

Acts 21:17-36

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[0 : 00] The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grace and Peace is a new church that exists for the glory of God and the good of the northeast suburbs of Hamilton Place, Collegedale, and Ottawa.

You can find help more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. Chapter 21, verse 17.

And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day, Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews who have believed.

They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you, that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to the customs.

[1 : 11] What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. Take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads.

Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in obedience to the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter that our judgment, with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality.

Remember, that's coming back from chapter 15 when the elders sent a letter to Paul and the rest of the Gentiles called the Jerusalem Council. Verse 26.

Then Paul took the men and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, these are people who would have known Paul, they would have known him from sight, they're from Asia, they were the ones against him, they saw seeing him in the temple.

[2 : 20] They stirred up the whole crowd and laid their hands on Paul, crying out, men of Israel, help, this is the man who's teaching everyone everywhere against this people and this law and this place.

Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple, Gentiles, and has defiled this holy place because they had previously seen Trophimus, the Ephesian, with him in the city.

And they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Turns out he didn't, but they thought that. Verse 30, Then when all the city was stirred up and the people ran together, they seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple.

And at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. That's like the Roman soldiers. He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them.

And when he saw the tribune and the soldiers, when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested Paul and ordered him to be bound with two chains.

[3 : 19] He inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered them to be brought into the barracks.

And when he came up the steps, Paul was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd. For the mob of the people followed, crying out, away with him.

Okay. Friends, remember, this is God's word. And he gives it to you because he loves you and he wants you to know him. I wonder if you are familiar with that phrase.

You may have heard it before. In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity. You've heard that before?

In essentials, unity. We're united around essential things. In non-essential things, there's liberty. There's freedom to do what you want about those things. But in all things, there is charity.

[4 : 18] There's grace. Actually, I didn't know this, but that was originally coined by this German philosopher and theologian back in the 1620s in the midst of what's called the Thirty Years' War, which I'm sure everyone remembers, the Thirty Years' War, from your one random European history class that you had to take your freshman year.

And that was actually this war that went on for 30 years. It was the rise of the nation states in Europe where you basically had all these people that were separating themselves according to their kind of nationhood as well as their theology.

They used theology and church identity and slaughtered each other for 30 years. It was a bloody time with full of conflict and tension. And this German theologian used that phrase in essentials.

Unity. Non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity. What you have in Acts 21 is a time of incredible tension and conflict. These people did not like each other very much.

But what you see here is actually the application of that truth. In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.

[5 : 27] Actually being worked out. Another word for that charity is grace. So this passage is all about conflict and grace. And, you know, I want to show, I think what this is a helpful passage to highlight is, is that no matter what the conflicts that you are experiencing in life, there is actually the hope that there can be grace in the midst of your conflicts.

A writer that I like to read, I've said this before, it doesn't matter whether you are a parent, a parent of, you know, kids or you're the president.

It doesn't matter what your realm of authority is. All of us have conflicts and they all have similar dynamics and all of them can see grace in the middle of that. So, I want to look at what the problem is.

I want you to see the problem in this passage. I want you to see what the resolution looks like and then what are the results. Okay? Problem, resolution, results. Here's the problem. The first thing they did, that Paul did when he got there, was he went and visited the elders.

He went and visited James. Verse 17, look back at the beginning. When they had come to Jerusalem after traveling, the brothers received us. Us meaning there was a bunch of people traveling with Paul. It was all his disciples and church planters.

[6 : 41] And verse 18, on the following day, Paul went in with us to James and all the elders were present. What did they do? After greeting them, Paul related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said, you see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews who have believed.

So there was this, this meeting had a lot of uncertainty and tension to it. The first thing Paul did when he got to town was go and visit.

And why did he do that? Well, because there was, James and Paul represented the two major factions in the church. There was Jewish Christians.

James ministered to the Jewish Christians who lived in Judea. These were people who had come to believe in Christ. They trusted Christ. They were building and supporting the church, but they followed Jewish culture and Jewish tradition.

[7 : 45] Okay? Paul, on the other hand, had been converting Gentiles. And these Gentiles, they also followed Christ. They also were supporting the church. But they did not follow Jewish customs and Jewish heritage in a lot of different ways.

And a lot of people looking on at this Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian divide, they made the assumption that it was completely incompatible that these two groups could continue going forward together.

They were so culturally different. No one thought that they could actually go forward together. And so look at verse 21. And they have been told about you, that you teach all the Jews among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children, walk according to the customs, et cetera, et cetera.

