

Acts Series Part 15

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[0 : 0 0] Everything changes. Nothing stays the same. No constants, no absolutes. All is negotiable.

Sometimes we get the impression that these are the principles or rules by which our society operates. As this evening we consider the passage that we're going to be considering as we continue through the book of Acts, a passage that describes Peter and the apostles before the Sanhedrin and how they are charged and how they defend themselves.

As we consider this passage, I want to identify that which is timeless in the account. And I'll mention the four things that I'll be highlighting, those things that are timeless.

And then as we consider them one by one we'll see how they fit in or where we find them in the passage that we're going to be reading just in a moment. First of all, a timeless antipathy. Maybe you can take a mental note of these things and as we read the passage see if you can spot what it is that I'm coming up with these titles I suppose.

A timeless antipathy. Then a timeless imperative. A timeless message and a timeless principle. So these are the matters we're going to be considering in this passage.

[1 : 3 8] We're talking about Acts chapter 5 and verses 27 through to the end of the chapter. Now we're going to read that part of the chapter.

It will help us just to read the passage and have it familiar in our mind as we then consider it in the way that I've described. So Acts chapter 5 from verse 27.

You'll remember the occasion.

And we pick up the story at that point in verse 27 of Acts chapter 5. Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest.

We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, he said. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.

[3 : 0 0] Peter and the other apostles replied, We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.

God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.

When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.

Then he addressed them. Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago, Judas appeared claiming to be somebody and about 400 men rallied to him.

He was killed. All his followers were dispersed and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt.

[4 : 13] He too was killed and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case, I advise you, leave these men alone. Let them go. For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail.

But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God. His speech persuaded them.

They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name.

Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ. The Word of God.

So, Peter and the apostles have been freed from prison thanks to the intervention of the angel.

[5 : 19] And yet, that divine help that was granted to them clearly isn't some guarantee that they will now be free from any opposition.

Quite the contrary. Immediately, they find themselves once again being opposed by the religious authorities and brought before them to answer the charges that are made.

And as we consider the charges that are presented to them and the manner in which they respond, we will identify these timeless elements in the account.

First of all, in the charge that is brought before them, this charge reveals what we are describing as a timeless antipathy.

To put it another way, what is it that drives the high priest and his associates to oppose the apostles with such vigor? It's very clear that at the heart of their opposition is their hatred of the name.

[6 : 23] There in verse 28, we read the charge that is made. We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name.

The high priest, clearly, at the heart of his opposition, we identify this dislike, this antipathy, this hatred for the name to the extent that he's reluctant even to pronounce the name of Jesus and rather describes what he describes or says what he has to say in this fashion, this derisory fashion.

We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Indeed, as he goes on in his charge, he again very deliberately avoids even pronouncing the name of Jesus.

Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood. This man. Again, I don't think it's an accidental thing that he avoids pronouncing the name.

There is in this man and in his associates a profound antipathy to Jesus, to the name of Jesus, to the person of Jesus.

[7 : 43] Now, there are other factors in play. There are political factors. There is a concern that their power will be lessened by the influence of these Christians.

And perhaps we could identify other reasons why they opposed the apostles. But I think we are right in affirming that at the heart of their opposition, there is this timeless antipathy, this timeless opposition to God.

And here to the eternal Son of God, to the name of Jesus. A timeless antipathy. And of course that is true.

It has always been so. And it will ever be so. There are times in history where that antipathy, that hatred of Jesus or towards Jesus is more visible.

It's more crude in its expression. And there are other times when it is more subtle. It's clear that at times of growth, as was the case here in Jerusalem, there is a particular backlash, as it were, of those who are enemies of the Gospel, of those who are enemies of God.

[9 : 02] They are disturbed by evidence that God is at work. They are disturbed to see many coming into a relationship and a friendship with their enemy.

And so there is a particular opposition and an intensity to it, as is the case or was the case on this occasion.

But even today, I wouldn't say even today, including today, particularly today, we are also engaged in a spiritual warfare as the church of Jesus Christ.

And there are enemies who hate the name of Jesus. We are surrounded by those who hate the name of Jesus. Not all who surround us, but there are those who hate His name.

And there are those who hate His name with a passion when He is presented as He must be and ought to be as the only name given under heaven whereby we may be saved.

