

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished: Facing Opposition to Christian Witness

A Sermon on Acts 4:1-22

Knox @ Faith PCA

12/3/2023 PM

Our text this evening continues the story of the healing of the lame man and the commotion it caused in Jerusalem. Two weeks ago Pastor Steven showed us the pattern of Subversive Fulfilment in the account of the healing itself. Last week Pastor Nathanael led us through the sermon Peter preached on this occasion, showing us that Jesus is the one who connects the dots of the Old Testament promises, types, and shadows.

This evening's text shows us the hard-hearted response of Israel's official leadership. Despite this undeniable, supernatural sign and despite Peter's compelling preaching, the powers that be in Israel aggressively oppose the Christian witness of the apostles.

In telling us this story of the first major opposition to Christian witness post-Pentecost, the Holy Spirit not only teaches us a bit of our family history, but he also instructs us in how to face opposition as we bear witness for Christ.

Acts 4:1-22.

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep your Bibles open, and may the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Acts 4:1-22 prepares us to face opposition in 4 ways.

First, it teaches us to **expect opposition**. Look again at this passage as a whole and consider the fact that this is just the first of **many** brouhahas in the book of Acts. This book is punctuated with **controversy, conflict, and commotion**.

Look again at verses 1-2 and notice the **source** of **this** turbulence: **opposition** to the **gospel**, “And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed (or agitated) **because** they were **teaching** the people and **proclaiming** in **Jesus** the **resurrection** from the dead.”

A bit of context will help us understand **why** the Sadducees were so strongly opposed to the gospel. At this point in history, the Sadducees were in control of the temple and the priesthood. They very much wanted to **keep** that control for **political** reasons (*to maintain a peaceful relationship with Rome*) for **religious** reasons (*their project was to maintain the temple as the center of Israelite worship and faith*) for **theological** reasons (*unlike the Pharisees, they did not believe in angels or the resurrection, and they only accepted the first 5 books of Moses as canonical*) and for **economic** reasons (*they were the wealthy, ruling elite and the temple was their cash cow*).

Remember from the gospels that Jesus **threatened** the Sadducees on **every** one of these levels. **Politically**, Jesus was dangerous because He claimed to be the **Messiah-King of Israel**...a claim which implicitly **challenged** and **relativized all other** authority. **Religiously**, Jesus was dangerous because he prophesied that the temple would be **destroyed** and then claimed that His body “**was**” the temple. **Theologically**, Jesus was dangerous because He not only taught the **resurrection** to the masses and proved it from the **Torah**, but he also made wild claims like “**I am** the resurrection and the life.” Even **worse**, there were stories of Him **raising** people from the dead (for example **Lazarus**). And **economically** Jesus was dangerous because He drove the **money changers out** of the temple, and he taught radical things about money such as “blessed are the **poor**” and “It is harder for a **rich** man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a **camel** to pass through the eye of a **needle**.”

Jesus had been **such** a threat to the Sadducees that they had even been willing to conspire with their **rivals**, the **Pharisees**, to have him **killed**.

So, imagine their **consternation** in this moment: Jesus' disciples are now preaching His name with **renewed vigor**, performing **miracles** in the temple, and winning over a **significant** portion of the city's population. Jesus was **supposed** to be **dead** and **gone!** Besides, the temple was **their** turf! Who did these uneducated commoners from the backwaters of Galilee think they **were**, teaching the people at **all**, let alone **contradicting** their **theology**?!?!

This was the particular shape of the opposition here in chapter 4, but throughout the book of Acts we will see it take different forms. Opposition will come from both Jews **and** Greeks, and it will be motivated by **many** different reasons. But **whatever** form the opposition takes, there will always be the **same** common **denominator** that we see **here**: a **hard heart**. A mind **darkened** by **sin**. An **irrational resistance** to **truth** married to an **unwillingness** to **turn** from **sin**.

When you consider the nature of our **message** and the nature of those who **hear** it, it should come as **no surprise** that Christian **witness** is met with **opposition**. We do **not** bring a **take-it-or-leave-it** message that leaves everyone with the **warm fuzzies**. Our message is **not** just **good advice** that you can **add-on** to your life. Our message doesn't **affirm** sinners as **basically ok** but who could be helped by a **little religious sentimentality sprinkled** over the **top**. Jesus is **not** a **therapist** who helps you to **sort out your feelings**, to **find your own** answers **within**, and to live your **best life now**. He is not just another **golden idol figurine** that you can add to your collection at home on the **mantlepiece** or **decorative shelf** so that you can rub his belly and pray to him when you need healing, good luck, or extra money for Christmas shopping.

