

Sermon- How to Get On the Right Side of History

Scripture: Acts 5:17-42

Sunday, September 26, 2021

The passage we are going to work with today is something that interests me in a special way because I have meditated on Gamaliel's approach and thinking for a long time now. The portion we are looking at today is a long one. I could not break it into smaller chunks because we have to take in the whole story and then look at the competing forces going in there and then draw out the principles being put forth for our understanding. This is our task for today.

First let's take a quick look at the story. The Apostles we know were doing great work healing people, preaching the Gospel and transforming people's lives. As a result there is this incredible spiritual fruit and life brewing in the community. On the other hand, the temple leaders who had all the titles had nothing going on spiritually compared to the Apostles. This made them really jealous. So what do they do? They arrest the Apostles again and arrange for a public trial. They want to put on a show of power in front of the Apostles. So let's look at what happened at this showdown. Actually it is very entertaining because they find that the Apostles have managed to not only walk out of their arrest through a fully locked and guarded prison but they were back in the temple courts preaching about Jesus Christ! Well, talk about displays of power! Everyone in the temple was shocked but there was nothing to be done except send temple guards to go and arrest them again, bring them in for the trial.

The trial was full of interesting dynamics. But at the heart of it all is the simple question, "we gave you strict orders not to teach in this man's name so why are you still doing it?" To that the Apostles give a simple answer, "we must obey God, rather than human authority". After that statement they once again carefully lay out the Gospel. Their

presentation did not produce any repentance or reflection. Instead the authorities were so enraged by the Apostles words that they wanted to kill them. At that point, one of the pharisees, the famous and universally respected Gamaliel calls a stop to the proceedings by asking for the Apostles to be sent out for a while so he could present some things for the Sanhedrin to consider. When this was arranged, Gamaliel proceeds to remind all those highly upset colleagues of his that there were many so called leaders and pretenders in the recent years who gathered followers in an attempt to start movements centered around themselves. What was common about all of them too was the fact that when they were killed, the movement that they lead quickly died out as well. In the light of that fact, Gamaliel offered this approach. He told this colleagues, that it was better to leave these men alone because if their movement was anything like the others that came and went, it was bound to die a similar quick death. On the other hand, if their movement was really from God then it would not die no matter what and they would be found to be in opposition to God Himself. So what Gamaliel of saying was whether this movement was from God or not there was nothing to be gained and potentially a big danger in opposing the Apostles.

This perspective was very effective in carrying the day. It was also important enough to God that he arranged for it to be recorded in the Bible for people in every generation to examine it for all eternity. So if it was that important to God, it should be important to us too. So let's look at Gamaliel's strategy more closely.

Let me start by laying out the landscape Gamaliel was operating in. It is possible that he was a secret believer. We don't know that. And I am also not pinning whatever I am about to say on that because God can and has used outsiders like king Cyrus in the Old Testament to accomplish his purposes.

Anyway I want us to consider the dynamics of this conversation. At that point in the Sanhedrin, as we already noted the religious leaders were feeling very threatened. Now

the Apostles were not trying to threaten anybody. But still they felt threatened. The problem is when a whole group of people is feeling threatened, mob mentality kicks in. And you know with mobs no one is thinking straight. Typically, one person says or does something stupid and everyone will follow along no matter how ridiculous the actions. And at that point it is hard for any one individual to stop the madness or even feel that they can do anything different from what the crowd is doing. It is like a swollen river flowing with a strong current. The only option for those in the crowd is to go with the flow. What is remarkable is that professor Gamaliel too was in that crowd and should have felt as threatened as everybody else there and should have felt the same pressure as everyone else to go with the flow. The fact that he did not itself shows his remarkable independent thinking. He was not someone who simply went with the flow if he did not think the direction of the flow made sense. He was not someone who was taken in by emotions either. He was someone who wanted to look at the facts and analyze the situation objectively. To do that he very effectively calls a timeout by asking for the Apostles to be sent out, ensures that his colleagues are not simply posturing. He then carefully presents what he has to say.

