

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...

ACTS 21:17-30 DECEMBER 2, 2020

In 2010, British Prime Minister David Cameron made a diplomatic blunder on a visit to China. He was there, hoping to develop commercial activity between China and the UK. But, there was a snag: When he met with Chinese officials, he had a *poppy* pinned to his lapel.¹ In November the poppy is used to honor the war dead in Britain. For the Chinese it's not a welcome symbol, especially when being worn by an Englishman. For them, the poppy is a reminder of the Opium wars, fought between China and England in the 19th century, both of which China lost. Cameron and his team resisted requests to take off the flower. And, in the end, they came away with deals that could be described as "modest" at best, but certainly disappointing.²

In our passage tonight we'll see a significant diplomatic blunder that ends much worse than David Cameron's. Paul will be sent into the Temple to put on a show for the Jewish believers and instead of everyone clasping hands and singing *Kumbaya My Lord*, a violent riot breaks out.

As we read it's clear that mistakes were made. But who made them? Was Paul wrong to participate in the effort? How might the church have dealt with the brewing controversy? And how do we dwell together in unity when we come from such different backgrounds and traditions and live during such a time of unrest and agitation?

As we start in on the text, after a long journey through the Empire, Paul has arrived in Jerusalem.

Acts 21:17 - 17 When we arrived, the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem welcomed us warmly.

What a great thing to see this warm embrace from the Christians there. He was welcomed as a brothers, not a celebrity.

Paul had been warned again and again that suffering and imprisonment were waiting for him in Jerusalem, but as he finally entered the city, he didn't do so looking over his shoulder in fear. He felt compelled by the Spirit to come. So, he wasn't freaking out, bracing for impact. But that doesn't mean it was easy, either. Remember - he had said to his friends who were trying to convince him *not* to go, "Why are you breaking my heart?" I'm sure by this point Paul was pretty convinced that his race was going to end in martyrdom. So, with the Lord as his strength, he pressed forward.

Matthew Henry reminds us of how Paul had strengthened other Christians out in on the field "by encouraging them to continue in the faith and by telling them, 'It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.'"³ We shouldn't think it strange that we are faced with trouble in this life. Rather, we should expect and endure and remember that one day we, too, will cross the borders into the New Jerusalem, to be forever in glory with our Lord.

Acts 21:18 - 18 The following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

It seems none of the 12 were in town when all this happened. Paul's habit when he came to Jerusalem or back to his home church in Antioch was to give a report of all that had happened on

¹ <https://www.smh.com.au/world/uk-pm-cameron-snubs-china-over-poppies-20101110-17mqn.html>

² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-CJB-11579>

³ Acts 14:22

his missionary journeys. He also has his gang of 8 with him - guys like Luke and Timothy and representatives from the Gentile churches who had all pooled money together to give as a gift to the famine-starved Christians in Judea.

On the one hand, it wouldn't have been unusual that the elders were all assembled here. But we're going to see that they had an agenda. Sadly, they're going to behave in a way that feels a lot more like the Sanhedrin than the Upper Room.

Usually we try hard not to criticize the decisions that believers make in Scripture, that is when it's not overtly sinful or commented on in the Word. There have been lots of moments in Acts where commentators want to point fingers and lay blame, like when Paul and Barnabas got into their argument. This is another one of those areas.

Unfortunately, it's hard to find much that is redeeming about James' and Company's behavior here. Their plan is going to be a complete failure. Their methods are political, not spiritual. So, while we want to take a gracious approach, it seems they made quite a mistake in this scene.

