



"The Gospel On Trial"
Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"
Acts 4:1-22
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(New International Version)

Peter and John Before the Sanhedrin

¹ The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. ⁴ But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

⁵ The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. ⁶ Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. ⁷ They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ Jesus is

"the stone you builders rejected,
which has become the cornerstone."^[a]

¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

¹³ When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. ¹⁵ So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. ¹⁶ "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

¹⁸ Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! ²⁰ As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

²¹ After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 4:11](#) Psalm 118:22

Introduction.

Americans have a curiosity about trials and courts of law. That explains the great popularity of long-running television drama series like "Perry Mason" and "Matlock" back in the day, and, more recently, "Law and Order." There is even a channel now on cable television called "Court TV" which presents exclusively matters related to trials and the judicial system.

How many of you have ever served on a jury? I read in the Bible Reading Plan this week that in Travis County as many as 150,000 people are sent jury summons each year. I remember



a jury on which I served many years ago when Lorie and I lived in Dallas in a trial that lasted two weeks. I still think about that experience from time to time.

Have you ever been accused of something you didn't do, or were you ever arrested or charged with a crime which really had no foundation or was completely false? You and I may tell a lot of lawyer jokes from time to time, but that's when you really want a good lawyer who will defend you against a powerful system that isn't always a level playing field.

This morning we read of the first time the Gospel of Jesus Christ was put on trial. It occurred after the healing of a crippled beggar and after Peter's second sermon at the end of Acts 3. Two of the apostles, Peter and John, were required to appear before the Sanhedrin and stand trial for the events that happened that day. Let's take a closer look.

I. The Arrest.

While Peter was still speaking, the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees came up and arrested him and the another apostle, John, who had been a part of the healing. Luke makes it plain that the Sadducees were behind both the arrest and the first wave of persecution against the early church.

Who were these Sadducees? They were a ruling class of wealthy aristocrats in the nation of Israel. Politically they ingratiated themselves to the Romans and followed a policy of collaboration. Theologically they believed that the Messianic age had begun in the Maccabean era around 160 BC, so they were not looking for a Messiah. They also denied a belief in the resurrection of the dead, and therefore they saw Peter and John as both agitators and heretics, disturbers of the peace and enemies of the truth as they understood it.

Led by the chief of the temple police, they arrested the apostles and Peter and John were taken into custody, but, since it was already evening, they were put into jail until the Sanhedrin could be called together the next morning to judge their case. The Sadducees could arrest the apostles, but they could not arrest the gospel! We see in verse 4 that *"many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about 5,000."*

II. The Trial.

The next day members of the Sanhedrin gathered to hear the case. The word Sanhedrin means "council," and this body served as both the Supreme Court and Senate of the nation of Israel.

A. The Court. The Sanhedrin was comprised of the high priest, who served as president, and seventy other men made up of three groups of people: members of the high priest's family (how convenient!); experts in the Law, who were scribes or Pharisees; and other respected members of the community who were called the "elders." You'll recall from the gospels that both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathia were members of the Sanhedrin. The council sat in a semi-circle within a hall that adjoined the southwest part of the temple area, and it was dominated by the Sadducees.

As Peter and John were brought before this powerful group of people, memories of the trial of Jesus must have filled their minds. Was history about to repeat itself? Would they experience the same fate as their Lord? They could hardly expect justice from this court, which had listened to false testimony and unjustly condemned Jesus. Would they be handed over to the Romans to be crucified, too? These questions must have raced through their minds.



Or maybe they recalled the words of Jesus in Luke 21 when He told His disciples, *"They will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict"* (Lk. 21:12-15).

B. The Defense. The Sanhedrin began their interrogation with a question to Peter and John, *"By what power or what name did you do this?"* (v.7). In reply, Peter unapologetically bore witness to Jesus Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit, he made his defense. He said the healing of the crippled man was an act of kindness, and he attributed the healing to the power of the name of Jesus.

Next, he drew attention to the fact that this same Sanhedrin, who was trying their case, had been responsible for the death of this same Jesus, but God had vindicated the Lord by raising Him from the dead. Peter said these things were a fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy in Psalm 118 and that Jesus was the stone which the builders rejected who became the capstone, the crowning part, of God's creative work in the world.

Finally, Peter moved from the idea of healing to that of salvation, and he used the occasion to speak of not only of physical and temporal restoration but also spiritual and eternal salvation. He saw the man's physical healing as a picture of the salvation which is offered to everyone in Christ. Peter's two negatives, no one else and no other name, proclaimed the positive uniqueness of the Person of Jesus. His death, resurrection, exaltation, and authority established Jesus as the one and only Savior for all the world.

C. The Decision. The Sanhedrin was amazed by the courage of the two apostles, and they noted that these men had not been schooled in theological disputations. They had no rabbinic training; they were just ordinary men. Yet they fearlessly and confidently made their defense and persuasively presented their biblical argument.

There could be no denying that the cripple had been healed. He stood before them physically able to walk. But even the miraculous could not penetrate the Sadducee's preoccupation with protecting their vested interests. They shut themselves off from really seeing the miracle right in front of them.

The Council dismissed the apostles and discussed the matter among themselves. They could not deny the miracle, but they would not acknowledge it either. So they decided to warn Peter and John to speak no longer to anyone in "the name," a name the Sanhedrin was apparently reluctant even to pronounce.

III. The Response.

The Council called the apostles in again, and they solemnly forbade them to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. The decision was to impose a ban on Peter and John that would both warn them and provide a legal basis for further action should any be needed. But the Council was not ready for the response Peter made in reply to this admonition.