So rumors had been going around about Paul. What they were saying was, if there were Jews amongst these Gentiles, he was saying, you don't need to be Jewish anymore. You know, you don't need to have the cultures and the traditions of being Jewish.

But that the circumcision isn't necessary. Feasts were unnecessary. Temple was unnecessary. But in reality, what Paul was preaching was that faith in Jesus' life and death and resurrection was the central thing.

[9 : 07] That if you had Jesus in his life, you had reconciliation with God. You would be made right with God if you had Christ. That was essential.

That was the central thing. But following the customs, following the traditions, following heritage, that was not essential. It was liberty.

You had the freedom to do it, but it was not essential. So Gentiles had the liberty to not follow Jewish customs, while Jews had the liberty to do that. And so as you can imagine, in swirling around, when you have people of different cultures, there was suspicion.

There was fear. The Jewish Christians, in particular, feared that Paul was taking away and minimizing their heritage. They thought they were going to lose their way of life.

They thought that they were going to lose the things that they valued culturally. They thought it was only a matter of time before their uniqueness as a people was going to, they were going to lose their uniqueness as a people.

[10 : 10] Now, that's pretty easy to understand. I think if you look around at Christian circles these days, whether it's looking at the political discourse or looking at Christians, talking to other Christians, you see this same kind of fear and distrust.

Because there are people who fear that they are about to lose everything that they value, their way of life, the thing that makes them unique. But you see this in families as well.

You see this as parents, as they're talking to their children, as their children age. My daughter graduated high school this weekend. She's aging. We're freaking out about that. We don't handle that well all the time.

You know, we have the question, are the things that we value as a family, now that we're beginning to have adults, if other adults in our family, are we going to lose those things that make us unique?

You feel that at work. If you've got conflict with your boss, am I going to lose my job? Am I going to lose the things that I've liked about this? We see this in friendships, in conflicts with our spouse.

[11 : 16] And underneath all of those conflicts, there is often this deep distrust. There's fear. There's suspicion. And it pops up in these flashpoint conflicts.

The Jews and the Gentiles here were having trouble figuring out what was essential in their life together. What did they have to be unified around?

What was not essential and they could give each other liberty about? And how in the world could they be gracious and generous to people that they were different than? That's fundamentally what this was about.

It was a failure of grace. It was a failure to be able to treat other people honorably. I don't know if you know this, but do you know how the Beatles got started?

How they came together? Super fascinating. John Lennon had a little band and they were playing a church event. It was a Sunday afternoon church event and Lennon was playing this event with his band and Paul McCartney was riding his bike by in Liverpool.

[12 : 20] And riding his bike by, heard this band playing at this church event, stopped, went in. They kind of, they met, someone introduced them, they jammed together a little bit and within about four or five weeks, the band had become the Beatles with John and Paul at the very center of the thing.

One of the things that united John and Paul was the fact that both of them had lost their mothers as teenagers. John's mother died, I believe, of cancer.

Paul's mother died in a car accident. One was 13, one was 14 when they lost their mothers and they united around one another, not just their talent because they were talented, but around this shared sense of loss, a shared sense of missing something, of tragedy in their life.

And that's part of what gave their music the pathos that it had, this feeling of truth to it. And of course they were talented and it became this great thing, but you know how long they stayed together?

As monumental as the Beatles are in our culture, they only stayed together 13 years. That was 1957 when they got together. By 1970, Paul had released his own solo album and essentially the band broke up.

[13 : 33] Of course it was Yoko Ono. Nobody likes Yoko Ono. It's fine. And that conflict though, they were unable to retain that sense of unity because they were unable to live in charity and grace with one another.

Over time, their rivalries simply got the better of them and they ceased to work for one another and they promoted themselves. Let me ask it this way. Is it possible that the things that most strongly bind us together in unity can be lost simply because we lack charity with one another?

You can lose those things which are most precious to you and most bind you to other people and institutions and movements simply because you lack graciousness with the other people that you are with.

See, in your conflicts with spouse and boss and friend and children, you might see in your own life the same kind of suspicion, rumor, gossip, fear, anger.

All of that shows a lack of charity. So where do we find grace? Where do we find grace in the midst of that conflict? That's the problem. The second thing is the resolution. And this resolution has kind of three details that I want you to see.

[15 : 00] Paul and James, there was this subtle but powerful resolution. The first thing that you see in their interaction is they both cultivated a gentle spirit with one another. When Paul arrived, the first thing he did was visit them.