Acts 21:19 - ¹⁹After greeting them, he reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

Paul gave a very thorough account of *everything* that had happened. Astonishing things. World-changing things. There would've been many more things reported than are written down for us by Luke. And we notice the careful choice of words: "what *God* had done among the Gentiles." It wasn't that Paul was the perfect minister or that their methods were the perfect methods. It was *God* working through them to accomplish *His* purposes. If Acts teaches us anything, it should be that God has opinions and He has plans for what He's doing today and in whatever city we find ourselves in. It's not our job to decide what we think Hanford needs or what method of ministry is "most effective." Our job is to discern the will of God and make ourselves available to it. Think of the difference between Abel's offering and Cain's. Cain's offering was *his* idea. And I'm sure it was lovely from the human perspective. Full of care and effort. But it wasn't what God wanted and so He wouldn't accept it. The question we should ask is not "What do I want to do for God," but, "What does God want to do through me?"

Acts 21:20 - ²⁰When they heard it, they glorified God and said, "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law.

James and the elders are not completely callous, but we see they start to tip their hand here. They glorified God after Paul's report (how could you not after hearing those things?), but they then immediately pivot onto a subject they've clearly been discussing themselves. Have you been to a meeting like this? Maybe you or someone shares at length about some issue or initiative and then the people in charge say, "Great. But what we *really* want to talk about is...budget cuts."

G. Campbell Morgan points out that there's no recognition of the generous gift Paul and his friends brought with them at their own peril. In fact, they don't even *acknowledge* the Gentiles standing there right before them. And that's because they've become completely distracted by traditionalism and their own heritage. And what follows is a sad cave to legalism, bigotry and man-pleasing.

They begin by saying "Paul, we've got this problem...and there are just *SO* many people who agree with what we're about to say." *Red flag*. "And, all these people, they are all *zealous* for the Law." The

term they use is “zealots.” Now, there are a couple of issues here. First of all, since when did being a Mosaic Zealot become a *good* thing in the Church? And, second, this is a *huge* generalization. Obviously there were many Jewish Christians who were *not* hung up on the ceremonial Law the way many in Jerusalem were. Paul is an example. Barnabas. Aristarchus. Silas. But we see, from the beginning, James and the elders are drawing a line and, in fact, building a barrier between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. This is not a good thing. We *know* it’s not a good thing because an entire book of the Bible is written to Hebrew believers telling them to stop being Hebrew in their approach to God! But here we see that the leaders in Jerusalem have become partisan. Back in Acts 15, with the first Jerusalem Council they were able to resist the pull, but they’ve slipped and now they’re being dominated by this legalistic and sectarian mentality.

Acts 21:21 - ²¹ But they have been informed about you—that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or to live according to our customs.

This is such a sad statement. First, they’re generalizing again “you teach *ALL* the Jews this stuff.” And they’re saying, “Everyone’s been gossiping about you.” But, even worse than that, what they were saying wasn’t true. Every Christian who knew Paul knew this isn’t what he taught. He was on *record* on these issues. Romans and Corinthians had already been written. Paul’s views on the law are clear in those letters. Of course the printing press wasn’t around yet, but we know that his letters had circulation. Peter references them. Also, it was public knowledge that Paul had Timothy circumcised in adulthood so *that* he wouldn’t offend Jews they were trying to evangelize. So, anyone who knew Paul, including James and these elders, knew these accusations were made up.

But, notice what they say there at the end: these are “*our customs*.” Each of us come into the Church with certain heritage, background, affiliations, but as a Christian, what you are is a *Christian*. You’re not a Jew first or an American first or a Libertarian first. You’re a Christian. Blood bought into the family of God, united with your brothers and sisters from every corner of the globe. If your customs divide you from others, then it is the *custom* that should be discarded, not the brother.

Because these Jerusalem Christians were poorly prioritizing their affiliations, it was causing a lot of tension when Paul came into town. So what should be done about it?

Acts 21:22-23a - ²² So what is to be done? They will certainly hear that you’ve come. ²³ Therefore do what we tell you...

