

“Christlike Boldness”

Acts 3:13-31

May 11, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

The enemies of the early church regarded the boldness of Peter and John to be one of their striking features. They were struck by Peter and John’s boldness as these two apostles were testifying before the supreme Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. This council would be roughly equivalent to our U. S. Senate. And it was a hostile group. Just a couple of months prior to this, this same group had grown concerned at the popularity of Jesus. They were concerned because their political preferences were to collaborate with the Romans, and the Romans didn’t like any kind of popular movement. The Sanhedrin thought that with the execution of Jesus, the leader of this movement, things would quickly die down. But it hadn’t happened that way. First, there were reports that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and the reports were not easily refuted. Hundreds of respectable Jewish men and women said that they had seen him. And none of the Roman or Jewish authorities could produce the dead body of Jesus to silence forever this movement.

Things were not calming down at all. The latest event was the healing of this forty-year old man who had been lame from birth. Every Jew in Jerusalem knew this man because it was his custom to beg for alms at the entrance to the Temple. His family and friends had taken him there for years, and he had become something of a fixture as people went to pray at the Temple. Now these followers of Jesus had healed him in the name of Jesus. And the miracle was irrefutable. The man whom they had seen themselves for so many years was standing with Peter and John. He had not been able even to walk, and now for the first time in his life, he was leaping and dancing. Peter had preached to the crowds who gathered to see this miracle, with the result that thousands more were now following Jesus. If the nation was to survive, thought the Sanhedrin, this simply must be stopped.

So Peter and John were standing before a group of very powerful men who were strongly opposed to them. Their minds must have gone back to the time just two months prior to this when their Lord and Master had stood before the very same group. That didn’t turn out so well for him, leading to his death. Would they be next? But they didn’t back down. Even though they had not been formally educated, they spoke with a confidence and conviction that even the best and brightest of their educated elite could not surpass. Listen to Peter’s bold answer to their opening question, **“By what power or by what name did you do this?”** Peter replies. “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the

dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (v. 8-12). Peter reminded them of someone. Jesus had spoken with that same kind of boldness and confidence. Jesus was marked by boldness, and we as his followers are to share in this quality. I would like for us to look at this area of boldness today and ask three questions.

I. What Is Boldness?

It's important to recognize first that it is a spiritual trait and not a personality trait. Extroverts have no advantage in acquiring boldness. Peter is portrayed in the gospels as being quite extroverted. He seemed always to be the first to speak up, and it was clear that many times his thoughts were not well-formed before they were spoken. Extroverts often do that because they like to process their thoughts out loud. But not long before this event, the extroverted Peter had exhibited a complete lack of boldness. A little servant girl had recognized him as being with Jesus. But Peter denied even knowing Jesus. Boldness is not just being a person who likes to talk a lot. It's not the brash person who says whatever comes to mind. Though boldness will look different with an introvert than an extrovert, both are equally able to acquire this feature.

Boldness is the confidence and the courage that results when the inevitable victory of God is grasped. It is the human response of coming to know a God who will not be denied his missionary purposes. Not even the death of God's champion, the Messiah, will stop him. If ever there looked to be an end to God's purposes to bring his blessings to the earth, it occurred at the death of Jesus. But God would not be denied. This death turned out to be the cornerstone of victory, providing God's way of forgiveness. And to demonstrate that, God brought back to life his champion, Jesus. Then he sent his Spirit to give a demonstration of his intentions to bless all nations of the earth, uniting their languages on the day of Pentecost. The old prophecies are now being fulfilled in amazing ways. Isaiah had said **“then shall the lame man leap like a deer”** (35:6). They had all just witnessed such a thing happening with the healing of the lame man whose story lies at the heart of these two chapters. Notice how Luke illustrates God's determined purpose to build his church at the beginning of this chapter. We can see it in the way he puts together verses 3-4. **“And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.”** Man's opposition will not be able to stop the Word of God. They can arrest the apostles, but they can't arrest the gospel. Luke will go on to show this determined purpose of God throughout this book. Even when the church leaders grow reluctant to take this gospel to the world, as in the case of Peter's reluctance to go to the Gentile, Cornelius, with the good news of the gospel, even then God will not be stopped. And when King Herod arrests Peter

and puts him in the most secure prison he can find, God sends his angel to release him.

Boldness is simply the approach to life that happens when it finally dawns on us that God has a purpose and that he will not be denied his purpose. This life is filled with meaning after all. It's not just about your peace and comfort. If that's your conclusion about the meaning of life, the result will be great anxiety and a fragile, timid approach to life. But when you come to see God's purposes and his invitation to us to follow him in this, we learn to have confidence in life. We live out of conviction instead of convenience. Think of it this way. Boldness is the difference between walking on the broad side of a two by four placed on the floor and one elevated sixty feet from the ground with no handrails or safety net. It's easy to have confidence if you will only fall an inch and a half (the thickness of a two by four) if you should be unable to maintain your balance on the board.

II. How Do We Get Boldness?

Boldness can be acquired, and our passage speaks of three means by which we acquire it. First, we pray for it. After Peter and John speak before the Sanhedrin, they report to the church all that had happened. All were encouraged by the boldness of these two apostles, and they pray, **“Lord, ... grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness”** (v. 29). God's answer to that prayer is reported just two verses later. **“They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness”** (v. 31).

