

IS YOUR FAITH PLASTIC OR ELASTIC?

Today's Text: Acts 5: 22- 42

Extracts:

So one came and told them, saying, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" ...When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while. And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men... And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of man, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it- lest you even be found to fight against God." And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they ... let them go. So they departed... rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for [Jesus'] name [Acts 5:25, 33-41]

Kirk Cameron, 41, was an atheist in his early teens.¹ He became born again at age 17 at the height of his career in "Growing Pains," a popular TV sitcom that aired on ABC, 1985-1992. Thereafter, he starred only in faith-based films and became a co-founder of "The Way of the Master," a TV show that now airs in over 20 languages around the world. On Friday, 2 March 2012, he appeared on Piers Morgan's CNN talk show to promote a new documentary on the Christian foundations of America. When he was asked about his opinion on homosexuality, he said that it was "unnatural" and "ultimately destructive to so many of the foundations of civilization." In response to the loud and vitriolic response from gay community organizations, he maintained that he would never base his views on political correctness but on his faith.

For someone who gave up Hollywood glamour for Christ's sake, Cameron showed his critics that his faith was elastic (resilient), not plastic (shallow or superficial). He was not a closet believer or a hypocrite but one who would not be silent in the public about Christ. How about you? In this week's Bible story, the apostles were brought before the Jewish council to defend their faith in Jesus. We have something to learn from their response that can help us to improve our faith from mere profession of it (plastic) to its true demonstration (elastic).

¹ Story is based on the following sources: Chris Gardner, "Kirk Cameron defends anti-gay comments, accuses critics of hate speech, slander," <http://wonderwall.msn.com/tv/kirk-cameron-defends-anti-gay-comments-accuses-critics-of-hate-speech-slander-1670307.story> ; Tue., Mar. 6, 2012; and "Kirk Cameron," from Wikipedia, The free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirk_Cameron

1. Background: The Apostles' faith survives a crucial test

Believers are required to walk by faith and not by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7]. That is where the challenge begins because we already have a problem walking by sight! For example, many of us may have eyes and yet cannot see. They could be visually challenged by blindness. They could have eyes that would require corrective lenses. Or, they could have double vision- seeing one object as two. Most people see only what they want to see. That is why several people looking at the same object may see different things! Why do you think that we may not have similar problems when we walk by faith? For example, some people have no faith [Mk 4: 40]; some have little faith [Matt. 6: 30], while some more are double-minded [Jam. 1: 8]. Nevertheless, there are some people of great faith [Matt. 8: 10]. Only this last group can be said to have clear spiritual vision that can be classified as elastic faith. What then is faith?

Faith sees what our eyes cannot see. The eyes can only see temporal things but faith can see eternal things [2Cor. 4: 18]. Faith has been defined as “the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen” [Heb. 11: 1]. Examine those two words- substance and evidence. They can both be tangible in that they can be handled or proved. But “hope” and ‘things not seen” are in the future, intangible and unprovable. Therefore, *faith means an advance notice of what will surely come to pass.* It is not like weather forecast because that is based on probabilities. Rather, it is like a new employee who works in advance of pay because s(he) already has the assurance of a pay cheque on the next pay day. The story of Jacob’s meeting with his son, Joseph, makes the point quite vividly.

As far as Jacob was concerned, Joseph was dead, presumably killed by wild animals when he went searching for his brothers. That was the story that they had brought back to their father over ten years earlier to cover up the fact that they had sold Joseph to Midianite traders on the way to Egypt [Gen. 37: 31-36]. Many years later, when Jacob’s sons went to Egypt to buy food during a global famine, they brought their father the “unbelievable” story that Joseph was alive and he was in fact the governor of Egypt! We are told, “And Jacob’s heart stood still, because he did not believe them” [Gen. 45: 26]. How could a dead man be governor? That was what his logical mind taught him. Here comes the faith part: “But when they told him *all the words which Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the carts which Joseph had sent to carry him*, the spirit of Jacob their father revived. Then Israel (Jacob) said, ‘It is enough. *Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him* before I die” [vv. 27-28]. The substance and evidence of Joseph being alive were his words and the carts he had sent to bring his father to Egypt. Jacob had not yet seen his lost son but he said, “Joseph my son is still alive.”

