

A Jew to the Jews

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[0:00] Please turn your Bibles back to Acts 21 as we continue our series through the book of Acts. I think I've mentioned John Wesley before, but let me tell you again about John Wesley and George Whitefield.

So, these two people, I think, exemplify a humble heart of service to God and others. Both of them lived for the sake of the gospel.

They often preached the gospel up to a dozen times a week. They both gave away a lot of their money towards the service of others.

So, I've mentioned before that John Wesley lived practically without savings, giving away up to 80% of his annual income towards charities.

George Whitefield also gave away most of his income to charities, among which was an orphanage in Georgia.

[1:04] And they also often showed humility in their service. There was very little space for their own ego in their ministries. So, they were formerly best friends with each other, but their relationship got broken by their theological disagreement around the topic of predestination.

But it's recorded that when George Whitefield was asked by one of his followers, Do you think we shall see Mr. Wesley in heaven? And when Whitefield replied, I'm afraid not, for he will be so near the eternal throne, and we at such a distance shall hardly get sight of him.

And when Whitefield died, Wesley in turn preached at his funeral, calling him a blessed instrument in God's hand.

Their lives were exemplary in terms of showing humble hearts of service.

But their lives of service were not perfect. In the service of others, they often abandoned their wives, which is not exemplary. There's a story of George Whitefield taking his wife to America to preach the gospel, and then he took a ship back to England for getting his wife there.

[2:35] That's not exemplary. They were not perfect, but we can see that they had humble hearts of service towards God and others.

And we see the same humble hearts of service in our Lord Jesus, and we see the same humble hearts of service in the Apostle Paul, especially in our passage today.

So, we read in verse 17, Now, we need to read this in the context of last week's passage.

Paul has been told by the Holy Spirit that he would be captured in Jerusalem. He would be imprisoned in Jerusalem. And I don't know about you. If I knew that I'd be thrown into prison, I would probably do some preparation.

Sending letters to my loved ones. Perhaps spending a week indoors, preparing myself before going out to be captured. Eating some chicken and chips for the last time.

- [3 : 51] But we see here Paul caring for nothing except the gospel. Because in verse 18, the very next day, he went out and saw the church leaders to report to them about his work of the gospel.
- And pay attention to how he did it in verse 19. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God, not Paul, what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.
- We see here the first instance of Paul's humble heart of service towards God. There's very little space for his own achievement or selfish ambition.
- He did not report his own work. He reported among the Gentiles what God had done. I've been reading this book, *The Way of the Dragon* or *The Way of the Lamb*.
- Which basically compares the humble way of the Lamb, that is, Jesus Christ, which involves laying down power to make way for God's glory.
- [5 : 05] And compares that to the way of the dragon, that is, Satan. And the book talks about how a lot of Christians, sadly, are often attracted to and use power for the sake of boosting their own ego.
- Many parts of the church have been influenced by the world to think that success in ministry is because of our own charisma or our hard work, diligence, or our strategy.
- And they follow pastors who have those things. Hard work, charisma, strategy. Now, it's not a bad thing to use God-given gifts of charisma or hard work or ability to strategize for ministry.
- It's not a bad thing. But if those things make us think that we're powerful without God, then that's satanic influence.
- Paul here leaves no space for his own credit or power or achievement. It's all what God has done through him.
- [6 : 17] And because of that, in verse 20, when they heard this, they praised God. Not Paul. Not, Paul, you've done such a good job.
- Paul, you've been given a lot of your time. Thank you for that. No, they praised God. Not Paul, not his rhetoric ability, not his hard work, but God and him alone.
- What motivates us to do ministry? Is it to be seen? Or is it to serve God and others?
- Are we only willing to serve in public ministries and in ministries where we can feel great and competent? Or are we also willing to serve in less visible places, doing things that we are not confident in doing?
- Because we know that God will equip and empower us, and when he does, the glory comes back to him and him alone. You know, like what Paul says, God's power is made perfect in our weakness.
- [7 : 35] Several years ago, when I first felt that God was calling me into ministry, my mom was very much opposed to the idea.
- She said, but you don't have the gifts. You can't talk in public, and you're not a people person. And I said, yes, mom, I agree. I was very bad in public speaking.
- I would often stutter. I still do sometimes. My hands still shake before every sermon. I'm not a people person, so pastoral ministry doesn't come naturally to me.
- But when God calls, he equips, because his calling is not for our glory, but for his and his alone. And so now, every time I get encouragement from people who say that they've been blessed by my ministry and my preaching, I know that it's not me.
- It's God's work 100%. I'm just a socially awkward man who shakes and stutters in public and who breaks the printer on a Sunday morning.
- [8 : 48] I encourage and challenge you to serve others in areas that you might be confident in.