Second, we establish a foundation for boldness in our lives as we repent and believe. We can see this in the preaching of Peter. As of the end of Acts 4, Luke has treated us to three of Peter's sermons. One of the common lines in all three of his sermons goes like this. “You crucified Jesus of Nazareth, but God raised him from the dead” (2:23-24; 3:15; 4:10). What he means by it is that they have lived their lives in opposition to God. At a foundational level, they have committed themselves to a path that puts them squarely in the camp of God's enemies. They crucified Jesus, but God raised him up. God always has and always will bring judgment upon his enemies, and they are in a place of grave danger for this judgment. But then Peter gives them the good news. **“Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out”** (3:19).

What we learn from Peter's preaching is that you cannot begin or continue a relationship with Jesus gently. A boldness is required, the kind of boldness that doesn't merely tweak a few things along the margins of life. It's not just a matter of changing some external behavior of our lives. “I need to be more faithful in church attendance” or “I should watch less television and read inspirational Christian literature more.” Those may be good and even necessary things to do, but by themselves they can't touch our core problem. It's like trying to cure cancer with a low-fat diet. Many people view a relationship with Jesus like this.

“Maybe these Christians are right and there really is a heaven and hell. In case they’re right, I will pray the prayer they told me I’m supposed to pray. And they say that when I pray in Jesus’ name, God will answer my prayers. So this is an added bonus. I can get what I want in life and God will help me get there. I may have to give a little money to the church, and I will have to spend most of my Sunday mornings at church now. But it’s worth it if God will help me succeed in this life and then take me to heaven in the next.” That is not the message Peter brings. Our problem is much deeper than not getting what we want. Rather, we want the wrong things. There is a deep heart problem. Peter is careful, though, always to give good news. He says that when we see our desire to live apart from God and repent of it, God will wipe away our sins like a wet sponge wipes away the print on a whiteboard. No trace is left of our rebellion. And God goes further. Peter says that he gives **“times of refreshing... from the presence of the Lord”** (3:20). But such a turn in our lives, away from our self-controlled and self-directed lives and toward God, takes boldness.

The third thing this passage teaches about how we get boldness is that we get it when we see God’s complete sovereignty over our enemies. Luke has begun in chapter 4 to talk about the enemies of the church. John Stott says it like this. “We might say that, if the chief actor in the story of Acts 1 and 2 is the Holy Spirit, the chief actor in Acts 3-6 almost seems to be Satan” (p. 88). He points to Satan’s common three tactics of persecution, moral compromise from within the church (ch. 5) and false teaching (ch. 6). It’s easy to be bold when you’re with people who agree with you, but not so easy with one’s enemies. The real key to boldness is to be able to view our enemies within the sovereignty of God. The early church viewed the enemies of Jesus as the key to understanding this. Notice the strong language about the sovereignty of God over the enemies of Jesus. When Herod and Pilate and the Jewish leaders conspired against Jesus, they were only doing what **“your hand and your plan had predestined to take place”** (v. 28). We will never be bold until we come to know that our God is sovereign over all things and people, even his enemies. Events that seem at first to be setbacks to God and to his church, like the death of Jesus, only turn out to further God’s purposes.

III. How Should We Use Boldness?

I notice two things they did with their boldness. First, it made them less certain of their own conclusions about what should happen to their enemies. If God can use our enemies for his good purposes, and if we understand that we were once his enemies, it makes us less likely to pray for God’s vengeance upon our enemies. Notice how they pray for their enemies. **“And now, Lord, look upon their threats”** (v. 29). That’s it. They prayed that God would see their enmity, and that he would do what was right. They were happy to leave it in his hands, just bringing to him their needs and letting God work out all that needed to happen. I would suggest that this is an appropriate path we should follow in dealing with our enemies. For some of you, your enemy lives in your house with

you or may work in the office next to yours. Don't be so certain that you know what should happen here. God is able to use your enemy for his good purposes both in your life and in the life of your enemy and even others.

Second, if boldness makes us less certain of our desires that our enemies get what's coming to them, it makes us more certain of our need to live for God's kingdom and to move into people's lives with boldness. We read here that **"they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness"** (v. 31). If boldness is the human response to God's determined purpose to establish his kingdom, then we need to be bold in working for this same purpose. We need to be like a 16th century British man named Thomas Bilney of Cambridge. Bilney was called "Little Bilney" because he was an unusually small man. But he was a man of great courage and boldness in his declaration of the gospel. It was his bold witness that God used to bring to faith a man by the name of Hugh Latimer, who was one of the great preachers of English history. Latimer described himself as "as obstinate a papist as any was in England." This happened in the era of Queen Mary, called Bloody Mary because of her pattern of killing Protestants like Bilney. David Calhoun describes Bilney's bold witness to Latimer like this.

One day Latimer was preaching a very anti-Protestant sermon, attacking Philip Melancthon and Lutheran doctrine. Bilney, who was a lovable and gentle sort of person, approached Latimer after the sermon and asked Latimer to hear his confession. Latimer the priest heard Bilney's confession, but he really heard the Gospel in that confession. Bilney not only confessed his sins, but he also confessed God's grace, the truth of the Bible, and justification by faith that Luther had been teaching. Bilney confessed everything Latimer needed to know to be saved. So the confessor heard the Gospel and never forgot it. There are many ways to witness, and that was the way God used to bring Latimer to Himself. Latimer became the best-known preacher of the English Reformation.

CONCLUSION:

Would you consider praying for boldness? Let's pray that God would give us boldness to move into people's lives with the truth of the gospel. Let me lead us in a prayer, using the words of the apostle Paul as he asked people to pray for him. We pray, O God, that you would open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ (Col. 4:3). We pray also that words may be given to us in opening our mouths boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel (Eph. 6:19), that we may make it clear, which is how we ought to speak (Col. 4:4). We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen.