

Ambassadors for all people

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. My name is James, and it is good to be with you today. Brand ambassadors and now social media influencers have the tough job of trying to convince me and you to buy a product that they're selling. They often do this by showing that they love it and they use it, and we should too. When I think of the actor George Clooney, and I don't very often, but when I do, I just picture him with an espresso machine and a tiny cup of coffee in hand. You should be able to see him on screen. I fully expect that if I ever went to George Clooney's house, he would welcome me with a fresh espresso, and I'd walk in, and there'd just be a wall of coffee pods, and he'd have Nespresso machines, and he'd just be giving them out at his front door.

Well, product ambassadors need to have authenticity to the product or the country that they represent. I would feel let down by this personal friend of mine, George Clooney, by this actor in TV with all of these ads. I would feel let down if I found out that he doesn't actually drink coffee. You've been lying to us for years. There was a Brazilian football player named Ronaldinho, and he was an ambassador for Coca-Cola, and he was being paid a million dollars a year to be a brand ambassador. That was until he turned up at a press conference drinking Pepsi.

Gasp! I hear you saying. Here I was thinking that if I drank Coke like Ronaldinho, I could play football like Ronaldinho, and now all my hopes and dreams have been dashed. And Coke quickly dropped him to the curb.

When an ambassador is seen to be untrustworthy, it makes us reconsider the product that we're selling. All Christians are ambassadors. Not ambassadors for a product or a country, but for a person, for Jesus. We represent Jesus to the world, to our families, to our friends. We represent him online with what we post on social media. Are we aware of the influence we have on other people's lives to how they view Jesus? This is really daunting. The way we live our lives actually influences how other people see Jesus. Will the way we represent Jesus encourage people to check him out, or will we send them away from him? What kind of ambassadors are we? Today, we're continuing in our series in Acts, and we're in Acts 25, and Paul is on trial. And in this situation, he is very much like a brand ambassador. He is standing in the place of Jesus as his ambassador. And Acts 25 is going to show us what happens when an ambassador is authentic, when he represents truly the one he is an ambassador for, and the influence that comes from being a gospel ambassador. The challenge for us today will be to understand what our lives look like, and to understand what we actually look like as ambassadors, so that we can use our influence so people can see Jesus. There'll be two points this morning. First of all, that we are gospel ambassadors, and secondly, the influence of ambassadors. So as we have a look at this part of the Bible, let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, and for this part of the Bible, reminding us that Paul was an ambassador for you. Help us, as we consider what our lives are like, to be aware of how people see Jesus in our lives, so that they would get to see him all the more clearly, Lord. Amen. First of all today, gospel ambassadors. At the start of chapter 25, we meet some new characters. First of all, we meet a new governor, Festus. He has come in and replaced Felix. The Jews were under the control of the Romans, and this region was very difficult to keep peaceful. And so when

Festus became governor, one of the first things he did was go to Jerusalem. He'd only been in charge for three days when he went to Jerusalem, because he goes there, because this region has the chance of boiling over and having a lot of problems. So Festus, a high-ranking Roman official, is sent, and he goes to this volatile area. And he immediately seeks to build relationships with the key movers and shakers, and that's the Jewish leaders. He wants to bring peace and law and order, and the Jewish leaders, they bring their most pressing issue to him, Paul. Have a look with me at verse 3. This is the Jewish leaders. They requested Festus as a favor to them to have Paul

transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. Come on, Festus, the Jewish leaders are saying, you've become our new ruler. Look, we'll follow you. We'll listen to you. Just do us this little favor.

[5 : 51] Bring Paul back to us. Let's try, let's put him on trial up here in Jerusalem. Do a little favor. You scratch our back. We'll scratch your back. But Festus needs to emphasize that he is the one who's in control.

If you want to put this man on trial, come down to Caesarea where he is, and then you can bring your charges against him. And so the Jews come, and they bring their charges against Paul. And verse 7 says that they couldn't prove them. They actually had no evidence. They're trying to convince Festus because Festus' word is the law here. The Jewish leaders try and bring every accusation against Paul to win Festus over. But they couldn't get anything to stick. The Roman judicial process is actually working in Paul's favor here because you can't just bring baseless claims against a Roman. You actually need to have evidence. And so it's most likely that the Jewish leaders are arguing at this point that Paul has brought a Gentile person into the Jewish temple, that he was blaspheming against their God, and that he was claiming that there was another ruler, Jesus, that he was following, not Caesar.