On the contrary, our message is an **ultimatum**: believe and repent or be judged. Our message is **exclusive**: "there is (as Peter says here) **no** other name by which we must be saved" ...not Mohammed or Allah, not Buddha or Krishna, not Joseph Smith or Brigham Young... only the name of **Jesus**. Even as our message is, in one sense, a **gracious** offer, it is also, in another sense, an **authoritative command**, "there is no other name...by which we **must** be saved." Not to believe is not only foolish, but sinful. Our message is a **comprehensive summons**: you must repent...you must follow Jesus...no man can have **two** masters...Jesus is Lord of **every** area of life. Even as our message is (or should be)

motivated by love and compassion, it is also **humbling rebuke**: you are a sinner in need of rescue.

Jesus was **not shy** about the **divisiveness** of his message, which is why he said of himself, “Do not think that I have come to bring **peace** to the earth. I have not come to bring **peace**, but a **sword**.” He goes to explain, pointing out the dual effect He has on every family and community. Some **embrace** him in faith and obedience, rearranging their priorities and loyalties so that Jesus becomes their **highest allegiance** and the **center** of their community. Others **reject** Him. But in **either** case, **no** person is left **unaffected**. A **massive wake** is left in the train of his visitation.

We see that **two-fold effect**, that **bifurcation**, happening **here** in Acts 4, and we will continue to see it throughout the rest of Acts. **Wherever** the word of Jesus goes, it brings **some** into **fellowship** with Christ, and provokes **opposition** in **others**.

In a sermon on this passage, Calvin said, “That then is a story that ought to arrest our attention because in it Luke shows us, as in a mirror, that God’s adversary the devil does not sleep. As soon as the gospel appears, he immediately conspires to thwart it to the extent God permits...When we see great disturbances in the church we must be surprised for that is the way it has always been.”

Jesus himself taught us to **expect** opposition, “A student is not above his teacher; if they hated **me**, they will hate **you**.” One of his metaphors for discipleship was “taking up your **cross**,” a visceral reminder of just **how extreme** the opposition can be.

But Jesus not only taught us to **expect** opposition, but to **rejoice** when we encounter it for the sake of His name, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **Rejoice** and be **glad**, for your **reward** is **great** in heaven, for so they persecuted the **prophets** who were before you.”

Expect opposition.

Secondly, our text helps us to **understand** opposition to Christian witness. Look again at our text with me and notice that it shows us **three common characteristics** of opposition to Christian witness.

First, look at verse **14** and notice that the opposition here is **irrational**, “But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they **had nothing to say** in opposition.” Compare that with what we find in verse **16**, “What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is **evident** to **all** the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and **we cannot deny it.**”

Here we see something of the folly of unbelief. The Sadducees have no **rational argument** against the message of the apostles. Everything about the life and character of Jesus **confirmed** His identity as the Messiah. Moreover, they even admit to themselves that the healing of the lame man was an **undeniable, supernatural sign confirming** the apostolic message. Not only have they backed themselves into a corner rationally and intellectually, but morally as well. They have arrested two for performing a life-changing act of charity. Notice how Peter opens his defense with an implicit criticism of the injustice of this examination in verse 9, “if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man...”

And yet, despite the obvious inconsistencies, they still persist in opposing the apostolic witness.

Our text is a reminder that, ultimately, **all** opposition to the gospel is **irrational**. Scripture repeatedly declares that **all** of creation **plainly testifies** to the existence and attributes of God. Paul teaches us that the **law of God** is written on the **conscience** of mankind. The Proverbs tell us that **wisdom cries aloud** in the streets, urging the simpleton to **receive instruction**. And the gospel of Jesus Christ is not only amply **attested** by **history, scripture**, and thousands of years of **Christian witness**, it is also a **gracious offer** of **eternal life**. As Jim Eliot said so well, “He is no fool to give up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

All things considered, what **sense** does it make for a person to **reject** and **oppose** a message so **clear**, so **well-attested**, so **gracious**, and so **good**?

To say that all opposition to the gospel is, ultimately, **irrational**, is **not to deny** that unbelievers have **arguments** and **reasons** for their unbelief. Of **course** they do, and **we should**, as Christ’s ambassadors, seek to **answer** them clearly, graciously, rationally, and courageously when presented with the opportunity. To say that all opposition to the gospel is, ultimately, irrational, is, instead, to say that, however fiercely or sincerely held

those unbelieving arguments and reasons may be, they are, ultimately, a deception, a suppression of the truth, a result of a mind darkened and corrupted by sin.

