

Fighting Against God (Acts 4:13-22)^a

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Context

1. **Acts 3** - Peter and John healed a man who was lame from birth.
2. The healing took place in the *temple*.
3. Peter explained the significance of the healing, that it points to Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah whom they had crucified.
4. Many came to faith . . . and then the Sadducees came upon them and they were placed in custody.
 - A. Sadducees did not believe in resurrection after death, but Peter and John *preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead (Acts 4:2)*.
5. During their examination by the Sanhedrin, Peter boldly proclaimed that the healing was by the power of Jesus, whom they had rejected.
6. Today's passage records the response of the Sanhedrin to Peter's testimony.

Today's Passage¹

- Acts 4:13 - *Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.*
- Acts 4:14 - *And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it.*
- Acts 4:15 - *But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves,*
- Acts 4:16 - *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.*
- Acts 4:17 - *"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."*
- Acts 4:18 - *And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.*
- Acts 4:19 - *But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge.*
- Acts 4:20 - *"For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard."*
- Acts 4:21 - *So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done.*
- Acts 4:22 - *For the man was over forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.*

Three primary themes from the passage

1. The Blessing of the Meek — God's use of the lowly to advance His purposes
2. The Hard Heartedness of the Proud — their resolute rejection of undeniable evidence for God
3. The Obedience of the Christian — how are we to respond when Caesar's law contravenes God's law?

The Blessing of the Meek — God's use of the lowly to advance His purposes

1. **Acts 4:13** - *Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were*

uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.

A. uneducated

- I. Both Peter and John were simple tradesmen: fisherman (Mat. 4:18-21; Mark 1:18-19).
- II. How was it that their speech had become flavored with the wisdom of God?
- III. The wisdom of God opposes the wisdom of man, also known as worldly wisdom: the sophisticated and tortured reasoning learned in most academies and so often mistaken for intelligence.
- IV. Their understanding of the Scriptures was superior to that of the experts of their day: the scribes, Pharisees, and religious leaders.

B. boldness

- I. What was the source of their great boldness?
- II. **FIRST** - They were convinced that they knew the truth. (Unless a person becomes convinced of the absolute truth of God's Word, he will never exhibit the boldness of John or Peter!)
- III. **SECOND** - They feared God more than the face of man.
 - a. Acts 4:19-20 - *But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard."*
- IV. **THIRD** - They were indwelt and empowered by the Third Person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit.
 - a. *Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. (Luke 12:11-12 cf. Mat. 10:18-20; Mark 13:11)*
 - b. *The preparations of the heart belong to man, But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD. (Pr. 16:1)*

C. they realized that they had been with Jesus

- I. They saw the "Jesus effect" — evident when people are dramatically transformed by their encounter with Jesus
- II. Whether of high or low station, the effect is undeniable
- III. Whether originally timid and uneducated, or prideful and sophisticated, having been transformed by Jesus, they exude Godly wisdom, divine clarity, and unstoppable boldness.
- IV. If you have been born again, you are not who you once were.

- a. Your family saw the change.
- b. Your friends saw the change.
- c. Some asked you about it. Others find it too awkward to acknowledge or deal with.
- d. Some think you've become addled, like Festus in his response to Paul: "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!" (Acts 26:24)

2. Jesus said, *Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.* (Mat. 5:5)

- A. Peter and John were among the meek Jesus spoke of who would inherit the earth.
- B. Meek = *πραεῖς* [*praeis*], "gentle, meek, mild"
- C. Meekness is highly valued by God:
 - I. *Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel— rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle [meek, KJV] and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. (1Pe. 3:3-4)*
- D. Meekness is an important attributed of the character of God:
 - I. *Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly [Meek, KJV], and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.'* (Mat. 21:5)
 - II. *Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle [meek, KJV] and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:29)*

