

## **Does It Matter What I Believe? The Difference Between Mere Human Faith And The True Christian Faith.**

Text: Acts 5:27-42

Suggested Hymns:

299, 352, 257, 285, 207

- 1) Mere human faith builds on human knowledge and experience
- 2) The true Christian faith builds on God's Word and the merit of Christ

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Acts 5:27-42, <sup>27</sup> *And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them,* <sup>28</sup> *saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!"*

<sup>29</sup> *But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. <sup>30</sup> "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. <sup>31</sup> "Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> "And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."*

<sup>33</sup> *When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. <sup>34</sup> Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while.*

<sup>35</sup> *And he said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. <sup>36</sup> "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. <sup>37</sup> "After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.*

<sup>38</sup> *“And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; <sup>39</sup> “but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it -- lest you even be found to fight against God.”*

<sup>40</sup> *And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.*

<sup>41</sup> *So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. <sup>42</sup> And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

On the past two Sundays we have considered several qualities of the Christian faith. We learnt that the Christian's faith does not take holidays but that it moves a person to regular Church attendance, steadfastness in godly virtues, and perseverance in the service of Christ and the Church. By faith the Christian walks in the light of the Gospel, and is always engaged in the struggle against sin, and finally obtains the treasures of salvation, which is justification by faith. Such topics are not popular in the world. Occasionally Christians are charged with making too much of faith.

Our Lutheran Church especially is frequently accused of stressing faith too much but this charge has no foundation. It is true that we emphasise faith. But faith plays an equally important role in the life of those who accuse the Christians of over-playing faith.

The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is not that the Christian believes something while the non-Christian believes nothing. The difference rather is this, that the Christian believes something wholly different from what the non-Christian believes. The true Christian faith is something distinct from common human faith and is on a much higher plane.

Common human faith is the conviction and the confidence which people have in themselves, in human institutions, and in the so-called laws of nature. Such a

faith is indeed a necessity in human life. Without it no business would be possible, no planning whatever could be undertaken, and our very existence would become unbearable.

But as far as the heavens are above the earth, the true Christian faith is above common human faith. This is because the true Christian faith is the conviction and the confidence which people have in God's Word and promise and in the work and merit of Christ. This is clearly illustrated in the lesson before us today. Let us therefore consider *The Difference between Mere Human Faith and the True Christian Faith*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

### **1. Mere Human Faith Builds On Human Knowledge And Experience**

The apostles had been brought before the Council of the Jews because they preached and performed miracles in the name of Jesus.

Earlier these men had summoned Peter and John to appear before them and had commanded them not to speak at all, nor to teach in the name of Jesus. We read in Acts 4:15-18, *the council, ... conferred among themselves, <sup>16</sup> saying, "What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup> "But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name." <sup>18</sup> And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.*

This command the Apostles had ignored. Continuing their activity,<sup>1</sup> they showed forth such power and authority that the people praised them all the more. Many more believers were added to the Church, and the Apostles' miracles were multiplied. As a result the Apostles were arrested a second time.

This time the high priest begins the examination, *"Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!"* In these words he not only asks a pertinent question but also makes a confession of faith.

He sets forth in plain words what he believes. He believes that the Apostles intend to bring the blood of Jesus upon the head of the high priest and his

associates. And when Peter seeks to defend the Apostles' activity by saying that no such intentions have motivated them but that they merely obeyed God, by testifying what they had seen and heard, the members of the Council became even more angry so that they wanted to kill them, as our text says, <sup>33</sup> ***When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them.***

Surely no one can deny that these members of the Council had very definite convictions. They certainly had a definite faith. What they believed also moved them to definite resolutions and actions. They believed that the Apostles were a menace to them and to the people of Jerusalem.

They believed that the name of Jesus was a threat against them and their well-being. Therefore they were resolved to put a stop to these dangers and even to go so far as to kill the Apostles.

But how did they get these convictions, this faith? It was solely from their limited human knowledge and experience. Because these many miracles were an unheard-of occurrence, they concluded that they must be false, and yes, the very works of Satan.

Because they had hated Jesus and crucified Him, they concluded that the Apostles hated them also and meant to do them harm. Because they knew that men of power and authority had successfully held their position by destroying those who opposed them, the members of the Sanhedrin believed that they should follow the same course.

But while their conviction, their faith, was very strong, we know that it was altogether wrong. Both the knowledge of these men and their experience was far too limited and too much influenced by their own wickedness, pride, and lust for power to keep them from grievous errors and horrible wrong-doing.

Sadly it is the same with the convictions which many people hold today. It is commonly found that the less people know, and the less experience they have, the more opinionated, proud, and conceited they are. The less reasons they have for their opinions, the surer they are that their own opinion is the only correct one. Whether they are conscious of it or not, the fact remains that they have a faith, a very definite faith, even though it is founded on nothing but ignorance.

Fortunately not all who reject Christ are guilty of founding their faith on such prejudices, preconceived notions, and ignorance. There are many people who are

both moderate and considerate and who arrive at their convictions, their faith, by a more careful consideration, inquiry, and judgment.

Of this class was Gamaliel, the learned Pharisee, at whose feet Paul had sat as a pupil, as we read in Acts 22:3, <sup>3</sup> ***“I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.***

While the majority of the Council was already deliberating how the Apostles might be killed, Gamaliel urged a more careful examination of their case. He, too, based his argument, his conviction, his faith, on purely human knowledge. However, he did try to overcome personal prejudice and to base his faith on facts and experience.

