

Almost Christian

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[0 : 00] Thanks to all of you for your patient indulgence as we all relearn how to be together in worship.

What a great thing to get to do to remember how to be together and praise the Lord together. And I'm delighted to be here this morning. I'm delighted to continue the series that we started at the beginning of the summer looking at the book of Acts, which is essentially Luke, volume 2.

This is the story of the early church. And as we are relearning how to be together in the church and worship on Sunday mornings, we're also remembering how to be the church in the world.

And that's why we're looking at this book. What is the church? What are we called to be? What are we meant to do? Why are we here? And so we've been looking at this final section of the book of Acts. And this is essentially the Apostle Paul facing a series of trials.

He is literally on trial facing all of these political leaders. And what we see in these confrontations is the Apostle Paul who has no power, no influence, no pull whatsoever, having to stand before these powerful leaders who have literally the power of life and death over him. And he is confronting them with the gospel. He's telling them about Jesus. And it doesn't always go over that well. And in some ways, I think this is a picture of the church in the world. Especially in the West, it feels for many Christians as though we are like the Apostle Paul.

[1 : 41] We have very little cultural influence. And yet we are facing the world and having to speak the truth about Jesus in ways that sometimes delight people and sometimes offend people. And it's the calling of the church to be faithful witnesses in the world regardless of how the world might respond.

And some of us are here this morning and we're here as Christians. And we're thinking, what does this mean for me? And some of us are here and maybe you're not Christians and you're thinking, this is what I don't like about Christians. They're always talking about their faith. And they're always trying to shove it down people's throats. So what does it mean to be a witness? What are Christians called to do when we talk about being witnesses of Jesus confronting the world with the truth of the gospel?

We're going to look at Acts chapter 24 verses 22 to 27 and we're going to see the Apostle Paul confronting Felix, who's a local governor. And we're going to see here some of what it takes to be a faithful witness. So we're going to look first at the messenger himself, Paul, and then we're going to look at the message. What is it that he's actually saying to Felix? Messenger, message, what does it mean for us?

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for its inherent power. We thank you that you promise in your word that it never goes out from you and returns void, but it accomplishes all that you set out for it to accomplish. Lord, I'm here, we're all here with all kinds of different things on our minds. But our great hope is that you're also here. Whatever might be on our mind, whatever our agenda might be, you have an agenda. You can do things in us that are unexpected, unexplainable, miraculous. We pray that you would do your work in us this morning for your glory. In your son Jesus' name, amen. So first of all, let's look at the messenger, Paul himself. Let me give you some context of what's happening at this point in the story. Paul's being held under house arrest.

[3 : 42] If you were here last week, you remember there was a big riot in Jerusalem. They were beating up Paul. They were trying to kill him. Some of the soldiers come down and rescue him. Lysias comes down the tribune to rescue Paul before they kill him. And they end up putting him on trial in front of Felix, who's the governor there. And the Jews have cooked up all of these trumped up charges against Paul.

You know, the riot was his fault. All of this is his fault. Of course, none of that's true. We know from the text that Paul is clearly innocent. He's not done anything wrong. But the Jews are trying to get him punished. They're trying to get him shut down because they don't like what he's saying. The governor, Felix, hears some of this, and then he decides to put everything on hold. He suspends the hearing, presumably so that they can wait for this key witness to arrive, a man named Claudius Lysias, who's the key witness in the investigation. He was there when the riot broke out.

If you know the context, you know that what Felix should have done was simply to let Paul go. He's not done anything wrong. But he says, no, let's put him under house arrest, but make sure he's comfortable. Make sure that, you know, his friends can come and visit him, and he's got a certain amount of freedom. But just keep him under guard. And you say, well, why would he keep Paul around? What's his ultimate agenda? And we find out a little bit later in verse 26, Felix is hoping that Paul will offer him a bribe in exchange for his freedom. He mistakenly thinks that Paul has money. He knows that he's the ringleader of these Nazarenes, as the Jews accuse him of being. He's the ringleader of this Christian rabble. And they also know that he came to bring alms to the church in Jerusalem. And so it seems, that Paul may very well have access to money. So Felix says, well, if I keep him around, maybe he'll figure it out, figure out how things work around here, offer me a little money, and then

I can let him go. So that's what Felix's ultimate agenda really is. And Paul's response shows us something very important about Paul and what it means to be a witness. And that is that Paul has tremendous integrity, his tremendous integrity. You need to understand it would have been very justifiable, very easy to justify offering Felix a bribe so that Paul could be let go and be free again, right? Think of how many conversions could be happening. Think of how many baptisms could be happening. Think about how many churches Paul could be planting if he weren't locked up in this house.

