

“Loaded with Anger and Set on Detonate”

Acts 5:27-42

May 27th, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Here is what had been happening up to this point. Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to over 500 believers and the first church of Jewish Christians began. It was a voluntary commune and everyone shared all their possessions.

Curiously, a married couple named Ananias and Sapphira participated in giving over their possessions to the commune but they lied. They secretly held some things back. When confronted about their lying, each of them dropped over dead on the ground – making everyone frightened at such a fatal and supposedly supernatural event. Fear seized them all¹ but that was only the beginning.

Every day, Peter and the other apostles were teaching in the great Jerusalem temple and actually healing people of their diseases. People were joining the new movement of Christianity called “The Way.” Luke was careful to note that men and women were joining this new following and because of Jesus’ lifestyle, they included women in full participation (unlike their Jewish tradition then being exclusively for men). But the supernatural events were drawing people from all over the region.

Peter brought Tabitha² back from the dead.³ People were bringing their infirmed relatives in cots and leaving them on the street near Peter’s house – hoping and praying that he would walk by and his shadow would fall on them and cure them. They were bringing people from towns around the region in hopes of their being healed.

Imagine Peter living here in Cedar Grove and the shoulders of the road, which circles through this community, was lined with sick and aged people hoping to be cured. Think of that. People coming from North Tonawanda, Angola, Lockport and Rochester. Even Jamestown, Erie and Toronto. Demon possessed people were cured.



¹ Acts 5:5

² or Dorcus in Greek

³ Acts 9:36

All this didn’t go unnoticed by the prominent religious leaders in Jerusalem. Who were they?

The Jerusalem power structure consisted of representatives of two of the three largest Jewish groups. There were the Priests, lead by the High Priest, and they ran the Jerusalem temple cult. There was also the political and economic party the Sadducees who were the wealthy estate owners and politicians. Prominent members of both of these groups were on the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, their Supreme Court.

All of these people on the Sanhedrin wanted to keep the peace with the Roman occupying forces or they’d lose their temple, their religion and their estates. They were the wealthy right-wing Republicans types (in that culture) who wanted to keep the status quo at ANY cost. They were the ones who killed Jesus because of their fear of losing what they had.

The third group, the Pharisees, had only a few members on the Supreme Court Sanhedrin council. They were the professors who taught in any of the hundreds of neighborhood synagogues and worship centers.



As we reflect on this event, let’s focus on the emotions of those men in that courtroom chamber.

First, verse 17 tells us that they were filled with jealousy. You can almost hear their wives taunting them that morning, saying things like “What are you so jealous about? Here you are, a revered Justice on our nation’s Supreme Court, and you’re actually jealous of these fanatic fishermen friends of the dead Jesus.”

But their wives words⁴ to them at home didn’t get their attention, as it usually is when people are driven by jealousy and fear. They probably didn’t listen to others about anything and this was just one more irritant in their series of bad days. So Caiaphus, the High Priest, acted out because of his

⁴ had they actually uttered such taunts

jealousy and had these apostles arrested and thrown into jail.

A logical action, wouldn't you say?⁵ People going around speaking of resurrection from the dead, performing healings and miracles and you throw them in jail. More than a little close-minded, actually. If you had people in your neighborhood cured of their years of chronic afflictions, wouldn't you come to see it with an open mind and heart? Not if fear and jealousy has your soul in their grip!

So that night in their jail cells it's 'Touched By An Angel' time and they're all let out. But they're told to head straight for the temple again and tell the story of Jesus' life⁶. It's not Michalob time – it's Vacation Bible School and they are to do it right on center stage in marble-floored temple during business hours.



Comically, the temple brass straightened the wrinkles out in their judge robes but right when they were hoping to pompously process into their court room, their in-house goons didn't traipse in with a bunch of scared prisoners but said they couldn't find them in jail. Instead, they were conducting Jesus seminars in the hallway right outside the High Priest's office. So these leaders, according to Luke, were perplexed. They were shocked and confused that something happened that they hadn't controlled and expected. You see, they were control people who stared at the still-locked jail cells and there had been no violent insurrection and rescue attempt to free them.



