

Introduction

1. Intolerance toward Christians values and the Church is increasing exponentially in the U.S.
 - a. We've seen it in lawsuits against Christian business owners who refuse to compromise their convictions
 - b. We've seen students, teachers, and professors discriminated against because they expressed their Christian beliefs publicly, and even privately at times
 - c. We've seen it in during the pandemic lockdowns where restrictions against churches have been stricter than many other entities
 - d. Most recently, the Equality Act passed by the House, threatens to strip away the rights of Christians, Christian businesses, and Churches to practice their faith in their private businesses, private schools, non-profit organizations, and even Churches
 - e. Many are concerned that this will prevent Christians and the Church from carrying out our mission. But, will it?
2. There are three main themes in our passage today:
 - a. The remarkable growth of the Church
 - b. Confrontation and persecution
 - c. The joy of suffering shame for the name of Christ

A. The Remarkable Growth of the Church (5:12-16)

1. The growth of the Church is one of the major themes we find in the book of Acts and this is now the fourth time Luke has mentioned it in five chapters (2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14)
2. What stands out about this passage is the amount of details Luke provides (READ 12-16):
 - a. Luke has mentioned before that the Holy Spirit was performing signs and wonders through the hands of the Apostles, but we get a picture here of how significant this was (12; 15-16):
 - 1) This was all being done **“among the people”** which means it was being done publicly and out in the open
 - 2) Luke mentions some of this activity taking place in **“Solomon’s portico”** which was a porch on the east side of the Temple which overlooked the valley; it measured some 400 feet long, 23 feet wide, with double forty-foot-tall columns which supported a cedar-panel ceiling—this place could hold a LOT of people!
 - 3) Vs. 15-16 tell us that people were coming from all the cities around Jerusalem; so many that they were lining the streets with the sick and demon possessed, hoping that as the Apostles made their way to and from the Temple that they might be lucky enough to have Peter’s shadow fall on them
 - 4) Can you imagine what an awe-inspiring scene this must have been? And, it was apparently happening every day!
 - b. We also learn that the Church was becoming a visible but polarizing force (12a-13):
 - 1) They were clearly visible and identifiable as a group: Luke’s comment that **“they were all with one accord in Solomon’s portico”** suggests that it served as a common meeting place for believers (between five and ten thousand by this time) which would make them a highly visible and identifiable group

Christians congregating every day in the common area outside the upstairs meeting rooms in the UWEC student center

- 2) They were also becoming a polarizing force: Luke tells us that while they were held in high regard among **“the people”**, there were others (**“the rest”**) who would dare not associate with the Church
- c. A final detail Luke provides is that people were **“constantly”** getting saved and added to the Church...and apparently in droves (**“multitudes of men and women”**; 14)
3. This must have been an incredibly amazing and wonderful time! – masses of people, signs & wonders being performed through the Apostles, people getting healed, demons being cast out, people getting saved every day, and 1000s of new believers
4. Takeaway:
 - a. The growth of the universal Church is God’s plan and nothing can or will stop it
 - b. Individual churches may come and go, some will explode with growth, some will stay small like us, and some will even shrink and disappear
 - c. But, Christ’s body, the Church, will continue to grow until He returns

B. Confrontation and persecution (5:17-40)

1. As the early Church grew, so did the opposition and persecution by the religious leaders
2. In an effort to stop the growth of the Church, the High Priest and Sadducees arrest the Apostles and put them in jail (READ 17-18):
 - a. Jesus’s chief adversaries were the religious leaders and it’s no different here
 - b. This is the same group who had arrested Peter and John just days earlier
 - c. Unlike the prior arrest which was done under the guise of false teaching (e.g., Sadducees objection to resurrection), this one is motivated by jealousy
3. However, God had other plans for the Apostles (READ 19-25):
 - a. Luke tells us that an angel rescues the Apostles--the supernatural aspect of this event is provided in the details:
 - 1) Luke tells us that the angel opened the gates (probably multiple sets; 19)
 - 2) When the officers come to retrieve them the next morning, they find the prison **“locked quite securely”** (23)
 - 3) They even find the guards still standing there guarding the doors, apparently completely unaware that the Apostles were gone (24)
 - 4) Luke’s description of the guards and the religious leaders being **“greatly perplexed”** means they were stupefied by what they discovered
 - b. The purpose for the rescue was so that the Apostles could go back and **“continue speaking [lit.] to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life”** (e.g., the gospel, 20)
 - c. The Apostles do exactly as they are told, return to the temple the next morning, and begin to teach (21)
4. The religious leaders re-arrest the Apostles (READ 25-32):