Think of all of the good that Paul could be doing for the kingdom if he wasn't sitting here waiting for Felix to make a decision. So it would be easy to justify offering the bribe. Well, I'm doing this for the kingdom. I'm doing this for Jesus. Surely Jesus would understand. But Paul doesn't do it.

[6 : 39] Nor does Paul make any attempt to ingratiate himself to Felix or his wife, Drusilla, which he easily could have done. Instead, Paul voluntarily stays under house arrest for at least two more years. And then after Felix, even longer. And then Paul uses the opportunity not to befriend or ingratiate himself to this man, but to preach the gospel to him. And, you know, this is something that we want to think about. Paul's response to this sort of invitation, this tacit invitation by Felix. You know, in his commentary on this passage, Willie James Jennings says this. He says, Felix is of the world of empire politics. He's of the old world of empire politics. You know, there's a certain way things get done in the government. And Felix is very well versed in those sort of behind-the-scenes dynamics. So he invites

Paul into the dance of money and power. He offers Paul the opportunity to gain his freedom by becoming captive to the way of empire politics. And I love that phrase, the dance of money and power. That has always been a temptation for God's people. It has always been a temptation for the church. There's always been the temptation to sacrifice just a little bit of your integrity, to sacrifice just a little bit of your character, your credibility, in order to gain more influence, to gain a little more freedom, to gain a little more prestige, to gain a wider audience, to gain a little more money. There's always been that temptation.

It can be very seductive. And you see it all throughout history. The dance of money and power, this is what sits behind the corruption of the medieval church that made the Reformation possible. This is what sits behind all of the sexual abuse scandals and the motives behind covering those up. Right? This is what sits behind the transformation of the evangelical movement in our country from being a theological affinity group to a political voting block. The dance of money and power. This is the thing that you see in the recurring headlines about celebrity pastors who ascend to the heights of wealth and power and power and influence only to come crashing down like Icarus, wings of flame, leaving a trail of dead bodies and devastated churches in their wake. What sits behind that is the dance of money and power.

It is very seductive. It is very alluring. It is always there. We see it in the local church. You see it in local churches when people who lack character, who lack maturity, have an outsized influence on the mission and the direction and the priorities of the church simply because they're the biggest givers or because they have very impressive job titles. Right? You see it when the preaching and

teaching of the church is driven more by market research or partisan talking points than by faithfulness to scripture. The dance of money and power. We see it in our own lives. I see this in my life. Far be it from me to stand up here and act as though I'm somehow immune. We see it all of the times that we're tempted to minimize our faith or compartmentalize our faith or compromise our standards or nod our heads and agree with things that we don't actually believe just to gain a little more status or approval. Just to gain a little more respect at work, just to avoid rejection by our peers. The dance of money and power. These are the seeds of it right there. But what we see in scripture is this is not the way of God's kingdom. That's the way of the empire. That's the old way of doing things.

[10 : 37] But God's kingdom is breaking in and there's a new way of being human therein. And there is no dance of money and power in God's kingdom because God's kingdom turns everything upside down. And Paul knows this. His central message is the kingdom. And if he doesn't embody the kingdom, how can he possibly preach the kingdom? And so Paul knows this and so Paul stands firm. I will stay in prison and I will continue to talk to you about the kingdom. So that's the first thing. That's the messenger.

Now I want to look at what Paul actually says. Felix and his wife Drusilla, they summon Paul and then Paul uses the opportunity to preach to them. It says in verse 24 that they heard Paul speak about faith in Jesus Christ. So, you know, the sermon header would be faith in Jesus Christ. So Paul's going through probably one of his typical sermon outlines. And it says that when he gets to the part in his sermon, in verse 25 it says, when Paul gets to the part about, quote, righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix is alarmed. You know, Felix is like blah, blah, blah, going along, going along, going along. And then Paul says something about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment of Felix. Well, all of a sudden, Paul's got his full attention. And you say, well, what's going on here?

Well, Paul's using, as I said, one of his standard sermon outlines. You can see examples of this in places like Acts chapter 17. When Paul talks about righteousness, or you could also translate this justice, probably what Paul would be saying, he's probably starting with the idea that there is a way that things are supposed to be. There's a way that the world is supposed to work because this world was created by a holy God, a righteous God. And so there's a way that the world is meant to reflect that righteousness. That's point one. There's a way things are supposed to be. And this is not it.

Then he would have talked about self-control. Maybe a better translation would be moral virtue. Moral virtue. Not only is there a way that things are supposed to be, there's a way that people are supposed to be. There is a right and wrong. There's a certain definition of what it means to be human. And there are lots of ways, lots of things that we can do that depart from that.

