

Brilliant Sermon; Bad Response

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[0 : 00] Well, for a short time this evening, let's turn to Acts 24, chapter 24 in the book of Acts, and from verse 24.

After some days, Felix came with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity, I will summon you.

There are some sermons mentioned in the Bible that you wish you had heard, or that you wish had been recorded even in the pages of Scripture itself.

We alluded to one during our studies in Luke some time ago, when you come to chapter 24, and you find there written that Jesus, in divulging to the disciples on the way to Emmaus, beginning with Moses and the Psalms and the prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

What a sermon that would have been. What a privilege to have listened to that, as Jesus himself, expounded from the Old Testament Scriptures those things in which he himself was found.

[1 : 32] And so also you find the same idea here. The same thing comes to mind when you stand here and read of what happened on that occasion, when Felix, the governor, sent for Paul, and when you read here that Paul, as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, preached the gospel to this Roman governor.

It's a sermon you would have loved to have heard. Just imagine listening to the Apostle Paul as he preached about these issues.

As he expounded on faith in Christ Jesus and then, in a more detailed way, broke it down into these three headings.

Righteousness, self-control, judgment to come. And yet the sermon had little impact, lastingly, on its hearer.

Felix certainly, as we'll see, for a short time even trembled. But it didn't change his life. He didn't go away from this a new man.

[2 : 51] And even after two years, successively meeting with Paul and hearing him, he still didn't change his ways. Even listening to such a great preacher as the Apostle Paul, or even the greater preaching of Christ himself, it's not itself a guarantee that lives will be changed.

I want to look at this passage. It's a fascinating passage in many ways. And we'll look at the sermon's content, because, as we say, there's three points to Paul's sermon.

And then we'll look at his method of delivery, how the sermon was delivered to Felix. There'll be others listening as well, but the focus of the passage is really on Felix, how Paul delivered this message to him, his method of delivery.

And that's in the word reasoned, as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and coming judgment. And thirdly, we'll look at the hearer's response.

How Felix, first of all, was alarmed, and then how he remained unchanged, despite the fact that he was alarmed.

[4 : 08] Look at, first of all, the sermon that Paul preached. It's a fascinating passage, this in many ways, because it begins, really, with an emphasis on Paul being a prisoner, and Paul being accused as a prisoner by the Jews, and by their hired lawyer, Tertullus, who had come to present the case against Paul to the court.

It begins with that emphasis on Paul being the prisoner. And yet, as Paul, the prisoner, comes by invitation of Felix to preach to him, you end the chapter, and who is the prisoner?

Well, it's not Paul. Yes, he is, literally. But it's Felix who's the prisoner. He's the prisoner of the truth of God that's been delivered to him. He's been caught up in the very tight meshes of the gospel.

And he just throws it off and goes his way. But he's still a prisoner to conscience from what he heard from the apostles. He, first of all, spoke to him as he began speaking to Felix.

He said, you see, there in verse 24, he heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And it's interesting that it says that there, and then goes on to speak about these three points.

[5 : 32] Because that tells us that faith in Christ Jesus can never be detached from righteousness and self-control and the judgment to come.

The gospel, as it sets out the importance of faith in Christ Jesus, trusting in Christ for salvation, never suggests anywhere that all you need to do is give an intellectual assent to the message of faith in Christ Jesus, that you just intellectually believe a message and other things in your life are left basically as they were.

Now, Paul is saying, faith in Christ Jesus, Felix, actually comes to include these details of righteousness and self-control and a judgment to come.

And these three points are related. Because this, first of all, righteousness is Paul beginning with the standard. The standard.

The standard that gives the measure to every other standard against which every other standard, especially of human behavior, has to be measured.

[6 : 43] Righteousness. It's one of the great words of the Bible. We have to open up that word to our children, to the succeeding generation, for their understanding of what it means, what it's about.

Because righteousness, while it has various sides to it in terms of its meaning in the scriptures, it is basically, it is first and foremost, the standard that you find in God himself.

It is God in his integrity. It is God in his perfection. It is God in his spotless holiness. It is God in terms of what the Bible says that in him is no darkness at all.

Righteousness, uprightness, holiness, perfection of thought, of speech, of action, of purpose. Wherever you look at whatever aspect of God you think of or has been revealed to you, it's always marked by righteousness.