Their next emotion, beyond their confusion, was fear. They were afraid that if they got into a scuffle and started dragging them from the crowds whom they were teaching there in the temple – their following would riot and stone THEM. What a reversal of fortune.

But fear had been governing them all their lives. They grew up learning and then teaching a religion of fear. They squirmed through the tough testing and academic challenges for certification

⁵ obviously suggested sarcastically

⁶ Acts 5:20

into the Priesthood cult. From then on, you can bet they made the ordination trials tough for the younger ones who followed.

They keep at teaching their toxic legalistic religion of being good enough before their equally judgmental God, so fear lived in their souls. But now they were not only afraid of these new Jesus followers – they were afraid of losing their social esteem by those who seemed enamored by their teachings.

Instead of taking them by force, their guards diplomatically coaxed Peter and the other apostles into their courtroom and they started in. 'We thought we told you not to teach any more – not to mention that you're hell-bent on blaming the blood of Jesus on us!' (A truly incredible bout of memory lapse on their part, wouldn't you say?)

It was just weeks before this that they had Jesus standing there bound in front of them while they spit on Him and slapped Him before dragging Him off to Herod to be tortured to death. And don't forget that they were the ones who actually bribed the temple guards, who had seen the resurrection, to lie and say it was His disciples who had stolen the body from the grave.⁷ Who did these guys think they were fooling? Of course, it wasn't Peter and his friends.

Peter essentially said, "Yea right, . . . but get this. We listen to God, not mere human big shots and it is God's very Holy Spirit Who is driving this movement through the hearts of us believers. Deal with it."



As you would expect, these leader's next emotion was rage. The people who are the most fearful are the ones who flip into rage the quickest. These fine religious clergy were so enraged that they wanted to kill them.⁸ Kill them. We're talking murder. They were bent on violence – again.



With exquisite contrast, Luke talks of Gamaliel, a respected Pharisee (who actually had been a teacher of Paul). He's on this Supreme Court

⁷ Matthew 28:12

⁸ Acts 5:33

Council and look how he acts in the face of this conflict.⁹

The first thing Gamaliel feels is sensitivity and consideration for these local Jewish followers of Jesus. He asks that they be taken out in the hall for a few minutes. It is obvious that he didn't want to talk ABOUT them in their presence as if they were objects or on some lower level of worth. So they were lead out of earshot into another room.



Next, Gamaliel warns his enraged colleagues to “carefully consider” what they would do about them and he had a suggested course of action. He cited two previous messianic Jewish revolt leaders – Theudous (and his 400 followers) and Judas the Galilean.¹⁰

‘Learn from history,’ Gamaliel was warning them. ‘Learn from your own religion,’ he continued with simple logic. ‘If this Christian movement is just human-made, it will fail just as did Theudous and Judas.’

‘If it is from God, however, you may find yourself actually fighting against God! So don't have anything to do with them – back away – and wait and see.’ And the reason he was urging them to back away was because if these people were

⁹ Gamaliel was actually the grandson of the famous Rabbi Hillel who was quoted extensively in the Mishnah writings. He was one of the two primary authorities on interpretations before Jesus' time. Gamaliel was so respected, according to Jewish historians, that he was the first rabbi (which means “my master”) to be called *rabban*, meaning “our master” or “the great one.” Gamaliel was known as a tolerant liberal and generous leader who always tried to keep the rabbis in unity, particularly in preserving the Pharisee tradition of life-after-death - which was coming under attack from the Sadducee party.

¹⁰ There was a Theudas who claimed to be the Messiah and that he could divide the Jordan river by verbally commanding it. He was decapitated by the Roman General Cuspius Fadus. Judas the Galilean appeared around 6 or 7 in the common era when a Quirinius order the national census (that bought Joseph and Mary to Jerusalem). This Judas joined with a Pharisee named Zudok and organized a rebellion against the Roman authorities. He may have been the founder of the revolutionary group called the Zealots or the more violent underground terrorists, the Sicarii.

starting a revolution, they'd be crushed and everyone associated with them.



