

Gospel Opposition & Priorities

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at Christchurcheastbay.org. Good morning. I'm Melissa Arsuniega and I'm part of the El Cerrito, Kensington, Berkeley, and Berkeley.

I'm a Richmond community group and I'm a deacon. Today's scripture reading is from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 5, verse 41 through chapter 6, verse 7, as printed in your liturgy.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name.

Day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

[1:06] In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Also, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

[2:21] This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. We have been exploring one of the most exciting books of the Bible. And I'm not even sure if Sir Christopher Nolan could do justice to this book, The Acts of the Apostles.

And we've been asking ourselves the question, what is authentic Christianity? What is real, original, historic, genuine Christianity?

We've also been asking ourselves the question, what is a living church? What's a healthy church? What are the marks of a church where the living God is at work?

And we've been taking that even a step further to examine ourselves and to ask, am I like this? And are we like this? Do we conform to this pattern that they've set for us?

And is this true of us? Is this the sort of thing that we're doing? And today we have this short passage, but it's actually much deeper than it looks on the surface.

[3:28] So let's just dive right in. And I want to talk about three things. I want to talk about rejoicing in the name, clarifying the priorities, and calling to obedience.

Rejoicing in the name, clarifying the priorities, and calling to obedience. Think about rejoicing in the name for a minute. Because if you've been with us, you've noted this repeated theme in the first five chapters of this book.

And the theme is about the power of the name of Jesus. So I'll just go back to Acts chapter 2, where it says, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

And then later in that chapter, it says, repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. The next chapter, in chapter 3, it says, silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Walk. And then in that same chapter, by faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. And then you may remember in Acts chapter 4, Peter said, salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

[4:51] And on that basis, the church gathered together to pray. And they prayed this way at the end of chapter 4. They said, Lord, stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant, Jesus.

So why is it important to draw attention to these aspects of this book? It's simply this, that to be a Christian is to delight in the name.

That's a good definition of what a Christian is. Delighting in the name of Jesus. They were not ashamed of this name. They were not hoping that people in their office or in their school would never find out that they're associated with this name.

They were proud to believe in Jesus. They were proud to belong to Jesus. The name of Jesus was everything to them. They rejoiced in it. They exalted in it because in this name, they had come to experience the power of God for salvation.

And now I want to draw our attention to this very strange and wonderful verse. The first verse in our text, verse 41. It says, That's really strange.

[6:16] We didn't print the verse right before that. But in verse 40, the apostles were flogged by the authorities because they had been told not to speak in the name of Jesus.

And when Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, he says in 2 Corinthians 12, he gives a list of all the sufferings that he's undergone because of the name of Jesus.

And in that list of sufferings, he says, I've been flogged five times. So this was not a one-time occurrence. This seemed to happen quite a bit. And what would happen is you'd be stripped to the waist.

You'd be tied to a post. And then you'd be flogged. You'd be beaten with a leather strap. And they would do this 39 times. 39 lashes.

Because 40 was seen as the outer limit of cruelty and degradation. And they knew that you could take 39 lashes and still live.

[7:13] And so how did the apostles respond to this first painful beating? It says that they're rejoicing. Why are they rejoicing?

Because it says they were counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. They were honored to be dishonored for the name of Jesus.

They were proud to bear shame for the name of Jesus. So if you want to know what real Christianity, authentic Christianity is, this is it right here.

They said God has considered us worthy. He's honored us. And why did they consider it the greatest honor that had ever come to them to be counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus? And for many of them to go on and eventually lay down their life and to die for this name? Well, there are two main reasons. First of all, because of who Jesus is. And secondly, because of what Jesus has done.

[8:18] His person and his work. They rejoiced to be associated with this high and wonderful person named Jesus. And who is he?

Well, Hebrews chapter 1 says that he is the son. S-O-N. Jesus is the son and he's the radiance of God's glory.

The exact representation of his being. Through whom God made the universe. And who sustains all things by his powerful word. Who God appointed heir of all things.

That's the name that these apostles refused to stop speaking about. And the one that they were ready to die for. He's the eternal Lord of glory.

He's the creator of the universe. And in Colossians chapter 2, the apostle Paul says, In Christ, all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form.

[9:14] The absolute, transcendent, utter fullness of the living God dwells in Jesus. And so they rejoiced in Jesus. And they were ready to suffer for him and be dishonored for him because of who he is.

But it wasn't just his person and who he is. It was also his work and what he had done for them. And I want you to listen to the way that these two apostles who were flogged for Jesus and eventually martyred for Jesus put it.

