

Fighting Against God?

Acts 5:38-39

This morning we'll be looking at the events that took place in the life of the early church in Acts chapter 5, but I want to first share with you where we're headed- I want to go ahead and let you know the key verses that we're going to hone in on and work on applying to our lives, verses 38 and 39. One of the religious leaders is speaking, and he's one of the top dogs amongst the leaders- he's older, has tons of experience- many looked up to him as a wise teacher. So, concerning the apostles who have been arrested, he says to the other religious leaders... ([verse 38-39](#))

These verses have huge implications for us- I can't wait to dig into them with you. But in order to feel their full weight, we'll need to back up and understand the full context. In Acts chapter 4 we learned that while being in this same area in the Temple courtyards, two of the apostles (Peter and John) were arrested and threatened that they were never to speak again of the name Jesus. But they prayed with the church and God answered their prayers giving them renewed boldness to continue sharing and teaching others about Jesus.

And last week we looked together in the first half of Acts chapter 5, soaking in the story of Ananias and Sapphira who were dishonest, in-authentic, and who were putting on a bit of a show to make themselves look godly. And in the midst of this special time of God's working, God made it very clear that faking godliness was completely unacceptable. After God took the lives of Ananias and Sapphira, there was a renewal of fear, respect, reverence, awe- for God and His holiness. The church continued sharing with others within the church who had need, miracles were still happening regularly, more and more people were choosing to place their trust in Jesus, and they were all meeting together regularly in Solomon's portico- or porch as we might say today. This area was basically built into the temple courtyard walls, imagine the temple building in the center with two smaller "town square" type courtyards

that were surrounded by walls, and then that entire complex was surrounded by a massive courtyard- think basically a football field of flat open space to the front of the temple, and to both sides of the temple. And then all that entire area was surrounded by tall, military/castle type stone walls that on the inside portion attached to a roof covering that extended a little inwards towards the courtyard, supported by massive pillars. If you look on the screen there's a pretty good rendering of what the Temple area looked like in Jerusalem in the book of Acts. Solomon's porch was an area underneath one of the pillared coverings, and this is where the church was gathering- where they listened to the apostles and engaged with others in conversations about Jesus. And this is where round number 2 arrest takes place, this time it wasn't just Peter and John, but it sounds like perhaps *all* the apostles were rounded up this time and put in jail. Let's check it out, starting in verse 17... ([17-21a](#))

So, against orders, the apostles are teaching and boldly talking about Jesus. And a mob of religious leaders come (most likely in collaboration with the Roman leaders) and put them in jail. But God sends an angel, leads them out, and then tells them to go back and continue teaching- and they do just that. Now, if I were in their shoes, I might have been thinking, "Uh... I don't know Lord, this might be like baseball- 3rd strike and you're out. Can we just go somewhere else to talk about Jesus?" It would be like getting pulled over for going 80 mph on the highway and getting off with a warning. And then God says to go pass that patrol car again, going 100 mph this time. I'd be like "God, I don't know if that's going to go so well- aren't we pushing things just a little?" But, no, they've built this relationship with Jesus, and are learning to trust Him no matter what the circumstance, and so they go back and continue teaching despite any temptation to give way to fear.

Meanwhile, in the verses that follow, we learn that the leaders aren't aware of the escape, and they send for the apostles in order to put them on trial, but they can't find them, and are now greatly confused about what is going on. But then someone runs in and says "The same guys you

arrested are out again teaching the people!” So, they go out again, round up the apostles another time, and make their now 3rd arrest, and this time, instead of throwing them in jail- they bring them directly in front of the jury, and say this to them, [verse 28](#)...

This is the “we told you not to do this” moment. It’s the pronouncement of the apostles’ clear violation. And the apostles could have responded in many ways- they could have gotten all riled up, been angry, they could have attempted to justify themselves, but no- look at their gospel-focused response, verse 29... ([29-32](#)).

They respond with just a clear, simple presentation of the gospel. To paraphrase their response, they basically said: “We live to obey God. God sent Jesus who was killed on a cross. God raised up Jesus. Jesus is the Savior who gives opportunity to repent in exchange for forgiveness. And this is our story.” They kept the focus on God, on the truth, on the heart of the matter. They could have responded and chased other justices and talked about human rights, political rights, suing, freedom of speech, whatever- but no, instead they just presented the gospel- clear and simple.

Before my wife and I went overseas we did a 3-day interrogation/security training. It was intense- guys dressed up in black would storm the classroom, take a “hostage,” and place them in a separate room to be interrogated. There was a video camera in the room that displayed on a screen to the rest of us what was taking place. There were different scenarios- different motives, threats, stories presented- acted out and taught on with the purpose of equipping those being sent out with the skills to handle a threatening situation while living in countries that could be hostile towards Americans or hostile towards followers of Jesus. And one of the most useful tools taught to us was the idea of keeping responses within a predetermined “box.” You had to keep it in the box. The box contained truthful answers that were simple, and that would keep things focused where they needed to be. Answers outside the box

could dig deeper holes, could lead to further misconceptions, and could cause more endangerment to yourself and/or to others.

