

Contrasting Reactions to the Gospel

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Scripture reading: Acts 5:12–42

Newton's third law of motion states, "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." You might wonder what physics has to do with the gospel. It is this principle of action and reaction that runs through the Book of Acts as the gospel continues to be preached boldly, accompanied by signs and wonders. As Christ continues to build His church by the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the apostles, the kingdom of darkness unleashes its fury against the growing church. Coming on the heels of Ananias and Sapphira, Luke records three contrasting movements as it were of this action-reaction as the gospel continues to increase.

The first contrast that arises from our passage (vv. 12–16) is that of *crippling fear and vibrant faith*. In response to the sin and judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira we read that great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. This fear has been described as an indefinable mixture of reverence, fear, pleasure, joy, awe, and love which overwhelms us when we realize who God is and what He has done for us. But it seems that another type of fear was manifesting itself as the apostles preached and worked their signs and wonders through the power of the Holy Spirit, and as the church gathered in unity and the fear of God. Verse 13 records for us this human fear, "And of the rest durst no man [no man dared] join himself to them: but the people magnified them."

Commentators struggle with what to do with this verse, but a straightforward reading of the text tells us that this is a reaction that comes not from the believers but from unbelievers. There were spiritual impressions being made upon their hearts and minds with what they witnessed. But there was this fear that held them back—an unhealthy fear of God’s judgment, and a fear of committing all to follow Christ. They were fence-sitters, you might say. They were impressed with what they witnessed and even magnified the apostles, but because of the judgment of God that they had witnessed, they held back. Their unhealthy fear of God and their fear of commitment crippled them spiritually. Perhaps they even moved with the crowds in the Temple identifying with the church, but after what had happened they hung back and did not dare to make the commitment for fear of what God or the temple guard might do to them. They did not want to end up like Ananias and Sapphira, so they thought it better to hang on to sin and hang back than be revealed to be hypocrites like they were.

There was not just this crippling fear, but there was also vibrant faith found in the church immediately after the death of Ananias and Sapphira. There is this principle at work—addition by subtraction. That sounds counterintuitive doesn’t it? How does something grow by subtracting from it? Because of the discipline that took place inside the church, the fear of God came upon all the church, and this fear of God in turn led to the addition of believers to the church and acted as a self-disciplining tool to keep the half-hearted and non-committed out of the church. And how do we know that the church was growing even though many were crippled by unhealthy fear? Because verse 14 tells us, “And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and

women.” In spite of the devil’s attempts to keep people half-hearted and non-committal about joining with Christ and His church, the Spirit of God is far more powerful in adding to the church. His methods are counterintuitive. He uses faithful discipline and faithful preaching of the Word of God to build His church. This is not something we immediately call a good strategy for church growth. But it is this that the Holy Spirit uses to add multitudes to the church and to keep out those who are half-hearted and non-committal to Christ.

But there is more going on in terms of vibrant faith. In verses 15 and 16 we read of the sick, both rich and poor, and those crowded with unclean spirits who were being healed as they were brought to the apostles. What these verses indicate is that there were multitudes of such people lying in the street, hoping for Peter’s shadow to touch them for healing. What is this but a similar picture to the faith of the woman with the issue of blood who simply wanted to touch the hem of Jesus’s garment for healing? And the power was not in Peter’s shadow. Here we have language that points sinners to the power of the Holy Spirit. The word here for “overshadow” is also used by Luke in his Gospel when the angel comes to Mary and says, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee” (Luke 1:35). It is also used of the glory cloud that descended upon the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. This is nothing else but the power and presence of God the Holy Spirit moving along the streets of Jerusalem. It is here where the hope for healing of these sinners lay. (The original text actually has the emphasis simply on “the shadow,” and doesn’t necessarily identify it as Peter’s.) And we see that the Spirit draws others from beyond Jerusalem as we read in verse 16. This is not about Peter, but about

the Spirit working vibrant faith in the hearts of the sick and those possessed with unclean spirits as He draws these hearts and lives to Christ.

What do we learn from this contrast? The Holy Spirit is at work in the church, both in keeping His church pure from those who are non-committal and afraid of joining themselves to Christ, but also in building His church by working vibrant faith in the hearts of those who believe that a mere touch of the Spirit's power can make them whole. Where do you fit today in this contrast?