[10 : 09] When He is presented in that way, when in obedience to the command of the angels that was given to the apostles, we would preach the full message of the Gospel of Jesus as the only way whereby men and women, sinners all, can be reconciled to God.

The only name. Then there are those who find that message entirely objectionable and offensive. And they hate the name. It has ever been so.

Here we have in the opposition of the high priest and his associates a timeless antipathy. But as we consider a little bit more the charge that is brought against the apostles, a charge that is born of this antipathy, this hatred of the name, we can just notice one or two elements of the charge that is brought.

Two parts of the charge that I just want to note briefly. One that is true and the other that is false. What is it that the high priest says?

Having reminded them that they had been under strict orders not to teach in this name, he then goes on to say there in verse 28, Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.

[11 : 30] If we think of the two parts of this charge, the first one true and the second one false. The first thing that he says that is true and irritatingly true for the high priest is you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching.

It's a very eloquent and a very vivid description of what the apostles had been doing. They had indeed filled Jerusalem. Everybody in Jerusalem knew of this name. Many were followers of this name but certainly all knew of him.

This teaching, as the high priest very accurately states, had been brought in such a way that it had filled Jerusalem. This was true.

But then the high priest goes on to say something that is false. He accuses the apostles in this fashion. He says that you are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.

Now this accusation that the high priest brings to the door of the apostles reveals the foolishness of a sinner's heart.

[12 : 38] He says to them, you are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood. Now this is such a foolish thing to say, firstly because it's impossible for anybody to make somebody else guilty of anything.

The apostles couldn't make the high priest and his associates guilty of the blood of Jesus. What the apostles were doing fearlessly and they do so again on this occasion is to accuse the religious authorities of this crime and to indicate that they were indeed guilty but they weren't making them guilty.

They had made themselves guilty by their actions and yet this is the manner in which the high priest levels the charge against the apostles.

But not only is it foolish in that sense but it's also foolish in that it betrays a serious case of what we might call short-term memory loss or at least selective memory on the part of the religious authorities.

if we just cast our minds back a little and remember how the Jews responded to Pilate washing his hands and declaring himself innocent of this man's blood.

[13 : 56] That was the winner. We know the story well of how Pilate in a very futile fashion certainly not achieving his objective of freeing himself from guilt or responsibility but nonetheless this is what he did in a very visible way and how did the Jews respond to this action of Pilate?

Well we find that in Matthew chapter 27 and verse 25 and we can just notice it very briefly. Matthew 27 and verse 25 in response to Pilate washing his hands and announcing I am innocent of this man's blood it is your responsibility then we read all the people answered let his blood be on us and on our children.

Now we don't know exactly the composition of that crowd who were before Pilate but it seems entirely reasonable that their sentiments were sentiments that eloquently expressed the sentiments of the high priest and those who were guilty of sending Jesus to his death.

We take his blood upon us they've already confessed and yet now they are complaining and accusing the apostles of making them guilty of this man's blood.

Well these things simply reflect how the enemies of the gospel the enemies of Jesus Christ lack any coherence in the position that they take.

[15 : 30] Nonetheless it doesn't lessen in any way the intensity with which they would oppose those who are of Christ. So a timeless antipathy but then in response to the charges that are laid before them we find Peter and the apostles first of all revealing a timeless imperative as they would respond there in verse 29 we find Peter in representation of the apostles replying Peter and the other apostles replied suggestion there is all of them replying but presumably Peter as their spokesman and what does he say and of course what he says reflects the sentiments of all the group of apostles what does he first say we must obey God rather than men this is what we're describing as a timeless imperative we must obey

God rather than men now this is something that they had already said Peter had already expressed previously very recently in chapter 4 and verse 19 on the previous occasion when he had found himself before these very men who made up the Sanhedrin in chapter 4 and verse 19 we've already noticed these words of Peter but Peter and John replied judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God and they continue the same principle and here repeated by Peter and all the apostles and God's people have ever recognized this imperative and the solemn consequences that can accompany being faithful to this imperative we must obey God rather than men the examples are many and vary we've already read of Daniel and of his loyalty to God and of his adherence to this timeless principle of rendering loyalty first to God before loyalty or obedience to men and as we would consider other perhaps examples of such loyalty our minds in these days have been drawn to the 70th anniversary of the start of