But again, for this, they didn't have any proof. In this situation, God is using Paul's Roman identity to protect him. And Paul briefly gets a chance to defend himself and share his side of the story. Have a look with me. Verse 8. Paul said, I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law, or against the temple, or against Caesar. Really simply, he says, I'm innocent. The Jews have attacked and slandered him with everything they've got. They knew they had to just make it more than just a case of difference of theology. They needed to make him out as someone who was against Caesar. This Paul guy, he's a rebel. He's a destabilizing power in Jerusalem. You know, Festus, if you want peace, you know, we really should get rid of this man. But they aren't able to convince Festus.

Paul is on trial in a very similar way to the trial that Jesus had. In that situation, the Jewish leaders claimed that they had no other leader than Caesar. Paul, like Jesus, is innocent on trial. Jesus stood condemned. But in that situation, Jesus didn't defend himself. He knew that his purpose was to die, to be the innocent lamb sacrificed for us instead of us. Paul's purpose is different. He knows already, as we've seen over the last couple of weeks, that God was going to take Paul to Rome to preach the gospel. He was going to spread it even to rulers. And so when Paul defends his innocence here, he's being an ambassador for Christ and also for Christians. He is defending the credibility of Jesus and the credibility of Christians. He is highlighting before rulers and powers the purity of Christians. Christians aren't rogues and rebels who are going to start wars and try and destabilize powers, but they are godly people. Paul isn't seeking to defend himself.

He is seeking to defend Christians. He's not trying to do this to get himself out of dying. Have a look with me. Verse 11, he says to Festus, if, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. He is defending the one he represents. But he even says to Festus, if you find me guilty, I won't fight you. You put me to death. Paul here is on trial just like Jesus.

[10 : 01] He's on trial as Jesus's ambassador. And this is why he argues for his own innocence, standing before the governor and the rulers just like Jesus did. They laid the same accusations against Jesus and Jesus was killed. But Paul, when faced with an unjust trial, shows the kind of ambassador that he is. He is authentic. He doesn't crumble and try and save his own life, but he is representing Jesus. Now, this situation would have been totally different if the Jewish leaders had any evidence. It's actually really interesting because they have no evidence. It actually makes Paul come across as a more reliable ambassador.

Festus and Agrippa, who we'll see in a moment, are actually more likely to listen to him because the Jewish accusations are so strong and yet there is no evidence for it.

Whether we like it or not, we too are ambassadors for Jesus. Every day I go out, every day you go out, whenever we do go out, we are ambassadors for whatever we're representing, whether it's the clothes that we wear, the sporting team that we wear, a hat, the country that we're from, but most importantly, the Lord that we follow. Paul would later write in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, he said, we are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

I wonder if when Paul wrote that later on, he's remembering this situation here, where he is being Christ's ambassador to these rulers, to kings and to queens.

Paul knew firsthand that God uses people like us to make his appeal to other people of the goodness of Jesus. It says something important about our role as ambassadors for Jesus. Just like

Paul, we'll be scrutinized. Our words and our actions will be sifted. When people are trying to figure out who this Jesus is, they won't first turn to him and investigate, they will look to us. They will look to Christians. If it is easy to dismiss Christians because they're unloving, they're harsh and they're judgmental. Well, it is easier to dismiss this Jesus. But when we are quick to forgive, when we are patient and loving and gentle, God's appeal for Jesus can be made through us. We are ambassadors.

[12 : 54] What kind of ambassador are you? What picture of Jesus would people get if they were around you? If you're not a Christian, have you been judging your entire view of Jesus on other people?

