



The Book of Acts - Chapter Five

II Acts 2:14-5:42 - The Witness in Jerusalem (continues)

Summary of Chapter Five

If the church were a train then, at this time, it goes from its amazing express journey head-long into the buffers; all because hypocrisy had entered into it! It was not what Ananias and Sapphira gave or didn't give that was the issue; it was what they pretended to give that grieved the Holy Spirit. It is sad that some people feel the need to try to raise their own profile in the church in this way, by pretending to give more than they do, pretending to speak in tongues, or to show off other gifts they have not been given, pretending to be slain in the spirit to impress others, or pretending they are serving out of a heart for God and others, rather than for their own gratification. Such people are mocking God and the dangers of doing so are evident in this story. But the tares will be in the wheat until harvest.

This sad tale does, however, hold out hope for the church, as it brought reverent fear to those in the church, and made those outside take note as well.

The apostles were greatly empowered, and worked openly in the temple and other parts of the city. The Holy Spirit performed many healing miracles and people started to gather in large numbers, not just from the city but from the surrounding towns and villages as well. The church continued to grow and prosper because of the Name.

The success of the church and its powerful message filled the religious leaders with jealousy and they had all the apostles arrested and put in prison. But man cannot counter God and an angel was sent to release them; not to set them free but to give them further opportunities to 'Tell of this Life' to all the people in the temple area who would listen.

The men were brought back in before the Sanhedrin but not for a fair trial, as the Jewish leaders only wanted one outcome - the death penalty. However, the great Pharisaic teacher Gamaliel was a voice of reason and he advised his peers not to act hastily but, citing historic precedence, to wait and see if this teaching was of human origin, in which case it would fail. If, on the other hand, it were from God, which of course it is, then the Jews could not prevail against it.

They had the apostles severely flogged and ordered them not to teach any more in the name of Jesus. Again, Peter explained that they could not comply as this would be against the commands of God. The men left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing at having been considered worthy to suffer for the glory of their beloved Lord.

II.g Acts 5:1-11 - Ananias and Sapphira

The positive picture of the community's sharing is marred by the account of a couple who abused the practice by holding back a portion of a gift, while claiming to be giving it totally to the church. The context is important to note: the incident is bracketed by references to the Spirit's power (Acts 4:31, 4:33 and vv.12-16). The Spirit was closely linked to the unity of the fellowship, manifesting in their sharing. Ananias and Sapphira abused the fellowship through their deception and thereby threatened its unity.

¹ Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Acts 5:1-2

The couple kept back part of the money. Kept back, the Greek word *nosphizō*, means 'to put aside for oneself, to take or keep back in a secret and dishonest way'. It is an uncommon word, which was used also in the Septuagint in the story of Achan: <<But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the Lord's anger burned against Israel>> (Joshua 7:1), who received a sentence of death for holding back some of the spoils from Jericho that were dedicated to God.

³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?"

Acts 5:3

Lied to the Holy Spirit: <<Yet you say, 'What does God know? Does he judge through such darkness? >> (Job 22:13). Luke clearly identifies the Holy Spirit as a person in his own right.

Satan was the instigator behind the couple's deed, filling their hearts just as the Spirit had filled the community for witness (Acts 4:31). Twice Ananias was charged with keeping some of the money for the land (v.2 and v.3), indicating that he must have claimed that he was dedicating the whole to the Lord's work. There was no compulsion to give anything to the church; his sin was the lie, claiming to be doing more than he did.

Hypocrisy in the church is something that turns outsiders away from the faith.

⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

Acts 5:4

Peter made clear the voluntary nature of the church's charity: Ananias did not have to give anything. Note that, whereas Peter accused Ananias of lying to the Holy Spirit in v.3, here he says that he has lied to God, showing that the Holy Spirit and God are, in essence, the same person, though each is distinctly individual, and that the Holy Spirit is himself divine.

Lying is characteristic of Satan: <<You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies>> (John 8:44), and exactly opposite to the character of God, who cannot lie: <<God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?>> (Numbers

23:19), <<Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him>> (Proverbs 30:5), <<a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time>> (Titus 1:2), and: <<God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged>> (Hebrews 6:18).