They’re about to unfold this plan, but notice here the way they’re going about it. “Paul, all the Jewish believers are freaked out because they’ve heard you’re anti-Jew.” First of all, it wasn’t true that everyone thought Paul was some anti-Law fanatic. Remember what we read in verse 17: The brothers and sisters received him *warmly*. They weren’t wringing their hands about Paul being there. The fact of the matter was there were *Judaizers* in their midst who wanted to tie Christianity down under the Law of Moses and Paul stood in their way. That group was just as mad as they had been back in Acts 15 while they were trying to keep Gentiles from entering into salvation! But, in response to the gossip, the church leaders say, “Paul, *you’re* going to have to prove yourself to these people.”

If it was so easy for people to hear news about Paul’s arrival and his activities, why didn’t James just spread the simple message that, “Hey, what you’re saying about Paul isn’t true.” What’s *more* Biblical? To tell people the truth or to put on a show hoping people will see that you want to please them? Because that’s the plan being laid out here. Here’s how they thought it would go:

Acts 21:23b-24 - We have four men who have made a vow. ²⁴Take these men, purify yourself along with them, and pay for them to get their heads shaved. Then everyone will know that what they were told about you amounts to nothing, but that you yourself are also careful about observing the law.

Then everyone will know. If it was so easy for word to spread, why not spread the truth? Why pretend? Why put on a show? There are a lot of problems in this plan. First, its goal is to seek the approval of man. Second, it sends the message that purification comes through ritual and sacrifice and everyone in the room knew *that wasn't true*. Jesus had said, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."⁴ Third, they asked Paul to pay the fees for 4 men. This would've been an *expensive* thing. Paul didn't have any money. They're putting this huge financial burden on him to pretend that he still believes in the ceremonial Law so that people who hate him won't have to be rebuked and corrected for spreading lies and gossip about him.

Jack Arnold writes: "The leaders [in Jerusalem], fearing a division, accepted the philosophy of peace at any price."⁵ God calls us to unity, but not at any price. These leaders were wrong to indulge gossip, to refuse to defend the Apostle and to use worldly methods of manipulation to try to appease legalists. They hadn't needed to do all this nonsense back in Acts 15, when the church was threatened with division over the Law before. What happened then? Well, back then there were a few men who were courageous enough to stand up and say, "No" to legalism and bigotry and partisanship. That was needed again here in chapter 21, but this time there was no dissent.

Some commentators call this plan compromise, some call it prudence. They say that it would've been too difficult to expect lifelong Jews to abandon their heritage in the rites and ceremonies. Yet, we remember that Jesus Christ called the disciples to leave their nets. Leave their tax booth. Leave father and mother and follow Him. Do you still have a heritage once you become a Christian? Of course. But that background, those traditions are never to have their hands on the rudder of your life because you are a *new* creation in Christ. A citizen of a heavenly Kingdom. Speaking of us, Jesus said: "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world."⁶

Acts 21:25 - ²⁵With regard to the Gentiles who have believed, we have written a letter containing our decision that they should keep themselves from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what is strangled, and from sexual immorality."

If I had been in Paul's position, this would've hurt. It assumes that he had *not* been teaching these things effectively out in those Gentile churches. That he hadn't properly shown them how to Christian. And then think of what it would've felt like to be one of the Gentiles there in the meeting! "Yeah, I *know* not to be sexually immoral."

Plus, we see a flaw in their logic. So a simple written note would be sufficient for *all* the Gentile world to know the truth, but they couldn't handle spreading the truth through the Christian community in one city (Jerusalem)?

⁴ John 15:3

⁵ <http://www.cleartheology.com/expo/01Acts/Acts%2052.html>

⁶ John 17:16

We also note a contrast between Paul's sharing in verse 19 where he talked about what "God had done" and then James and the elders saying here in verse 25, "Here's *our* decision."

Acts 21:26 - ²⁶ So the next day, Paul took the men, having purified himself along with them, and entered the temple, announcing the completion of the purification days when the offering would be made for each of them.