By that perfection, by that standard that has no flaw in it at all. And you then move to righteousness in terms of your own life and my life.

[8 : 04] Because the God who himself is the standard in himself requires of those that he has created, that's all of us, that we be righteous.

When the Bible says be holy as God is holy, be holy because God is holy or as God is holy, that means be righteous.

Have the standard applied to yourself that you find first and foremost in God but that he then comes to require of all of us human beings.

That is where we began human life. God created Adam and Eve in righteousness, knowledge and holiness.

there was no flaw. They met the standard. They fitted the demands of God's law.

[9 : 07] There was no transgression. There was no falling short. There was no twistedness within. All the concepts that the Bible uses to describe sin were absent when God created man.

But then something happened. something dreadful, something drastic, something that has eternal repercussions.

We sinned against God. We broke his law. We attracted the penalty that he promised to a broken law. We came under the sentence of death.

We became subject to his wrath and to his condemnation. Did that remove the requirement to be righteous? No, it didn't.

Just because you and I are flawed and fallen human beings has not displaced the need to be righteous, has not displaced the command and the demand of God that we be righteous, that we be perfect in his presence, that we meet all the terms of his law, that we meet all his requirements in order to be perfectly acceptable with him.

[10 : 23] The fact that we cannot do it ourselves is no excuse because we brought that inability on ourselves. And that's where the wonder of God's provision in Christ Jesus comes so much to be central and important to human life.

What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh. That's Romans 8 as you know. It's telling us that now that we're fallen, now that we're sinful, now that we're corrupt, now that things are not what they were to begin with, and now that we cannot meet this law ourselves by doing what it demands, what did God do?

He sent his son into the world in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. Why?

so that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us. Isn't that amazing? You begin with a human being that cannot meet the terms of the law because they are fallen sinful creatures.

And God in seeing that does not simply say, well that's it, I'm now going to condemn them to a lost eternity, to hell forever. When he says this, by my grace I will make a way for them by which they will meet the terms of this law.

[11 : 51] I will send my son into the world to die that death of the cross where this broken law will be met by him in its penalty of death. And where his righteousness will be imputed to those who believe in him.

That's the core of the gospel. And that's God's way of bringing us to meet the righteousness of the law to be fulfilled in us.

We walk not after the flesh but after the spirit. Is there anything more amazing to you tonight than that God took the initiative in this?

That God actually himself saw to this in his grace? That God in his grace went so far as to do this for fallen sinners who brought this dilemma upon themselves.

Paul reasoned of righteousness. The righteousness, the perfection of God. I'm sure he would have brought it to human righteousness, the need to be righteous.

[13 : 03] And he was not dealing with a righteous man. And Paul knew that he was dealing with a man who was inherently unrighteous. a man who was really corrupt. Felix in history has gone down as somebody who was so prone to bribery, to corruption, to all the things by which he had reached himself.

He was formerly a slave. He had made his way up through the ranks. And yet deep down he still lived a debased life. He was here with his wife Drusilla.

He had actually in a corrupt way and a way that was sinful engineered that he would actually get it for himself. Though she wasn't his to begin with.

You know what I mean. He wasn't dealing with a man who was upright and Paul well knew that this was a specimen of humanity that really exemplified how corrupt a man could be as a fallen sinner.

What did he do? He spoke to him of righteousness. of God's standard. He didn't say well like Tertullus you see the difference.

[14 : 19] One of the fascinating things about the passage when Tertullus this hired lawyer for the Jews against Paul began his speech to Felix. He ingratiated himself with Felix.

He actually said there at the beginning of the chapter most excellent Felix. Reforms are being made for this nation by you. we know that in everywhere and in every way we accept us with all gratitude.

What a fraud! He was just buttering Felix up making him feel nice and big and important.

and when Paul came before him he spoke to him of righteousness of the standard of God. That's what he put to him as the first point in his sermon.

That's where we always begin or should begin with God's own standard and with God himself as the standard and with his law as the reflection of that standard as he has made it known to.

[15 : 27] Second point in the sermon self-control you see it moves logically as Paul preached here beginning with the standard now he's actually coming to think of behavior in relation to that standard and self-control again was something that Felix badly lacked.

