

Rejoicing in the Unstoppable Gospel Pt. 2 Acts 5:41-42

Main Point:

God's "unstoppable gospel" should fill Christians with confidence and joy as they proclaim Christ to a hostile world.

Introduction: Joy & Confidence in God's Unstoppable Gospel

Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 5. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 5 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). Last week we covered the first of a two-part series on chapter 5 that we are calling "Rejoicing in the Unstoppable Gospel." I tried to explain how Luke skillfully tells the story of the early church in such a way as to reassure us that the gospel of the Lord Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is simply unstoppable. No human government, no institution, no person or groups of persons, and no spiritual forces are able to withstand its momentum and power. Just as the Lord Jesus Himself said in Matthew 16, "and the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church." I concluded with these two statements:

How the Unstoppable Gospel shaped the Apostles' attitude (and should shape ours!)

- 1) ***Absolute Confidence in the triumph of Christ's cause and kingdom.***
- 2) ***Resilient Joy despite temporary persecution, trials, and difficulties.***

This morning, I want to expand on number two by offering some theological reflection on Acts 5:41-42 and the current cultural situation we currently face today. Let us pray as we begin...

Starter: Perspective Matters

We live in discouraging times. In past messages, I have referred to Aaron Renn's cultural analysis of what he refers to as "negative world." For those not familiar, I bring it up again as a helpful tool to understand the times we are in.

Aaron Renn's "Three Worlds of Evangelicalism":

- **Positive World (Pre-1994):** Society at large retains a mostly *positive* view of Christianity. To be known as a good, churchgoing man remains part of being an upstanding citizen. Publicly being a Christian is a status-enhancer. Christian moral norms are the basic moral norms of society and violating them can bring negative consequences.
- **Neutral World (1994–2014):** Society takes a *neutral* stance toward Christianity. Christianity no longer has privileged status but is not disfavored. Being publicly known as a Christian has neither a positive nor a negative impact on one's social status. Christianity is a valid option within a pluralistic public square. Christian moral norms retain some residual effect.
- **Negative World (2014–Present):** Society has come to have a *negative* view of Christianity. Being known as a Christian is a social negative, particularly in the elite domains of society. Christian morality is expressly repudiated and seen as a threat to the public good and the new public moral order. Subscribing to Christian moral views or violating the secular moral order brings negative consequences.

The key takeaway from Renn's proposal is the social space (if I could put it like this) which Christianity in our culture currently occupies. The movement and emphasis in our society right now on being a "good human being" is instructive here, because Christians by and large do not fit into that category. In the minds of many, evangelical Christians are considered to be "bad citizens" whose repugnant ideas are a threat to the social fabric of society – in short, we are not "good, kind, human beings". Now, the interesting thing is that this is exactly the kind of criticism that the early church received, especially as it moved out beyond Jerusalem and into the frontiers of broader Greco-Roman world. This will become more pronounced as we move forward in our series on Acts.

According to Renn, the approaches that might have worked in what he calls "positive world" and "neutral world" are not sufficient for the challenges "negative world" poses. I think he's largely correct. Evangelicals have by and large had a difficult time reckoning with these new realities. Some groups have tried to find ways to find an alliance with the secular world by adapting themselves to the ideologies of our day – especially in the area of gender/sexuality; others have taken a more combative stance towards the culture and are actively trying to fight their way back to the table; others are simply retreating back to the safety of their evershrinking evangelical ghettos.

But in my experience, the most damaging result of being in negative world – for the church – is the deep and pervasive pessimism many Christians seem to be living with and exhibiting. Last week I gave you just one example of that pessimism based on a conversation I had several years ago with a woman in my church in which she remarked that she is glad she doesn't have to raise kids in this culture. I called this attitude unbiblical and borderline atheistic – for it presumes that there is no resurrection to hope for! No life back from the dead! So today I want to revisit these themes again from Acts 5, and encourage all of us that what God has done historically He can still do again today – and will do today! For His gospel is unstoppable. The question for us is: will we by faith believe this good news and rigorously apply ourselves to it?

Acts 5:41-42 This is amazing! As the opposing pressure increases and the shadow of more severe persecution grows (which is coming in the next couple of chapters), we don't find the Apostles becoming pessimistic, anxious, or fearful – instead, they grow bolder, more determined, and more hopeful of what God was going to do and – dare I say it! – more joyful. How? Where do the apostles get their excitement, energy, and passion for the Lord Jesus, despite the threats of the religious leaders? Simple: from the conviction that the gospel of the resurrected Lord Jesus is unstoppable! Not even the gates of hell can withstand the power of Christ's Spirit-filled church!

Main Point: *God's "unstoppable gospel" should fill Christians with confidence and joy as they proclaim Christ to a hostile world.*

Application: Lessons for Today

What I want to do now is engage in what is known as *theological reflection*. Theological reflection is a process in which we think about the significance and meaning of a biblical text in light of what we know to be biblically true about God, Christ, the Spirit, the church, etc.

How the Unstoppable Gospel shaped the Apostles' attitude (and should shape ours!)

- 1) *Absolute Confidence* in the triumph of Christ's cause and kingdom.
- 2) *Resilient Joy* despite temporary persecution, trials, and difficulties.