Because perhaps, that's where God's glory shines the most. And then you can testify, like Paul in this text, how God, not you, God has been working through you.

So that's what Paul did. And upon hearing the news about what God had been doing among the Gentiles, the Jerusalem church leaders responded.

In verse, still verse 20. When they heard this, they praised God and they said to Paul, you see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed and all of them are zealous for the law.

So God had been working not only among the Gentiles, but also among the Jews in Jerusalem. Thousands have believed and they're zealous for the law.

[9 : 58] Now, Jews observing the Old Testament law is not a bad thing. Previously in chapter 16, we have seen Paul encouraging Timothy to be circumcised.

A problem arose, however, in verse 21. These Jews have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, from the law, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs.

So what's happening here? Well, we know in verse 25, if we just glance that the leaders reiterated the decision of the Jerusalem Council back in chapter 15, outlining that Gentile believers don't have to follow the law in order to be saved.

They only need to avoid meat sacrifice to idols, from blood, from strangled meat, and from sexual immorality, which were temple worship activities.

In other words, no, we're not going back to Jerusalem Council. This is not a gospel issue. The Gentiles, we only insist that the Gentiles must not go to the temple and participate in idol worship, but they're not expected to follow the law.

[11 : 25] They are saved by grace through faith. And same with the Jews. In chapter 15, it's decided that the Jews are also saved by grace through faith, not by the law.

And so, it appears that the problem here was not a gospel issue. They did not insist that the law was necessary for salvation, but it's a cultural one.

The Jews did not insist that the law was necessary for salvation, but they still wanted to follow the law because it's cultural. They had been doing it for thousands of years.

And they were annoyed because they thought that Paul was spreading the news that to be a Christian was to be non-Jewish, to live their Jewish culture and customs.

Perhaps it's like today if someone says that to be a Christian, a Chinese person, for example, had to abandon their Chinese culture and customs.

[12 : 30] But that's not true. Paul never said that. Following Jesus doesn't make us without culture. even though we are all Christians, we are still Australian Christians, Anglo-Christians, Chinese Christians, Indonesian Christians, Persian Christians.

And as long as our cultural customs are not idol worship, you know, like what the Jerusalem Council says, and they're not against the gospel, we are free to do them.

Paul himself says in 1 Corinthians, was a man already circumcised when he was called to be a Christian? He should not become uncircumcised.

Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. We are free to do our cultural customs and or not to do them because they are worth nothing for our salvation.

And so this accusation against Paul was untrue. He never said that. And so the elders suggested to Paul that he should prove to the Jews that this accusation was not true in verse 22 to 24.

[13:54] What shall we do then? They will certainly hear that you have come and so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men join in their purification rights and pay their expenses so that they can have their heads shaved.

Then everyone will know there is no truth in this report about you but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. So there were some Jewish Christians in their midst in the Jerusalem church who had made the Nazarite vow.

Now this was a form of self-dedication according to the law. Remember a couple of weeks ago we mentioned we talked about dedication. This was one of the forms and as a part of the vow they had to do certain things like not drinking wine and not cutting their heads so they had to let their heads grow grow long.

And at the end of the vow period they had to shave their heads to indicate that the vow is over and they had to make some offerings bulls or sheep or goats and they had to go to the temple to do some purification rites to be cleansed.

And so these were extremely zealous Jews who also had become Christians. And the elder suggested that Paul join them in doing those rituals and also paying for their sacrifices.

[15:42] Now of course Paul had not made a Nazarite vow and so the purification rite that he would do was not a part of the Nazarite ritual. So why did he need to be purified?

Well, it was probably a ritual to cleanse himself because he had been traveling in Gentile territories which the Jews considered to be ritually unclean or if you remember from the previous chapter because he had touched the corpse of Eutychus which was also considered to be ritually unclean.

So how did Paul respond to the elders suggestion? In verse 26 The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them.

Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them. He did it all on the next day.

Why would Paul do this? He had every right to say no. In his letters to the Galatians or to the Romans or to the Corinthians he had been going on and on about the futility of the Old Testament law.

[17:01] And here he had every right to stand firm and fight for the implication of the gospel that liberates. Which was important especially considering that the practice of ritual purification could be taken as anti-gospel.

We don't need to be purified again because the blood of Christ is sufficient to purify us. And so by partaking in the rites it could have been taken as anti-gospel.

So why did Paul not fight for the right theology here? Why did he not stand up for his right to say no? God will be here.

I think again we see Paul's humble heart of service. This time not towards God but towards others. Again what Paul's facing is not a gospel issue.

The leaders have been clear that we don't say that salvation is according to the law. Salvation is by grace through faith. This was a cultural issue and Paul was happy to be a Jew for the Jews and a Gentile for the Gentiles.

[18:15] As he says in 1 Corinthians 9, Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible.

