

Acts 5: 33-42; “Gamaliel’s Ethics – Not Enough to Save”, Sermon # 21
in the series – “Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by
Pastor Paul Rendall on March 1st, 2015,
in the Morning Worship Service.

We see in these verses the sinful, unreasonable anger of the council against the Apostles. That anger was quelled by the very powerful words of a man named Gamaliel. He certainly was a very great man to be able to undertake this task. What shall we say of him? Was he a true and faithful Christian man, or was he compromised in his convictions? Was he for Christ and for the Apostles, or was he speaking in simply a selfish way? It is important for us to determine this, because our answer to that question may well determine what kind of a response that we will give under somewhat similar circumstances. We ourselves may be brought before the authorities someday for preaching or sharing Jesus, or we ourselves might be present in situations where it will be determined what is to be done about people who have been preaching the gospel. What will we say? What will we do? Gamaliel was a master of words and therefore we do have some things to learn from him. And yet, we shall also see that even though he was great in this way, in a human sense, that Christ was not his Savior, or his Master, or His King. And so let us think together this morning of how Gamaliel used his words to influence the decisions of the men around him, and how we ourselves can and should use our words to influence and change people around us.

1st of all – Let us see how Gamaliel used words of warning in relation to the history of Israel. (verses 33-37)

The Apostles had been preaching and healing in the name of the Lord Jesus, and great numbers of people were being converted to Christ. This council that the Apostles were brought before was the supreme judicial and administrative body of the Jews. It was called the Sanhedrim. It was an assembly which consisted of seventy men, and they would be determining the fate of the Apostles. But they had failed to reckon with the fact that God was not with them in their words; He was not with them in their judgments. They were proceeding on their own authority, even though duly appointed to their office. Let us understand that when men hold offices in the political government and the church, that their authority is not absolute. Instead, they have the most solemn responsibility to do what is right in accordance with God’s revealed word the Bible. But they should never use their authority to simply promote their own interests. They should be holding their authority as a trust from God, to whom they will give an account. Well, these men had the Old Testament Scriptures but they did not really see the Scriptures as being God’s authority over them. Instead, they imposed their own interpretations and their own laws upon the people; things which were additions to the Scriptures. The only reason that the words which Peter had spoken to these men provoked them, was because their hearts were sinfully rebellious to the purposes and plans of Almighty God. They were God’s chosen people and yet they had rejected the Messiahship of Jesus Christ even though He had in every way proven Himself to be their promised Savior and Deliverer.

Turn with me over to John Chapter 5, verse 39 and you will see that Jesus had already said this to them when he came preaching to them. “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.” “But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.” Most of the men in this council were not willing to consider that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the promises of the Scriptures, or to believe in Him when He came to them. Most of the men in the council believed that both Jesus and His Apostles were guilty of disobeying their spiritual authority and they deserved to be killed for what Peter had said. They had already given the Apostles strict instructions not to teach at all in the name of

Jesus. But the first thing that the Apostles had done, when the angel of the Lord had released them from their prison, was to go back to the temple and preach again. When the council confronted them over this, Peter's response was - "We ought to obey God rather than men". Peter went on in his short sermon to declare to them the truth, that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead! He was risen, Peter told them, even though they (the council) had arranged for Jesus to be murdered by hanging him on a tree. He was saying to them that God thought Jesus had done everything well; that God believed that Jesus had obeyed His commandments to the very letter, and thus God exalted Jesus to His right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, in order that He might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. This was very provoking to the Sanhedrim and especially the Sadducees among them who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Most of the men of the council were "furious" our text says. In the margin it says that this word means, "they were cut to the quick". They were feeling the pains of guilt which they thought that Peter was trying to lay on them. They were greatly offended by hearing Peter's words, which were like a sword to their heart and conscience. But they were not intending in the slightest way to repent of their former sins of having agreed to the murder of Jesus. Instead, they were angry that this matter had been brought up at all. And, their intent was to murder Peter and the others with him for telling them that they were guilty.

It is at this very point, after Peter had preached the gospel, that Gamaliel stands up in their midst. He is described for us in verse 34 as a Pharisee, one who did believe in the resurrection of the dead. He is further described as a teacher of the law who was held in respect by all the people. And he says in verse 35 - "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men." This was a very fine thing to say at this point, for he was giving them a clear warning. He was trying to show them that there would be bad consequences which would come to them if they did decide to kill these men. We should see from this that no matter how sinfully angry a child, or young person, or adult is, one who has been raised with a general understanding of the Scriptures, that it is never wrong to attempt to warn them and to show them; that what they intend to do in anger is sinfully wrong. These were even men in political and church authority, and Gamaliel still has the boldness to confront them and warn them. They did respect him for his personal moral character even though they could not manage their own hearts well at this point at all. Parents and people who are in positions of authority. You not only have a right, but you have a responsibility to tell those under your charge, or those whom you are in authority with, that they need to take heed to themselves in regard to their making decisions when they are in an angry state of mind.

