

Sermon Text: Acts 5:29-32

We Must Obey God!

Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

A number of years ago our family was blessed to go on a vacation to Hawaii. One day on the island of Hawai’I, also known as the Big Island – just an hour or so after I’d gotten stitches in my hand – we were heading out to a beach on the north side of the island. Just as we were getting out to the beach itself, my wife said, “Before we get onto the beach, I want you to read this paragraph in the tourist guide book.” It read, “As you head onto the beach, you’ll see a large cliff jutting out into the ocean on the left hand side of the beach. There will likely be a number of numbskull 20-something’s jumping off the cliff. Don’t even think about it!” Sure enough, as we stepped onto the beach, there was that cliff – jutting out into the ocean – the waves crashing into the base of the cliff. And it was calling to me! “I’ve got to jump off that cliff! I must do it!” Of course, my wife, who knows me all too well, said, “Didn’t you just hear what you read?” I said, “Yeah, it said that numbskull 20-something’s shouldn’t jump off the cliff. I’m a well-grounded 40-something year old; and I’ve got to do it!”

Why do we, as Christians, obey God? Because we have to? Because we must? Well, yes. Not in terms of the law, like we “have to do it or else . . . death and hell await!” But rather in terms of love – love for the God and Savior who so loved us first . . . heaven awaits us, guaranteed! We’ve got to do it! Love compels us! Love draws us to obey!

Consider the early disciples of Christ. On the day of our lesson, the Christian Church was still in its infancy stage. Only weeks had passed since Jesus had ascended to heaven and ten days later sent the Holy Spirit in wonderful fashion to kick off the public work of the gospel ministries of the apostles. While still a bit apprehensive, much of Jerusalem was all abuzz about the person and saving work of Jesus. The early believers were very active in sharing the Word of their resurrected Savior; the apostles were preaching and teaching and healing in the temple courts in the name of Jesus; the Holy Spirit was regularly bringing people to faith in Christ and adding to the number of believers.

But, as you can imagine, the Jewish leaders were less than thrilled at the gospel’s early success. They had thought the name and the teaching of Jesus would die along with him when they had him crucified. Instead, Jesus’ crucifixion (and of course, resurrection) had only fueled the fire! The name and the teaching of Jesus (not to mention Jesus himself) were alive and well! And the Jewish leaders felt they needed to take swift and serious action to put an end to it. So they had Peter and John arrested. Imprisoned them. Threatened them. And ordered them to not mention the name of Jesus ever again.

But the apostles, in their own words, “couldn’t help but speak about what they had seen and heard.” This only infuriated the Jewish leaders further. Once again they had them arrested and imprisoned . . . this time not only Peter and John, but all the apostles. But that night, unbeknownst to the guards, an angel led them out of jail and issued this order from the Lord: “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life” (5:20).

When the Jewish Sanhedrin gathered the next day to interrogate the apostles and figure out what to do with them, to their great surprise the apostles weren't in the prison. In fact, someone reported, they were back at the temple preaching the gospel! The Sanhedrin was not amused. They had the apostles arrested again and brought before them, where the High Priest, Caiaphas, said: "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" (vs.28).

The Sanhedrin's orders were clear. They were firm. And they came with threats of serious consequences were those orders not adhered to!

But God had issued other orders. Not just through the angel the night before, but the risen Son of God himself had personally given them these marching orders: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt. 28). The victorious and glorified Savior of the world had said: "Preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16). Just before returning to heaven, where to this day he rules over all creation and reigns supreme over every authority in heaven and on earth, Jesus issued this order: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1) and "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in my name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24).

So there stood the apostles – witnesses of history's most important and consequential events sent by the Lord himself to testify of these things to the world – now before some of the highest authorities of the land, who were threatening them with death were they to refuse to obey their orders to cease and desist. The choice was a no brainer. "We must obey God rather than human beings!"³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross.³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

The apostles had a higher authority to answer to: the Lord of heaven and earth. They had a message that, quite honestly, was worth dying for to communicate to others (just as Jesus had died to accomplish it): forgiveness of sins and a relationship of peace with God for all eternity. How tragic would it have been were the original witnesses to the truths of the gospel, the bearers of the only message that saves sinners from the hell that otherwise awaits them, to keep that news to themselves. It would have been absolutely criminal if the apostles didn't witness boldly to as many as they possibly could concerning what Jesus had come and done for the world. "We have to share this message at all costs." "We must obey God!"

I'm sure many of you are familiar with Penn Jillette of the Las Vegas-based magic duo, Penn and Teller. Penn is the tall, long haired one that does all the talking. Both men are devout and outspoken atheists. But Penn posted a very interesting video blog a number of years ago. Penn was talking about how silly he felt the message of the Bible and Christianity was. But he went on to say that the only Christians he had any respect for were those who tried to witness to him! Why? Well, Penn said, if you really believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven, that he died and rose for all people, and that the only way to get forgiveness and to be saved was through faith in Christ, and that all who didn't know and believe this would spend eternity in hell – a place of unending torture and agony, but you didn't share that information with others, you'd be cold and heartless . . . it would be criminal. Those Christians – those who truly believe what the

Bible says to be true and want others to know and believe it, too – those kind of Christians even a hardened atheist like Penn Jillette has respect for.