With that, they “were convinced”¹¹ but watch their actions and emotions. They were convinced by this wisdom but went ahead and had them flogged (probably out of sight in a private room away from the more public areas of the temple). These leaders were mean spirited and violent. Certainly personality characteristics we'd want in our clergy today?¹²

Luke concludes the story by having the apostles give each other the ‘high-five’¹³ for being considered worthy enough to be taken seriously. Then they went right back out in the temple teaching again, every day, like it never happened. Who do these creeps in the black robes think they are anyway?



Every scripture passage is there not for the people being described. These stories are there for you. And they'll never be relevant to you unless you make it about you and the way you're living your life. But it all seems to come down to this in comparing the two ways the apostles were approached by these leaders.

If you died and everyone who knew you got together and started to talk about what you did with your life, what would they say?



Here's one possibility.

Perhaps they might talk, in polite tones, about your being defensive, fearful and jealous of others. Maybe they'd speak of your being judgmental, not open to new ideas or perspectives from other people. Not open for God to actually be doing something that you didn't think of yourself.

Maybe some would recall times when you were mean-spirited or even violent. Times you scared people into doing it your way.



A different possibility would be that those who know you would say you were always open to new

¹¹ Acts 5:39

¹² said in sarcasm

¹³ figuratively speaking

ideas, new teachings. They'd remember that you are open minded, always 'signed up for class,' so to speak, to keep learning. Maybe they'll talk of how you chose to act wisely – *never* gossiping and *never* saying negative things about others.

Perhaps they'd tell of times when you found yourself in a minority and you stayed calm and kept at your openness for learning but carefully weighed your thoughts and feelings instead of emotionally reacting. Perhaps they'd say you always gave the other person the benefit of the doubt and admitted that there's a lot you didn't know. How you were smart enough to wait things out until you persevered to learn more. That you weren't a hothead and you were not only able to learn from *your* experiences but also the experiences of *others*. That you intentionally opened yourself to the thinking of others outside of your limited circle of friends.



How will others probably talk about you? If you don't like how you think you'll be remembered, change now. What you say and do and teach – with even your casual comments – will either heal others or deepen their prejudice, perpetuate their negative thoughts and expand their fear of connecting with others.

Seek wisdom as if it is the very oxygen you need to live. Ask God – every day of your life – for wisdom.¹⁴ You'll get it. You'll get it from reading Proverbs and the life of Christ in the Gospels enough that you'll assimilate wisdom into the core of your being – so that you'll find yourself standing in the minority and suffer because of it.

¹⁴ **James 1:5-7:** If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

James 3:17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Be mindful of everything about which you're thinking, feeling and doing with yourself. This is your only chance at this life. Live without fear. Stand apart. Refuse to go along with the stupidity of what others around you choose to do with themselves.



Finally, do these things:

1. Make your word impeccable.

Tolerate nothing but the truth and make everything in your life stand firmly on the truth of your word. Confront untruth in words which perpetuate prejudice, hatred, bigotry and negative talk.

2. Don't take the opinions and actions of others personally.

It is only their opinion and if they are wrong, misinformed or toxic in their speech – disagree with them and refuse to give even the impression that their thoughts or actions control what you think of yourself and your worth.

3. Don't make assumptions.

You do this out of fear of not knowing enough, so you try to fill in the missing pieces in order to give yourself the impression that you know more than you actually do. Instead of assuming other people have done something or are doing something for wrong motives, ask. Investigate and ask questions instead of assuming and adding to the gossip.

4. Always do your best.

On any given day, regardless of how tired or discouraged or how little time or training you have, do your best with what you've got. Live in each moment of time – with whatever you have or don't have – but do your best.

5. And lastly, break away from old agreements that are corrosive and damaging to the core of who you are. One by one, break away from things which and people whom are poison.

These are the ways you and I can live our lives with integrity. This Fall I'll be leading some you in a course on these principles.¹⁵ But today, choose Gamaliel's way rather than the way of the High

¹⁵. One of the books, On which these five items are based, is *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz ISBN 1-878424-31-9.

Priest. You will change your life and no longer live
in fear. ✠

