

## **“PAUL’S VISIT TO JERUSALEM.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA**

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**Texts for the Sermon: Acts 21:17-26**

**Prayer:** Holy Spirit, open our hearts to receive what you want to say to us today. Amen.

### **Introduction.**

Someone has said all of Scripture is equally inspired, but not all of Scripture is equally inspiring. You might find yourself thinking that about this passage. We all said “This is the Word of the Lord” but how is Paul’s paying for four haircuts God’s Word to us today?

Remember last week when Sara’s shared about the A-H Bible. She told the story of how in one village the genealogies are being used by Jesus to convince them this Book is the truth. They said this book tells the history of the prophets and even who the prophet’s fathers were.

**II Timothy 3:16-17** All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Let’s see how Paul’s paying for four haircuts might train us in righteousness and equip us for every good work and speak to us about the daily living and getting along with people at work or school or church.

Let’s hear what the Spirit is saying to His church under *three headings*.

Paul’s report and the elder’s response.

Jewish rumors and James’ request.

Paul’s action and application.

### **Paul’s report and the elder’s response, Acts 21:17-20a.**

Two missionary journeys covering many years had taken place since Paul was last in Jerusalem. Luke’s phrase one by one, means Paul gave a detailed report. He left nothing out concerning dates, times, places, people. He would have told them about:

The supernatural leading of the Holy Spirit to cross over from Asia to Macedonia/Europe.

The conversion of Lydia in Philippi.

The earthquake in the Philippian jail that led to the jailer’s conversion.

The conversion of devote Greeks, leading women, nobles, before being run out of Thessalonica.

Preaching to the philosophers in the Areopagus in Athens.

The conversion of Crispus, the synagogue ruler in Corinth.

The years spent building up the church in Corinth and Ephesus, and the riot in Ephesus  
The death and resurrection of Eutychus during one of Paul's long sermons.  
His narrow escapes from assassins, his persecutions, beatings, sufferings.  
The power of the Holy Spirit through signs and wonders bringing Gentiles to Christ (Rom 15:18)

**Notice Paul's humility**, he could have talked about his ministry and work, how well he did, how successful he was, how much he had done for God, how many converts he had made, how much money he collected and brought for the offering. But no, he gives all the credit and glory to God.

He says nothing about what he did, but only about what God did. His was only an instrument in God's hands.

**I Corinthians 3:6-7** I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

Paul never once boasted in himself, but always boasted in the Lord.

It is part of our sinful human nature to talk about ourselves, what we have accomplished. When we talk about ourselves, are people more impressed with us or with Jesus? When you talk about your day, about your work, about your accomplishments, do you say what you have done, or what God did, what God enabled? Everything is God, everything is gift, it's all grace. Do you give Him the glory?

**Romans 11:36** For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.

Do you have a good report to give of God's grace in your life? What can you point to recently that God has done or shown you or taught you or changed in you? How tangible is His grace in your life? What if we had those kinds of conversations with each other?

Maybe that sounds scary to you, awkward, embarrassing, too personal or private. But God's work in our hearts and lives and homes and work ought not to be kept secret. We should have a report of His grace in our lives so others can join us in giving glory to God.

And when others share a report do we rejoice when those around us are more successful, or more blessed by God? Do we praise God for the graces evident in others? Do we truly enjoy watching God love on others and use them?

**Notice the response.** The elders didn't praise Paul and commend him for his good work, they didn't envy him, they weren't jealous that he was so successful, they gave all the glory and praise to God. They glorified God for His grace that was poured out to Gentile sinners.

May we see the hand of God in our daily lives, at the end of each day may we be able to give a report of God's grace and may that be cause for worship and gratitude.

### **Jewish rumors and James' request, Acts 21:20b-25.**

We discover the Jerusalem church is like a other churches, they have problems, a big problem, Jewish rumors and gossip and misunderstanding concerning Paul's teaching.

The Jewish church has grown by thousands and thousands. They are true believers in Jesus Christ. But having been born and raised in Jewish Law, customs and traditions they are still zealous for the Law of Moses and following it.

They didn't fully understand their freedom from that law, they still loved the shadow even though they had the substance in Christ.

As is sometimes the case with rumors there is some measure of truth in them. It is true Paul taught freedom from the Law for both Jews and Gentiles but he didn't hold the Law in contempt. He taught freedom from the necessity of keeping the Law, but also freedom of conscience to hold in honor what they felt inclined to hold in honor, as long as it didn't replace the finished work of Christ on the cross for our salvation.

Paul is not entirely opposed to the Law, rather he sees it honored and fulfilled by Christ Himself. For him the glory of the Law is that it points to Christ, it reveals and shows us Christ and the necessity of faith in Him for righteousness, that there is no righteousness in any works.

Christ makes the outward use or external practice of the Law unnecessary, empty rituals. They were unimportant to Paul, a matter of freedom.

**Colossians 2:16-17** Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

**Romans 14:5** One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

The elders seem to indicate they didn't agree with the accusers. The rumor Paul was teaching Jews to no longer observe Jewish cultural customs and traditional ritual practices was false. So how to prove it? Once the rumors and lies are out there, can they be reversed? How do you shut down a rumor mill?

All of us have been on both the giving and receiving end of rumors and gossip and accusations. We have all heard second and third hand news and passed it on. And we have all had things said about us that aren't true passed on. None of us is righteous in this regard. We all have logs in our own eyes.