That was high on his priority list. He came in and he retold all that God had done. Did you notice? There was no sense of selfishness here. He didn't point to his own accomplishments.

He patiently went through the details of what God had done. And did you notice how James and the elders responded? I mean, it seems like this genuine response of verse 19, greeting them.

I'm sorry, verse, where's it? 20. They glorified God when they heard it. They broke out into praise of God. There was not this factionalism between the two leaders.

They had a sense of gentleness with one another. They seem to genuinely enjoy the successes of one another. It really needs to be asked.

[16 : 09] In our day of social media and the factions that are out there, the fissures that are out there in our public life, is this. Have you cultivated a gentle spirit towards other Christians or towards other opponents that you have?

Do you have a gentle spirit towards them? Do you have a gentle spirit in what you write and post online? Are you actively seeking the best in other people that you disagree with?

Do you talk about people the same in private as you do in public? Do you name call and belittle people just because you don't know them because they're public figures?

Are you cultivating a gentle spirit? John Newton, you remember John Newton, he wrote Amazing Grace. He was a slave, he owned a slave ship, got converted and eventually was part of, helped William Wilberforce abolish slavery in Britain.

He was a pastor after that and he was written, he responded to a letter by a younger minister who was engaging in a controversy, kind of a public controversy with an opponent and I want to read you part of this letter.

[17 : 24] I put the whole thing on the website, you can find it there. Newton says this, he says, consider your opponent. If you account him a believer, this is a long quote, so, you know, settle in.

If you account him a believer, though greatly mistaken in the subject of debate between you, the words of David to Joab concerning Absalom are very applicable. Deal gently with him for my sake.

See, the Lord loves your opponent and the Lord bears with him. Therefore, you must not despise him or treat him harshly.

The Lord bears with you likewise and expects that you should show tenderness to others from a sense of much forgiveness and of need yourself. Listen to this, in a little while, you will meet your opponent in heaven.

He will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth, that you have on earth now. Anticipate that future period in your thoughts and you may find it necessary to oppose his errors.

[18 : 31] View him personally as a kindred soul with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever. And more, consider your own, consider your, consider your own concern in the present undertaking.

It seems a laudable service to defend the faith once delivered to the saints. We are commanded to contend earnestly for it and to convince gainsayers. If ever such defenses were seasonable and expedient, they appear to be so in our own day when errors abound on all sides and every truth of the gospel is either directly denied or grossly misinterpreted.

And yet, we find but very few writers of controversy who have not been manifestly hurt by it. either they grow in a sense of their own importance or they take on an angry, contentious spirit or they insensibly withdraw their attention from those things which are the food and immediate support of the life of faith.

And they spend all their time on and strength on matters which are at most of secondary value. This shows that if the service is honorable, it is very dangerous.

What will it profit a man if he gains his cause and silences his adversaries if at the same time he loses that most humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights and to which the promise of his presence is made?

[20 : 00] We have to cultivate a gentle spirit. In our drive for controversy, you will find the death of your soul.

That could just, you may not ever actually post or forward anything. That just may mean you scrolling through your feeds and letting yourself get all taken up in it.

Okay, that's the first thing. We have to cultivate a gentle spirit. Second thing, Paul honored them when he came. Paul honored the elders. It doesn't say it directly in here, but Paul brought a gift with him.

He talks about it in chapter 24. It's in the background of this. And he's been talking about this gift as he's been traveling. It's this collection that Paul took up from all the Gentile churches around Asia Minor and Greece.

He's been taking up these collections. He's been bringing it to the people, to the Christians in Jerusalem. Why did he do that? Well, a couple of reasons. It was an appropriate gift for the poor in Judah, which was true, but it was also a symbol.

[21 : 04] It was a symbol of respect and solidarity that the Gentile church had for the Jewish church. It was important for Paul. In fact, Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, he said that actually the Gentiles owed it to the Jews because they had received spiritual blessing from the Jewish church.

They'd received the gospel. They owed it to the Jewish church to provide material blessing because they had it. It tells you something about the respect that Paul had for the Jews.

You know, it's life-giving when we see graciousness lived out. That's what's so striking about John Newton's letter is that when you're able to treat people, even people that you deeply disagree with, who are your opponents, people who have treated you badly, there is something so fundamentally different about that, that graciousness.

Paul had received suspicion and distrust from the Jewish Christians, but he returned that distrust and suspicion with gifts of love and honor and respect.