Unbelief, in other words, is **not fundamentally** a matter of the intellect and of reason, but rather a matter of the **heart**. The Sadducees didn't **want** Jesus to be the Messiah because that would turn their whole way of life on its head; therefore they didn't believe the signs that seemed so obvious to everyone else. For all of his intellect and arguments, Christopher Hitchens, the late and infamous atheist, didn't hesitate to make it known that he didn't **want** there to be a God like the God of the Bible.

And so, once again, we are reminded of **why** we must **pray**, which is precisely what the apostles do in the very next passage. Only the **sovereign grace of God** can overcome such spiritual blindness. More on prayer next week.

Understand that opposition is ultimately **irrational**.

Secondly, look again at verses 17-18 and notice the **Insecurity** of the opposition, "But in order that it may **spread no further among the people**, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name. So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."

Our text gives us a window into the Sadducees' **motivations**; they feared losing **control**: control of the **temple**, of the **priesthood**, and of the **people**. The apostles now present the same basic threat that Jesus did, and so the Sadducees now consider how to silence, marginalize, and eliminate them too.

Along those same lines, notice the specific question they ask the disciples in verse 7, "**By what power** or **by what name** did you do this?" The question is **very** similar to the one they asked **Jesus** in Matthew 21:23, "And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "**By what authority** are you doing these things, and **who gave** you this authority?" In other words, there's a power battle going on underneath the surface of these interactions between the Sadducees and Jesus/the apostles. Who's in charge here?

Doubtless, the Sadducees would have insisted that they **were** the rightful authorities, even that they represented the authority of God himself as they guarded his temple and taught his law. But, of course, one of the great ironies of the gospels is that both the Sadducees and the Pharisees **opposed** Yahweh in the **name** of Yahweh. They

crucified the Lord in the **name** of the Lord. They **broke** God's law under the guise of defending it.

And here we find them doing the same thing: opposing the Lord's **apostles** in the Lord's **name**, all the while terrified of losing their control.

Such insecurity is tyranny.

Our text is a reminder that the gospel is **always** a threat to tyrants **everywhere**, because it proclaims that Jesus **alone** is Lord...because it declares that He is the **highest authority**... because it declares that there is an **ultimate standard** by which all **subordinate** authorities will be judged.

This is why **Herod** sought to kill Jesus as a baby, and this is why many of the **Roman emperors** persecuted early Christians. They could **not abide** the doctrine that there was a **higher** authority than theirs... that their citizens would have a higher **allegiance** than themselves.

This same **tyrannical** opposition to the gospel continues today in places like North Korea and the Communist Party of China where only a **caricature** of Jesus can be tolerated- a Jesus who has been **eviscerated** of his **authority, domesticated**, and made **subservient** to a totalitarian state.

But Jesus isn't just a threat to those who would tyrannize the **state**, but to tyrants of every sort: to men who would **abuse** their **wives** and **children**, to **harsh taskmasters** who would **threaten** their **servants** or **employees**, and to **contemporary Pharisees** who would tyrannize the **consciences** of other Christians with **extra-Biblical and legalistic requirements, and man-made regulations**. It's no accident that the branch of the church most known for emphasizing the **sovereignty** of God (that is, Calvinism) is **also** the one most known for emphasizing **freedom**: Christian liberties, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of worship, representative self-government both in the church and in the state...governments being limited by constitutions rather than ruled by absolute monarchs or infallible popes (by the way, reminder that we have an **entire chapter** in our confession of faith devoted to Christian liberties and Liberty of Conscience).

The seed of all those freedoms is found here in the conviction of Peter and John, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to **you** rather than to **God**, you must

judge, for we **cannot but speak** of what we have seen and heard.” If it’s true that God is truly sovereign everywhere all the time (and it is), then all other authority is **relativized** and **subordinated**. Our submission to all **other** authorities is **conditioned upon** and **qualified by** our submission to the Lord Jesus. And when that lesser authority comes into conflict with the law of God, we are not only **free** to disobey it...we **must!**

Understand that the opposition to Christian witness is often **tyrannically insecure**.