He had the power yet the influence to use his authority to use his power to throw his power around to get things even by corrupt means but Paul was having none of letting him off the hook he actually preached secondly on self-control.

Now self-control is a very important word in the New Testament. We've come across it many times but we have to remind ourselves of it that it has that significant place in the teaching of the New Testament as to what a Christian life is about.

It's at the very core of a Christian life and a Christian way of life and Christian behavior. But it doesn't mean that it's not required of those who are not Christians. For example if you go to Galatians chapter 5 and verse 23 you'll find a list there of the various components of what it calls the fruit of the Spirit.

It's not fruits but fruit. And the fruit of the Spirit is made up of these several things that are mentioned. They all go together to make up the fruit of the Spirit.

[16 : 54] The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace. And then it comes to include self control. And when you go to Colossians chapter 3 and verse 5 and the verses following that, Colossians chapter 3 begins with the importance of looking to Christ, looking to what Christ has done, seeking those things that are above where Christ is.

For he says you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. That means you died spiritually, you died to a life of sin, you died to the dominance of sin.

Similar to Romans 6. Therefore he says put to death what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness, which is idolatry.

walk also not in anger or wrath or malice or slander, put all obscene talk out of your mouth. Do not lie one to another. What is he saying there?

He said live a self-controlled life. Now you have to put that against the emphasis of our age, of our generation.

[18 : 13] self-control because to many people out there self-control is not what the Bible means by self-control. Self-control to many people out there means being in charge of your own life to do pretty much as you please morally and in terms of behavior.

Apart from going to extremes like committing murder or something like that but other things well taking somebody else's wife that's not a problem if it's fine for you, if it works for you both, if things are not as they should be anyway what's the problem?

Same-sex relationships, the death of the unborn, taking the life of the aged and euthanasia, you take God out of your reckoning, out of your calculations, why shouldn't these things be done?

If the world is entirely humanistic, then it's human values that dictate how human beings should live and when human beings make up their own rules, well that's what you get.

You don't expect anything less than that, anything different to that. Self-control to many people is just having the freedom to live as you choose, to actually have things arranged in your life the way it seems right to you, and how dare anybody, especially these fundamental Christians, to tell you how to act differently and that you should live differently.

[19 : 35] But self-control in the biblical sense is very different. self-control is Jesus saying if anyone sees a woman and lusts after her without ever committing anything physical, just the very sight of it and the very thought of it, you have committed sin.

Self-control in Jesus' teaching is very much to do with abstinence, with keeping yourself back from something that in your heart of hearts as a sinner you would want to do, but that you know God warns you against doing.

And that's why this man is hearing all about self-control. It's something that the Christian certainly is expected of the Christian because in these passages that we read that we mentioned there in Colossians and in Galatians as well, always in these passages it's a matter of Paul saying this is what is true of you as Christians and therefore this is what's expected of you in behavior.

It's a response to the grace of God. It's a response in thankful acceptance of what God has done that you live a holy life.

That's entirely different to the self-control of the world which just wants to think of control as doing it my way. and Felix is confronted with a need for abstinence for keeping himself back from things that in his conscience he might know are wrong but with the power he has can't carry them out freely.

[21 : 29] we have to pray friends for a return to the biblical idea of self-control.

Our children and young people are facing massive pressure that their lives would be lived as they see fit or as humanists will tell them.

And what do you end up with? You end up with a massive increase in teenage pregnancies in sexually transmitted diseases among young people.

Why? Because we have chosen not to accept God's way. What's wrong with abstinence?

With self-control? It's old-fashioned. it's Victorian. It's back to the days of the apostles.

[22 : 36] Few people seem to realize that it is right. That it is God's requirement. That it belongs to our righteous life.

He reasoned of righteousness, self-control, and then of the coming judgment. That too is logically related to the previous two points in the sermon.

He begins with the standard. He moves from the standard to human behavior in relation to that standard, focusing on self-control. He then moves thirdly to where every human being must give an answer for how they have lived in relation to that standard, the coming judgment.

And it's quite clear from the way that the text states it there that what Paul was actually preaching to Felix was all about the final judgment, the coming of Christ, the judgment of the world by the Lord Jesus Christ.

In other words, Paul was taking the governor to the governor. He was taking Felix in all his behavior before the final tribunal.