Therefore, *faith is like lightning before thunder.* We scamper for cover when we see the flash of lightning because we know for certain that thunder will follow. However, we think the danger is in the thunder. The truth is: *it is lightning that*

kills, not thunder! That is why, without faith, you cannot please God. Those who come to Him must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him [**Heb. 11: 6**]. That was the faith that the apostles demonstrated in the Bible story that we are about to examine.

You will recall that since a lame man was healed in the name of Jesus through Peter and John, the apostles had become a major target of persecution by the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin. The apostles were arrested, warned and intimidated but they waxed stronger, such that “the people esteemed them highly, and believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” The sick and the demon-possessed were brought before them and they received miraculous healing [**Acts 5: 12-16**]. That was what forced the high priest and a sect of the Sadducees to embark on a new round of persecution of the apostles. The scenario played out as follows:

a) *The apostles were imprisoned but not silenced!*

The Jewish leaders “laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. But at night, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ‘Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life’” [**vv. 17-20**]. How would you feel if you were in the place of those apostles? No human beings came to bail them out of the prison. When the Jewish leaders came to pick them up the following morning, the prison doors remained shut and the prison guards were still manning them but there were no prisoners there! They were in the temple, teaching the people [**vv. 21-25**]!

b) *They were tried but not cowed!*

Fear came on the high priest, the captain of the temple and the chief priests on hearing the report. So, when the captain went with his officers into the temple to re-arrest the apostles, they “brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned.” The chief priest asked the apostles, “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” The apostles, led by Peter, replied, “***We ought to obey God rather than men.***” They went on to reiterate the basis of their faith: the crucified but risen Christ and [they were] “His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him” [**vv. 26-32**].

How would you feel if you were in the place of those Jewish leaders? You have tried all the instruments of coercion at your disposal and they do not seem to have worked. Instead, they are telling you what you do not want to hear. What blood runs through the veins of such “militants” who call

themselves apostles?! The best thing then is to get rid of them once and for all. Kill them [v. 33]!

c) *They were beaten but they still rejoiced!*

It was at that frustrating moment that a highly respected Pharisee and member of the council came to the rulers' rescue. Gamaliel was a teacher of the law (the KJV calls him a "doctor of the law", that is, a Ph.D. or LL.D. in modern terms) [v. 34]. After sending the apostles outside for a while, Gamaliel cautioned his colleagues to "take heed what [they] intend[ed] to do concerning these men." He reminded them of two earlier movements in Israel and what befell them. In the first case, Theudas rose with about four hundred supporters. He was killed and all those that supported him were scattered and their movement died. Then followed Judas of Galilee during the census. He drew many people to his side and, again, he perished and all those who had supported him were scattered. So, on the new Christian sect, he advised, "Keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it- lest you even be found to fight against God" [vv. 35-39].

They agreed with him. They called back the apostles and, after beating them, and commanding them not to speak ever again in the name of Jesus, they let them go. But *the apostles departed, "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name, and daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ"* [vv. 40-42].

What can you say about the faith that those apostles demonstrated? It *was strong, consistent, resilient, unshaken and unshakable! That is elastic faith.* Where did it come from? *It came from whom their faith was built on- Jesus Christ.* While He was still with them before His Passion, Jesus had told His disciples on several occasions, "Now I have told you *before* it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe" [Jn 13: 19; Jn 14: 29; Jn 16: 4]. After His ascension to heaven followed by the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday, the apostles became living witnesses of Christ's promise. We have seen it demonstrated in the foregoing story. Can you describe your faith the same way?