The Sanhedrin had before it two people whose lives had been transformed by the way of the Holy Spirit. As with the prophets of old, God's Word burned within their hearts, and they could not remain silent. They said, *"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard"*



(vv.19,20). The court threatened them further, and then they let them go. They couldn't punish the apostles, for all the people were praising God for what happened.

In these two disciples, we see an example of civil disobedience in the Christian life, which many believers have followed since. There may be times when our commitment to Christ must take precedence over our commitment to anyone or anything else. In this case, it had to do with an injunction that the leaders of Israel sought to impose. Later on in the life of the early church, it would have to do with mandates laid down by the Roman government concerning emperor worship.

Around 160 AD the Roman Empire began to persecute the early Church under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and Christians were required to burn incense in front of a statue of the emperor and acknowledge that Caesar was lord. There was a man named Polycarp. His name means many-fruited, probably referring to his many fruits of the Holy Spirit. Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna, a city in what is now western Turkey. He had been a disciple of the apostle John, this same John in our text. Polycarp was dragged before a large crowd in the city square of Smyrna and urged to renounce his faith and perform the emperor worship. However, the old man bravely refused and said, "Eighty-six years have I served (Jesus), and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" As a result Polycarp was executed and burned at the stake.

There comes a time when we have to go against the crowd, when we must take an unpopular stand and risk rejection, maybe even death itself. Our allegiance to God is higher than our allegiance to the state and anyone else, and no one can bind the conscience but God alone.

Conclusion/Application.

Notice the small comment in this passage in v.13 which says the members of the Sanhedrin "*were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus.*" Do people take note that you have been with the Lord? Does it show in the way you live your life that you have been with Jesus? Is the quality of your faith indicative that you are one who walks with the Savior daily? Do people take note that you have been with Jesus?

One Sunday morning on their way home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said, "Mommy, the preacher's sermon this morning confused me."

The mother said, "And why is that?"

The little girl replied, "Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?"

The mother answered, "Yes, that is true, honey."

"And he also said that God lives in us? Is that true, too, Mommy?"

Again the mother replied, "Yes, that's true, too."

Then the little girl said, "Well, if God is bigger than us and He lives in us, why doesn't He show through?"

Indeed, He should. Peter and John reflected a relationship with Jesus, and it showed through. Does it show through in you and me?

Another question I want to ask as we close is are you willing to stand for Christ regardless of the consequences? Think about these two apostles. This is the same Peter who just weeks before denied Christ 3 times, and yet here he boldly condemned the very court that put Jesus to death. Do you and I have that kind of boldness for Christ? Are we that courageous for the



Lord? Are we willing to go against the crowd to take our stand for Jesus? Are we as committed to doing God's will over any human law if they are ever in conflict with one another?

When Lorie and I attended Cape Town 2010, we heard a number of personal stories of people who had suffered for their faith around the world. There were the 300 delegates from China who were on their way to the conference whose passports were confiscated at the airport in Beijing by government officials, and they were not allowed to attend.

There was a young man from Iran who spent several years in prison for sharing his faith with Muslims. There was Ziya Mireal from Turkey who told us that after giving his life to Christ he was disowned by his family, and he spoke of losing everything that had been dear to him growing up. There was a young woman from South Korea who told of her father who was killed by the North Korean government in recent years after he secretly entered the country from China and began to share his faith with others.

These stories of courage challenged my weak and timid faith. I thought of how often I'm afraid of what others will think of me if I tell them I'm a Christian, and I keep it to myself. I turn the Bible over so my seatmate on the plane doesn't see what I'm reading, or I avoid telling them I'm a Christian because I don't want to be labeled a right-wing fundamentalist. How many of your co-workers know that you're a Christian? How many of your neighbors know that you're a follower of Christ? Why are we so afraid to make that part of our lives known to the people around us?

We live in a day and a time when the social contract in America urges us to keep quiet about our faith. The courts in our country have ruled you can't pray in the classrooms of our schools, you can't put a crèche on the courthouse lawn, and there are certain places where you cannot post the Ten Commandments. Our culture urges us to believe what we want, but keep it quiet. Keep it to yourself; it's a private matter.

I appreciate the wisdom of the separation of Church and state, and I support this founding principle of American government. I believe we need to protect the rights of everyone regardless of their creed or personal belief. However, let us be clear. Separation of Church and state was never intended to mean separation of religion and state. It was originally established to protect the church from the state, not the other way around.

One contemporary scholar has written, "Christ did not give the keys of the Kingdom to Caesar nor the sword to Peter." In God's provision the state is not to seize authority over ecclesiastical or spiritual matters, nor is the church to seek authority over political matters. Yet the constant temptation of each is to encroach upon the other. Our faith in Jesus Christ may be deeply personal, but it should never be private. And every time I'm forced to restrict the free exercise of my faith it should be confronted and challenged.

I believe it will be more difficult to be a Christian in this country in the next 20 years than it has been in the last 20, and persecution may intensify in the years ahead. I've been surprised in the way we've seen people call evil good and good evil in this country, and we're headed down a dangerous path. We have moved from an appreciation of a plurality of belief in America to an endorsement of pluralism which says all truths are equally valid. Plurality is a good thing, but pluralism is a lie from hell. Whenever we are pressured to remain quiet about our faith, we should resist the pressure and boldly stand for Christ, just like Peter and John.

Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran pastor who served in Germany when Hitler came to power. At first, he thought Hitler would help rebuild the nation and reestablish a moral



foundation to the troubled nation. However, it wasn't long before he realized the demonic nature of the Furher's reign. In a German concentration camp he wrote: "In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up."

May you and I be courageous today. May we take a stand for Jesus no matter what it costs. And may we live for Christ in such a way that our allegiance to Him trumps any other allegiance we may have. If I am ever arrested for being a Christian, I hope there is enough evidence to convict me. Amen.