Not lied to men but to God: <<Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also?>> (Isaiah 7:13).

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.

Acts 5:5

Fell down and died. God's judgement on those who mock him or lie to him or try to cheat him will come. Sometimes, it will come swiftly as here; at other times, it will come later and in different ways. But there is ample warning in scripture: <<Their heart is deceitful, and now they must bear their guilt>> (Hosea 10:2a), and: <<But Elisha said to him, "Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money, or to accept clothes, olive groves, vineyards, flocks, herds, or menservants and maidservants? Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever." Then Gehazi went from Elisha's presence and he was leprous, as white as snow>> (2 Kings 5:26-27).

Great fear is the Greek word phobos. Fear in response to a manifestation of God's presence involves both reverent awe and a healthy fear of God's displeasure and discipline: <<For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God>> (Romans 3:23), therefore, fear is appropriate: <<For the wages of sin is death>> (Romans 6:23a), <<but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord>> **amen** (Romans 6:23b). So many people quote the first half of this verse when the focus is on the second half but only thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus and for those who have chosen to follow him.

⁶ Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

Acts 5:6

Carried him out and buried him. For both cultural and climatic reasons, dead bodies were buried as quickly as possible. Normally, they would have waited for the widow to be present. It may be they were unable to locate her or that, because of her part in the crime, they considered her unworthy to be there. Despite Ananias crime, he was clearly buried respectfully as they wrapped up his body.

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price."

Acts 5:7-8

When Peter asked Sapphira whether this was the price they had received for the land, she repeated the lie, stating the partial amount the couple had given.

Yes she said shows that, as with Adam and Eve, they were one in their disobedience.

⁹ Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

Acts 5:9

Peter accused Sapphira of testing the Spirit, an expression that echoes OT passages about testing the Lord: <<So they quarrelled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" >> (Exodus 17:2), <<Do not test the Lord your God as you did at Massah>> (Deuteronomy 6:16), when he was tested by Satan: <<Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'>> (Matthew 4:7). This is another indication of the Spirit's deity.

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

Acts 5:10

Peter informed Sapphira of her impending death before it happened; the note of divine judgment is unmistakable. The text does not give enough information to know if Ananias and Sapphira were false believers or if they truly belonged to the Lord, despite their egregious sin. One could view the event as God's removal, from the young Christian community, of the distrust and disunity provoked by the couple's dishonesty. It was a time when the Spirit was especially present in the community, blessing it with unity of fellowship (Acts 4:32), and the power of miracles (vv.12-16). The same power brought judgment on those, who by their actions denied this unity and power. Satan (v.3) was, and still is, no match for the Holy Spirit.

Sapphira died at Peter's feet as if her life was the balance of payment due.

God's judgement on those who mock him or lie to him or try to cheat him will come. Sometimes it will come swiftly, as here; at other times, it will come later and in different ways.

¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Acts 5:11

As previously stated, having reverent or great fear of God's power and judgements is healthy for all believers. It is also something that should form a key part of our proclamation of the Gospel message and we should never promote God as a soft touch.

II.h Acts 5:12-16 - The apostles heal many

We move from a single act of judgement to a multitude of mercy. How typical of our God, and it wasn't done in corner! They met again in Solomon's Colonnade, where Jesus had taught (John 10:23). This summary centres on the Holy Spirit's activity in the apostles' healing ministry.

¹² The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.

Acts 5:12

The Christians had prayed for God to grant them the power to perform the signs and wonders, see Acts 4:30. This was mightily fulfilled through the apostles, especially in the temple area of

Solomon's Colonnade, where the Christians often witnessed, as in Acts 3:11. Colonnade, the Greek word stoa, is often translated portico and is a covered walkway. Other examples are: <<Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades>> (John 5:2), and: <<and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade>> (John 10:23).

¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.

Acts 5:13

No one else dared join them. Some take the antecedent of 'them' to be the whole church in v.13 and understand 'all the believers' in v.12 as referring to the whole church. Others understand 'them' to be the apostles in v.13 and understand 'all the believers' in v.12 to refer just to the apostles. The Greek grammar allows for either interpretation. The first interpretation would show that unbelievers were afraid to attach themselves to the church unless they were truly converted. The second interpretation would show the unique authority and miraculous power of the apostles, through the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. ¹⁵ As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by.