2. Knowing what faith you have

Faith is measured by its use, not its profession. This is the point underlined by James where he writes, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe- and tremble! But *do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?* [Jam. 2: 19-20]. Does every professed believer demonstrate elastic faith? Do you? Let us find out from the following types exhibited among believers in our various places of worship:

a) *The fatalist*

To the fatalist, life on earth is a mere passage to heaven. ***We are here to suffer so that we can enjoy heaven hereafter.*** Their role model is Lazarus in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus! Therefore, whatever happens to them on earth is their fate. That is how God has willed it. When they fail or are poor, it is God's will. When they run into wealth, it is a temptation! The miracles recorded in the Bible belonged to old times, not their generation. With such a defeatist attitude, you cannot ask for a better status than you currently endure; you become resigned to it. Many such believers populate the pews in our churches today-docile, poor and melancholic!

Take the case of Gideon when Israel was under the control of the Midianites. When the Angel of the Lord appeared to him, he was sitting under a big tree and threshing wheat in the wine press "in order to hide it from the Midianites." He was resigned to his fate as a conquered people. But the Angel of the Lord said to him, "The Lord is with you, you man of valour!" [**Judg. 6: 11-12**]. Following God's guidance, Gideon became the instrument by which Israel threw away their tutelage. Gideon thus became introduced to Jehovah-Shalom- God our Peace [**v. 24**]. His faith moved from plastic to elastic. He became known as Jerubbaal (let Baal plead its case) [**v. 32**]!

You can grow out of such plastic faith by seeking to know what plans God has for you. Paul has said, "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." He added, "***Who has known the mind of the Lord that we might instruct Him? But we*** [true believers] ***have the mind of Christ***" [**1 Cor. 2: 14, 16**]. When you let God rule your life, He will guide you the way you should go.

b) *The optimist*

The optimist ***lays claim to every promise in the Bible without paying attention to the conditions attached to them.*** For example, they believe they will have children because the Lord has said that there shall be no barren among them [**Ex. 23: 20-26**]. Yet, they are not married! They walk around a piece of land barefooted, claiming what God told Joshua that everywhere the sole of his feet would touch had been given to him [**Josh. 1:3**]. Yet, they have no legal title to the land! Their problem is that they are merely engaged in wishful thinking. They have no relationship (or a good one) with God. They are not investing time and other resources to deal with their worsening situation. Unlike fatalists, they are not happy with their current situation but they believe it will soon get better. What

God has told them keeps shifting from day to day, year to year! That is like hoping in hopelessness. How can you sow nothing and expect something? That kind of faith is suicidal because it is based on nothing. It is plastic and cannot work.

If you find yourself in that situation, go and read the fine prints of God's promises. All things work together for good *only to those who love God and who are the called according to His purpose [Rom. 8: 28]*. God will supply all your need (not wants) *according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus [Phil. 4: 19]*.

c) *The skeptic*

The skeptic *wants things to be proved beyond reasonable doubt before s(he) can accept or believe it*. Recall what Thomas Didymus said when his fellow apostles told him that Jesus had risen from the dead. He said, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." To rebuke that kind of attitude to faith, Jesus told him when He showed up a week later, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" **[Jn 20: 24-29]**.

With the fast pace of technological illusions that we currently face, the skeptic is bound to run into more problems with his/her faith. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God **[Rom. 10: 17]**. Therefore, if God's word in the Bible is no sufficient proof to make your faith elastic, you are on slippery slope.

d) *Or a tested believer*

The case that we treated today is a clear example of tested and tried faith. It was similar to what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faced in Babylon. In the face of imminent death, they told Nebuchadnezzar, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up" **[Dan. 3: 17-18]**. What else can we add to that?

3. Conclusion: Jesus has told you!

What else do you want to hear or know? Jesus has told you He will soon return to judge the world. Do you believe Him totally? If you do, your faith is elastic; it will take you through the rest of your life. Otherwise, it is plastic and you are living on borrowed time.