

How to handle prejudice and ridicule because of your faith

Message for Sunday, April 26, 2015
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Acts 5:17-42

Children's Message: (read Luke 9:1-6)

Show a nasty looking “*Not* Welcome” sign. It’s natural to feel hurt when we are rejected. Remember this: you are responsible only for what you do. You can’t control what others do. So we follow Jesus’ way, and leave the rest up to God.

Have someone act out a person who wants—*needs!*—to be liked by everyone. (e.g. “Do you think I look better in brown or blue?” You end up wearing multi-colour clothes, and looking ridiculous.) Imagine what lengths that person will go to, to satisfy that craving. How much better it is to not worry about what others think about us. Instead, live to please God.

Introduction to the Scripture reading from Acts 5

Headline: “Police Helpless Against Growing Crime Wave”

I recently read an account of criminal gang whom the police were trying to put out of business. They had been in trouble with the law several times before, and had been warned that if there was a next time, the hammer was going to come down on them.

Instead of quitting, the gang grew even worse. They were known for their boldness, often committing crimes in broad daylight. It was making the chief of police look bad, and he and his officers were relieved when they finally captured the gang leaders and locked them in jail. The gangsters had powerful friends, though, and before the night was over, they had all escaped!

The very next morning they pulled off one of their biggest schemes, and they did it within a block of the police headquarters! This time, however, the police were ready. They immediately surrounded the area, and rounded up everyone. This time they made sure no one was getting away.

They were all found guilty, and sentenced to death. But then some bleeding-heart lawyer appealed their case, and through some fancy double-talk, was able to let them walk free once again.

Doesn’t it get you mad when you hear of people getting away with stuff like that?

By the way... I didn’t read this story in a newspaper. It’s in the Bible, in Acts 5! As far as the leaders of Israel

were concerned, these people weren’t just a religious cult. They were traitors to the faith and to the nation. They were dangerous revolutionaries, and had to be stopped.

Now read Acts 5:17-42 out loud.

Message “How to handle prejudice and ridicule because of your faith”

Persecution and prejudice today

Christians today aren’t likely to face the kind of opposition we read about in Acts: beatings, imprisonment and death... Christians in Canada, that is. Right now, in many places around the world, Christians face terrible persecution. People are tortured and murdered for their faith. In fact, over the last 100 years, more people have died for their faith in Jesus than any other time in history.

My focus today is on the situations that you and I face. Instead of beatings and murder, you are more likely to meet ridicule, rejection, and prejudice. Not from everyone, of course, and not every day. But there are times, and there are people who will try to make your life miserable because of what you believe.

How to respond to persecution and prejudice

Even though the type of situation we face is different from that of the Christians in Acts, their attitude is a helpful example for us.

1) Trust God; be faithful

The apostles were brought before the court. The officials demanded to know why they had disobeyed the order of only a few days earlier [Acts 4:18], to stop talking about Jesus:

Acts 5:28–29, New Revised Standard Version:

“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.”

But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.

“We must obey God.” That’s it in a nutshell.

When things look frightening, it’s because we’re not looking at God. Instead, we’re looking at ourselves, our self-interest, our weakness, our inability. We need to turn our gaze and look at God. And then obey God.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had just settled into a position as pastor of a nice church in Montgomery, Alabama, when some people in the church talked with him and asked

him to take a stand on civil rights. He could have worried, “What will happen to my job as a minister, my middle class status, or my personal safety if I take part in the movement for black equal rights in the United States?” Instead he asked, “What will happen to the cause of justice and the millions of black people who have never know political freedom and financial security, unless I participate in the movement actively and courageously?”¹

He knew God’s commands in the Bible to stand up against injustice, to take the side of the poor and the oppressed. So he obeyed God, rather than listen to the voices — both white and black — that warned him to stop.

On April 3, 1968, King was in Memphis, Tennessee, speaking at a rally, and closed with these words:

We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I have been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now.

I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I’m not fearing any man.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

The following day, Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered.

Can you say those words, and make them your own words? *“I just want to do God’s will... And I’m not fearing any man.”*

“We must obey God.”

2) Be happy! You are sharing in the life of Jesus

Acts 5:41, New Living Translation:

“The apostles left the high council **rejoicing** that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonour for the name of Jesus.”

Wow!