Acts 5:14-15

More and more men and women believed. It seemed as if nothing could stop the church from growing and the word being proclaimed to an ever increasing audience. Special attention is given to women, who had not enjoyed such prominence, freedom or mention under Judaism: for the covenant was for the circumcised, the feasts obligatory only for the men, and the court of women was on the periphery of the temple complex.

Peter's shadow might fall on some of them. Although this may seem strange to modern readers, it indicates that the Holy Spirit was so powerfully manifested in and around Peter that even those who only came near him, experienced the healing of the Holy Spirit. We see this in: <<so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them>> (Acts 19:12). The promises of Jesus again come to pass: <<I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father>> (John 14:12).

We must always remember that it is the Holy Spirit and not the object that is doing the healing. Many have, over the years, adopted a superstitious awe of 'holy relics', which not only misses the point in recognising the work of the Spirit but it becomes a danger for those whose faith is superficial and who may then start to dabble in dubious arts and even in the satanic.

¹⁶ Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

Acts 5:16

The miracles continue and the word spreads beyond the city gates.

II.i Acts 5:17-42 - The apostles persecuted

Just as Peter's healing of the lame man provoked a trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 3:1-4:22), once again the apostolic miracles precipitated a trial, this time of all the apostles. The Sadducean High Priest leads the opposition to Christianity. The Sadducees would oppose the spirituality of the resurrection. As a result of the first arrest they had been threatened, see Acts Chapter 4, this time they were imprisoned and would be beaten. Thus again the words of Jesus come true.

¹⁷ Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy.

Acts 5:17

Filled with jealousy. These Sadducees were jealous, not for God's honour or for the advancement of his kingdom but for retaining their own influence and power, we have seen this theme before and it is repeated again in Acts 7:9, Acts 13:45 and Acts 17:5.

¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.

Acts 5:18-19

Peter and John were previously locked up in jail overnight for preaching in the temple courts (see Acts 4:3).

We will again see an angel of the Lord opening locked prison doors when Peter is released in Acts 12:10 <<They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him>>.

²⁰ "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."

Acts 5:20

The full message of this new Life means the words of salvation and eternal life. It seems that early Christianity may also have been called 'the Life', as well as 'the Way'.

The Way is the Greek word hodos that means also road, highway or way of life. It is an expression we will encounter in Acts 9:1-2 during a period of persecution for the church: <<Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem>>.

²¹ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin – the full assembly of the elders of Israel – and sent to the jail for the apostles.

Acts 5:21

It was daybreak and a crowd would be gathering at the temple for the morning sacrifices. What would Peter be thinking as he could hear the cocks crowing?

The Sanhedrin is called the council and the full assembly of the elders as members of the senate in some translations. Council is another way of translating the Greek word synedrion.

It seems the eldership is called in order to crush the Christian Faith in its embryonic phase once and for all. The Council comprises the 71 members of the Sanhedrin, and 23 each from the judicatories that met: one at the outer court gate; and one in the inner court at the Beautiful Gate, where the lame man had recently been healed.

²² But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, ²³ “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” ²⁴ On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this.

Acts 5:22-24

When Peter escapes from prison in Acts Chapter 12, Herod Agrippa I responds differently to the captain of the temple guard. Herod has his guards executed!

They were puzzled. They would think it unlikely that the guards standing at the doors would be so negligent as to leave the prison unlocked or to collude with the apostles’ friends to help them escape, and the only other explanation would be divine intervention, the very solution they were trying not to consider.

There are many speculations including those supporting black magic, and conspiracy theories, involving either the leaders or the jailers or both, as to how the prisoners escaped and left the jail locked and guarded behind them. But God knows how these men were so miraculously released and Luke has recorded it for us to know as well. We should accept his divine reasoning for doing it in this manner by faith.

²⁵ Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.” ²⁶ At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

Acts 5:25-26

They feared that the people. They arrested the apostles but did so respectfully, partly due to their reverence for the temple, or so they claimed, but later they would beat Paul in it! But mostly it was because of their fear of the people. They could have done it in fear of divine retribution, especially given what had so recently happened to Ananias and Sapphira. We also have instances where fire would be called down in judgement, such as by Elijah (2 Kings 1:10-12) or as John and James would have done (Luke 9:54), but their fear was for the crowd and not fear of God.