Now, Christians are ambassadors for Jesus. We do get to see a picture of Jesus through Christians, but small reminder, Christians are not Jesus. So let me encourage you, if you are still investigating this Jesus, go and investigate him directly. Go and read the book of Mark. Go and read part one of Acts, which is the book of Luke. Go and investigate this Jesus directly. That's our first point today, that we are gospel ambassadors and that we need to look like the one we represent so that people can see Jesus. Paul showed the importance of living out his faith as an authentic ambassador. There is wonderful benefit for us to having a saving faith in God, a faith that we live out, one that responds to God's love for others. I was so encouraged in this in the last couple of weeks as we've been raising money for Sam and Sally Lowe on the Gold Coast and their church plant. I have been so encouraged to see our church give so generously. It warmed my heart. It's been difficult in this season to see you, to feel connected to you because we are disconnected, but it was so encouraging to see how God is working on your heart to be generous because our God has been so generous to us. When we are good ambassadors for God, we look like him.

And it doesn't just benefit us, it does benefit others too. And it's our second point today, the influence of ambassadors.

After Paul met with Festus, he appealed to Caesar, as was his right as a Roman citizen. But before he would be taken to Rome, King Agrippa, the king of Judea, and his sister Bernice, it was actually a massive scandal in the Roman Empire at the time that Agrippa was living with his sister. You can investigate that on your own though.

[15 : 26] And these two come to hear from Paul after they meet with Festus. The impact of Paul's honest character, the fact that he had all of these accusations brought against him, but none of them would stick because there was no proof, meant that people would end up talking about Jesus.

Not just people that knew him, not just those in the churches that he ministered to, not just their friends and families, not even just people in the streets hearing about Jesus, but kings and rulers of nations would see Paul and hear about Jesus.

King Agrippa and Bernice came and they met with Festus and Festus explained this situation of Paul to them, seeking to get some understanding of the problem.

It was urgent. It was something that Festus was taking very seriously. But Festus was clearly confused by all this. You can almost hear a puzzled tone in Festus' words as he explains the situation.

Have a look with me at verse 18. When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus, whom Paul claimed was alive.

[16 : 54] It's a confusing set of theological debates outside of Festus' expertise. But Festus can see the heart of the matter. It's all about this man Jesus.

The Jews claimed that he was dead, but Paul claimed that he was alive. Paul claimed that he had been raised to life. This short conversation between Agrippa and Festus reveals two things.

First of all, the Romans were mostly ignorant of the gospel. They may have heard about it like Festus had, but they didn't understand what it meant.

The Jews saw Jesus and his followers as the leaders of the greatest scandal of their faith. But non-Jews, it just led to confusion. This is still true today.

Many people have heard about Christianity. Maybe they've heard about the peripheral things, how Christians have laws and rules that they're trying to follow. Christians have strong views on sexuality and sexual ethics.

[18 : 01] But a lot of people, when they view Christianity, miss the heart of it. That it's all about this man Jesus and whether he was raised to life again, proving that he was God and that he has dealt

with our sin and our shame on the cross, promising us eternal life.

We can't assume that when we talk to people, that they are on the same page. They may be confused like Festus and Agrippa were.

Many people I talk to these days don't understand the differences between religions, let alone that Christianity is all about a dead man who came back to life. We need to assume that people will have some understanding, but have missed the heart of it.

That it all depends on the resurrection of Jesus. The second key part of this short conversation is that these two rulers talk about the resurrection.

Even though they are confused, they ponder the good news of the resurrection. God has started to work in them, sowing seeds of the heart of the matter.

[19 : 16] Jews say that Jesus is dead, but Paul says he is now alive. God often works slowly in people's lives.

Very rarely do people hear the gospel preached and then convert straight away. Far more often it takes many times of hearing the gospel before someone will realize their need for Jesus and turn and follow him.

This can often come from a number of different faithful ambassadors for Jesus, over years reflecting the love of Jesus to a person in their lives. But as these leaders consider the resurrection of Jesus, they're investigating Paul as his ambassador.

The Jewish leaders attacked Paul with little to no evidence, whereas Paul was willing to face trial, even if it meant his death.

The baseless attacks of the Jews made Paul look like a more reliable ambassador for Jesus. He stands up under unfair attack and he is given an opening for people like Agrippa and Festus to hear him preach the gospel.