When I say that we are supposed to have a gentle spirit, it is not to have Southern niceness. You all know how this goes. You've all got grandmothers who do this or mothers who do this.

[22 : 28] You know, they're super syrupy, nice to somebody and then they get in the car and they start out with, bless their heart, that girl does not know how to dress. You know, it is the niceness with a dagger in private.

That is not what Paul is talking about here. Paul, that what's happening in this passage is a radical humility fueled by the transforming grace of Christ in Paul's life that was then lived out towards other people.

You know, this is how God has treated you. God came to you bringing gifts of grace even though what you had brought to Him in the first place was suspicion and distrust and rebellion and anger and turning away from Him.

To those rebels, to you and to me, God's first word to you is grace. There is not a moment where God's first word is condemnation.

His first word to this world is graciousness of bringing people in. And in that rejection there may be words of judgment but what did Jesus say? Why did He come into the world?

[23 : 52] Not to condemn the world but that through Him the world might be saved. See, God brought the gift of grace in His Son and only one who has received that grace who fully sees the power of the grace that God has given to them are they then empowered to go and to live graciously and honor other people.

The reason you might have trouble respecting and honoring other people in your life is that you may not know the fullness of the grace that God has given you.

That's the second thing. Okay, so they cultivated a gentle spirit. Paul honored them. And then thirdly, this is really interesting, neither man needed to win the argument. So James asked Paul for a favor.

He wanted Paul to make this public gesture. In the Old Testament there was this tradition, it's called a Nazarite vow and this took on various forms. Samson, Nazarite, that you would restrain yourself in some way.

It would be something costly and then you would put a certain amount of time on it and if you fulfilled that vow then you would be purified and you would go as an act of worship. And so apparently four men, Jewish men, had come under, they had done some sort of a Nazarite vow and James asked a favor of Paul.

[25 : 13] He said, Paul, here's what I want you to do. I want you to join these four guys. I want you to pay for it because it's expensive and then I want you to join them so that when they get to the end of their seven days, I guess is how long they had to do this, it would, you would be with them and be purified with them.

And the reason that James wanted Paul to do this, well there were a couple of reasons. First, he wanted, he wanted to show, publicly show the Jewish people that Paul actually did understand Jewish custom.

You know, he was a real Jew, he got it, even this Nazarite vow thing. They all, James also wanted to show that Paul doesn't reject, he actually participates in Jewish culture.

And the third thing, excuse me, the third thing was he wanted to show that Paul valued the spiritual importance of Jewish culture. See, Paul had been saying it's not necessary to do all the Jewish things, but now he's going to be able to say it may not be necessary, but it can be beneficial.

That's a huge thing. That's a huge thing that we could say that we disagree on something. You know, there are churches that don't follow the church calendar. You know, we talk about Pentecost Sunday.

[26 : 29] Is it necessary that we do that? No, of course not. Is it essential? No, of course not. But we have freedom to do it and it can be beneficial.

That's the exact same thing that is going on here. And what's important about this is that James was not saying, Paul, you need to change your theology.

Paul, you need to get on board with what our party line is. Paul, you need to agree with us. He never asked Paul to agree. He asked Paul to submit to what other people were doing.

what they were enacting right here was this. We're united in the essentials of Jesus. We have liberty in the non-essentials, but we're going to treat one another with charity.

James was not trying to force Paul into his way of living out the non-essentials. You sometimes hear people say things like, by any means necessary, we need to win by any means necessary.

[27 : 36] This is a, there's a lot of tenseness out there. And people use that kind of language. But let me be clear, by any means necessary is not a Christian value.

In no place it is by any means necessary a Christian value. I saw this clip, you know, I guess because I'm a pastor I get on Facebook, it will show me clips of other pastors.

I don't know why that is, maybe because of our church. But I saw this clip of a preacher. I don't know who he is or where he's from or anything about him. But, and I listened for about three seconds.

And, but what I heard the first line was, Christians these days have taken on a retreat Christianity. I thought, that's interesting. A retreat Christianity.

And he said, in his view, we needed to take, to get aggressive and assert our rights in the culture. And I thought, that's fascinating.

[28 : 32] I wonder what he might have thought of Paul here. You know, Paul, Paul was not required to do any of this Nazarite vow. And he did it anyway.

Paul wasn't interested in asserting his rights and proving his point. He didn't need to win the argument. I wonder what this preacher guy would have thought of Jesus if he would have thought that Jesus, you know, enacted retreat Christianity.