²⁷ Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸ “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

Acts 5:27-28

Just as Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:7), now it is the full group of apostles.

We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. See Acts 4:18 for this instruction.

²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men!

Acts 5:29

We must obey God rather than men! Again, they demonstrate that believers have the responsibility not to obey authorities when such authorities prohibit preaching the Gospel or otherwise require Christians to disobey God’s explicit commandments.

³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.

Acts 5:30

The God of our fathers makes it quite clear to the Jewish leaders that this is a message for the Jewish nation and not just for the apostles. It also links it to the teachings of the OT.

Raised Jesus from the dead. The Jews had loaded Jesus with disgrace but God has raised him up with and to his right hand, given him crowning glory and a name above every name in which they and we must preach, and the only name by which men can be saved: <<The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name>> (Zechariah 14:9).

Hanging him on a tree. Peter will later state before the Centurion Cornelius and his household: <<We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree>> (Acts 10:39). The allusion is to Deuteronomy 21:22-23 <<If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance>>.

The Cross is referred to as a tree, making a clear connection with the use of the same Greek word xylon in the LXX translation of Deuteronomy 21:23. Jesus was put in a position that the OT says is 'cursed by God', thus taking on himself the penalty for sin: <<Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree” >> (Galatians 3:13).

³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Acts 5:31-32

God exalted him to his own right hand is confirmed by these words: <<But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” >> (Acts 7:55-56).

We are witnesses but so is the Holy Spirit, who is given by God: <<But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you>> (John 14:26), in answer to prayer: <<And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever>> (John 14:16), sent by Christ: <<When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me>> (John 15:26), and: <<But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you>> (John 16:7). The work of the Holy Spirit not only justifies Christ: <<Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was

seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory>> (1 Timothy 3:16), but glorifies him.

Christ is appointed to give repentance, by his Spirit working with the Word, to awaken the conscience, to work contrition for sin, and an effectual change in the heart and life of the believer. We need to apply ourselves to Jesus, by faith, for his grace to work repentance in and through us.

³³ When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.

Acts 5:33

On the Jews' pattern of resistance also see: Acts 7:51, Acts 12:1-3, Acts 13:45, Acts 25:7 and Acts 28:24, and: <<"I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me," declares the Lord>> (Amos 4:6), is a further example of the stubbornness of the Jewish leaders throughout history.

³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.

Acts 5:34

The lone voice of reason in the Sanhedrin to speak against an immediate death sentence was that of a Pharisee named Gamaliel. He was the most prominent rabbi of his day and the teacher of Paul, see Acts 22:3. He belonged to the Pharisaic minority in the Sanhedrin but had considerable influence and respect.

Honoured by all the people is important as he had the respect of the majority Sadducees in the Sanhedrin and also the general public.

The Pharisees resided primarily in Jerusalem and were divided into at least three schools: the disciples of Shammai, Hillel and Gamaliel. These schools were especially concerned about the proper administration of the temple.

The disciples of Shammai, who represented the more conservative wing of the group, were dominant before the destruction of the temple in AD70 (Mishnah, Shabbat 1:4). But Hillel, representing a more liberal interpretation of the Jewish scriptures, had moved from Babylon to Jerusalem about a generation before Jesus, and had gained wide influence as well.

Gamaliel, the son or possibly grandson of Hillel, was a renowned teacher of the law in Jerusalem. The apostle Paul had been a disciple of Gamaliel, which Paul himself confirms in Acts 22:3. Gamaliel is remembered for his wisdom when dealing with the disciples in Acts 5:34, and with careful management of the Jewish calendar.

Most Jews followed a lunar-solar calendar, which consisted of 12 lunar months, totalling 354 days. Every three years or so, a thirteenth month had to be added in order to bring the average total days of the year up to the 365.25 days of the solar year. Otherwise, the seasons would not have matched the festivals and sacrifices in the temple. Gamaliel determined when to add the thirteenth month (Mishnah, Rosh Hashshanah 2:8; and Sanhedrin 2:6). Ironically, if the Galatian Christians had adopted the calendar of Jewish religious holidays advocated by Paul's opponents, as referred to in Galatians 4:10, they would have found themselves under the authority of his old teacher!