World War II and that occasion reminds us of those who suffered under Hitler for being true to this imperative of obeying God rather than men we think of a man such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer executed for his loyalty to this principle of obeying God rather than men we think of a Corrie Tenboom and many others like her perhaps unknown to us who suffered a similar fate for being loyal to this timeless imperative we must obey God rather than men and of course church history affords us so many other examples it's also worth noting that this principle this timeless principle or this timeless imperative serves as the cornerstone for a noble tradition of Christians who have opted for the root of civil disobedience when faced with the choice of obeying God or men as Christians and this is true today for us as Christians we must disobey when civil or indeed ecclesiastical authorities would command us to do what God forbids or forbid us from doing that which

God commands in these circumstances and we would say in these circumstances alone we are under obligation we are duty bound to pay heed to this timeless imperative of obeying God rather than men this precisely was the situation that Peter and the apostles found themselves in they had been forbidden by the civil and religious authorities of doing that which God commands they had been forbidden from teaching in this name and that prohibition came under this principle that they had to choose do we obey men or do we obey God and they very eloquently expressed their choice not only with their words but with their actions so we have here as they begin their defense this timeless imperative we must obey God rather than men now it might be mentioned just in the passing that the application of this imperative isn't just for the big things that may come our way as

Christians but this principle holds in the playground in the office in our homes and in so many circumstances day by day when we are faced with this choice who do I obey do I obey God or do I obey men but as the apostles continue their defense they go on to present what we can call a timeless message and this timeless message is described in verses 30 and 31 having established their obligation to obey God rather than men they go on Peter goes on to bring in synthesis it may be that Peter's original discourse or defense was longer than what we have here we don't know but certainly what we have here is this summary statement that presents a timeless message the message of the gospel there in verse 30 the God of our fathers raised

[21 : 31] Jesus from the dead whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel now there's much that could be said concerning the message that is presented but what we can say and for reasons of time we limit ourselves to saying is that it revolves around it all revolves around Jesus this name so hated by the high priest Jesus crucified Jesus raised and Jesus exalted these are the three fundamental truths that Peter presents as he would present this timeless message Jesus who died Jesus who was crucified Jesus who was raised by the father and Jesus who was exalted to the right hand of God this is our timeless message of Jesus who died in the place of sinners who died in my place and in your place of Jesus who was raised by the father in vindication of his finished work of Jesus exalted as prince and savior of all who would put their trust in him but notice also that in the words of Peter the exalted

Jesus is presented as being active now so in the words that he uses to describe Jesus' ministry it's not all looking back into the past he's not simply saying well this is these are all the things that have happened to Jesus and well it's all finished now no the words of Peter present a Jesus who is active now having been exalted there in verse 31 God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel so what Peter is saying is that now in that place where he has been exalted to he is active he is active in this way in giving repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel this language that Peter uses is intriguing and we can maybe just comment on it briefly when he describes

Jesus active in heaven in this way giving repentance and forgiveness of sins and particularly intriguing is the verb that Peter uses that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel how are we to understand how this works if I can put it that way what does that mean that Jesus gives repentance and forgiveness of sins are we to understand this simply as indicating that the work of Jesus his death and resurrection now exalted to the right hand of the father that this finished work gives sinners the opportunity to repent and be forgiven the language he uses and the manner that he expresses himself seems to be saying more than that just as Paul in such an eloquent manner in his letter to the Ephesians presents faith as a gift of God that no man may boast so here

Peter presents perhaps surprisingly not only faith as a gift of God but even the repentance that we exercise as we recognize our condition as sinners and put our trust in Jesus that repentance is a gift of God and having received the gift of repentance and having exercised this gift we then receive a further gift the gift of forgiveness of sins so this Jesus this Jesus who is at the heart of this timeless message this message is not simply a historical account of things that have happened in the past but this Jesus remains the Jesus of history and the Jesus who is active today at the right hand of the Father exalted on high that he might today give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel and to all who would come to him who all who would receive these gifts that are being offered and it's maybe fitting and appropriate this evening to ask that question of you is this a gift that you have received this gift of repentance this gift of forgiveness of sins but then as we continue identifying those things that are timeless in this account the passage concludes with what we can call a timeless principle we've noticed so far this timeless antipathy that there has ever been and ever will be of the enemies of the name of Jesus the timeless imperative to be loyal to God rather than to men the timeless message concerning Jesus and his death and resurrection and his current active work in that exalted place but then as the account continues we're presented with a timeless principle and by this