3. Why does God invest in the meek?

- A. The meek are more likely to respond to God, to recognize and admit their need: *Blessed are the poor [humble] in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* (Mat. 5:3)
- B. The meek are more likely to remain faithful, recognizing that whatever God accomplishes through them is not to their own credit.
 - I. God invests spiritual valuables where they are safest
 - II. This is still the case today: the learned and mighty scholars are blinded by pride, seeking the accolades of men and discourse with fellow academics rather than walking in simplicity and faith toward God.
 - III. This is why we must come to God as little children (Mat. 18:3; Mark 10:15), with a simplicity of heart (Acts 2:46).
- C. This is why Christianity has never been entrusted into the hands of the powerful and worldly wise. If it had, it would never have survived to our own day.
- D. Paul, probably the most sophisticated and educated among the Apostles, understood this

reality:

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. (1Cor. 1:26-29)

The Hard Heartedness of the Proud — their resolute rejection of undeniable evidence for God

- Acts 4:14 - *And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it.*
 - Acts 4:16 - . . . *For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.*
 - Acts 4:22 - *For the man was over forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.*
1. **Notice that *they themselves* admit the reality which is staring them in the face.**
 2. **Unlike the meek, their hearts remain hard, regardless of the reality of the evidence.**
 3. **Although they incessantly clamor for evidence, they have no intention of yielding to it: to do so would be to accept God and to submit to His claim on their lives.**
 4. **Act as if their problem is one of the *head*, but Scripture reveals it is a problem of the *heart*.**
 - A. ***The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."*** (Pr. 14:1; Ps. 53:1)
 - B. **They are like the rich man in Hades who asks Abraham to provide objective evidence to warn his brothers before they too die and come to the same place.**
 - I. ***" . . . he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send [Lazarus] to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' "Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'*** *"And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'* *"But he said to him, 'if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.'"* (Luke 16:27-31)
 5. **Examples of undeniable reality which the proud continue to reject in our day.**
 - A. **Biblical testimony**
 - I. **Testimony of archaeology to the accuracy of the biblical account**
 - II. **Uncontrovertible evidence of the reality of God's ability to reveal the future in advance: the reality of prophecy (e.g., Isa. 53 and the Dead Sea Scrolls)**
 - III. **The historical and global influence of Christianity.**
 - a. **Is it really sane to attribute the genius and uniqueness of Christianity among the religions of the world to the teachings of a liar, lunatic, or legend?**
 - IV. **The historical transformation of the Apostles, including Paul, the inveterate enemy of Christ.**

V. The history of the Jews, Israel, and Jerusalem and the situation today

B. Evidence in nature

I. The complexity of life itself

- a. Fantastic design in nature, including at the cellular and genetic level, evidence of intelligence—the only source of information known to the universe.
- b. The Cambrian explosion: early fossil evidence of a widely varied and sophisticated group of animal life forms with no known precursors.

II. Evidence of a global flood

- a. Marine fossils worldwide, at high elevations
- b. Thick layers of sediment bearing dramatic evidence of catastrophe
- c. Similar flood legends in most cultures worldwide

III. The nature of man

- a. The nightly news
- b. Centuries of opportunities to improve environmental and educational factors, yet sinfulness has not abated one wit
- c. Our own soul, our inability to achieve righteousness and to live consistently in a way which matches our ideals

IV. Psalm 19, Romans 1

6. Just like the members of the Sanhedrin in the passage before us.

- A. The evidence of God's work is clearly seen, but rejected in what amounts to a denial of reality.
- B. . . . [men] . . . *suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse (Rom. 1:18-20)*
- C. As one person observed, "Atheists can't find God for the same reason criminals can't find policemen."²

The Obedience of the Christian — how are we to respond when Caesar's law contravenes God's law?

- Acts 4:18 - *And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.*
- Acts 4:19 - *But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge.*