[23 : 53] Here was Felix presiding over this court case. And Paul is saying to him, look Felix, this is nothing compared to what you have to face yet, and you will not be in charge.

You will not actually be dictating who says what, and what the verdict will be. You'll be in trial. You'll be under charge. And the Lord Jesus Christ will be your governor.

That's the sermon. The three points. Logically arranged, the one leading to the next, until he finishes with this emphasis on the judgment to come.

But how did he deliver it? I mentioned this word reasoned. As he reasoned about righteousness self-control and coming judgment.

You see, Paul didn't just open his mouth and throw great lumps of teaching at this man. He didn't actually just come to him without thinking of how he was going to put things and how he was going to tie things together in the sermon that he preached.

[25 : 04] He didn't just open his mouth without having made prior preparation as to what he was going to say to this man. He did it carefully. He did it with precision. And especially he did it in a way that reasoned with Felix.

What does that actually tell you? It tells you that the truth of God is something that comes to reason its way into your mind. The truth of God is itself designed by God to fit with what God has given to you as a human being, as a mind, as a reason.

You are the only being in God's creation that can be reasoned with. That's why human beings in the Bible are clearly above the rest of the creation in terms of status and in terms of ability, in terms even of this quality of reason.

Paul reasoned of these three points. He presented them to the mind of Felix, to the conscience of Felix, to the understanding of Felix.

you cannot reason. We are very used to the whole idea of evolution, aren't we?

[26 : 28] And that human life itself developed from very simple beginnings and that we came through a whole gradation over millions and millions even billions of years, a whole series of gradations upwards until we end up with what you have now, sophisticated, thinking, able human beings.

You can't reason with an ape. You can't reason with a cow. You can't even reason with the friendliest dog. You can train them.

They can come to be trained in a remarkable way. They can do remarkable things for you once you train them, but you cannot reason with them. They don't have the capacity of reason.

Not even the highest of primates, the highest of monkeys or apes or that kind of animal. You can't reason with them.

They don't have the ability to reason, to think in a way a human being does. What is important with this is that the gospel has to be presented in a way that reasons with your mind and with my mind.

[27 : 45] That's what Paul is actually doing. He reasoned about righteousness. He made up arguments that would actually get to the mind of Felix, to the conscience of Felix. This is really in line very much with the scripture itself.

God doesn't just throw great lumps of theology at you and say, now there you are, go and sort that out for yourself, go and try and make something of that yourself. God reasons with you through the gospel.

God reasoned with Felix through Paul. God is reasoning with you through the preaching of the gospel. Through your reading of God's word, you're using your reason as you actually read this word, as you listen to it preach.

What are you doing tonight? What were you doing when you sang the psalms? What were you doing when you were listening and involving yourself in prayer, as I led in prayer?

What are you doing now as you're listening to the gospel expounded? You're reasoning, you're using your thinking, your mind is being engaged, your conscience is being activated.

[28 : 51] God and the nature of God's truth as it's designed for your mind is reasoning with you. You know, we don't believe that Felix was ever saved.

Certainly no evidence here in the passage that he was saved. And one of the worst things for a Felix in a lost eternity will be the fact that he was reasoned with and still was lost.

Felix in eternity will forever regret God that he knew what it was to be reasoned with by Paul. God was reasoning with him through the preaching of the apostle and this man if he's lost us we understand forever will spend eternity regretting and saying oh why?

Why didn't I give heed when I was being reasoned with by the apostle Paul? Paul and everyone in here who loses their soul who actually comes to be lost and I hope none of you is.

But if you are this will be one of the worst things of your eternity that you will regret forever that you were reasoned with by God that the truth of God reasoned its way into your mind that your mind was engaged under the gospel to think about the things of God.

[30 : 26] Think about that. Think about how critical that is. Think. Think and think again.

he reasoned of righteousness and self control and coming judgment. You know the fact that our mind is damaged by sin and that's very obvious to us.

If you think of your mind as a kind of receiver for spiritual signals from the truth of God from the God of truth. Just because it's damaged doesn't mean it's no longer a mind.

Doesn't mean it's no longer capable of receiving. Tonight you and I are receiving. Receiving the truth. It's reasoning its way into our minds.

And as you think on it and reflect on it. God is now as he was with Felix saying now I've reasoned with you. What are you going to do about it?