Right? And then finally, the coming judgment. Things are not the way they're supposed to be. People are not the way we're supposed to be. Why? Because human beings have rejected God. Human beings live in the world that God made as though God doesn't exist. And so Paul would say because of that, because things are not the way they're supposed to be, and because God is a God of justice, one day God's going to come and put the world right again. And he's going to give everyone their due. That's what justice means. Everybody's going to get what they're owed.

[13 : 29] Right? So right when Paul gets to that point, no, God's one day going to come. He's going to put things right. Everybody's going to get their due. That's what Felix says. Okay, I've had enough for today. Right? Because Felix, you know, you say, well, why would this make him uncomfortable? Well, Felix is notoriously corrupt. The Roman historian Tacitus described Felix as, quote, cruel, licentious, and base. Cruel, licentious, and base. And it's as though Paul's words shine a spotlight on his corruption. Right? They shine a spotlight on that corruption. One day God is going to judge you and give you your due. And so Felix, you know, he doesn't openly freak out. He does what a lot of people do when they're made to feel uncomfortable and exposed. He plays it off like he couldn't care less. He goes, okay, that's enough for today. Go away now, little Paul, and when I find it convenient, I'll sin for you again. Right? But we know from Scripture inside he's deeply disturbed.

He's alarmed. And as far as we know, Felix never repented. In fact, I think after historians tell us that after he ended his post, he actually went to Rome and was put on trial in Rome, and he was accused and found guilty of corruption and cruelty. So it doesn't end well for Felix as far as we know.

But the implication for us is this. Again, you see Paul's integrity. That he's willing to say the things he knows are going to upset Felix. He could be ingratiating himself to this man.

But he's saying things that he knows are going to upset Felix, which means risking further imprisonment or worse. In other words, when it comes to his witness and his message, Paul is willing to cross the pain line. He's willing to cross the pain line. That's a term I first came across in the book *Honest Evangelism* by Rico Tice. The pain line. There comes a point when you are sharing the gospel with people when what you say will be offensive to the person that you're talking to. That's the pain line.

Right? Up to that point, you're talking about vague spirituality. You're talking about God's love. You're talking about, you know, all of the things that people want to hear. And then there's this point where you kind of got to get to the bad news of the gospel. Because the gospel, at some point, before it can be good news, it starts out as bad news. And you have to take the plunge and you have to, okay, I'm going to say the hard thing now. What's the hard thing? Well, almost no one in our culture is really a moral relativist. You know, I hear a lot of people say, oh, everybody's moral relativism is everywhere. No, no, no. That's not at all true. I've never really ever met a moral relativist.

[16:17] Because everybody has a sense of the way things should be. Everybody has a sense of the way people should be. Everybody has lots of opinions about what's right and wrong in our culture. It doesn't matter if you're religious. Everybody has strong opinions about that. But what we do is we typically, whenever we draw the line between right and wrong, right and wrong, we typically like to draw the line in such a way that we are comfortably on the right side. Right? So I know there's a right and wrong, there's bad people and good people, but compared to most everybody else, I'm on the right side of that line. You know, we may have a sneaking suspicion of our own badness deep down, but most people think, you know, relative to most other people, I'm a pretty good person. Here's the line, I'm over here.

You know, Hitler is over there. And then everybody else is kind of in between. You know, that's the way we like to think. But the gospel says, and here's the pain line, the gospel says, no. You drew the line in the wrong place. Don't you see, the gospel says, you along with all other human beings, you're on the wrong side of the line. You thought the line was here. The line is a lot higher than you thought it was. God's definition of righteousness is a lot higher than you thought it was. Don't you see that you're alienated from God right now?

Don't you see that you're a part of what's wrong with the world? Now, we might sneakily suspect that we are, but for somebody to just say it, it's alarming. Because you live in the world that God made and you ignore him, don't you see you're on the wrong side of the line?

And Rico Tice says, this is the main reason that Christians don't share the gospel. Right? It's because it's offensive. You know, a message like this does not sit well in modern Western culture. We live in what sociologist Philip Reif calls a therapeutic culture. What's a therapeutic culture? Well, it's a culture where people value their sort of right to feel a sense of psychological well-being above everything else. You know, the ability to feel good about yourself, to feel good and satisfied and fulfilled about your life, that is treated in our culture like a basic human right. And if you do anything or say anything to rob somebody of that sense of psychological well-being, it is a violation of their rights. And people get really upset about that.