1. Peter and John openly disobey the religious leaders.

2. **Yet, we know from God's Word that Christians are commanded to obey authorities who are placed in power by God for the purpose of restraining evil (Rom. 13:1-7; Tit. 3:1; 1Pe. 2:13, 17; cf. Gen. 9:6; Deu. 17:9-12; Ecc. 8:12).**
3. **The principle of "Higher Law" — when Christians are called to disobey governmental or religious authorities in order to keep God's law, a higher-law.**
4. **The idea is related to the familiar quotation of Jesus, which He gave in reply to a question concerning payment of taxes to Rome: *Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.* (Mat. 22:21 cf. Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25).**
 - A. **The things that are Caesar's — our duty to the state.**
 - B. **The things that are God's — our duty to God. (This includes our duty to the state, where the state does not require us to violate God's higher law.)**
5. **Many other examples of the principle of higher law can be found in Scripture:**
 - A. **The Hebrew midwives disobeyed Pharaoh's command to kill the male Jews (Ex. 1:16-21).¹⁸⁷**
 - B. **Moses' parents disobeyed Pharaoh's command to kill their male baby, Moses (Ex. 2:2). This act was referred to as an act of faith (Heb. 11:23).**
 - C. **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego refused to bow before the image King Nebuchadnezzar had set up (Dan. 3:13+).**
 - D. **Daniel refused to stop his daily prayers to God (Dan. 6:10+).**
 - E. **Mordecai refused to bow before Haman (Est. 3:2-4).**
 - F. **Peter and the apostles defied the same command of the Jewish council a second time, responding, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).**
 - G. **Believers refuse to worship the beast and his image during the Great Tribulation (Rev. 13:15+; 15:2+; 20:4+).**
6. **In such cases, Christians are personally called to follow God's law and disobey the authorities.**
 - A. **Since the authority is often civil, we know it as "civil disobedience."**
 - B. **What are some principles which must hold before we are justified before God in practicing civil disobedience?**
 - I. **Biblical discernment is needed: many have practiced civil disobedience motivated by laudable goals of social justice, but this is not the Biblical basis for such action.**
 - II. **Unambiguous - The lower law must violate a higher law which is clearly expressed in Scripture: not just a general social principle.**
 - a. **For example, being forced to sit in the back of a bus, as unjust as that may be, does not biblically qualify as a basis for the Christian to respond in civil disobedience.**

- b. **An unjust law, in itself, is not adequate Biblical justification for disobeying the government.**
- c. **Consider that Romans 13, advocating our submission to civil government, was written by Paul during the reign of one of the more wicked governments of the time: Nero's Rome.³**

III. **Unavoidable - The lower law must directly interfere with the ability of the believer to follow higher law.**

- a. **Nebuchadnezzar and the government of Babylon could worship many Gods, choose to erect idols, and do any manner of ungodly things. The faithful Jewish men had no warrant to personally interfere with the ungodly pagan practices of the government they were under.**
- b. **Neither Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, or Abed-Nego embarked upon civil disobedience until they were being forced to personally violate God's law.**
- c. **A real world example:**
 - i. **We are not biblically justified in withholding tax payments to the government simply because the government sponsors or endorses activities which violate God's law (e.g., elects to pay some of those moneys out to support abortion).**
 - ii. **On the other hand, if we were forced to directly support or practice abortion, then we have biblical grounds for disobedience.**

7. **Potential for Abuse**

- A. **Civil disobedience can be readily abused as a tool in the hands of Christian rationalization.**

8. **A very large topic which we can only touch on today.**

Summary

1. **Three principles highlighted within this passage.**

- A. **FIRST: The Blessing of the Meek — God blesses and uses the meek, whom he empowers with boldness and the wisdom of God. We should seek to be found among the meek and humble.**
- B. **SECOND: The Hard-Heartedness of the Proud — The proud suffer from a hard heart which rejects God despite abundance evidence to the contrary. Their claim to objectivity is manifestly and demonstrably false. This is why a work of the Holy Spirit is needed to bring man to his spiritual senses.**
- C. **THIRD: The Obedience of the Christian — Christian civil disobedience has a well-established Biblical basis. But we must use discernment when determining whether to embark on a path of disobedience to authorities. We must identify clear biblical grounds for our disobedience and determine that we have no other recourse. Disagreement over general civil policy or support for laudable goals of social justice do not, in themselves, constitute sufficient grounds for disobeying the government.**

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Endnotes:

1. [NKJV](#), Acts [4:13-22](#)
2. [CTS](#), Charles Clough, *Conservative Theological Society*, session #4, August 2003.
3. Paul is thought to have written Romans [13](#) in 56 A.D. Nero was Roman Emperor from 54-58 A.D.

Sources:

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- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/16_Acts_4_13-22/index.htm.
b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
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