In our time overseas, we ended up utilizing our box responses quite often for our own safety at checkpoints when traveling in and out of areas. One of our box responses when we were questioned was something like *"We're volunteers with the such and such organization."* And no matter what question was asked, that was our response. "Why were you going into this area?" *"We're volunteers with the such and such organization."* "And who did you talk to?" *"Sir, I'm sorry, we're just volunteers with the such and such organization."* "And what is it that you do?" *"Um, we're **volunteers** with the such and such organization."*

And I believe this box strategy is kind of what the early church used over and over again when questioned, threatened, and interrogated. "Why are you talking about things that are contrary to our customs and beliefs?" *"We live to obey God. God sent Jesus who died on a cross but was raised back to life. He's the Savior who gives forgiveness to the repentant."* "Why are you helping them?" *"We live to obey God. God sent Jesus who died on a cross but was raised back to life. He's the Savior who gives forgiveness to the repentant."* "What do you think about me slitting your throat if you refuse to renounce this Jesus guy?" *"Well... we live to obey God. God sent Jesus who died on a cross but was raised back to life. He's the Savior who gives forgiveness to the repentant."* How well we would do to already prepare our box statement as believers, so that no matter what challenging circumstances arise, our response would focus our own minds, *and* the minds of the those who might come against us- to be focused on the gospel. *"We live to obey God. God sent Jesus who died on a cross but was raised back to life. He is the Savior who gives forgiveness to the repentant."*

Well, as good of a box statement as it was, the religious leaders' response was not positive. Maybe it was because their statement did also have a little bit of accusation to it in [verse 30](#), *"The God of our fathers raised up*

*Jesus, whom **you** had put to death...*” That was probably the trigger. It would be good for us to note, don’t accuse the interrogators in your box statement... hey, the apostles did as best as they could, they didn’t take the 3 day security training. [Verse 33](#)...

The phrase “cut to the quick” means the statement cut deep, it cut past the outward skin and deeper into the living, inside tissue. In other words, they were deeply offended and infuriated by their words. But, now here is where we get the wise counsel from the top dog religious leader, verse 34... [\(34-42\)](#)

Gamaliel was old enough to have perhaps been one of religious leaders questioning and listening to Jesus when Jesus was a young boy visiting the temple with His parents. [\(Luke 2:46-47\)](#) Later on in Acts [\(Acts 22:3\)](#), we’ll see that Gamaliel was whom Paul studied under before his surrender to Jesus. And whether Gamaliel was beginning to trust in Jesus or not, I believe that God used him here in this moment to speak Godly wisdom. He pointed out that previous uprisings had faded into nothing, and that perhaps this was something else that would also fade into nothing, and therefore they should not get heavily involved in trying to squash it. *Or*, if it was something that truly God was doing, then they should *still* not get heavily involved in trying to squash it, because they’d be fighting against the very hand of God. Now obviously, sitting on this side of history, we can clearly see that God *was* involved and that it *was* His will that the message of Jesus be taken to the ends of the earth. And there in the moment, the *apostles* clearly knew God was involved and that it was His will to spread the message of Jesus. And because of their confidence and their trust that God was at work, we see in [verses 41 and 42](#) that the apostles just let this incident roll off their back like water on a duck, and they continued to teach and proclaim Jesus there under the temple porch gathering place, as well as in homes as they met together casually and organically in smaller numbers.

Now, surely a large part of the application of this passage to us today is to be bold in our witness no matter the situation, to have gospel-focused responses, to obey God above any governmental law. But I want to make sure you don't miss the wisdom from Gamaliel here in [verses 38 and 39](#).

I want us to put ourselves in the shoes of the religious leaders during this time. We've looked at the book of Acts so far mostly from the perspective of the believers, but now I want us to consider what was going on in the minds of the religious leaders. Now, some chose to believe in Jesus- some openly, others secretly. And some were really sincere in their attempt to please God and follow Him, but others were just going through the motions. Some had open hearts to Jesus and were perhaps shifting their stance after learning more and witnessing all the events surrounding His death and resurrection, but others had only become more hardened against Jesus. While there was some variation amongst them, generally speaking the "Jesus followers" were a bit of a threat to the religious leaders' way of life. The situation was uncomfortable, with perhaps a mix of emotions- pride for attempting to keep their religion pure and untampered with, but also maybe some remorse and questions after sentencing Jesus to death. And they're hearing about miracles, and this group meeting under the porch covering is growing each week, there's less people coming to sacrifice in the temple- what had been comfortable, stable, and predictable for years and years- was suddenly being overturned. And they were fighting it, tooth and nail. Perhaps it was beginning to consume them- a desire to keep things from changing, to get things back to how they were, to snuff out anything that was causing discomfort. And Gamaliel's advice was to stop fighting it so hard, because either things would just work out in the end anyway, or if it was God causing the changes they definitely didn't want to be fighting against God.