So what do we do? Here are some practical thoughts for you to consider:

How do Christians living in “negative world” cultivate the same *resilient joy* the early church possessed?

- 1) *The early church joyfully prioritized the mission of Jesus over all other political and social matters*

We sometimes forget the social and political world of first century Judaism, and how that world would have likely shaped the Apostles and the early church at this stage. So far in the story, the church is primarily a Jewish church. Eventually, the gospel will penetrate into the Gentile world. Now keep in mind, the Jews of the first century will intensely focused on the future coming of the kingdom of God as promised by the prophets. They expected Messiah who would have victory over the Gentile oppressors. Their ethnic and theological identity was everything to them. And yet, as we see in the gospel accounts and will see later in Acts, Jesus continuously seeks to raise their vision above the interests of the Jewish nation, and Jewish identity. And as we will see, this will become difficult especially around the issue of circumcision – the primary Jewish identity-marker. Before debates about Jesus's divinity, and justification by faith, the authority of the bible, and, in our day, gender/sexuality, circumcision was the hot-button issue of the day!

At every turn, we see the apostles surrendering their national, ethnic, and theological aspirations and identity, to the greater interests of the Kingdom of God. It was not always easy...but it was essential for them to do what Jesus was calling them to do, and they responded. Why? Well, the text itself tells us: The gospel, the message of Jesus, is the word of “life”. Luke uses “word of life” to refer to Jesus and what Jesus brings for people. Furthermore, the text tells us that the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey Jesus. It's not through Mosaic Law, or being ethnically Jewish, or following the rituals of the temple that one receives the promised Spirit of God – it's through Jesus! So believing all of this by faith, and experiencing it, the Apostles joyfully set aside their own national/political interests, their commitment to their ethnic identity, and lay it all down at the feet of Jesus, and take up a new cause – the cause of His kingdom, embracing a new identity – Jesus-followers (true Israel!) with Him.

And so it is with us! We too are called to put our own ethnic and national interests to the altar of the mission of Jesus. Jesus, and His priorities, are to trump every other loyalty in our lives. This is a challenging one, especially in our current cultural climate, where there are numerous voices calling out for our loyalty and telling us where our loyalty should be! There are strong, strong forces vying for our affections, our hearts and minds!

Since I have become voting age, every election – literally, every single election I have been a part of as an adult – is the one that will supposedly decide the fate of our country. And we have another one coming up! Friends, this kind of emotional attachments to our election cycle is not healthy or sustainable – as we are seeing. Our ultimate loyalty lies beyond the scope of national politics. Guard your heart and mind, friends, from anything that would rob your joy in the Lord

Jesus, and anything that would keep you from the primary mission that Jesus calls us to: making Him known – as we say in our vision statement, “seen” – by all!

2) *The early church joyfully accepted the conditions required to fulfill the mission of Jesus*

The early church considers suffering for Jesus a privilege and a means by which believers draw closer to Him.

Relevant texts showing their view on suffering...(Jesus own words/promises, Phil. 1, Rom. 8, 1 Peter). But they also knew their cause – the cause of the gospel – was unstoppable! And so it could be joyful...and even more determined to keep on preaching the name of Jesus. Let me give you some examples: Matthew 10:22 - *and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.* Phil. 1:29, Rom. 8:16-17, 1 Peter 4:12-14

By and large, the American (evangelical) church considers suffering for Jesus an impediment to faith and a political problem to be remedied

Contrast this with our experience. Fear, insecurity, pessimism, even rage! Anything and everything except what we see in the text here: resilient joy, and absolute confidence. Friends, as we walk into this present darkness in our culture, let us do so with the understanding that the mission of Jesus calls us to suffering – so that we can know Him more deeply, and shine His light more brightly. It doesn't come through ease and comfort; it doesn't come through scoring political points against the opposition, or getting the right leaders in place. It comes through seeking first the kingdom of God, denying ourselves so we can carry the crosses He gives to us, all in the hopes of making Christ more and more visible in our witness!

3) *The early church joyfully believed they had an unbeatable offensive scheme against which Satan's best defensive strategies are helpless*

Finally, let us remember, the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. The purpose of gates is defensive; gates don't attack! Gates don't advance! All gates can do is try to keep the enemy at bay. So, friends, it's not us who are being attacked and forced into a corner – it may feel like that, but our feelings betray us – that's not what's actually happening. Biblically speaking, its the exact opposite. So friends, lets be very real about the challenges we face. But let's not become pessimistic and cynical. Lets not succumb to the temptation to withdraw and adopt a bunker mentality. We don't see that kind of mentality anywhere in the book of Acts, or anywhere in the New Testament, or even the early church over the first 3 centuries.

According to Jesus, this is the spiritual situation we find ourselves in: the gospel is relentlessly assaulting Satan's stronghold, and he knows his time is short. So all he does is play defense, thrashing around and doing all he can to upset the work of God in the world (C.S. Lewis, Screwtape example).

Closing

Life in “negative world” will be challenging, at times dangerous, and full of discouragement. But we can't let our circumstances in “negative world” keep us from what the Holy Spirit promises here: resilient joy in unstoppable gospel of Christ!