Gamaliel was a man who knew the law. He was a teacher. He was trying to teach them, at this point, a principle which is very clearly laid out in the book of Proverbs Chapter 10, if you will turn over there with me. Proverbs is a book which Gamaliel was probably very familiar with. The principle that he was trying to teach them, was that they should take heed of making decisions which affect the lives of other people while they were angry. Look at verse 6 for instance. "Blessings are on the head of the righteous, but violence covers the mouth of the wicked." It is when you are caring for the welfare and well-being of people around you that you are a righteous person. It is not righteous thing to counsel violence and force against people who have done you no evil. This Gamaliel saw. He saw that violence covers the mouth of the wicked. He saw that God cannot bless that person. Look also at verse 11. "The mouth of the righteous is a well of life, but violence covers the mouth of the wicked." The latter phrase here is identical to the other verse that we just looked at. But the first phrase here is saying that the words that a righteous man speaks are a well that others can draw from. This was what Gamaliel was trying to show his fellow council members. He was saying to them, "Listen to the voice of reason, and take heed to yourselves what you intend to do." This same principle is taught very clearly in the New Testament book of James, if you will turn over there with me.

James 1, verse 19. "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God." Let me ask you whether you have learned this principle; sufficiently so, that you will not make decisions when you are angry; decisions which will affect other people's welfare and well-being? Gamaliel's principle is a true one and you and I should follow it, but we must also see here that Gamaliel did not attempt to inculcate this principle of truth in relation to repentance and faith in Christ. He inculcated it as an ethical principle related to history, the history of their nation. He is very wise, in a human sense, in this. He commands the guards to put the Apostles outside for a little while and then he tells them about Theudas, who some time back had risen up "claiming to be somebody". (Verse 36) "About 400 men joined him, and he was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing." And he gives them a second example. Judas of Galilee who rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him." "He also perished and all who obeyed him were dispersed."

You see, this is where Gamaliel shows his true colors. He is not for Christ at all. He is not going to investigate and ask the Apostles to explain themselves any further than they have. He does not even consider it a possibility that Jesus might be the Christ, the one who was the Prince and Savior of Israel who could give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. No, he does all this by way of human wisdom so that the Council would hopefully continue to stand in good favor with the people. He could not deny that spiritual things were taking place. He could not deny the miracles and the conversions and all the help that was being given to many people in the name of Jesus Christ. But his religion was only a religion of moral and ethical principles of what would be good in terms of their nation continuing on in its false humanistic religion. Ethics is the study of what is the right thing to do in any given situation. The good ethical principles of warning against wickedness, he must have gleaned from the Word of God; but he himself would not go any further than the ethics of what he believed was expedient to deal with the problem of Jesus. Many in the Council thought that it was false teaching that they were dealing with; that is, to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. Gamaliel doesn't see himself as needing to be saved. And so he lumps Jesus in with common rebels and insurrectionists; men who "drew away the people". He knows that this is what the Council is primarily concerned with; the people being drawn away from the religion which they themselves had imposed upon the Scriptures and the people of Israel.

This religion at its best was personified by this man Gamaliel. But even at its best, it was a false religion of human wisdom without seeing the need of conversion to Christ. It was the religion of self-righteousness in the place of God's righteousness. It is being religious with all the outward religious rituals commanded in the Old Testament Scriptures, but without preaching the need of having true and saving faith in Jesus Christ, the only Savior of sinners. Let me ask you if you have the true faith in Jesus Christ, or do you honestly believe that Christian ethics will be enough; loving and caring about people with a human love of what will resolve conflict on an interpersonal level? No, ethical people are condemned and undone just as much as any other people who may be far worse than them. Why? Because having Christ's righteousness and His wisdom is essential to your being truly wise. His wisdom and His righteousness are perfect, whereas your wisdom has some sinful flaws. Being ethical and even being moral, will not bring you to holiness and to heaven without Jesus Christ our Lord. Gamaliel should have welcomed the Apostle Peter's words and exclaimed, "Men, we ought to listen to these simple fishermen." "They speak the words of sober truth." "Even the best of us needs to be saved." "Please teach me the gospel Peter." But he is too proud to make that request. He will speak to his fellow council members with Peter and the Apostles out of the room! O how I pray that none of us is so proud as to think that we do not need Christ to save us from our many sins.

But 2ndly – Gamaliel was a word master who used words of exhortation and holy reasoning. (verse 38-40)

“And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.” “And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the Apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.” We see here, again, the human wisdom which Gamaliel had. He knew how to reason, and he even knew how to reason in a holy way, in a measure. For he understood God’s sovereignty. He knew that some great movements are of men, and men only. God is not in what they are doing. God leaves some men to themselves. He leaves some men to their own plans and desires for greatness or power or wealth; and the end and outcome of all that they do comes to nothing. But he also knew that some movements which are spiritual and which have political ramifications, are of God.

