

“Are You Teachable?”—Acts 5:38-39

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Are You Teachable?”, is Acts 5:38-39 → Gamaliel said, *“In the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”* So they took his advice. This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Throughout my life I’ve heard the statement made that men refuse to ask for directions. It is an interesting stereotype. Many wives may not consider it a stereotype but rather a fact which has been proven to them over and over again. I’ve even read books which confirm this state of affairs because it’s “how men are hardwired.” Supposedly, they like the adventure of trying to figure things out themselves and the little “scenic routes” are just a part of the adventure. “Who needs directions or instructions?”

However, stereotypes can be rather dangerous. They can actually flow from a self-righteous attitude which judges experiences on the basis of personal and emotional preferences. Stubbornness gets blamed on everything under the sun except the sinful heart which refuses to be

teachable. Not being willing to be taught and listen to instructions may not be a serious issue when it comes road trips and putting that cabinet together. However, when it comes to your relationship with God it becomes a serious problem as our text reveals.

We are given a glimpse of the inner council of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was made up of seventy lay elders and the religious experts and teachers of the Old Testament Laws, presided over by their chief priest. They sat in judicial court interpreting and guarding Jewish life, customs, and laws in the system of Judaism, especially in Jerusalem. They were responsible for instigating the crucifixion of Jesus. Now they had to deal with His followers who were filling Jerusalem with their teaching that Jesus is *the Christ, the Son of the living God* (cf. Matthew 16:16) and intended *to bring this man's blood upon them*. (cf. Acts 5:28)

Could it be that these men, so learned in the Old Testament Law, were actually unteachable? Their interactions with people in the New Testament gives us the impression that they sure didn't like it when someone tried to challenge their knowledge. Of course, this too is the sinful nature in us which doesn't want to admit that we're wrong, tries to justify actions rather than discern them as right or wrong, and hates it when someone makes us feel like we don't know what we're talking about. Our sinful hearts can throw us into an unteachable mode pretty fast and lead us to react emotionally and irrationally in sin.

In the midst of such emotional, irrational reaction by the council our text records the advice of a Pharisee named Gamaliel. He is described as *a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people*. (cf. Acts 5:34) Referring to a couple of other guys in the past who rose up as leaders with followers who apparently stirred up problems for the Sanhedrin, Judaism and the Jewish people, he reminded them that they were killed, their followers *were dispersed and came to nothing*. (cf. Acts 5:35-37) His advice to the Sanhedrin? *Keep away from these men and let them alone*. (cf. verse 38)

Such an unlikely advocate could be viewed as God's intervention on behalf of the apostles. However, this really wasn't about the apostles. They rejoiced in their persecutions and imprisonments! (cf. Acts 5:41) **This was about the spread of God's Word, specifically the Gospel of Jesus Christ, through which the Holy Spirit would create faith in the hearts of sinners so they could be saved!**

This was actually the focus of Gamaliel's advice as well. He said, *If this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, they would not be able to overthrow them*. In fact, they *might even be found opposing God!* (cf. verses 38-39) He shifts the focus from some kind of academic interpretation of events to who they were in relationship to Yahweh. Gamaliel is not expressing a faith in Jesus by his advice. He

simply brought the focus to trusting Yahweh's omnipotence *in the present case*. He was expressing the words which these religious experts in the law knew so well as recorded in Deuteronomy 32:39 where the LORD says: *See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god beside Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of My hand.* In other words: "God's going to perform His will one way or another so make sure you're not found to be opposing Him."

If one refuses to be taught the process of bringing him to submit to the Lord Jesus Christ with confession of sin and faith is difficult. Many of these learned experts of God's Old Testament Word refused to be taught by that very Word when they encountered Jesus. When Jesus told them of their need to trust in Him for forgiveness and salvation they clung to that Word tenaciously, while refusing to accept its teaching about Jesus. Jesus even told them in John 5:39-40 → *You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, **yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.***

The men in this Sanhedrin were apparently teachable because *they took his advice*. They did not accept the message of the Gospel because in following Gamaliel's advice *they had called in the apostles, they beat them and still charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let*

them go.

Yet, it is God's will for everyone to have a relationship of forgiveness with Him **through faith in Jesus Christ alone**. Those who refuse to be taught by Him and submit to Him in repentance and faith He will strive to teach, one way or another. It's just that the "scenic route" is not the most beautiful and comfortable way to be taught. You remember the "scenic route" as described in Jesus' parable about the son who went off and *squandered his property in reckless living*, don't you? He was brought to such a low point in his life of disobedient choices and sin that he had to take a job of slopping pigs. He became so hungry that *he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything*. God taught him through this process by humbling him, bringing him to his knees where all he could do was admit his sin, return home and say, *Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants*. (cf. Luke 15:11-19)

True life begins at the teachable moment of humble confession and absolution! God desires to kill the sinful pride and haughty spirit which goes before destruction (cf. Proverbs 16:18) and bring forth a life of peace in submission to His will and Word. The wonder of it all is that we have a Father in heaven who is like the father of the unteachable son—*And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his*

father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. (cf. Luke 15:20)

Your Father in heaven is constantly running to you with open arms to embrace you with His love and forgiveness through His means of grace! As those who are in relationship with Jesus we get mis-focused much like these men in the Sanhedrin who lived in relationship with Yahweh. It would be interesting to know how many of them later came to faith in Jesus in light of Gamaliel's advice to take a closer look at who they were in that relationship with Yahweh. His arms were always open to receive them as they are open to receive you as you come in humble repentance and faith in Jesus on the basis of the written Word of God.

Are you teachable? Are you willing to submit to the Lord Jesus on the basis of His work through the means of grace distributed amongst the body of believers? Here your Father comes to you in Baptism, Absolution, the Lord's Supper and the Gospel, not just to teach you, but actually give you the embrace of His love, forgiveness and a new way of living with Him in your daily life! Amen.

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

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