Do you face crippling fear today? Do you fear God's judgment because of sin and so continue in sin because that is better than ending like Ananias and Sapphira? Or is your fear motivated by what man might do and say if you would wholeheartedly bow to the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ on your life? Are you attracted to the preaching of the gospel and of Christ, but lack firm commitment because you do not want to die to your sin and yourself? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, wrote, "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die." It is that cost that keeps you out of the kingdom because you are not willing to surrender your entire heart and life to Christ. And you must not think that you do this willy-nilly without the drawing power of God. There was something in the preaching of the apostles that drew these people. And maybe you say, "There's no hope for me. I am hopelessly entangled in my fears." There is the other side of the contrast—the Spirit at work. Place yourself under His overshadowing grace—that is your responsibility under the gospel. He willingly overshadows and powerfully heals—that is His power and sovereignty. For the lukewarm, for the backslider, for the one who seeks the Spirit afresh, His overshadowing power is still the same being duplicated in lives today just

as then. Oh, that He would work again with such power and grace in our assembly!

The second contrasting reaction is *jealous anger and bold witness*. In verses 17–33 we see this contrast. The apostles have been preaching and doing miracles with great power. And as the Sadducees witness this, they are provoked to jealousy. When Scripture says in verse 17 that they were filled with “indignation,” it means “jealousy.” They wanted the power and the approval and following of the people that the apostles had. Their jealousy led them to want to silence the message and mute the power of the gospel. They had the apostles thrown into prison. They are careful not to rouse the anger of the crowds as the authorities come to detain the apostles for the second time after they are set free by the angel. It is a jealous anger that abuses their legitimate authority as religious leaders of the Jewish people. In verses 21–28 we see them abusing their authority by coming to retake the apostles. They remind the apostles of their command not to preach and teach the name of Jesus. They are afraid of the far-reaching effects of the apostle’s doctrine and the miracle of the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate. They give the apostles a not-so-subtle reminder that they are the ones in charge. And in the final analysis as Peter preaches Christ both as a Prince and a Savior, their jealous anger turns to murderous rage. Their hearts are sawn asunder (cut to the core), and they want to do with the apostles what they did with Jesus—slay them.

In contrast to this jealous anger the bold witness of the apostles comes through. It is a witness that is aided by heavenly intervention. As the chief priests and Sadducees throw them into prison, the angel of the Lord

comes and sets them free. Ironically, the Sadducees do not believe in angels and yet the Lord of the church sends angels to free the apostles to continue witnessing. Their witness is reinforced through a heavenly command in verse 20, “Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.” The angel does not say they are free to go home. No, they are free to proclaim the words of this life in Jesus to the people. This is the constraining command for all believers, to proclaim the words of this life in Jesus.

And the apostles do exactly that—long before the authorities are awake. They obey in all faithfulness without question as to the dangers they might face. And Peter once again stands before the council and speaks with Spirit-worked boldness the gospel of Jesus Christ. He tells them of their commitment to obey Christ over man, that a mere man cannot silence them and bar them from preaching the gospel. God is the supreme authority of the believer. No man can command us to stop speaking the gospel.

And as Peter preaches, he focuses on Christ as the heart of the gospel message even to these angry and jealous rulers. He finds common ground with these rulers, citing “the God of our fathers.” The gospel that Peter brings is nothing new. This God of our fathers has always been at work and especially so in the raising of Jesus from the dead. He has done this in faithfulness to His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of *our* fathers. Even as Peter points out this common ground, he implicitly calls them to repentance because their view of God is different from what Peter will preach next.

Common ground gives way to presenting gospel truths that run counter to everything the Sadducees

teach. They do not believe the resurrection and yet Peter does not hesitate to say, “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree” (v. 30). The common theme reemerges in Peter’s message. There is this note of conviction that rings loudly. The evidence is undeniable—Jesus is alive by the power of God, and you have blood on your hands. The goads are sharp and they saw through the hearts of these men.

Peter continues to proclaim the gospel, moving from the goads of conviction to the good news, this Jesus whom God has exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Savior. There is the double truth that the rulers cannot deny in the face of the proclamation of the gospel. Jesus is the Supreme Ruler (in contrast to their power and authority) and He is the Supreme Savior. And He is exalted with these titles with one purpose: to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. Here is tremendous hope for these men who deny Christ and who persecute His followers. Christ in all His fullness and power as a Prince will lead men in submission to Him, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light and truth. Christ in all His mercy and grace as the Savior will grant men the forgiveness and removal of all their sins. This is the message the rulers needed. This is the message that you and I need.