If you were to challenge someone's worldview or worse, their lifestyle, that is seen as an attack on them, an attack on their well-being. It's seen as a form of traumatic abuse. People talk more and more about the trauma of having their worldview or their choices challenged. And so what many Christians and churches have done in a therapeutic culture is to simply change the way we talk about the gospel. We remove the pain line. We talk about the gospel purely in terms of God's desire for you to be happy and to be fulfilled and God's promise to help you live your best life now and God's desire for you to have the things that you want and the fact that good people do ultimately go to heaven and most of us are good people. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this cheap grace. You remove the pain line and what you're left with is cheap grace. It's knock-off counterfeit grace. Here's what he says about it. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. God loves you. God forgives you.

[19:44] End of story. It's baptism without church discipline. It's grace without discipleship. It's grace without the cross. It's grace without Jesus Christ. You don't need this if you don't have a pain line. It's irrelevant. You don't need the cross. You don't need Jesus. God loves you. God made you.

God wants you to be happy. End of story. You don't need the cross. The thing is cheap grace sells books. It fills out stadiums. It drives up ratings. Cheap grace is utterly inoffensive and that's the

problem because that also means it's utterly impotent. Right? Offense is part of the point. And you say, well, that sounds, are you, you know, just like making people sad and angry? No. Offense is part of the point. It's necessary. Right? Only after, here's the point, only after you're confronted with the bad news of your own sin, are you ready for the good news that follows. And the sad thing about Felix is he never let Paul get to the good news. He cut him off at the bad news. That's enough for today.

If he could have just waited a little bit longer, he would have heard the good news. And when you hear the good news, it's like the sun coming up on a dark morning. The shadows are dispelled and everything is seen in the new light of a new day with all of the hope that brings. Paul would have said, yes, God is a God of justice. That's the first part, but you didn't let me finish. Yes, God's going to one day come and put everything right. But the good news is God's not only a God of justice, he's also a God of mercy. And then Paul would have looked at Drusilla, who was a Jew, by the way. She was Jewish royalty. And he would have said, you know this, Drusilla. Tell him. Tell your husband. This is the dilemma that runs all the way through the Old Testament, that God is at the same time this God of justice and also this God of mercy. And even the greatest Jewish scholars couldn't reconcile those two. How can God sometimes mete out justice and then other times he promises that he's going to forgive and restore his people? How could both be true, justice and mercy? And Paul would have said,

Drusilla, have you ever known how to reconcile that? And she, if she were honest, would have had to simply shake her head and say, no, it's one of the great mysteries of the scriptures. And Paul would have said, mystery solved. The only way to resolve this dilemma is for someone else to pay the price for all the sins of humanity, for justice to be done, but not to human beings. Because here's the dilemma. If God doesn't bring judgment, there is no hope for the world. Things are never going to get better. But if God does bring judgment, then there's no hope for us. Because who could survive that?

So Paul says, the only way to resolve this tension is for someone else to pay the price. And the good news of the gospel is that there is a God who loves us so much that he sent his son to do just that.

[22 : 49] I was talking to somebody this past week. We were having a confirmation interview. And I asked her, when did the penny drop for you and your faith become real? And she said, well, I was listening to somebody talk about Jesus. And this person said, you know, I have a bunch of kids and I would readily die just in a moment's notice. I would die for any one of my kids. Absolutely. I love them that much, but I would never sacrifice one of my kids to save someone else. And she said, she's sitting there listening. And it was just like the love of God finally made sense to her.

Right? But you can hear this gospel a thousand times. You can hear Jesus died for your sin. And many of you in this room have heard this tens of thousands of times. But until you cross the pain line, it's never going to mean anything to you.

Right? Until you're so offended by the truth of your own sin that it throws you into crisis. The gospel is never really going to hit home. Yeah, Jesus died for my sin. Yeah, Jesus died for my sin. You'll hear it a thousand times. You'll never care. It'll never connect because you're not in crisis over your own need for grace. The penny's never going to drop. There's a writer named John Shore, and I do not agree with a lot of what he says, but at one point, John Shore wrote about his conversion on Huffington Post. And the title of his piece was, I, a rabid anti-Christian, very suddenly convert. So, so he describes himself. He says, you know, I wasn't religious. He thought Christianity was immature and stupid. He's very honest about that.

And he had totally bought into the therapeutic cultural ideals. You know, life's about being happy and fulfilled and loving yourself. And then he has this day at work, and there's something particularly immature and self-destructive that he had done.

[24 : 40] And he's sort of mulling over this and wondering why he had done it. And then he says he feels this strange feeling come over him. And he doesn't know what's about to happen. He sort of feels like he's going to start crying.

And so he, he doesn't know what to do because he's at work. You know, this is back in the old days when people were in offices. And, and so he, he doesn't know what to do. And so he, he runs into the closet, like a broom closet.