Are you one of those kind of Christians? Not because you want to earn the respect of Penn Jillette, but because you – like the Lord – want all people to be saved and come to a saving knowledge of the truth . . . the truth of the gospel – that Jesus lived the only perfect life on record and did so for all, to earn righteousness for a world of lost sinners! That he – an innocent man – was cruelly crucified to suffer the penalty for sin – all sin – your sin and my sin and their sin (whomever “they” may be)! That he miraculously, inexplicably, unbelievably, and yet truly defeated death with his bodily resurrection from the grave! And that because he lives, we too will live – body and soul – purified and glorified like him with God in heaven for all eternity!

This is news that can only be believed if heard and can only be heard if shared by someone like you . . . someone who themselves knows and believes and cherishes it enough to tell others about it! Any and all others. Because that’s who Jesus lived and died and rose for . . . all!

And that included the men who were threatening the apostles and ordering them to be silent. It’s pretty amazing if you think about it and put this account in its historical context to realize that among the very first to have the privilege of hearing that God’s eternal plan for salvation and forgiveness of sin was accomplished and was being made available were the very men who orchestrated and brought about the death of God’s Son . . . the very men who killed Jesus by hanging him on a cross! But such is the nature of God’s grace! It’s unconditional and undeserved! Forgiveness of sins is needed by all. Forgiveness of sins is available to all.

Recently there was a barrage of church arsons in Louisiana. Within a matter of 10 days, three historic Baptist churches serving predominantly African-American congregations were purposefully burned nearly to the ground by a 21 year old man who may have had connections to white supremacist movements.

The pastor of one of the churches was interviewed by Good Morning, America, which was hoping – it seemed – to get a good soundbite from the pastor about the state of racism in the American deep South and a rally cry for the fight against white supremacy or something along those lines. Instead, what they got was a clear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Standing next to the charred remains of an over 100 year old pulpit and holding up his Bible that had survived the fire, the pastor – when asked what he’d say to the man who did this – said, “I’d tell him I forgave him. The Lord has forgiven me for all I’ve done. I must forgive him!” Another pastor was interviewed by a local TV station and said, “A lot of people want to make it a hate thing. Well, we don’t represent hate. We represent love.” Indeed!

How about you? You may not have had your church or your house burned down by an arson, but you have been burned by a person or two cheating you, ruining your reputation or taking advantage of you. You may never be asked by a news reporter what you’d tell the person who so personally hurt you, but you may be asked by the one who hurt you. You may never have the opportunity to give a clear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ on national television, but God has and will give you the opportunity to witness of his saving love to a friend, a neighbor or a co-worker.

Human beings would say, “Give ‘em hell! Make them pay! You don’t get off the hook that easy!” But the heart of faith says, “I must obey God rather than human beings.”

How is this possible? Especially when the pain is real, the sin is so offensive, the damage done will be hard or even impossible to repair? The apostles said it . . . the Holy Spirit. God has given you the Holy Spirit – in your baptism, through his Word. God the Holy spirit lives within

you. And because of that, because he has brought you to repentance and forgiven your sins, because he has woven the gift of faith, the fruits of repentance, and his love into your heart and soul, you can and do witness of these same things to those God places around you.

God raised Jesus from the dead! Jesus lives! He's exalted and rules both throughout the world and within your heart as Prince and Savior. God wants everyone to know this! And he wants some of them to find out about it through you.

So . . . whose orders will you obey?

I'm not suggesting you openly defy the rules at your place of employment if they strictly forbid proselytizing on the job. Jesus himself said we need to be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves. We need to be smart about how we go about doing this. What I am saying is that we do need to be much more bold in obeying the Lord and willing to disobey the current cultural "rules" of religious indifference, of tolerance (which tolerates anything but the truths of God's Word), and the attitude that everyone's faith or lack of it is a person's choice not to be tampered with – that what a person believes is good or right for them and it's all the same, and only the ignorant would dare to suggest that their faith or their God is superior. These are lies of the devil!

Might there be a bit of fear or apprehension when you prepare yourself to make that leap of faith and share your faith more intentionally? Did I have a bit of apprehension looking over the edge of that cliff? You bet! But the thrill/the rush of obeying the Lord in this way is exhilarating! And all the Lord's promises concerning witnessing to your faith in Jesus make the leap far less frightening. As the apostle Paul once wrote: "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7)

Jesus is Prince and Savior! The Lord is the only true ultimate authority in all matters of body and soul, of time and of eternity! May the Lord continue to give you the desire, the courage and the capacity of love to join the apostles in saying: "We must obey God rather than human beings." "I can do this! I've got to do this!" Amen.