It is here that we must stand still and marvel. Here is a man who believes in the sovereignty of God, and yet he is blind to the purpose and plans of God in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. He rightly reasons that if this movement which Peter and the Apostles are leading is from God, then it could never be overthrown. He reasons that the council would find themselves fighting against God to oppose it. And yet he will not advise the Council to look more deeply and carefully into it; to see if it is indeed as it claimed to be, the fulfillment of all the promises of God to Israel. No, he counsels them to “keep away from these men and let them alone”. In other words, ignore it, and eventually it will all come to nothing and the movement will die of itself in time. This is a very gross mistake on Gamaliel’s part, but it is one which many millions of people in our own day are counting on, as being true. They think that Gamaliel’s way is the right way to look at what they believe is the fanaticism of Bible-believing Christianity. They understand neither the Scriptures or the power of God, as Jesus said in one place.

What is happening in our own day is that many people think that true Christianity is better ignored and left alone, than persecuted and punished. They are of Gamaliel’s religious convictions and mindset. Many of them are pacifists, and they do not like personal confrontation or belief in absolute truth. And since this is so, they never have any interest in spiritual things beyond their going to church to involve themselves in social causes and the interests of furthering human good, and the acceptance of all people in their sins. They think that this is what God is truly pleased with. It may be true that, like Gamaliel, they have a hope that God will someday raise the dead. But they balk at the idea that Christ might be that judge and that He would cast anyone into hell. They do have theological convictions, and maybe even hold to man-made theologies of various sorts. They may be mystics or pragmatists, but in this they are agreed. They will not be governed by the Scriptures or ruled in any specific sense by Jesus Christ. They differ from Gamaliel in this, that they often see church involvement as optional or a matter of personal preference. In Gamaliel’s day it was required of every Israelite that they would attend the temple worship or the synagogue. You and I should understand that it is possible for people to believe in the sovereignty of God and yet not be saved. They may have very strong logical minds, and yet they can still reject their need of Christ and His grace. They know that to persecute and kill Christians is fighting against God, but they themselves do not see that they are fighting against God by not believing in the name of the only begotten Son of God. My friend, do not let the strength of your own logical reasoning be the cause of your ending up in hell. This, it appears, was what happened to Gamaliel.

True Christianity is not simply a popular movement. It is a kingdom which has been set up by Jesus Christ Himself. It is His Church which He is building, and the gates of hell, and even your own unbelief, will not prevail against it. If you ignore the claims of Christ upon your life, you do so at your own peril. Christianity is not going to go away or die. It may be ignored in this generation until you might think it quite dead, but God will give Christ’s kingdom and cause

life as were from the dead at the right time, the time that you least expect, and then where will you be? You will be like one of the foolish virgins in Matthew 25 who was not prepared for His Master's coming. On the Day in which Christ comes again, many will want to be called a Christian. But, without coming to saving faith in the reasonable time which God gives to you, to repent and to believe in the gospel, it will be too late, and you will perish in your sins. Why not put away all of your foolish reasonings and trust in Christ. He will prove Himself to you if you will humble yourself and confess your sins and call upon His name. When you trust in Him, He will faithfully save and care for your soul. It is better to take your stand with the Apostles and be beaten for confessing that you need Christ, than to take your stand with Gamaliel and think that this movement of Christianity is going to come to nothing. When you trust in Christ you can then be as the Apostles, who "departed from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name." Is this you my friend, or will you be more impressed with Gamaliel's worldly wisdom and perish?

And then 3rdly – We should see that Gamaliel's worldly wisdom and his words were not heeded by the Council in the end.

You will notice that in verse 38 that Gamaliel had exhorted the Council to "keep away from these men and leave them alone." But that was the very thing that they could not do, because they did not even have common grace enough to heed his words. It says in verse 40 that "they agreed with him", and yet in the next phrase it says, "they called for the Apostles and had them beaten". And they went even further and "commanded them that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and then they let them go". They didn't heed Gamaliel at all, except they agreed not to put the Apostles to death. What spiritual savages they were. They would not even be instructed by the best of their teachers. They were murderers at heart, and as the Bible so clearly says in 1 John 3: 15 – "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." What can we say in conclusion? We can see that no one really heeded Gamaliel in the main things that he wanted to teach. The Council did not heed him, for they continued their persecution and oppression of the early Church. And the Apostles did not heed him or the Council for verse 42 says, "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." The conclusion that we should take with us is this. That where ethics and morals are inculcated, whether it is in the home, or in the church, or by political leaders, these ethics must flow from a person's having believed the Bible to be God's Word. And further, we must realize that it will take God's Holy Spirit working in a person's heart to see these moral ethics lived out to the glory of God in a way that will truly help other people. Ethics and morals are always good when they flow out of heart which desires to keep all of God's commandments. But the only way that you will truly come to have such a heart is to believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord. For only He has kept all of God's commands perfectly; and only He can change your heart and give you the power to do what is right in the way that honors and glorifies God. O may none of you be like Gamaliel, resting in ethics and good behavior, without striving to find Christ. Lay hold of Christ, and you will find that you have all that you need to be useful to God and men.