

Opposition to the Gospel

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Date: 01 June 2025

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[0 : 00] If you've got a Bible, you can turn to the New Testament, to the book of Acts. We're going to be in verse 17 of Acts.

It's a slightly longer reading this morning. I'm going to read to the end of the chapter. Acts chapter 5 and verse 17.

Then the high priest and all his associates who were members of the party of the Sadducees were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.

But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. Go stand in the temple courts, he said, and tell the people all about this new life. At daybreak they entered the temple courts as they had been told and began to teach the people.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin, the full assembly of the elders of Israel, and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there.

[1 : 19] So they went back and reported, We found the jail securely locked with the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside. On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

Then someone came and said, Look, the men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people. At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles.

They did not use force because they feared that the people would stone them. The apostles were brought in and made to 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.

Peter and the other apostles replied, We must obey God rather than human beings. The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead, whom you killed by hanging him on a cross.

[2 : 25] God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and savior, that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. 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, 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 he ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.

And then he addressed the Sanhedrin. Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago, Theodos 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.

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.

[3 : 38] 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. And 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 Messiah.

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study. Our King, our gracious Lord, feed us from your word this morning.

Teach us truth. The truth we need. The sustenance we need. Let us know you. Let us see you. Let us see your son clearly and let us be changed by what we see.

[4 : 43] Minister to us this morning, we pray. For Christ's sake. Amen. Amen. So we're in Acts again today. Last week, we looked at the whole issue of miracles.

And one of the reasons we talked about that was because I said, well, it's a fairly common occurrence or a common theme that's going to keep coming up over and over again as we walk through the book of Acts. And so it's worthwhile stopping and spending some time dealing with it. And it came up in our passage last week. Now, another common theme, another common feature that comes up over and over again in the book of Acts is opposition to the advance of the gospel. You've seen this. You don't have to read very far before it starts to come up. In fact, we've already seen earlier on in the series, we've already seen Peter and John be dragged before this same court, the Sanhedrin court in chapter 4.

And now what we're seeing is the opposition is starting to ramp up. It's starting to get more intense. I think passages like this can be a little bit difficult for us to apply for ourselves today.

[5 : 48] And we're not entirely sure what to do with them. In a place like South Africa in the 21st century, the early part of the 21st century, where 85% of the population, according to the last census, identifies as Christian, the idea of sort of Christians being dragged before these viciously antagonistic courts seems a little bit foreign.

It seems a bit alien to our experience. I've been a Christian pastor for 15 plus years. I've never been dragged in front of a court like this for preaching the gospel.

The whole idea of persecution can seem a little bit foreign to our day-to-day experience. And I think that's especially true if in your minds, when you hear the word persecution, you're kind of thinking lions in the Colosseum, Christians being fed to lions in the Colosseum, or Nero using them as human tortures.

We just don't face things like that, you and I, on account of our faith. At least not in this country.

Now there certainly, certainly, certainly don't ever, ever be closed to this reality.

There certainly are Christians facing violent persecution in other parts of the world, and we should give ourselves to be praying for those Christians facing those situations. But that's not our experience here.

[7 : 05] And so a passage like this, and the subject of opposition to the gospel, can feel a little bit irrelevant. Like it's interesting, it's fascinating to read about the persecution, it's good to pray for people in North Korea or something like that, but it doesn't really do much for me now.

So this morning I want to try and show you why I think this passage is extremely relevant for us, and why we need to understand what's going on here. Now, two things I want you to see. As we consider opposition to the gospel, we need to have, number one, right expectations, and number two, we need the right perspective.

We need right expectations, and we need the right perspective. Let's think about those things together. The first one is right expectations. This is a much longer section of text that we read this morning than what we've been covering in the last section.

And a lot of it's actually, you would have seen, pretty similar to what we saw in chapter 4, the first encounter that Peter and John have with the Sanhedrin. That's the highest Jewish religious and judicial court in the land.

So I'm not going to rehash all the details of the story, but the one obvious difference you would have noticed here with the previous chapter is that the apostles are released supernaturally from prison here. An angel comes and says, come out, go back and start preaching in the temple courts, which ends up being a source of serious embarrassment for the Jewish ruling class as they're trying to figure out where these people are.

[8 : 32] The similarity, though, between this and what's just happened in the previous chapter, in chapter 4, and what you're now going to see happening over and over again as lots of different Christians are brought before these sorts of courts, the similarities, I think, are trying to show us that opposition is inevitable.

Opposition is inevitable. It seems to be a feature that is almost like baked into the advance of the gospel.

That if the gospel is going to advance, it is going to come across opposition, no matter where you are. There are other parts of the Bible that actually bear this out. So if you go to what the apostle Paul says, for example, in 2 Timothy 3, 12, Paul says, everyone, that doesn't leave some gaps for maybe not this person or maybe that person, he says, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

So that seems to suggest that what we're seeing here in Acts, as we read this unfolding narrative of the early church and the early beginnings of the church, this is par for the course. This is not a historic anomaly.