The **third**, and closely related, common characteristic of opposition to Christian witness that we see here is that the Sadducees work by **intimidation**. Look again at verse 21, “And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them.” Since the Sadducees cannot resist the disciples either with **rational arguments** or **supernatural signs** of their own, they resort to **threatening**. Ironically, we get a strong hint at the end of verse 21 that the Sadducees were probably unwilling to **carry out any** of those threats, fearing the response of the people who had been so impressed by the healing.

There’s a **pathetic irony** in the fact that the Sadducees are both **Insecure** and attempt to **Intimidate** the apostles. Like the playground bully who feels threatened by the new student and so preemptively throws a **sucker punch**, the Sadducees here make **empty threats** hoping that the apostles won’t see the **fear** showing through their **mask** and call their **bluff**.

Seeing this pathetic combination of **Insecurity** and **Intimidation** ought to **encourage** us in our Christian witness. **Sometimes** the opposition is all **bark** and no **bite**. **Sometimes** the opposition is **far** more afraid than **we** are, though they probably wouldn’t **admit** it. **But** even when the opposition **isn’t** bluffing, even when they are supremely **confident**, we **still** ought to aspire to being **intimidation-proof**, like the Apostles are here, “we **cannot but speak** of what we have seen and heard.”

Knowing that opposition to Christian witness is ultimately irrational, often insecure, and often works by intimidation, it follows that the virtue we most need for faithful witness is **courage**. And that brings us to the **third way in which our text prepares us to face opposition: it encourages us.**

Look again at this passage and notice the emphasis on courage. You can especially see that in verse 13, “Now when they [the Sanhedrin] saw the boldness of Peter and

John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.” The word translated here in the ESV as “boldness” can also be translated “confidence.” A quick word study reveals that it especially refers to speech: freedom of speech, plainness of speech, openness of speech. The opposite is to communicate “in figures of speech,” in other words, to speak indirectly for fear of the consequences of openly and plainly stating the truth.

Think about how much **courage** it must have taken for the apostles to stand before the Sanhedrin- the same group of men who had orchestrated Jesus’ crucifixion only a few months prior- and say to them, “You crucified your own Messiah. You are the ones foretold by Psalm 118- the builders who rejected the cornerstone. You must repent and believe in Him.” Or to say to them, “we **cannot but speak** of what we have seen and heard.”

The same Peter who had **denied** Jesus in the presence of a servant girl only a few months ago, now proclaimed him so boldly that he shut the mouths of the Sanhedrin as if Jesus himself was rebuking them.

What accounted for this transformation? Verse 8 tells us, “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...” Here we have the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise in Acts 1:8 to empower the apostles for witness by the Holy Spirit. Here we have the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise in Luke 12:11-12, “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” Here we have the fulfillment of the Great Commission “and lo I am **with** you always.”

Christ was present with Peter in this moment by His Spirit, literally encouraging- that is putting his own courage into him.

Throughout the Bible, this is always the most basic way that the Lord in-courages us... “do not fear, for I am **with** you.” “Even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for **you** are **with me**.”

Christian, Jesus is **with** you by His word and spirit. **Remember** that when you face opposition, because if you **don’t**, you are likely to miss the opportunities present in opposition.

And this brings us to our final exhortation from this passage: look for the opportunities in opposition. Look again at verses 2-4 and 21-22 and notice how the passage begins and ends with a mention of the common people of Jerusalem responding to this sign of healing with faith and praise. Despite the threatenings of the Sadducees, the church was growing in the midst of this opposition. If anything, arresting and questioning the apostles only served to platform the apostles, not silence them. Look again at verses 7-12 and notice how the apostles **strategically over-answer** the question asked of them. “And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you **and to all the people of Israel** that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. *(Peter could have stopped here but kept on going...)* This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

As Toby Sumpter observed in his sermon on this passage, this is a pattern throughout Acts: anytime there is a commotion, the apostles don't miss the opportunity to proclaim the name of Jesus. They see opportunity in the opposition.

Could the same be said of you? If you were to find yourself in **jail** like Paul in Acts **16**, or defending yourself before an **angry mob** like Paul in Acts **22**, or explaining yourself to the **governor** like Paul before King **Agrippa** in Acts **26**, or under **house arrest** awaiting your appeal to **Caesar** like Paul in Acts **28**... would you, like Paul, be pinching yourself with excitement, saying, “I got em right here in the palm of my hand. This is my chance to proclaim Jesus. This is my greatest moment. I've been waiting for this moment my whole life.”

May the Lord give us that kind of courage. Amen?