Why, oh why did Paul go along with this? Some say he was deep into sinful compromise. Some say he was simply trying to be all things to all men. I think that's closer to the mark. We can't be sure of what was going on in his head, but we know Paul to be a humble man. He was a man who was willing to lay down his life to reach people with the Gospel. He was a man ready to sacrifice his own liberty to do ministry. And, we know that *he* knew he was going to be imprisoned in Jerusalem. I think it's very possible that he was able to be at peace with their scheme, not because he *agreed*, but because the Lord had given him a certain amount of prophetic revelation about what was going to happen. Maybe he was thinking to himself, "So *that's* how it's going to happen."

Acts 21:27-28 - ²⁷ When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd, and seized him, ²⁸ shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place. What's more, he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."

So, the literal opposite of what they planned for happened. They had planned this grand gesture of legalism and it completely backfired. Not only had the Jerusalem elders put Paul in a bad position, they didn't even help him in it. Where are they in this scene? They're so worried about this supposed rift in the church, but they're nowhere to be found. That's a sad testimony.

A simple lesson here is that, when we try to apply human methods to ministry, the result will often be the opposite of what we wanted to the detriment of people. Whether it's in fundraising or outreach or messaging, let God lead. We don't need to worldly techniques. Worldly recipes don't produce spiritual outcomes.

Acts 21:29 - ²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

This is a baseless assumption. But, note, not even the 4 guys finishing their vow vouch for Paul. When we give in to bias or prejudice or legalism in our minds or in the church the result is destructive. That's what we're seeing here. It goes both ways. In this case, Jerusalem was clearly dealing with an anti-Gentile bias. In much of history the church has been plagued by anti-semitism. Today our culture is obsessed with everyone grouping up and identifying who is "us" and who is not "us." Don't give in to that. It's detrimental and destructive and, ultimately, deadly.

Acts 21:30 - ³⁰ The whole city was stirred up, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul, dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.

John Phillips wrote, "What did James and the others think of themselves? We wonder... They apparently did nothing to secure (Paul's) release, nothing to speak on his behalf, nothing to appeal to

the Jews of Jerusalem to give Paul fair play. They sent no one to the Roman authorities to assure the commander of the garrison that Paul was innocent of the charges leveled against him.”⁷

This is a sad chapter, not only for Paul but in the history of the Church in Jerusalem. What might we learn?

Well, if we find ourselves in Paul’s position, we see from his example selflessness, humility and a willingness to lay down his rights. He knew he was where he was supposed to be because the Spirit had led him. To be sure, the situation was a painful one, but as usual he demonstrates that grace is the way. In uncertainty, in conflict, when being mistreated, respond with grace. That doesn’t mean we compromise with sin, but we can choose to humble ourselves and bear the fruits of patience and peace and grace, even when we’re not the ones in the wrong.

If we find ourselves in James’ position, we should learn from his example that *sometimes* our responsibility is to stand up for the truth, even if that makes us unpopular with our peers. We see the dangers of placing heritage over conviction. We see what happens when we cling too tightly to the approval of man or the traditions of man rather than the grace of God.

On a wider level we also learn two general but important things from this passage. First, we should takeaway the understanding that the ‘church’ is not co-equal with Scripture. For example, in Roman Catholicism, church tradition carries equal authority with Scripture. We see, in this case, the “church” decision wasn’t the right one. We are fallible, the Scripture is not.

But that leads to a second takeaway, as pointed out by H.A. Ironside, it *is* a comfort to see that even apostles made mistakes. We’re going to make mistakes. We’re going to offend one another. Hopefully it doesn’t lead to someone’s false imprisonment, but we are going to fall short at some point or another. Grace is the way forward. Clinging to what has been revealed in the Scriptures is the way forward. So let’s *move* forward, not in fear, not in traditionalism, not trying to win the approval of man, but forward in grace, as people of the Word, doing what is necessary to follow God and be used for His purposes.

⁷ <https://www.preceptaustin.org/acts-21-commentary#21:30>