Peter says in 1 Peter 2, he says, He, Jesus, he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.

By his wounds we have been healed. Paul writes to Titus and he says, Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Paul writes to the Corinthians and he says, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us in order that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[10:28] So not only did Jesus have God's judgment for our sins put on him, but also Jesus put his own perfect righteousness on us.

And because of Jesus, God treats you as if you had never sinned and as if you had never ever been a self-centered sinner.

It's as if you had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for you. And all you need to do is accept this as a gift of God with a believing heart.

Does it make sense why they were rejoicing in the name of Jesus? Paul goes on in Ephesians 2, he says, This is why they were willing to suffer.

This is why they were willing to be dishonored and to die for the name. Because the resurrected and reigning Lord of the universe had not only bought pardon for us and blotted out our sins, but he's made us new creatures.

[11:49] He's made us children of God. He's put us in the royal family of our heavenly father. And he's made us a joint heir with himself of all the glory that's yet to come.

And he has sent his spirit into you so that the very spirit that was in him is now in you. And this is why the apostles rejoiced in him and would not be silent.

It says in verse 42 that day after day, after this flogging day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

If you had just been beaten for speaking about the name of Jesus, would you go out immediately and start speaking again in the name of Jesus? They took risks in ways that it's hard for us to imagine.

But they took risks of being insulted and being mistreated and worse for Jesus. Because the effect of such suffering puts Christians in the same category as their Lord.

[13:03] And Jesus told us this in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5. He says, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Jesus says, rejoice, which is exactly what they're doing. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven. You know, in the Bay Area, you're probably not going to get flogged.

Probably the worst that could happen is someone could laugh at you or, you know, make a comment about you. But if that happens, if somebody says you're crazy because of the name of Jesus, they're actually paying you a great compliment because that's what they said about Jesus. You're following in his steps. You're participating in his sufferings. And the reason those first Christians were willing to take the kind of risks that they took is because they were no longer afraid of anything.

They weren't afraid of death. Because Jesus had conquered death. He had transformed and transfigured death. And we, too, can rejoice like they rejoice because all of our greatest enemies have been conquered.

[14:19] Sin and death. Hell and the devil. And Jesus, who conquered these things, is coming to set up his glorious kingdom. And when he does, he's going to glorify you to be glorious like him.

And you are going to share in his rule and in his reign. Do you believe that? Do you rejoice in this name?

Has he become everything to you? Does he control your view of life? Does he control your view of the things that are happening to you? And is he someone that you want to talk to others about?

Is he of greater worth to you than your own comfort and your own safety? Because the first Christians, the early church, certainly said, yes, he is. How is it that we should be so blessed by God to have this honor of being dishonored for the name of Jesus?

That is real, authentic, original Christianity. So I want to talk not only about rejoicing in the name, but I also want to talk about clarifying the priorities.

[15:34] Clarifying the priorities. You see, after Jesus was resurrected and ascended into heaven, after Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the number of Christians began to grow dramatically.

And we're told in chapter 6, verse 1, that the number of the disciples was increasing. And that meant increasing needs. The growth of people and the growth of needs led to neglect.

And the neglect of the church led to discontentment. And that's what we read about in verse 1. In those days when the number of disciples were increasing, the Hellenistic Jews, that is the Hellenistic Jewish Christians among them, complained against the Hebraic Jewish Christians because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Now we should just say here that in Israel, care for widows, whether you were a young widow or an old widow, care for widows was meant to happen in your family, your extended family.

And if they weren't able to care for you, then the broader community of faith would care for your needs. Moses says in Deuteronomy 27, Cursed be anyone who prevents justice due to a foreigner, the fatherless, or the widow.

[16:52] And after Moses, all the prophets, Israel's prophets, their shorthand of saying doing justice for widows, that was shorthand for covenant faithfulness to God. You showed your faithfulness to God by doing justice to widows.

And that kind of care and concern marked the New Testament church. James, in his letter, chapter 1, he says, Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows.

And you see, the problem was that when a Jewish widow converted to become a Christian, she was baptized into a new family, which meant that she lost her old family, which meant she was on her own and she was poor and she needed help.

And so the church, in the face of floggings, said, Well, let's set up a welfare system for our own people, for the poor in our congregation.

And you can imagine a food market and a soup kitchen and a clothes closet and a financial fund.

And that was alleviating the poverty that existed within the life of the church.

[18:02] But a problem arose that these native-born Hebrew-speaking insiders were being well-served by that welfare system.

