go first. They get violent, beating the apostles. But that violence is totally sterile and impotent. It does nothing to accomplish what the Sanhedrin want. Their commitments are wicked and pathetic, and so when they deploy violence it still does nothing for their cause. So it has ever been with persecutors. They might get very angry and violent, but they don't stop the message about Jesus.

##### **B. The Apostles' Potent Joy, vv. 41-42**

The apostles' joy is potent, though.

###### **1. Worthy to Suffer Shame for Jesus, v. 41**

They were worthy of being dishonored! How's that for a transvaluation of values? Do you feel worthy of being dishonored? The apostles did. They were glad that the Sanhedrin had said "Being on Jesus' team is bad, and you are clearly on that team."

Do you value being honored by God so much that you don't care what the establishment thinks of you? What those in charge think of you? That's where the apostles were. They were delighted to be shamed for Jesus. Are you? Are you willing to confess your sins (a shameful act) to please Him? Are you willing to be thought weird, fanatical, stupid because you believe in and talk about Him?

###### **2. Teaching and Evangelizing Jesus as Messiah, v. 42**

And so their potent joy results in them teaching and evangelizing Jesus. Everywhere, in the temple and in private homes, they continue to spread this good news that Jesus is the Lord's Anointed.

Do you know that news? Do you believe it? Does it fill your heart with a joy potent enough to obey God rather than men? Amen.