[20 : 30] At the end of chapter 25, we saw that Agrippa was keen to hear Paul preach. Now at the end of 25, there's a whole congregation of eager people willing to hear him preach the gospel.

They all come ready to hear the gospel. And you can read what happens in the next chapter. That's for next week. What the rulers do to Paul's life, people will continue to do to Christians today.

They will peer into our lives and watch and consider our actions to see if this Jesus is worth investigating. The behaviour of a Christian's life can either bear fruit for Jesus' claims or it can harm the witness of the gospel.

Hypocrisy in a Christian's life is one of the best ways to kill any credibility that we have. If we want to stop people investigating Jesus, Christians should say one thing and do another.

Just like that football player Ronaldinho did with the Pepsi. Coke stopped their relationship straight away because he was not an authentic ambassador.

[21 : 48] This is why we value authentic Christian faith here at St. Paul's. Lives that reflect our faith in Jesus.

When we say one thing, we do the same thing. Peter in 1 Peter chapter 2 speaks to this. He says, Paul is under attack.

They are accusing him of doing wrong. But Festus can see that he is innocent. And his innocence is pointing people to the resurrection. Paul being an authentic ambassador is causing people like Agrippa to want to hear more about this Jesus.

They are primed and ready for the gospel to be preached. So what does that mean for us as Jesus' ambassadors? Let me just briefly move from talking about brand ambassadors to a country's ambassador.

Imagine the ambassador for Australia who was living in New Zealand. I actually don't know if we have one, but let's just say Australia has an ambassador and they're living in New Zealand.

[23 : 12] They have certain responsibilities. They must get a message right. They don't get to make a message nice or pretty. They just have to deliver it.

Now imagine the ambassador from Australia had to deliver some bad news to their counterpart in New Zealand. Imagine that as the borders start opening up, a hundred people from Sydney had flown to New Zealand and they had COVID.

The situation of the ambassador, they've been told this by the Australian government. They need to share this terrible news with the New Zealand government. But imagine the ambassador got the message wrong.

Instead of saying there was a hundred cases of COVID, there was only one case of COVID. It's a very different situation. Or imagine the ambassador being worried about the New Zealand government's response.

I don't want to upset them. Maybe I'll try and make the message a bit nicer. We've got great news. We've got a hundred people who are coming to share.

[24 : 18] They're coming to share with you a disease. Can you imagine the ambassador trying to make the message nicer or prettier? Or imagine the ambassador not wanting to share the message at all because they were worried about it.

They have responsibilities to share their message and get it right to save lives. Brothers and sisters, we are ambassadors for Jesus.

We are not at home here. Our home is in heaven. We are on foreign soil as we wait for Jesus to return. And while we wait, we have an opportunity to share the message of Jesus with our words backed up by authentic Christian lives.

It's not up to us to try and make the Christian message a bit nicer. Maybe we don't want to share the gospel with people because we're worried about their response.

When we need to tell them that our lives are lost without Jesus. That we're doing things that God doesn't want us to do and it grieves him. But this is a message that we must deliver.

[25 : 35] We do not need to sugarcoat the gospel because the gospel of Jesus is so sweet already. This is a message that we must deliver.

And we must have our lives look authentic so people can hear it. By God's grace, he is making us more like Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit day by day.

Making us to be more authentic ambassadors. So this week, as we go online, as we post things on social media, as we engage in meetings with family and friends and work over Zoom, let me just ask you to stop and think.

How am I representing Jesus? If I post this negative message, this criticism of somebody on social media, what are they going to see of me?

More importantly, what are they going to think of the one I represent, Jesus? When I'm on Zoom, should I just turn off my camera and my microphone? Or should I actually engage and love the ones that I am meeting with?

[26 : 47] How am I representing Jesus here so that when people see me, they can see more of Jesus? Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the good news of your Son.

That he died for us. And that he was raised to life so we could be part of your family. Heavenly Father, it is very strange that you choose to make us your ambassadors.

But you do. Help us to look more like you. Help us to continue to check our lives so that people would see Jesus.

Because God, you love us and you are for all people, Lord. Help us to look like Jesus so that people would get to know Jesus more and more.

We ask this in your Son's name. Amen.