To the Jews I became like a Jew to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law though I myself am not under the law so as to win those under the law.

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law, though I am not free from God's law but I am under Christ's law so as to win those not having the law.

To the weak I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings.

We see in this passage the application of that, don't we? Paul obeyed the elders and he put himself under the law for the sake of love and service.

[19:20] Again, here we see little space for Paul's personal ego or opinion. Contrary to how we perceive Paul in the rest of the book of Acts or from his letters, you know, the Paul who's opinionated, the Paul who stands up for the right gospel theology.

Here, Paul doesn't even say anything. He humbled himself for the sake of serving his fellow Jewish Christians. And by doing that, Paul was actually fighting for the gospel.

He was embodying the gospel. Because in the gospel, the Son of God became a human like one of us to humbly serve us. Jesus rules not through lording his power over us, but by serving us.

He defeated his enemies not by exerting his power, but by surrendering to the cross. Here, too, Paul became like one of the Nazarites to humbly serve the Jews instead of overpowering them with his theological arguments.

he served them. I think this is one of the things that we can imitate from Paul. Because we are servants too.

[20:48] Each one of us is a servant because our king is a servant king. So have we lived our lives in the humble service of others? Instead of looking for various ways to disagree and have conflicts, let's find various ways to love and serve.

Of course, without compromising with the gospel or with idolatry, as Paul has shown. This is not easy to do.

It's not easy for me either. Because our hearts scream when we lose our rights in the service of others. Our hearts want us to be gods, not servants.

Christians. So we're not comfortable laying down our rights to be right. We often think that we are the right ones, the correct ones.

Our cultural practices, our norms, our version of Christianity are better than others. And we must overpower the others with our theological arguments every single time and win them every single time.

[21:58] But that's not what Paul did. Even though he did fight for the gospel in his letters, he also served others with love by becoming weak for the weak, becoming like them first before bringing them along with him to maturity with Christ.

This is the way of the Lamb. So why don't we do that with each other? Or at least learn to do that with each other?

To humbly serve one another in love instead of boosting our own ego. And so here in this text we see Paul's humble heart of service towards God and towards others.

there's very little space for himself. Now to end we might ask here whether Paul's decision was the right one.

Sure the principle of humbly serving in love is something to emulate but is the application right? Was this the right time and place for Paul to do this?

[23:22] Or would it have been more prudent for him to say no to the elder's suggestion? Well the text doesn't say the text doesn't commend or criticize his decision and perhaps that's a good thing.

So we don't just apply what Paul did here straight away to every cross cultural situation that we encounter. We have to struggle too.

And using wisdom and prayers we have to evaluate every situation and apply the principle of humble service differently. And so the text doesn't commend or criticize Paul's decision.

What the text does say is the result of Paul's decision. In verse 27 because of Paul's decision to go to the temple the Jewish authorities were able to capture him.

Now this seems like an indication that maybe what Paul did was a mistake. But isn't this what God had planned for him all along?

[24 : 35] That he would be captured in Jerusalem? And if we fast forward in the story, this was the start of Paul's journey to bring the gospel to Rome, which was the center of the known world at the time and thus fulfilling what Jesus said in chapter 1, that the Christians would be his witnesses from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth.

So whether or not Paul's decision was a mistake, from the human perspective, we don't know. The text doesn't say. Maybe it was. But from the perspective of God's sovereignty, it doesn't matter.

God's purpose is fulfilled in Paul. It's all about God. God's the one who brought the Gentiles to himself.

God's the one who brought the Jews to himself. And God's the one who brings the gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth. Using Paul's decision here. Paul was just being faithful in a way that he knew best.

And so from this, I think we can have some peace of mind. Because the work of the gospel is complex. Life of service and love is not easy.

[25 : 56] And often when we deal with people of different cultures or different religious backgrounds or different theological backgrounds, we might be a bit anxious. Is it a good idea to say that?

Is it a good idea to do this? Should I strongly assert what I think is the correct theology here, in this place or should I become weak for the weak and then wait for a later opportunity?

It can be a bit scary. But we can rest assured that we are not called to be successful every single time. We are called to be faithful.

Like Paul, we are called to be faithful to the work of the gospel and faithful to life of humble service to God and to others.

And God is the one who will make sure that his kingdom will spread and grow and be successful. It's all about God, not us, not our rhetoric, not our cultural wisdom, just him and him alone.

[27 : 08] God and that is the heart of the humble heart of service. Let's pray. Father, thank you that you are sovereign, you are the king of the world, and we are just your tools.

So help us, Lord, to be faithful to the gospel and faithful to the life of humble service towards you and towards others. Lord, in our work of service, let us decrease so that you may increase.

All glory belongs to you. In the name of Jesus, our humble servant king, we pray. Amen.