- a. They accuse them of three things:
 - 1) Violating their direct order not to teach in Jesus' name (28a)
 - 2) Filling Jerusalem with the Gospel (28b)
 - 3) Intending to bring guilt upon them for killing Jesus (28c)

- b. Peter's response is bold and direct—there are five elements to it:
 - 1) We must obey God rather than you (29)
 - 2) God raised Jesus from the dead after you killed him
 - 3) God has given authority to Jesus (“**exalted to His right hand**”) as both “**Prince [lit. leader] and Savior**” to grant repentance and forgiveness to Israel
 - 4) We are witnesses of these things
 - 5) But, there was an even greater witness, the Holy Spirit—the witness of the Holy Spirit here refers the evidence seen in God giving the Holy Spirit to “**those who obey Him**” (e.g. accept the Gospel)

5. Gamaliel warns the religious leaders to be careful (5:33-40)
 - a. The religious leaders respond with even more rage as we might expect (READ 33)
 - b. One man, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, warned the rest of the leaders to be careful (READ 34-40):
 - 1) What we know about him:
 - a) He was known for his wisdom and his tremendous knowledge of the OT and as Luke mentions here was a well-respected teacher of the Law (34)
 - b) He's only mentioned one other place in the NT, Acts 22:3, where Paul reveals that he studied at the feet of Gamaliel
 - c) He was the grandson of Rabbi Hillel who was one of the most influential teachers in Israel's history and shaped Jewish theology and philosophy for 100s of years (he lived and taught just prior to the birth of Christ)
 - d) When it came to application and practice of religious rituals, he was much more lenient than those who followed the stricter and more legalistic school of Shammai
 - e) He also had a more accepting attitude toward Gentiles
 - f) Both the Roman historian Josephus and the Jewish Talmud mention him and everything we know about him suggests that he was revered among his peers—and that certainly shows here as he commands a certain amount of respect and authority before the Council
 - 2) He warns the Council to be careful in how they deal with the Apostles (35-39):
 - a) He reminds them of two previous individuals who rose up, gathered some followers, were ultimately killed or perished, and their followers scattered (35-37)
 - b) He then instructs them to leave the Apostles alone (38-39):
 - 1) If what was taking place was of men, it would end the same way the others did
 - 2) However, if it was of God then not only would they not be able to stop it but they would be fighting against God Himself
 - c. The Council ultimately takes his advice and releases the Apostles, but only after flogging them and warning them again to no longer speak in the name of Jesus (READ 40)

6. Takeaway:
 - a. The Church will always face persecution—in some places and some times more than others

- b. However, opposition and persecution will not stop God’s plan and purpose for the Church
- c. Like He did the Apostles, the Holy Spirit will empower the us to stand up, obey God rather than man, and continue to preach the Gospel

C. The joy of suffering shame for the name of Jesus (5:41-42)

- 1. The Apostle’s response is twofold (READ 41-42)
 - a. Their first response is that they rejoiced because they were considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus (41)
 - b. Their second response is that they “**kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ**” (42)
 - c. Rather than become discouraged in the face of persecution, they saw it as a badge of honor and became emboldened to continue witnessing Jesus Christ to the world!
- 2. Takeaway:
 - a. When faced with persecution we have three options:
 - 1) We can shrink back and shut up—some choose this option because they aren’t willing to suffer for Christ
 - 2) We can compromise the Truth to appease our enemies—some choose this option in an effort to limit or reduce persecution

- Max Lucado—apologizing to the gay community for preaching the Truth
- Bethel Christian Service (adoption agency)—changing their policy against placing children with homosexual couples
- What do they both have in common? They both made statements claiming that faithful Christians can disagree about what the Bible says about homosexuality

- 3) Or, we can rejoice that we share in Christ’s sufferings and continue preaching Him to the world in spite of the opposition and persecution we may face
 - a) Jesus warned us we’d be persecuted
 - b) But, He also promised us there would be great reward (Luke 6:22-23): “**Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. 23 "Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets."**