

Acts 4:13-22

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The religious leaders are shocked that Peter and John speak so defiantly. They see that the apostles are uneducated but were followers of Jesus during His lifetime. They set Peter and John free because the people who witnessed the healing are praising God for the miracle, but they warn them not to preach about Jesus anymore. Peter and John reply that they will obey God, not man.

Peter and John were arrested for preaching the resurrection of Jesus in the temple after healing a crippled man. Now, standing before the Sanhedrin, they are asked to explain how they healed the man who could not walk. Peter gave his testimony, saying that it was through Jesus's name the man was healed, the same Jesus that the Pharisees and Sadducees had put to death, whom God had raised back to life. Lastly Peter declared that Jesus was God's Messiah, and that there was no chance of salvation apart from Him.

Peter said this to the very council that opposed Jesus throughout His ministry and successfully plotted to have Him executed. But Peter is telling the council that they failed, that Jesus is alive, having been raised from the dead. And that the only way to have right standing in the presence of God is through Him.

The Pharisees and Sadducees are taken aback by how bold and articulate Peter is: *Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.* Those in the council were apparently highly educated, whereas Peter and John were laborers, being fisherman. It is interesting to note that God used those without academic credentials to bring the truth to the educated.

In Acts 2:7, when the Holy Spirit began speaking through the disciples in foreign languages, those who heard them reacted similarly, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" Galilee was remote and rural, not known for producing academics or deep thinkers. Anyone in Jerusalem who encountered the disciples recognized they were from Galilee by their accent. The Sanhedrin *understood* that *Peter and John* were not rabbis, that they *were uneducated and untrained men*, by their standards. However, Jesus had different standards, and had his own credentialing process based on service and faithfulness.

The ruling council could not ignore *the confidence* of these two men, and were *amazed* by how Peter spoke. Soon enough they rightly *began to recognize them as having been with Jesus*. The council realized that these men had walked with Jesus, that they had spent time with Jesus, that Jesus was so close to them that they could recognize that they were part of Him. Peter and John were not well-educated or well-spoken. They were poor fishermen. But they had been with Jesus for three years, and now the Holy Spirit was continuing God's will through them.

Somehow, this situation catches the entire council off guard. They apparently thought the problem of Jesus had been laid to rest when they crucified Him. But here were His disciples preaching salvation in His name, and moreover performing miracles in public. The Pharisees and Sadducees appear to be dumbfounded. The healed man was present at this trial as well, since it was his healing that created the stir in the temple courtyard. *And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, the religious leaders had nothing to say in reply.* There was no arguing that a crippled man who begged in the temple every day for years was suddenly walking around.

But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, dismissing Peter and John so that they can determine a judgment, the religious leaders began to confer with one another, saying, "What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it." The fact that we know of these deliberations would indicate that either some of the ruling council or clerks working for them either believed or became believers thereafter, and were willing to convey the information to Luke, the author of Acts.

How could they criticize the fact that a lame man had been *healed*? They clearly saw him right before them, and they couldn't ignore the miracle. They couldn't deny that God had done something supernatural, something man could never do. They apparently did not know what to *do with* Peter and John. As religious leaders who purported to serve the God of their fathers, it is odd that they wanted to *do* anything *with* Peter and John.

To them, men working miracles that only God could perform presented a problem. Rather than eagerly listen to what these men had to say, to realize that God worked through them, that the words they spoke were true concerning Jesus—rather than repent of their sin when they crucified Jesus, and seeking the salvation in His name (Acts 3:19, Acts 4:12)—the question that the Pharisees and Sadducees ponder is, "What do we do with these men? They're making trouble for us."

The council is shrewd enough to see they have no case against them, that it was a *fact that a noteworthy miracle had taken place through them.* And again, how else could the *noteworthy miracle* have occurred if not by God? But this did not seem to matter to the religious leaders. They are concerned that this *noteworthy miracle* is being talked about throughout the entire city, that it *is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem* that the crippled man was healed, *and we cannot deny it.* Rather than stand in awe that the miracle had occurred, or to rejoice with the healed man, they lament that they *cannot deny it.* They cannot suppress it, they cannot conceal it, because everyone already knows about it. Obsession with their own political power seems to have blinded them to the amazing opportunity standing before them.

So the Pharisees and Sadducees decide to tell Peter and John to stop speaking: *But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name.*

They decide that the only thing they can do is release John and Peter, since they have no legal grounds to punish them, nor are they able to fabricate false accusations in the spur of the moment

as they had done to Jesus (Matthew 26:59-62). They think that perhaps if they warn them not to preach the gospel of Jesus, that Peter and John may be cowed into silence.