And he shuts the door. And he says, all at once, the truth was before me. He's sitting here in a dark broom closet. All at once, the truth was before me that instead of being a good guy, who's basically

always trying to do the right thing, I was a selfish, emotional wacko who was always doing and saying whatever best served my own needs at the time.

He just has this wake-up call about himself. And then he says, I wasn't the great honorable person I started out to be, that I'd meant to become, that I actually thought I was.

I was just another guy so busy thinking he's constructing the perfect home that he doesn't realize how long ago he stopped using a level. It's like my whole sense of good and bad and my own measure is off.

[25 : 53] I stopped measuring a long time ago. And so there sure is, standing in a broom closet at work, for the first time ever, seeing himself on the other side of that pain line, confronted with this.

It throws him into crisis. And he says, you know, this is not only true about me now, but I was, he says, the truth is, I was, I realized I was never going to change.

I'm going to die this way. And then he starts to cry. And you imagine this dude in a broom closet realizing this and just beginning to sob. And then he hears a voice say, isn't this what Jesus is for? And he writes, just like that, I stopped crying. And do you know what I knew at that moment, what instantly imprinted itself upon me? That the story of Jesus is historically true.

That it happened. That God, desiring above all else to show the people he'd created that he loved them, became a human and came to earth and sacrificed himself and in every way did everything he possibly could to show people exactly how deeply and terribly he loves them.

[27 : 02] See, he crossed the pain line. He had heard that a thousand times. He had probably mocked people who believed that thousands of times. But then he crossed the pain line.

And the gospel message about Jesus, that he had been mocking his entire adult life, all of a sudden became real. True grace, costly grace, can only be found on the far side of the pain line.

You have to cross that line. So let's pull all this together. What does it take to be a faithful kingdom witness?

Number one, integrity is essential for Christian witness. You know, you can say whatever you want. You can say whatever you want. But people don't have to listen to you.

They don't have to respect what you're saying. You have to earn the right to be heard, and that depends on your integrity. Right? One of my heroes, the pastor John Stott, before he died, he gave his last little bit of advice, which was simply this.

[28 : 14] On his deathbed, he said to his assistant, do the hard thing. You know, often integrity means doing the hard thing, even if no one's watching.

So integrity is essential for Christian witness. As the church, we need to get our house in order. We need to have integrity in our witness.

The second point is this. The pain line is essential for Christian witness. Right? It can be so tempting to remove the offense of the gospel, to make it more palatable, right, to talk in vaguely spiritual terms and think that's evangelism.

But when you do that, you think that you're being nice. You think that that's what you should do. But what you're doing is actually robbing people of the only opportunity they have to truly experience God's grace and love.

You're robbing them of that. You know, there's this old saying, what you convert people with, you convert them to. So there are many people sitting in churches right now who identify as Christians who've never experienced God's love and grace because they were converted with a very watered-down version of the gospel, an inoffensive gospel, which made it easy to swallow, but grace has never become real for them.

[29 : 34] Love has never become real because they've never crossed the pain line. And I will say this to those of us sitting here. Some of you may be Christians wondering this for yourself. Some of us may be, you know, here and not sure what we believe.

Have you ever taken a good, honest look at the truth of your heart the way John Shore did? Have you ever really taken an inventory of the space between the person you want to be and think you are and the person that you actually are?

Have you ever faced that? You know, this liturgy is designed to help us do that. When we hear the law at the beginning of the time together, when we hear God's standard for loving him perfectly, a little bit later in the service, when we confess together and you think about sins that we've committed, sins of commission, and then sins of omission, things that we've left undone.

Can any of us say that there aren't lots of things we've left undone that we probably should have done? You recognize that the Bible recognizes that as a kind of sin? Have you ever taken a good, hard look at the truth of your heart?

Are you scared to? Like the voice said to John Shore, isn't that what Jesus is for? If you've never been offended by the truth of the gospel, you will never be overcome by the love of the gospel.

[30 : 56] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for your gospel. There is nothing else in the world that gives us the courage to face the truth about ourselves like your grace.

But Lord, we don't do this because we like to indulge in suffering or self-flagellation. Lord, we do it because we know deep down there's a sneaking suspicion that we're not the people we think we are.

But we're so terrified of what that would mean that it's easier to pretend like it's not there. Lord, I pray that as this time together is infused at every turn with grace, I pray that that grace would be enough to give us the courage to face maybe for the first time ever the truth of who we are.

That we might come to see much more clearly the truth of who you are and the truth of what you've done. We pray this in your son Jesus' name. Amen.