This is how it's going to go. And so as a Christian, you should be setting your expectations appropriately. The gospel always seems to be accompanied by opposition.

[9 : 57] Now just one big caveat here at the very beginning. The inevitability of opposition to the gospel, which I think is clearly taught in Scripture, doesn't mean we should go out looking for it, right?

This is not a license for being arrogant and obnoxious and confrontational in the way that we practice our faith. God is not looking for an army of people who are just out there to offend others, just get in their faces.

It's not what he wants. We are actually explicitly told by the apostle Peter, the same Peter who we're seeing getting dragged before the courts here over and over and over again. That same Peter in his letter, 1 Peter says that when you give a reason for the hope that you have, that is you explain the Christian faith to a person who inquires, you do that, he says, with gentleness and respect. That's what he says. So the inevitability of opposition to the gospel is not an invitation to be offensive. It's not an invitation to be antagonistic. But it must temper our expectations for this life and what it's like to live in this life.

Now the reason I say we have to have right expectations around this is because I think we sometimes secretly think that we will be able to be faithful Christians and not incur any sort of opposition.

[11 : 18] Like if we just keep our heads down, if we're kind, if we're winsome, if we're gentle, if we show lots of respect to people, do good deeds, serving our neighbor, love your neighbor as yourself, all of those are great Christian virtues and you should and you must do those things.

But we think that if we just try to do all those things, we'll avoid conflict. We'll avoid opposition with an unbelieving world. And I want to say to that, if you're thinking that, I want to say that if you, if you think that if you go into your faith with that expectation, then you are going to set yourself up for, on the one hand, real, real discouragement.

And on the other hand, perhaps even more dangerously, the potential for compromise. Real discouragement and compromise. So let's think about those two.

Discouragement. Think for a second about the fundamentals of the Christian faith. The gospel tells us that we are great sinners in need of a great savior. That's the basic age-old Christian gospel. That is that the human race is alienated from their creator under judgment because we fail to honor and to live the way he designed us to live in his good will.

[12 : 31] The will that he so kindly and generously created for us. We have failed to do that. And so now we're alienated from our creator. And apart from us coming and humbling ourselves and repenting of that sin and submitting to Christ, we can't be saved.

That's the basic Christian gospel. So the gospel by its very, very nature confronts us. Look at how Peter preaches before the Sanhedrin in verse 29.

Peter is not going out of his way there to be obnoxious or arrogant or pick a fight.

In fact, he's even putting the offer of forgiveness and hope in front of these people. He's saying, this is how you find forgiveness. This is how you find hope. But he is just pointing out some basic realities.

Realities like the fact that the Son of God is hanging on a cross because of human sinfulness. And the only correct response to that reality is repentance.

[13 : 49] Human nature doesn't want to deal with that truth. Human nature doesn't want to own up to that. It doesn't want to confront its own depravity. It doesn't want to humble itself and it certainly doesn't want to repent.

And so for that simple reason alone, Christianity will always elicit opposition. No matter how nice a person you are, it will always elicit opposition.

If you think about our human nature, who enjoys the experience of being told that they're wrong? Anybody enjoy that experience here? Anybody like a masochist and just tell me about the bad things that I do in my life?

Tell me about my faults. Tell me about my failures. I know in hindsight, you can sort of look back on some occasions where maybe a trusted friend pointed out some error in you and now you're grateful for that.

But the experience itself in the moment, it wasn't a nice experience. It wasn't a pleasant experience. Nobody likes that. It's such an awkward, uncomfortable experience. It's humiliating. Friends, in one sense, there is nothing more humiliating than the Christian gospel.

[15 : 02] The gospel says that you, the gospel says that you are so sinful that the second person of the Trinity had to shed his own blood to make atonement for your wrongness.

That is way worse than your spouse like ever pointing out some flaw that you might have. How bad am I, God? Well, my son had to die to make atonement for you.

That's how bad you are. Nobody wants to hear that. Nobody wants to deal with that. If you don't understand this, you're never going to understand why even though you are so gentle and so kind and so peaceable and so loving even though you serve people around you regardless of their faith commitments as you should, they still sometimes turn on you in opposition and leave you in a place of serious discouragement.

Why is this happening? Why am I experiencing this opposition? So you have to have appropriate expectations about this to avoid that discouragement.

But there's another even greater danger that can come from incorrect expectations and that is compromise. So notice how Peter starts in his response to the Sanhedrin. Verse 29, he says, we must obey God rather than human beings.

[16 : 22] You see, friends, the possibility of opposition is always going to open the door for the possibility of compromise. That we will end up obeying human beings rather than God.

It's natural that we want to go the path of least resistance.