This message is supported by a twofold witness. Peter says in verse 32, “And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.” Peter is doing several things in his message. He says that this is irrefutable truth because the gospel has a dual witness—the apostolic message and the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit in wonders and miracles. The rulers are striving against the very truth of God established by two

witnesses. They are striving against God Himself. And then Peter makes a distinction—the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey God. He comes full circle to how he began his message. They obey God and so they have the Holy Spirit. The rulers are actually found to be disobeying God by rejecting Christ and the gospel and so lack the Holy Spirit. Could it be that you lack the Holy Spirit because you fail to obey Him? You fail to obey Him as an unbeliever by denying His message of Christ. You fail to obey Him as a believer by doing what He tells you to do in His Word, by not living in compliance to His revealed will.

Which side of this second contrast are you on today? There are two responses to the gospel as evidenced in this contrast. One is anger and hostility because you don't want to submit to the claims of the gospel. The other is of Spirit-worked boldness because you seek to obey the command of Christ to repent and believe and then also bring the gospel to others no matter the cost.

The final contrast, that of *pragmatic reasoning and joyful suffering*, is interesting and perhaps less clear than the other contrasts. Luke now introduces us to Gamaliel, a man respected by the people, as verse 34 tells. He is a Pharisee, a doctor of the law. He commands that the disciples be put outside so the council can deliberate. And what he says next has received mixed reviews. Some think that his counsel to the Sanhedrin is wise counsel and applicable to the church today. Others think that his counsel is misleading and simply pragmatic. Though there is wisdom embedded in his counsel and the Holy Spirit uses it to protect His church from further persecution, yet it is largely pragmatic counsel.

It is driven by religious and political expediency. Gamaliel was a Pharisee and there was long-standing religious and political conflict with the Sadducees because of the resurrection and political involvement with the Roman authorities. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection and the Sadducees did not. The Pharisees did not want to work with the Romans while the Sadducees were happy to do so for their own promotion and power. And so as Gamaliel stands up, he expertly guides the conversation in such a way that temporarily trims the power of the Sadducees. He calls them to examine what they are about to do with the apostles. He knows there is something afoot. He has seen what happened to Jesus and now what is happening to His apostles. Gamaliel is a smart man.

His counsel is reinforced through two negative examples in verses 36–37. Remember Theudas, this Messianic figure? He was killed and his four hundred followers were quickly dispersed. Oh, and do you remember Judas of Galilee, another supposed Messianic figure? He also died and his movement was dispersed rather quickly too. If history is a good indicator then this is what will happen to these men as well. Recall that Jesus was crucified, He who claimed to be Messiah. And here's his pious conclusion: If this movement is not of God, it will end the same way as Theudas and Judas. But if it is of God then it will continue and anything you will do will be fruitless, and you don't want to be found fighting against God, do you? We should leave them alone. There is a tremendous amount of truth to this reasoning, but it is a pragmatic way of getting out of a tough situation and clipping the wings of the Sadducees in the process. Gamaliel is not motivated by love for or

the right fear of God, or for the apostles or for the cause of Christ.

Gamaliel's reasoning sounds good in the ears of the council, but not good enough to let the apostles go without their backs being ripped to shreds by a thorough whipping. Gamaliel does nothing to stop this and the consensus of the council is that the apostles should stop preaching the name of Jesus.

The other part of the contrast is joyful suffering. As the apostles leave the council, you would think they would rush home and take a few days off to nurse their wounds and regroup to think up a new strategy. But they don't do that. They leave the council "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name." This, too, is the work of the Spirit in the lives of the apostles—true spiritual joy in the midst of difficult circumstances. The focus of their joy is not on what they have received, but in how God views them. God found them worthy to suffer shame for His name. We often speak of the possibility of persecution, but do we take the same perspective? Do we fear persecution and shame, or do we embrace them? This joy is not produced by the apostles themselves, but is evidence again of the Holy Spirit who works in their hearts and lives. Their focus in the midst of suffering is on the name of Jesus which brings joy to their hearts and colors their horizons with light instead of darkness. This Spirit-induced joy and focus on the name of Jesus is what sets them apart from Theudas and Judas because Jesus is the true Messiah; while they will be dispersed, their dispersion is not the end of a movement, but the very progression of the gospel.

The fruit of their joyful suffering is faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel. They go right back to the temple and pick up their daily routine. With the voice of the

angel still ringing in their ears, they return to the temple to speak the words of this life. They obey God rather than man and do not fear the rulers, as Luke records: “They ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.” Their experiences only strengthen and embolden their witness. Believers, is that true of you? Do your experiences of intense suffering, persecution, or internal strife with sin strengthen you for further boldness and proclamation?

In light of these three contrasting reactions, what is your reaction to the gospel? Where does this sermon leave you?