Now again, some of these guys were godly and were really seeking the Lord- they knew their Bibles, they never missed a worship time, they spent time with God in prayer, and yet- they were still missing something that God was doing. Perhaps their own pride, selfishness, guilt, hard-

headedness- was in the way of allowing them to see Jesus for who He is. If they only could see for a moment that it was *God* causing the disruption, that it was God bringing in a little discomfort, that it was God making things less stable, that it was God bringing the unpredictable into existence. He was causing this unexpected shift in the lives of the religious leaders, so that their lives would actually become improved, bettered, and blessed- but they weren't seeing this element of the gospel and were actually resisting and fighting against the uncomfortable change. And if they would only *stop* resisting and fighting, they would be led to true life, joy, peace, and contentment through their surrender.

And see, this is where I believe you and I can sometimes live. God is doing something, or allowing something to happen, and... it rubs us. We somehow miss that it is Him at work ultimately behind the scenes- working in the midst of a fallen world, wanting to bring redemption to the brokenness of this world. Obviously, the best-case scenario would be to recognize how God may be at work, but if we are missing that, we would probably at least do somewhat ok if we just kept on and ignored the rub, trusting that it will work out eventually. But instead... we fight. We strive. We let circumstances dictate our emotions. We become reactive, and often not in Godly, gospel- centered ways. We react negatively to another's counsel, or to a rebuke, or we respond with anger, or demand in our prayers that God would change things or change other people. We get defensive, bitter, frustrated, stressed. And I think we often fail to ask the questions of "How might God be working and orchestrating things through this situation?" "How is God building my character and preparing me for His kingdom through this rub?" "How can I glorify God in the midst of this circumstance?"

Now yes, there are spiritual attacks that we need to discern and fight against, but that's not what I'm referring to right now. The type of fighting that I am referring to is the self-preserving type of fighting and striving because things aren't going like we want them to go. The religious leaders *and* the Jesus-followers both had reason to become frustrated and bitter

as a result of self-preservation, rights infringement, unmet expectations, anger at God for not doing what they would prefer Him to do. The religious leaders filtered their frustration through the lens of their own self-esteem, but the Jesus-followers filtered their frustration through the lens of Jesus' work on the cross. They both were experiencing negative life circumstances, but their responses to those circumstances were completely different, and thus their life trajectories ended up completely different.

There's an illustration that someone put together that describes the difficulties we experience in life as being the "heat" of life. And we are all like trees growing in that environment of heat- at times, scorching heat. And our responses to that heat determine what are lives, as trees, produce. Often we respond to the heat of life in sinful ways, and we thus grow thorns. We react to life's heat with escapism, depression, fear, anger, deceit. But if we can respond by applying to our lives the work of Jesus in His life, death, and resurrection- then we have the opportunity to grow *fruit* in the heat of life. Fruit of endurance, wisdom, patience, trust, joy. Our reactions and responses determine so much. And I believe that often we respond to life in ways that would give the impression that we, (like the religious leaders here) are missing some element of the gospel. Are there times in which we are, in the moment not seeing some part of the work of God through Jesus? How do avoid being like the religious leaders here? For them, the element of the gospel they were missing was the very foundation of the gospel- Jesus! And without a relationship with Jesus, you are missing so much of the life God desires you to have here on earth, and without a relationship with Jesus you will miss out *completely* on the life to come in eternity that He desires for you.

But if we have a relationship with Jesus, you and I can still, through our reactions and responses to life- ignore, miss, forget- elements of the gospel. I talked about the apostles' gospel- centered "box response" to being questioned, threatened, and interrogated, and how we too could benefit from that model; but perhaps we could also benefit from having a

bit of a personal box response prepared for any circumstance in life that might cause us to feel a little anxious and unsettled. To have just a little mantra, or small check list, or a verse we train ourselves to immediately recall whenever we start to feel like life-as-we-know-it is getting altered in some way, or when there's a rub in a relationship, or when something unexpected happens. And it's something that we probably need to decide *now* will be our response, *before* whatever happens, because in the moment it might be difficult to come up with a godly, gospel-focused response. This week I felt like my box response for when something happens that makes my blood pressure rise, my box response needs to be a prayer: "God, you are still fully in control. You are always at work in every situation. What might you be wanting to accomplish in this situation, or accomplish in my heart and life as a result of this situation?" How much healthier could I be if I were able to make that my first, go to reaction in every circumstance? Feel free to attempt to adopt that or a similar "box" prayer response, but maybe yours might be more like a statement followed by a scripture verse. Something like: "God is my Father who loves me in ways I can't even comprehend, and I love Him too. He causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him." ([Romans 8:28](#)) Or maybe you need to aim to make your reaction just super simple: "God is with me."

I want to give you a couple minutes to process this idea- I encourage you to right now in this moment, predetermine how you want to respond to life's heat- from little annoyances to major upheavals. How can you go ahead and aim to bear fruit rather than thorns, for your responses to be filtered through the work of the cross rather than through sinful nature? I want you to go ahead and think of a personal "in the box," gospel-centered type response so that you, (and those around you) would be able to focus on God's work, and not fight against Him or miss what He might be doing on your behalf and for His glory.