These three schools attempted to shape the religious life of the ordinary Jew through the dissemination of their traditions and is recorded in Matthew 23:15 and Mark 7:1-13. It is also confirmed by Josephus in Jewish Antiquities 13.297. Galilee was also part of their mission. The

Jerusalem Talmud (Shabbat 15d) claims that Johanan ben Zakkai, a disciple of Hillel, spent 18 years, probably from AD20 to about AD40, teaching in the Galilæan town of Araba or Gabara. So Johanan and Jesus were teaching in Galilee at the same time.

The Pharisees also had considerable influence over local scribes who would preach in the synagogue according to their interpretations, see Matthew 7:29, 23:1-2 and Mark 2:16. When the Pharisees in Jerusalem were alerted by some scribes that Jesus was preaching a new teaching with authority, they sent a delegation which, after observing some alarming behaviours, attributed his miraculous powers to Beelzebul noted in Mark 3:22. Since the Pharisees were highly respected by the people, the accusation could have had devastating consequences for Jesus' mission, and resulted in Jesus denouncing woes on several local towns as recorded in Matthew 11:20-24.

The Pharisaic tradition was pragmatic and relevant to the needs of the time. For instance, the Law of Moses requires all loans to be forgiven in the sabbatical or seventh year as detailed in Deuteronomy 15:2. The intention was to provide relief for borrowers, but the reality was that lenders refused to give loans near the seventh year. Hillel addressed the problem by establishing the *prosbol*, a contract that requires a borrower to pay back a lender even in the seventh year (Mishnah, Shabbat 7:1). His school was also highly pragmatic when it came to rules for divorce, at least for husbands wanting a divorce, interpreting the ambiguous phrase in Deuteronomy 24:1 <<finds something indecent about her>>, as allowing a husband to divorce his wife for almost any reason, including burning his dinner (Mishnah, Gittin 9:10). However, the school of Shammai interpreted the law more narrowly, allowing divorce only in the case of adultery.

The Dead Sea Scrolls accuse the Pharisees of being 'Seekers of Smooth Things', i.e. passing on easy interpretations to the people as in Isaiah 30:10, which claims: <<They say to the seers, "See no more visions!" and to the prophets, "Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions>>.

While Jesus too was vulnerable to this criticism, at least in some areas of his teaching, especially his indifference to matters of ritual purity and Sabbath observance, he is even more stringent than Moses when it comes to justice. Instead of recommending the *prosbol*, he flatly commands his disciples: <<Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you>> (Matthew 5:42). Concerning divorce he adopts a similar position to the school of Shammai, but also notes that divorce was not God's original plan and is not required: <<It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce'. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery>> (Matthew 5:31-32), and: <<I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery>> (Matthew 19:9).

The difference in stringency can be further illustrated by the summations of the law provided by Hillel and Jesus. Hillel says "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereof; go and learn it" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a). Jesus says: <<So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets>> (Matthew 7:12). We find the negative wording of Hillel's teaching in earlier Jewish writings, such as Tobit 4:15 and Philo, Hypothetica 7.6-8. Jesus' summation is more challenging, requiring nothing less than a universal love of all people including one's enemies as pronounced in Matthew 5:44.

However, despite the curious quality of some of their traditions, the Pharisees were especially scrupulous to maintain a righteous status before God. Many were probably like Paul who claimed that, as a Pharisee, he was blameless as to the Law of Moses. Paul, himself a zealous Pharisee, recorded these words: <<as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the

law, faultless>> (Philippians 3:6). While many Jews tithed, Pharisees even tithed their garden herbs as noted in Matthew 23:23. While others fasted periodically, they fasted twice a week stated in both Mark 2:18 and Luke 18:12. They also maintained purity at their meals to the point of 'straining out a gnat' from a cup as referred to in Matthew 23:24, and confirmed in Mark 7:4, and they avoided sharing a table with sinners, those like tax collectors who habitually broke the law. Examples are found in Mark 2:16 and Luke 7:39.