As he makes his case, he does not ask his listeners to believe anything new. What he does ask them to do is consider the patterns occurring in similar situations to the present one from recent history. When people who claimed specialness gathered a following and when they were killed, their following disappeared. In this case before them as well, their leader was killed. What he is directly saying is that, if Jesus was just like those other pretenders his movement should fizzle out too. But what Gamaliel is implying without it being specifically stated here is this. Don't simply assume that this Jesus is like all the others. Before you come to that conclusion, examine the facts and let the facts lead you to the truth. In other words, don't assume something is a fact just because you don't like what you see in front of you. The true test for Jesus' claims is what happens to His movement after his death.

So in the end he advised them to let the Apostles go because the truth of who Jesus is would emerge on its own with the passage of time. They also should make sure that they avoid the possibility of being among those who oppose God Himself.

In other words Gamaliel was advising his colleagues to not simply react from some emotional place which is very unreliable. He was advising them to think through the situation objectively. When they do that they would realize that the present situation has many parallels in history. And if we were to examine those historical patterns we might be able to learn from those past patterns we might really learn some very important lessons and end up on the right side of history.

This is exactly why we are talking about Gamaliel and his advice to the Sanhedrin 2000 years ago. Because when the confusion of what was going on in Gamaliel's time settled and you can look back history is able to declare that Gamaliel was right. He was standing on the right side of history all along.

At this point we are not told if Gamaliel was a believer but what I observe about him is that he was an objective seeker of the truth who wanted to go where the facts led him.

Another point Gamaliel is making is this. When you are truly unsure of something, it is better not to act or you might make a big blunder. In the situation facing the Sanhedrin, it was better to set up an observation tower and observe what was happening to Jesus followers. In time what was once not clear would become clear in the end. And when it will be time to act.

And if we do these two things. 1. Be a sincere seeker of the truth of who Jesus Christ is by following the facts and 2. we recognize whether it is the time to act or not act, then when time marches on, we too like Gamaliel be found to be standing on the right side of history.

The biggest question history is asking is who is Jesus? And that is an answer that will one day be revealed when Jesus returns on the clouds and the rapture begins. If we have made our decisions carefully, then on that day we will be caught on the right side of history. If we allow ourselves to be deceived then when history rolls on, our actions will be exposed as foolish and only worthy of eternal death.

But before a Christ follower is vindicated by the ultimate and final act of history in Christ's return, there are many smaller questions that are constantly thrown at us on a day to day basis. Is Covid real is a question many were asking last year. I am sure some are still asking that question this year. In 1969 it was, is the moon landing real or is the earth flat? To discern the truth of these smaller questions too there is a process we could follow that Gamaliel demonstrated for all of us. And if we follow the data, and compare today's complex questions with similar patterns that have occurred in the past, then the what we need to do today will suddenly become obvious. And we will get the answers to today's questions right.

So why is it important for a Christ follower to apply this Gamaliel thinking to even these small questions like what about masks and vaccines?

Well, because the biggest role we have in life is to be witnesses to Jesus. But to be a witness who is taken seriously we have to also be a "credible witness". That means if the world is to take our witness seriously, it has to first take us seriously. People are constantly observing us to find out how we think and what we base our decision making on. They are looking to see if our reasoning in our regular daily life is squishy or solid. If we demonstrate solid thinking in the everyday areas of our life, the world will see us as respectable and credible thinkers who can also be considered credible when we talk about Jesus Christ.

To be a credible witness of Jesus Christ, we have to start by building a reputation of being credible in the small things. To be credible in the small things we have to be

objective in our thinking and not let emotions hijack our thinking. We have to make clear observations of the data, discern the patterns, compare the patterns with similar patterns from the past and draw our conclusions through this carefully thought through process like Gamaliel has laid out for us. On the other hand if we come across as irrational or stupid in our day to day life we are not going to be taken seriously when we talk about the big questions of life and especially the biggest question about who Jesus is.

I do hope that this lesson from Gamaliel will help us grow in our own ability to objectively analyze the world and the tough challenges facing our lives and our community. In our time, our careful thinking will cause those around us to see us as credible people and therefore credible witnesses when we testify about Jesus. But the impact of careful thinking like Gamaliel's lasts way beyond one's own lifetime. If we think through our own situation well, then one day many years later those looking at us through the lens of history will say, because they thought things through in their time, today even all these years later we can see the benefit of their thinking. That is what I want history books to write about us. Let it be said, of us, these were credible witnesses to Jesus in their time and their legacy lives on even as history marches onward. Let us pray.