It is notable that they did not want to speak the name of Jesus even among themselves, saying *let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name*, rather than “in the name of Jesus.” Whether by guilt, fear, shame, or pride, they would not even name the man that these Galileans claimed was God’s Messiah and was raised from the dead. The man they had killed. They are so eager to put the issue of Jesus to rest, that they don’t want to dignify the problem by naming Him.

The hearts of the leaders were so hardened that they missed every sign of God that came along in their lifetime: Jesus standing before them, speaking God’s words, Jesus doing miracles among them, Jesus dying on the cross, Jesus rising again; and they missed it all. Here, God gives them another opportunity to see Him working. He healed a crippled man, He speaks through Peter, He declares Jesus was His Messiah and the Savior to Israel, and again they hardened their hearts, and they refused to see any of it. Instead, they wanted to cling to their power, they wanted to perpetuate their way of life, they wanted their traditions to be upheld.

And when the council had summoned Peter and John, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. There was no threat of punishment, just the hope that Peter and John would fear the Sanhedrin’s political power.

But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

The command is to stop talking about Jesus.

The apostles’ answer is very simply, “No.”

Peter and John volley the Sanhedrin’s authority right back at them. They put the question to the Pharisees and the Sadducees to determine *Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God*. It is up to the religious leaders to *be the judge* of which is *right*, which is *of God*, to follow man or to follow *God*? It is of course a rhetorical question, and a thinly veiled accusation that the Pharisees and Sadducees are not giving *heed* to God’s will.

But again, Peter and John are both bold and honest. They tell the leaders that they are not going to obey them, *for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard*. The apostles *cannot* cease preaching Jesus. They frame it as if they have no choice. And what choice do they have? They *have seen and heard* the Son of God preach the kingdom of God for three years, healing, casting out demons, and resurrecting the dead. Finally, after seeing the Son put to death, they saw Him resurrected. The apostles had *seen* and been taught by Jesus for forty days after His resurrection concerning the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). They had *seen* Him rise into the air to return to Heaven to sit beside the right hand of God (Acts 1:9-11). They had *seen and heard* the Holy Spirit arrive upon them at Pentecost and speak through them in multiple languages, as

well as to perform miracles and wonders through them (Acts 2:43). They cannot *stop speaking* about any of these wonderful things God has done.

This defiant response displeased the Sanhedrin, so that *they then threatened* Peter and John *further*. The text does not say how they threatened them, but it was obviously not persuasive. In any event, the council saw no other option but to *let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.*

The healed man was not young: *more than forty years old*. Even by today's standards, that is "over the hill," in terms of being quick to heal. In the first century, for a poor crippled man, *forty years* would likely have been considered near to old age. Moreover, it seems he sat in the temple for years and was very well known to the Jewish people. Thus the religious leaders cannot claim the healing was false, that the lame man was a plant, that the whole thing was a hoax to trick people into believing in Jesus. No, this beggar had sat there in front of them for years. The leaders cannot say, "He just got better." He has been lame far too long for that. They know that this is a miracle. There was *no basis on which to punish* Peter and John, just as there is no *basis to punish* a doctor for giving a patient medicine.

However, it was not because of these logical conclusions that they let them go. Rather, it was on account of the Jewish people that the council could not act. The Jewish people were all glorifying God for what had happened. The council cared about their power and prestige, so they felt a need to accommodate the peoples' opinion in this matter. They are navigating public opinion rather than seeking what is true and right.

The Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests would apparently have killed Peter and John if they could, just as they had Jesus. Their desire to put Jesus to death went on for years before they found the right opportunity to do it. Jesus evaded death on a number of occasions (Luke 4:28-30, John 10:39), sometimes because the religious leaders knew that the people would turn against them if they arrested Him (Luke 20:19). So it is in this circumstance with Peter and John. Given their goal to grab political power, it would be a foolish move to put these men to death, after they healed a lame man and caused the crowds to worship God.

Soon enough the persecution and martyrdom of believers in Jesus will begin with Stephen, when the Sanhedrin becomes enraged by his testimony (Acts 7:54-60). But at this point, they are cautious and calculating.

How does Peter's Spirit-led response to defy authority fit with biblical admonitions to obey those in authority (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-2)? Peter even states we should obey those in authority:

"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in **authority**."
(1 Peter 2:13)

Authority always has a hierarchy. The American Constitution has priority over laws made under the Constitution. Federal laws have primacy over state laws. A child's parents have primacy over instructions that might be given by other adults. In the case of Peter's defiance of the ruling council, the Pharisees and Sadducees were in direct violation of God's commands, so Peter and John chose to follow the higher authority. Peter and John did not defy the authority in their own name, but in the name of God, whom the ruling council claimed to represent.

Biblical Text

13 Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus. 14 And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. 15 But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they began to confer with one another, 16 saying, "What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 17 But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name." 18 And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; 20 for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." 21 When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; 22 for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.