All three expressions of piety come together in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. Jesus depicts the Pharisee as distinguishing himself from the tax collector because he fasted and tithed in order to retain a righteous status before God. Jesus affirms tithing but claims the Pharisees neglect the 'weightier matters of the law', such as justice, mercy and faithfulness as recorded in Matthew 23:23.

The Pharisees took their personal relationship with God seriously, in part, because they believed that the resurrection of the dead was a reward for living a righteous life, this is according to Josephus, Jewish War 2.163, Jewish Antiquities 18.14, Acts 23:8 and Aboth of Rabbi Nathan 5A. But Jesus says: <<For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven>> (Matthew 5:20). On another occasion, he tells the Pharisaic teacher Nicodemus that he needs to be born again or born from above in John 3:3.

Despite the blameless way of life many Pharisees pursued, such efforts in Jesus' view was not enough. Like all people, they needed to repent and believe in the Gospel. From this perspective, Paul could anticipate being found by God at the resurrection: <<and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith>> (Philippians 3:9).

³⁵ Then he addressed them: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. ³⁷ After him, Judas the Galilæan appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸ Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

Acts 5:35-39

Gamaliel cited two examples from Jewish history to support his basic argument that movements not backed by God always come to nothing. Both examples were failed movements, the first being that of a revolutionary named Theudas, and the second that of Judas the Galilæan, who is said to have come after him. Judas the Galilæan is well known, having led a tax revolt in AD6 (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.23), and this is evidently the person to whom Gamaliel is referring. Although there is no historical record of the Theudas mentioned here, other than this statement by Gamaliel, most likely this Theudas was one of many otherwise unknown leaders of such movements, that frequently appeared following the death of Herod the Great in 4BC. Although Jewish historian Josephus, writing in AD95 in Jewish Antiquities 20.97, mentions someone named Theudas, who led a movement at a later date (AD44-46), it is clear that Josephus' reference is to a different person, since the movement to which he refers occurred many years after the speech by Gamaliel, which was sometime in the mid-30's AD.

The days of the census refers to a poll taken in AD6 and not the one at the time of Jesus' birth, which was around 5-4BC (Luke 2:1).

⁴⁰ His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

Acts 5:40

This time, the Sanhedrin enforced their command by scourging the apostles. The text does not say whether it was with the maximum of 39 lashes, as prescribed by Jewish law, which Paul frequently endured: <<Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one>> (2 Corinthians 11:24) or with fewer stripes. The lashing consisted of striking the victim's bare skin with a tripled strip of calf's hide. The victim received two blows to the back, then one to the chest. Thus each cycle had to be divisible by three, which explains the maximum limit of 39, one less than the 40 prescribed in Deuteronomy 25:3 <<but he must not give him more than forty lashes. If he is flogged more than that, your brother will be degraded in your eyes>>.

Not to speak in the name of Jesus. The leaders could not stop the apostles' voices but they could end their lives. Had they done so: <<"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" >> (Luke 19:40).

⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴² Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

Acts 5:41-42

The apostles left rejoicing at being considered worthy of suffering disgrace for their witness in Jesus' Name, which they boldly resumed day after day and quite publically from house to house and in the temple courts, despite the threats of the Jewish leadership.

Their suffering paradoxically resulted in the growth of the church: <<In those days when the number of disciples was increasing>> (Acts 6:1a). Suffering for the name of Jesus is a characteristic theme in Acts.

The Jewish leaders were persuaded not to kill the apostles but to satisfy their rage and save their pride by severely flogging them, expecting this to dissuade them from speaking anymore in the name of Jesus. Instead, it galvanised them all the more and they actually rejoiced at being considered worthy to be beaten and to suffer for the Name. How many of us today rejoice, even at minor setbacks? Of course, they had been taught to respond in this way by their Lord in the Sermon on the Mount: <<Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you>> (Matthew 5:11-12). Jesus had taught daily and they continued to do the same: <<Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching>> (Matthew 26:55b), and: <<Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him>> (Luke 19:47).

They were to preach the Gospel message: <<For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified>> (1 Corinthians 2:2).