[31 : 32] How are you going to respond? What's your reaction? What are you going to make of it? Let's see what he made of it. This hearer's response. First of all he was alarmed.

As Paul reasoned Felix was alarmed and that word alarmed is actually a bit too mild because the word in the Greek text originally means he was terrified.

This wasn't just something that sent a little shiver up his spine and then it was all over. this was a man who was quaking in his Roman sandals. He was absolutely terrified.

That's what the word means. This really got through to his conscience. This really got through to his deepest soul. And as he trembled there at the prospect of judgment and so much short of the standard that Paul was setting before him in self-control and righteousness Felix was terrified.

Have you ever felt a pang of terror under the gospel? Have you ever thought really what it's like to stand on the edge of hell and look in and say I don't want to be there?

[32 : 52] Well Felix did. He experienced that. He was on the brink. He was terrified. What did he do with it?

Well he dismissed it. He said to Paul go away for the present. What he was doing of course was sending his convictions away. Sending this thing that had caused his fear away.

If he sent Paul the preacher away he was sending the message away and therefore he was free of this terrible feeling that he had that made him terrified. and it happens all the time.

People have left this building many times. Having been stirred under the gospel and before they've reached the car park it's been dismissed.

It's been put away. eased the conscience. Especially when he now says that when I have an opportunity I will send for you again.

[34 : 05] He eased his conscience. He knew he was sending Paul away because it was troubling him what he was saying. So he pacified his conscience by saying but I will hear you again Paul.

There will be another occasion when I have a more convenient moment I'll send for you. And he did. That didn't make any difference. Friends a better opportunity than when you're feeling under God's truth the need to be saved.

A better opportunity doesn't exist. It's a delusion. Felix was deluding himself by persuading himself I'll be more ready for it the next time.

Well the next time came and the next time and the next time and for two years it continued. And still Felix remained the Felix of old.

Nothing changed. He was alarmed and yet he dismissed that and pacified his conscience with a promise for the future.

[35 : 19] The second thing in his response as he remained unchanged. You can see here he sent for Paul and over two years elapsed before he was replaced by Porcius Festus.

But you can see something else there. He hoped that money would be given him by Paul so he sent for him often and conversed. There's a bit of a mixture there.

there's an element there certainly of a spiritual or a religious conviction or a sense of religious need. But burying that and overwhelming that is Felix's greed.

Felix's sinful appetite for money. and that completely obliterated any sense of need that he had.

You can put it this way. if there was any religious interest as there seemed to have been. Certainly there was when he was alarmed.

[36 : 25] Any religious interest he had was overcome by self interest. He was more concerned about receiving a bribe than he was about receiving Christ.

we may think that promising ourselves opportunities in the future will make it more likely that we'll be saved.

Well it doesn't really work like that. Everything is possible of course for God. But if you take this passage seriously and you're here tonight and you're not yet saved and you have not yet received or accepted Christ or come out on his side or taken whatever step the Lord is laying on your heart to take.

Every refusal you can picture something like this. If you take each refusal as just a little thin strand of the thinnest thread something like a strand of silk you can say that's easy enough broken I'll have another chance.

But if you take the next chance to be another strand and you put it along with the first one and then the third one and then the fourth one and so it goes on before you know it you have a cord the thickness of your finger made up of all these strands of opportunity and then you can't break it.

[37 : 58] you have bound your soul by constant refusals that's how it works here is a man who tells you so he had all of these opportunities and hearings for two years didn't make any difference don't promise yourself you'll do it one day you'll do it tomorrow you'll do it next Sunday even if you see next Sunday will it be a better opportunity than now no the road called tomorrow invariably leads to the town called never tomorrow soon where does it lead to most often it leads to never saying

I'll do it tomorrow is really saying I'm likely never to do it think of Felix think of what the scripture says about him think of what the Lord is reasoning with you here and now as you think act act positively act now act in your saving interest act for eternity oh gracious Lord we thank you for the opportunities you give us we thank thee for the richness that comes to us in the gospel and with every opportunity that you appeal to us to go on trusting in you or to put our trust in you Lord we pray that you would enable us to heed all that we read of in your own word and hear of from your word in the way in which you urge us to convince us that today is your time and not tomorrow so that today if we hear your voice that we harden not our hearts oh Lord hear us we pray for

Christ amen