I think that it's probably a well-meaning but wrong way to think about how we are to relate in culture. Because what it presumes is that we can't lose.

If we lose, something fundamental about who we are goes away. But that's the thing. Paul and James here did not think that they had to win.

Winning wasn't the criteria for faithfulness. He didn't have to win. In fact, in some sense, Paul didn't win. Look at the results.

[29 : 34] So we did the problem. We did the resolution. Here's the result. We'll do this quickly. There was an immediate term and a long-term result. In the short term, things turned out very badly. Turned into a riot.

Paul got dragged. He got misunderstood for bringing Trophimus into the temple. He got dragged out of the temple. This was a public mob. This was a lynching. They were going after Paul.

They dragged him out. Thankfully, the guards came out and brought Paul into the barracks. But this was, you know, lest you think we live in a unique age, this is cancel culture.

This is cancel culture by violence, you know? We don't like what he's saying. He's our opponent. He's doing damage to us. We're going after him. You know, the crowds, look, the crowds, if you follow the crowds, the crowds, the crowds hate nuance.

The crowds, they hate, the movement of the crowds, they hate humility. They hate forbearing with one another in love. They hate, they hate humble Christianity.

[30 : 38] You know, it is okay if Christians do not win the culture war. This, this world will continue to move on its axis if Christians do not win the culture war.

James and Paul were not worried if they lost in the short run because they knew the outcome of the long run. Short run, bad for Paul, did not work out well.

Painful, in fact, but the long run was secure. Look at this. This meeting, this, this thing right here fits directly into what Jesus proclaimed at the very beginning of Acts, right before Pentecost.

You know what Jesus said? You, you church will be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And how is that going to happen?

Well, it's going to happen by Paul going on these nice missionary journeys, but it's also going to happen through this moment because this is the moment Paul gets arrested. This is the moment that the rest of the book of Acts is Paul dealing with being in Roman custody and you know where he's going to end up?

[31 : 47] Rome. He's going to end up in the very seat of Roman power, of social power. He's on his way. The short term was ugly, but the long term, Paul and James had the vision for where God was going to take the church, not because of their own giftedness, but because they trusted that God would take the church where he said he was going to take it.

I'll take your breath. God was going to take the church where he wanted it to go. You see what they were able to do because they trusted in where God was taking the church and what God was doing in this world.

They were able to be people who had a gentle spirit, who honored others in the way that they dealt with those they disagreed with. They were able to have unity and liberty and act with charity and they did not have to control all the outcomes.

Natalie and I, when we were kind of younger, Mary, this was years ago, we had a friend and she was making some poor decisions and I think we were right in diagnosing what was going on, but we decided that a confrontation was what was necessary.

And so we confronted and it did not go well. And it was, I'm not sure our relationship with this person has ever really recovered.

[33 : 19] And as I look back on it, we were right in what we thought. We weren't wrong. And it's possible that a confrontation was necessary and it might have gone that way in however we had done it.

It might just have gone bad and sometimes that happens. I'm not saying we shouldn't confront things. But I know that in Natalie in my heart, we saw the outcome we wanted for our friend.

We were committed to our vision for her life. We wanted to control and we were not okay that she wanted to do something different.

And that was fundamentally problematic. See, we didn't have the vision that actually God might be at work in this person in ways that we don't totally understand.

You know, in whatever conflicts you have right now, maybe it's your spouse. Maybe your spouse is not what you want them to be. Maybe it's your child. Maybe it's a boss. Maybe it's just all the online chatter out there that you might be called to say something in that that might provide conflict.

[34 : 33] I'm not saying just be nice. But I am saying that if you give up your gentle spirit, if you do not honor that person for who they are, and if you have to win the argument in order to be faithful, you're not following God's ways in the conflict.

Because Jesus has already come. God has already secured the outcomes. And our job is to simply submit to Him in the ways that He's given to us.

And when we do that, what we find is that we have the opportunity for grace. We have the opportunity for charity. We have the opportunity for that grace to build up our unity together.

And that grace is the only thing that will empower us on our mission. It's the only thing. We will not achieve our mission from God just by being right.

just by yelling louder, just by making people get in line with us. We will only succeed as grace becomes the forefront of how we live.

[35 : 47] Amen. May that be true of us as a church. May it be true of us. Let me pray. Father, would you make that true of us as your people that we might be full of grace and mercy when we go forward.

would you send your spirit to make us gentle, to help us to honor and to make us to be okay if we don't win with our outcomes. Father, be with us as we do that in Christ's name.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.