And these immigrant Hellenistic Greek-speaking outsiders were being overlooked and being neglected. And so what did the church do? What were her basic principles and priorities?

And what mattered most in her mission? Well, it says in verse 2 that the 12 gathered together all the disciples and they said, It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom, and we will turn this responsibility over to them, and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

And this proposal pleased the whole group. What the church said is that care for people in the church, especially care for our most vulnerable and our most poor, is so important that we're going to start a new ministry team.

[19:13] But they said there's something even more important that comes before all else. And what is the primary task of the church? They say it's prayer and the ministry of the Word of God.

They say, yes, let's divide our labor. Yes, let's delegate our work. Yes, let's widen the circle so that our ministry of mercy can be improved.

But they said it would not be right in the eyes of God. It would not please God if a secondary ministry like mercy or anything else meant neglecting our primary ministry of the Word of God.

Why is that? Because the gospel is not merely about human concerns. The gospel is about the glory of God. The gospel is not merely about bodies and bread.

The gospel is about souls and salvation. The gospel is not merely about temporal and material needs of today. It's about the eternal and spiritual needs that are going to go on forever.

[20:18] And so what they said is that the greatest need that the world has is to hear this message of the gospel. They said, who is going to talk to people about the best and most glorious news that's ever come to the world?

Who's going to talk to people about Almighty God? Who's going to talk to people about God's self-revelation in His Word? Who's going to talk to people about our souls and the need that our souls have to be reconciled to God and be forgiven of our sins?

Who's going to talk to people about their need to prepare themselves to die and to go through death and out into eternity with God?

Who's going to talk to people about the Messiah, about the Savior that God has sent? And I think this is, when you look at the history of the church, this is probably one of the most decisive moments in the whole history of the church.

Because if the church had made the ministry of the word and of the gospel secondary behind some other priority, would we have gotten the rest of the Acts of the Apostles?

[21:33] Would the gospel have gone to Africa like it does in Acts chapter 8? Would the gospel have gone to Europe as it begins to do in Acts chapter 10 and Acts chapter 16?

Would the gospel go on to India? Would, over the next 300 years, half of the Roman Empire have been converted by this gospel? Well, who knows? But they made this choice.

And why did they make this choice? Well, because Jesus, resurrected from the dead, told them to. He said in Acts chapter 1, verse 8, You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.

The church has been entrusted with a ministry of bearing witness about Jesus. That's our primary task. Jesus said in Luke 24, he told them, You see, that is why the word of the gospel must be put forward at all costs, because it's the only hope for every person in the whole world, in every single nation.

And you remember what Peter said in Acts chapter 4, he said, Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

[23:07] Jesus didn't say, I'm a light of the world. He said, I'm the light of the world. He said, no one comes to the Father except through me. He's the only Son that God has.

He's the only mediator between God and humankind, and is the only Savior and Redeemer that the world has. And that's why the message and the proclamation of that message has to be put before all else.

Whether you're preaching in a pulpit, whether you're teaching the gospel to kids or to youth, whether you're leading a Bible study, whether you're initiating spiritual conversations with your co-workers, whether you're inviting your friends to an alpha group, what we're saying in these things is that the most important thing in the world is your relationship to God and being reconciled to God. The church is always in danger of putting secondary things before the primary thing. Putting human needs before our need for God. Putting the body before the soul.

Putting time before eternity. But the right order is God before humans, the soul before the body, and eternity before time. Yes, let's do congregational care.

[24:28] Yes, let's do mercy ministry. Yes, let's relieve poverty for widows and orphans. Yes, let's do loaves and fishes. Yes, let's nurse the sick and start hospitals.

Yes, let's educate children and start schools. Yes, let's use our skills to advocate for justice in the legal system. Christians have always valued that.

They've always said that's massively important. We've always been really good at those things. But the gospel proclamation has the first place because it was the first activity of the church.

And that is what the church has always come back to in periods of reformation and revival. We have the one and only message that the world needs to hear for its salvation.

It's just as simple as John 3, 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

[25:31] And then we don't usually read these verses that come next, but it says whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only son.

And that is why they said we must give ourselves first and foremost to this ministry of God's word because it alone is the only real and lasting solution to the world's problems.

But notice in verse 4 there's something that comes even before this ministry of the word of God and the gospel. And what is that? It's prayer.

And why is that? Well, the gospel cannot be proclaimed properly and it cannot be proclaimed effectively unless it's done in an atmosphere, in an environment of dependent prayer for the

presence and the power of God.

They emphasize prayer because they realize their own inadequacy. The church realized her own impotence and her absolute need for the power of God to work in the midst of their weakness.