I'm referring to the argument presented by Gamaliel to the rest of the Sanhedrin that results in the apostles being freed now we're not going to go into the details of all that Gamaliel says particularly we won't be considering the historical examples that he gives but simply to notice that having presented one or two historical examples that back up the principle that he's going to go on to make he then states the principle that serves as the argument that allows the apostles to be freed and the principle is found in verses 38 and 39 the Sanhedrin are having to decide well what are we going to do with these men and Gamaliel involves himself in that discussion with this contribution in verse 38 what does he say I advise you in this present case

[28 : 12] I advise you leave these men alone let them go and here we really have the principle for if their purpose or activity is of human origin it will fail but if it is from God you will not be able to stop these men I think Gamaliel states the principle very clearly it doesn't require much elaboration but in summary the argument or principle is that if their mission is from God it will succeed and if it is of human origin it will fail now we're describing that as a timeless principle but we could maybe just pose the question is it a timeless principle it's what Gamaliel thought it's the argument he made and it was successful in persuading the Sanhedrin to release the apostles not before giving them a thorough flogging it's worth noting so it achieved its purpose but is it actually a timeless principle is it true what he says generally we consider this man very highly as a very wise man and we do so on the basis of these wise words as we consider them but it's worth asking the question is this actually a timeless principle does this principle hold in the real world it sounds very nice if this is of God it will succeed if it's of man it will fail but is that the way things work is that what we see round about us is it not the case that projects of human origin often enjoy dramatic success and missionary endeavors of divine initiative seem to struggle is that not what we so often see is this

Gamaliel principle is it a timeless principle or is it just his take on the world that achieved that immediate objective of having the apostles released having asked the question I think in answering it I think we can say that ultimately the principle expressed here is true and timeless ultimately God's purposes will succeed and that which is of solely human origin will fail but it is worth noting that this confirmation if you wish of the principle often will only be appreciated in the light of eternity and as we look around the real world in which we live today it won't always be as black and white as Gamaliel seems to consider or suggest Christ but I think we do have here something we can describe as a timeless principle and if you'll allow me and indulge me just to mention one other timeless element in this passage as we draw things to a close and it's what we could call a timeless demand in a way it's going back to the message that Peter presents and particularly what we've considered regarding repentance and the need to repent and indeed this reference to repentance and forgiveness of sins is a significant one in that even to these great hardened enemies of the name they are being given the opportunity by Peter presenting these truths that he is presenting them with a challenge with an opportunity or what we might call this timeless demand the demand to repent but as we just very briefly consider this demand let's do so from this perspective that this demand this demand to repent is directed as urgently to Gamaliel as to the high priest so often the high priest is presented as the foolish despot and Gamaliel the wise old owl you've got the baddie in the story and the goodie in the story and yet as far as we can tell both equally guilty of ignoring this timeless demand to repent and in that regard both fools you see there is nothing certainly in the passage before us to suggest that Gamaliel though no doubt a wise man and a respected man yet he is a witness of all these things that are going on in Jerusalem he is one who has knowledge of the gospel as it has filled Jerusalem he knows of the signs that are accompanying the apostles he knows of how they have been released from prison in these miraculous circumstances all of these things he has knowledge of and yet he does not repent he does not become a follower of Jesus and so while we maybe congratulate him on his wise words and by all means

I have no problem with congratulating him for those wise words yet sadly and tragically at least on the basis of the information we have before us he together with the high priest was equally guilty of ignoring this opportunity and this demand to repent this gift of repentance that the exalted Jesus was offering to him was not received or so it would seem a timeless demand so today there are those with a poisoned tongue who actively and aggressively oppose the gospel but also so many so many like Gamaliel genuinely nice folk sympathetic to the gospel and yet equally in need of receiving the gift of repentance and exercising that gift as it is received and as they do so receiving the forgiveness that they need as we all do let us then be aware as we close let us be aware and prepared for the timeless antipathy of those who hate the name but let us be true to the timeless imperative of obeying

God rather than man in our situation and in our generation let us courageously proclaim the timeless message concerning Jesus crucified raised and exalted and let us do all these things in the confidence of the timeless principle that if our mission be of God as it is it will succeed let us pray as be we Eminem have it is on on, whoa and he ous ous as as as all these things relevant in the the people are one as say