He brings to the attention of his associates the careers of two well-known teachers who had very recently made history in Israel. Both Theudas and Judas had gathered large numbers of people to themselves by their proud boasting and their exaggerated promises.

Both, however, had perished, and the cause which they represented had come to nothing. Therefore on the basis of these facts, this human knowledge and experience, Gamaliel also makes a confession of faith. <sup>38</sup> ***“And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; <sup>39</sup> “but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it -- lest you even be found to fight against God.”***

Surely credit must be given to Gamaliel that his faith was better founded than that of the high priest and the Sadducees. His faith at least acknowledged the over-ruling providence of God in the lives and affairs of people. In fact, Gamaliel expressed and confessed a truth which finds many applications in the lives of men. ***“If this work be of God, you cannot overthrow it.”***

Then, too, he stated his conviction so well, confessed his faith so sincerely, that the other members of the Sanhedrin dropped their own opinion at least in part and agreed with him. Thus the wise words of the Pharisee spared the lives of the apostles and restored their freedom.

But praiseworthy though the faith of Gamaliel was, it, too was based on nothing more than human knowledge and experience and therefore suffered from many serious defects. There was, for example, the linking of the Apostles' blessed activity with the revolutionary and fanatical doings of Theudas and Judas. Gamaliel thereby revealed how little he understood and appreciated the work of the Apostles.

His knowledge in this respect was, to say the least, exceedingly limited. Then, while it is absolutely true that no one can overthrow a work that is of God, this fact can never justify a do-nothing attitude when danger threatens, when people are misled, and when evil is done.

If Gamaliel had known the truth he would not have operated with "ifs" and "buts," but would have declared, *"These men are teachers come from God, for no man can do the miracles that these men do except God be with them."* Compare this to Nicodemus who said in John 3:2, *"Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."*

It is this mere human faith, such as the faith of Gamaliel that competes with the true Christian faith in the world and even in the visible Church. This human faith is a praiseworthy thing and even a genuine blessing, so long as it concerns itself solely with earthly things. No inventions could be made, no economic improvements produced, no harvests reaped, and no business conducted if people had no faith in themselves, in human institutions and in the so-called laws of nature based upon human knowledge and experience.

But when this purely human faith intrudes upon the field of religion, when it seeks to read God's mind and interpret His judgments and ways, it makes confusion even worse. We read in 1 Corinthians 2:14, ***"But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."***<sup>2</sup>

Mere human faith is not only subject to the limitations of human knowledge and as variable as human experience, but it is also continually influenced by people's desires and preferences.

It has proved itself in the case before us. The Sadducees believed that the Apostles should be killed. Gamaliel believed that they should be let alone.

Finally, the two beliefs were compromised. The Apostles were beaten, commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then set free.

## **2. The True Christian Faith Builds On God's Word And The Merit Of Christ**

How different were the actions of the Apostles, who were moved by the true Christian faith, which builds upon the Word of God and the merits of Christ.

While the Sadducees and the Pharisees debated between conflicting opinions, the Apostles were unanimous in their convictions and fully persuaded in their own minds.

*“We ought to obey God rather than men.”* The Apostles could say this because they had God's Word and knew His will. Wherever and whenever a choice had to be made between what people believed and what God has said, the Apostles invariably chose God's Word and will.

We read in Psalm 119, *“How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. ...<sup>41</sup> Let Your mercies come also to me, O LORD -- Your salvation according to Your word.<sup>42</sup> So shall I have an answer for him who reproaches me, For I trust in Your word.<sup>46</sup> I will speak of Your testimonies also before kings, And will not be ashamed.*

Our text says,<sup>30</sup> *“The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.”*<sup>31</sup> *“Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.* This faith was not built upon the variable experiences of men but upon the work of Jesus, their Prince and their Saviour.

Listen to the Second Article of the Creed, explanation. *I believe that Jesus Christ - true God, Son of the Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary - is my Lord.*

What does this mean?

*At great cost He has saved and redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has freed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil - not with silver or gold, but with His holy and precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.*

*All this He has done that I may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as*

*He is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.* That beautifully describes the work and merits of Jesus Christ.

Our text continues, <sup>32</sup> ***“And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.”*** This was not a vague opinion with the Apostles, something that could be disproved by subtle arguments or be driven out of their hearts by physical abuse and with the threat of death.

The work of the Holy Spirit is described in the Explanation of the Third article of the Apostles Creed, *But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.*

The Apostles were so fully persuaded that, even though they would kill no one for opposing them, they were willing to die for their faith. Compare this to Romans 8:36-39, ***“For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”*** <sup>37</sup> ***Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.*** <sup>38</sup> ***For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come,*** <sup>39</sup> ***nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

And as the Apostles believed, so they also lived. The Council had beaten them and threatened their lives. However, that did not weaken their faith but rather strengthened it because they knew that all this was done to them in accordance with what Jesus had told them beforehand, <sup>41</sup> ***So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.***<sup>3</sup>

Consequently they were ***daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*** The Apostles continued steadfastly in their blessed work and activity. We are assured in 1 Corinthians 15:58, <sup>58</sup> ***Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.***<sup>4</sup>



May we all be immovable in our faith which is based solely on the Word of God and merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 5:12-16

<sup>2</sup> See also 1 Cor. 2:9, John 1:18

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 13: 9; 5:12. Cf. Rom. 5:3 ff.; 2 Cor. 12:10

<sup>4</sup> See also 1 John 4:4-9,17-18, 1 John 5:5