[26:51] Why does Acts chapter 2 tell us that they devoted themselves to prayer? Why does Acts chapter 4 tell us that when they prayed, the place where they were gathered was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly?

It's because they knew it to be an absolute imperative and an utter necessity to go to God and get fresh supplies of His Spirit and fresh supplies of His power.

And I wonder if we know that. They said we have to go and pray to God that He would open up His word to our minds and enlighten our understanding of His word so that we can go and make that word plain and clear to other people.

We have to pray for God to anoint His word so that people hearing that word who are currently darkened in their understanding and blinded in their hearts and alienated from God can hear God's word and know that they have a soul and know that their soul is going out into eternity and know that they're going to stand before the judgment of God and unless God opens their eyes to see that, they'll never see it.

And so the church prayed, Sovereign Lord, let them see the mighty salvation You provided in Jesus and plant Your divine nature in them.

[28:13] Put the life of God in their souls. Make them new creatures. Cause them to be born again from above by the Holy Spirit. That was their prayer. And it says, Because they prayed that way, the word of God spread and the number of disciples increased rapidly.

Friends, do you share God's priorities? Is it obvious that the ministry of God's word is the most important thing in your life?

Do you believe that God's word will go nowhere and it will do nothing without prayer? And do you pray for God's anointing and His blessing on the ministry of the word of His gospel?

So they were rejoicing in the name. They were clarifying their priorities. And finally, they were calling to obedience.

And I'll make this quick. But you notice what happens when these Christians were willing to sacrifice some of their comfort and they were willing to keep the main thing the main thing.

[29:24] It says in verse 7 that the word of God spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Don't have time to explain all that that means, but basically a revolutionary change happens when you become a Christian.

And that change is described as obedience to the faith. And this, I think, is fascinating because it's what the Apostle Paul is talking about when he writes to the church in Rome.

And he says in Romans chapter 1, I was sent to the nations to call them to the obedience of faith for Jesus' sake. And in the heart of that letter, in Romans 6, he says, Thanks be to God that though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the gospel that has now claimed your allegiance.

And then as a capstone at the very last chapter of his letter in Romans 16, Paul says the gospel of Jesus is meant to bring all nations to the obedience of faith.

Gosh, that seems important, the obedience of faith. What does that mean? Well, everyone is obedient to something. And someone. If you're not a Christian, you obey yourself.

[30:41] You say, I choose for myself how I'm going to live. No one can impose this on me. I'm the master of my fate. I'm the captain of my soul. I'm my own Lord. But the question is, are you as free and are you as sovereign as you think you are?

In reality, we obey all kind of beliefs and values that are imposed upon us by our culture. In reality, we're obeying spiritual powers and forces that we simply do not understand, that want us to think that we're free.

In reality, Paul says that we're slaves of sin, that we obey our own desires and passions and appetites. We obey our work and our success. And we obey money and sex and power.

And we obey our algorithms and our addictions. And we obey our need for approval and our ambitions. We are obedient little creatures. And what does it mean then to be obedient to the faith?

It simply means a transfer of obedience from this to that. It doesn't mean that you start obeying something or someone. It means you are obeying something or someone and you transfer your

obedience from this to that.

[32:02] A new power comes in from outside of you when you become a Christian. It's the power of the Holy Spirit. And he changes the object of your obedience. He changes you so that you now have a new Lord and a new master.

And you say, I'm no longer going to put my trust in me and obey me. I'm going to put my trust in one who's proven himself to be way more trustworthy than I am.

And when we experience this supernatural change in our mind, in our heart, in our will, there's a fundamental restructuring of our trust.

And we say, ah, now I can see that the path to freedom lies not in obeying myself. The path to freedom lies in surrendering myself to another who's greater than myself.

The path to liberation lies in submitting myself to Jesus and being obedient to the faith about him, being obedient to the word about him, being obedient to the gospel about Jesus.

[33:09] And this revolutionary transfer of obedience is not, I obey, therefore I'm accepted. But rather it's, I'm accepted and therefore I obey.

And to go back to where we started, the first Christians, they looked at the person of Jesus and who he is. And they looked at the work of Jesus and what he's done.

And they said, how could I not obey the one who loved me and gave himself for me? Friends, have you come to obey the gospel from your heart?

Has Jesus claimed your deepest trust and allegiance? And are you living a life of obedience no longer to yourself, but to the faith, the faith in our Lord Jesus, crucified, risen, reigning, and returning?

Let's think about that as we come to this table. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.