The world teaches us the attitude, “Don’t get mad. Get even!” But Jesus teaches us a different attitude:

Matthew 5:44, New Revised Standard Version:

“But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Jesus never promised, “Follow me, and your life will be easy from now on.” Instead, he told us to expect rejection. He also told us how to handle it:

Matthew 5:11-12, Today’s English Version:

“Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven. This is how the prophets who lived before you were persecuted.”

When you face rejection and ridicule because you are a Christian, just smile, and be happy! You’re in good company.

The Northwestern Lutheran is the magazine of the Lutheran Church in Wisconsin. Joel C. Gerlach wrote this article in 1991:

Eight times the Ministry of Education in East Germany said no to Uwe Holmer’s children when they tried to enroll at the university in East Berlin. The Ministry of Education doesn’t usually give reasons for its rejection of applications for enrollment. But in this case the reason wasn’t hard to guess. Uwe Holmer, the father of the eight applicants, is a Lutheran pastor at Lobetal, a suburb of East Berlin.

For 26 years the Ministry of Education was headed by Margot Honecker, wife of East Germany’s premier, Erich Honecker. ... [Then] when the Berlin wall cracked ... Honecker and his wife were unceremoniously dismissed from office. He is now under indictment for criminal activities during his tenure as premier.

At the end of January the Honeckers were evicted from their luxurious palace in Vandlitz, an exclusive suburb of palatial homes reserved for the VIPs in the party. The Honeckers suddenly found themselves friendless, without resources, and with no place to go. None of their former cronies showed them any of the humanitarianism Communists boast about. No one wanted to identify with the Honeckers.

¹ *Strength to Love*, p. 20 (collection of King’s sermons, Harper & Row, 1963).

Enter Uwe Holmer. Remembering the words of Jesus, “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also,” Holmer extended an invitation to the Honeckers to stay with his family in the parsonage of the parish church in Lobetal. ... Pastor Holmer has not reported that the Honeckers have renounced their atheism and professed faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. But at least they fold their hands and bow their heads when the family prays together. Who knows what the Holmer’s faith-in-action plan will lead to before this extraordinary episode ends?

How you react to persecution shows what kind of a Christian you really are, perhaps even more than when things are going well.

3) Keep on, and stick together

Acts 5:42, Today’s English Version:
And every day in the Temple and in people’s homes they continued to teach and preach the Good News about Jesus the Messiah.

The apostles were severely beaten and threatened with death, yet they managed to get out with their lives. What did they do next? Run away and hide? Flee to another country for safety? No! They kept right on telling everyone about Jesus Christ, both in public places and in private homes.

When you are in trouble because of your faith, don’t quit. Go to God for strength. That was the first thing I mentioned in how to respond to persecution: trust God, obey God.

The other vital thing was that these Christians helped one another. A now famous psychology experiment went like this: volunteers were needed to help scientists learn how our eyes worked, how we judge things like distance and size. The volunteers were brought into a classroom in groups of ten, and shown a picture of two lines, where the top line was clearly longer than the bottom line. The person running the experiment asked each person in the room, one at a time, to tell which line he or she thought was the longest.

There was a trick: out of the group of ten “volunteers,” nine of them had been told ahead of time to point to the shorter line. In every group, the tenth person, the unsuspecting volunteer, was placed at the end of the row, so he or she would be the last one to be asked.

Here’s what happened: when the first person picked the shorter line, the 10th person chuckled at that person’s

obviously poor eyesight. When the 2nd person also chose the shorter line, the chuckle changed to confusion. When the 3rd, 4th and 5th people all chose the shorter line, the 10th person began straining to look at the picture, to see what was wrong. By the time everyone else in the room had all pointed to the shorter line, # 10 was a nervous wreck! *Almost every time*, he or she would follow the crowd and point to the shorter line.

When you are in trouble, and you try to face it on your own, then you’re really in trouble! You need to have other Christians around you for support and encouragement. People say, “I can be a Christian without going to church.” Maybe. But it won’t last very long. As soon as the going gets tough, they’ll crack under the strain.

Next Steps:

- When you’re a Christian, don’t get upset by people making fun of you or rejecting you. It’s what Jesus told us to expect.
- Don’t let those other people take away your joy. Instead, respond by loving them.
- Hold on to God even tighter. You trust God when things are going well. Trust him all the more now, and follow his commands.
- Hold on to other Christians. You need one another. In fact, make plans before you leave today to get together with someone.
- Read Acts 6 in preparation for next Sunday.