

DEVOTION TO DUTY

Acts 5:17-29

Here we see the forces opposed to Christ acquiring courage, but evidently it was that of desperation. Their hostility was due primarily to the great influence of the apostles and the prosperity of the cause of Christ. The boldness of these servants of Christ in conducting their meetings in the territory of His enemies had certain obvious results.

1. Indignation.

"Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation" (Acts 5:17). In their last skirmish with the Jewish leaders, because of the fact that some of the Sanhedrin shared a suppressed admiration for the apostles, they were released, after being given a warning. In other words, the members of the Sanhedrin were divided in their opinion of the apostles. Some were filled with admiration of them, and others were filled with exasperation because of them. But here the opposition was desperate. Drastic action was deemed necessary. Daily and hourly the most remarkable miracles were being performed by the apostles before the very eyes of the rulers and elders of the people.

2. Incarceration.

"And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison" (Acts 5:18). The Sadducees would no longer tolerate the defiance of the apostles and the wonderful popularity of the gospel of Christ, the risen Saviour. Led by the high priest, they laid hold on the entire apostolic group and placed them in the public prison. There they were to be kept securely until the morning when the Sanhedrin would convene for the trial.

From being preachers of the Word in God's great open spaces to being prisoners in a common prison was a far cry. That is exactly what happened, but it did not intimidate them, for from behind prison bars they could still look up to God and talk with Him. The Sadducees hated the apostles because of what they stood for and what they preached.

3. Emancipation.

"But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth" (Acts 5:19). After they had imprisoned the apostles, they went away to rejoice over their supposed victory, but their work was checkmated by an angelic power. The angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought out the apostles and shut the doors without the keepers hearing or seeing what they had done. How vain are all bars and bolts to shut in those whom God would have escape! The hour had come for God's interposing hand, so the contrivances of man's wrath were ineffective. This teaches us to ask God to deliver in His own time and way, to expect His deliverance in His own good time and manner, to wait patiently until His time arrives, and to recognize His gracious hand in whatever ways He may be pleased to act.

I. Their Duty.

The angel of the Lord who opened the doors of the prison and brought forth the apostles said, "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20). Thus the apostles were commissioned to go back to the same place where they had been preaching and teaching before and to continue in the same work, namely, the proclamation of the gospel to the people. There is no

respect of persons with God, no aiming especially to those of rank, wealth or power. It was their duty to tell the way of life to all who would listen to them. They were to make known to them that eternal life is a result of repentance toward God and faith in the crucified and risen Saviour. It is our duty to make these facts known to all to whom we may have the opportunity.

II. Their Decision.

So far as they were concerned, there was no hesitation at all as to what they would do. As soon as they had heard they went forth to obey the Lord implicitly. The record says, "And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught." It is not for any child of God to hesitate, to reason or to delay when duty is plain. Decisive action is the thing of paramount importance.

III. Their Disregard Of Consequences.

When the council members assembled in all their pomp and glory, they did so for the purpose of getting rid of what they considered to be a troublesome movement. When they were ready, they sent to the prison for the culprits. The head officials were in great distress when they were informed of the complete security of the prison and the absence of all the prisoners. What an embarrassment to that entire body!

In the midst of their perplexity another messenger rushed in with the report that the men whom they had put in prison were teaching publicly in the temple. What an upset of their plans! Following this announcement, the captain and his officers went and brought the prisoners without any violence. The apostles did not offer any resistance and the officers treated them fairly because they were afraid of the people. This was indicative of the progress of the gospel among the common people.

After placing the prisoners in the center of the council, the high priest asked, "Did not we straitly command you that you should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us" (Acts 5:28). What a damaging admission on the part of the high priest! The influence of the humble apostles of the Lord was greater than that of the Jewish leaders. These Jewish leaders had voted to have Christ killed, and now, instead of only a handful of followers of Christ, great multitudes were supporters of the faith, and of all places right there in Jerusalem, the stronghold of Judaism.

The apostles could not be frightened by threats, stripes, prison or death. They took their business seriously. They were convinced that God was with them. Any man is to be reckoned with who is convinced that he is acting under divine impulses. The apostles were convinced that they must obey God rather than men. "Obey" is not simply to know the will of God, but actually to do it. The question is not what others think or say, but what does God require?

Where else could you expect the apostles to be than in the temple? What else could you expect them to be doing than teaching the people? Perhaps if we had been there, and had been threatened with imprisonment or punishment, we would have been more cautious. Possibly we would easily have reasoned ourselves into the acceptance of some more "prudent" course of conduct. But these were men of conviction. They had fully adopted the principle that it is better to obey God than men. They disregarded consequences. They simply and unhesitatingly did as they had been commanded.

About the time of the fall of Fort Sumpter a naval officer in Washington, D. C., who was a South Carolinian by birth and education, went in great embarrassment to ask advice of Senator Sumner. "What shall I do," he said, "if my ship is ordered to the South to coerce my own people?" "Read your commission, sir," replied the Senator. "But suppose my ship is ordered to Charleston?" "Read your commission, sir!" "But what if I am ordered to fire on my own father's plantation?" "Read your commission, sir!" thundered the Senator.

Just so indifferent to consequences must we be if we would make up our minds to do duty under every circumstance. Loyalty to the right, to the truth, to duty and to God comes first of all. With us it must never be a question of temporary safety or apparent advantage. It is to be a question only of obedience. Cowardice asks, "Is it safe?" Vanity asks, "Is it popular?" But conscience asks "Is it right?" Dare to do right. Dare to be true.