Satan is the father of lies and slander and gossip. He delights in nothing more than to see Christians tearing each other apart with accusations, hateful comments, reckless, abusive speech, anything to make us suspicious of each other or stop loving each other.

You have probably heard the sermon illustration of a woman who spread a rumor about someone that turned out not to be true. She felt convicted of her sin and went to her pastor for wisdom about what to do. He told her to get a feather pillow and scatter the feathers about town. This she did, and then came back. OK, now what? He told her to go out and pick up all the feathers. This was impossible and hence the lesson about spreading gossip and rumors.

I heard a rumor about someone in our church a bit ago that troubled me, so I went to the person on a Saturday morning and asked if it was true. There was absolutely no merit to the rumor whatsoever. So I went back to the person who told it and put it to rest. I then asked them to go to the person they heard it from and they couldn't remember who it was. Some feathers may still be floating about.

Just this past week I was on the receiving end of a misunderstanding, someone making some false assumptions about something I had said. Mercifully since the issue was with me, they did something uncommon and came only to me and I was able to respond with some clarification that was well received, and resolved the concern. No more feathers.

We should cultivate the godly habit of closing our ears to all accusations, rumors, gossip, lies about anyone, even our enemies. Let us do to others what we would want done for us.

**Proverbs 26:20** For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases (without gossip it dies).

### **James' request.**

A picture is worth a thousand words. They had a plan for how Paul could tangibly, visibly, publicly show the rumors to be a lie. He could take part in one of the Jewish customs, traditions, a haircutting ceremony of four men who had taken a Nazirite vow.

Nazirite vows were an act of devotion sometimes in response to confession of sin and sometimes in response to some great kindness from God. The vows were generally for 30 days during which time the person would abstain from meat, wine, and cutting their hair.

At the end of the 30 days they would go to the temple and make a sacrifice and cut off their hair and put it into the fire. One difficulty was the sacrifice required was quite expensive. We aren't talking about four haircuts and a tip for \$100.

Numbers 6 calls for the sacrifice of a male lamb, a female lamb, a ram, and a basket of unleavened bread, and drink offerings. We are talking hundreds of dollars.

## **Paul's action and application, Acts 21:26.**

We know Paul is not a wimp, he has stood up to those who oppose the Word of God and the Gospel. We have record of him standing up to Peter, to the Judaizers, to Barnabas about Mark. So this is not a case of compromising his principles or caving in.

This is not a compromise of doctrine or moral principle. This is a concession in the area of practice where there is freedom in Christ. Paul concedes when no fundamental principle of Christian faith and Gospel is at stake. These rituals were just that, customs, traditions with no power to atone or save. They don't rob Jesus of His glory.

Paul is practicing what he preaches:

**I Corinthians 9:19-22** For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ... 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

Paul is all things to all people for the sake of the Gospel, in order to win some to Christ. This is Paul showing us how to lay aside our own rights, our own self, to deny ourselves for the sake of others. Memorial Day is a reminder of those who died to their own freedoms for the sake of others.

This is a call to lay down stubbornness, hardheadedness, obstinacy, inflexibility, pride for the sake of others, for the sake of Christ and the Gospel.

Paul was able to do this much, to go this far, without compromising his conscience. He shows his tolerance when the goal is to win some to Christ. Jewish cultural practices were a matter of indifference to Paul.

Remember in last week's text Paul was inflexible, intolerant, immovable. His conscience was captive to the Holy Spirit, he was to go to Jerusalem. This week Paul is flexible, he bends, acquiesces. This takes maturity and discernment.

Paul lived by two principles, the value of the Gospel and the value of unity in the church.

Where he had freedom to do so, he bent over backwards to submit to the greater good of the body. He was willing to do everything possible to accommodate himself to different views and different levels of maturity.

Don't go against your conscience. Don't compromise the truth concerning Jesus and His Gospel.

Paul always has an evangelistic purpose. He worked to create no stumbling blocks for others to come to Christ.

Paul worked to reach people who were different than him, people who were of a different opinion than him, people who had different perspectives, even people who were wrong about some things, but they were secondary issues.

Paul was free with money. Paying a huge sum for the sake of winning some for Christ was easy. For the sake of unity, no price was too high.

At great personal cost to himself, Paul was willing to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel. Paul was willing to waste his time and money for the sake of the Kingdom of Christ.

An example of this is when we turn 18 or 21 we gain certain freedoms, but if we are mature and Christ-like we also know how to restrain our own freedoms for the sake of others. (Sabbath keeping in a Dutch community).

“A truly emancipated spirit, such as Paul’s, is not in bondage to its own emancipation” (F.F. Bruce). Or, to put it another way, by his own freedom he gave up his freedom.

May we never boast in ourselves, but boast only in the Lord’s work through us, and may we report on God’s grace to us in a way that causes others to glorify God with us.

May we not spread rumors and gossip, but build up others with our words.

May we seek no righteousness outside of Christ, no salvation apart from the cross, and trust in no works but the work of Jesus, being free from the works of the Law.

May we know when to stand on principle and when to bend to accommodate others? Real life requires wisdom. Christian life calls for maturity and wisdom and grace. God puts us in situations that require seeking His wisdom. God might even put us in a situation where we have an opportunity to pay for someone’s haircut in the name of Jesus and for the sake of the Gospel.