

The Ethiopian Eunuch

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[0:00] We'll turn together this evening to this passage we've read in Acts 24, and we'll look at the verses beginning at verse 24, these verses to the end of the chapter. Acts 24 at verse 24.

After some days, Felix came with his wife, Priscilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus.

And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, go away for the present. When I get an opportunity, I will summon you or I will send for you again.

There are some sermons that you wish had been recorded, and this is probably one of them. We're only given really the basic headings, if you like, of the sermon, as you find it described in these verses, that Paul, in preaching to Felix, preached on these three matters, righteousness, self-control, and judgment to come.

These were the three headings of his sermon, and we don't have any of the detail. Think also of the sermon that Jesus preached to the two disciples in Luke chapter 24, when they were returning on their journey on the way to Emmaus, and he drew alongside them, and they began to ask him things, not realizing it was indeed Jesus risen from the dead.

[1:45] And you remember how the Scripture there describes how Jesus spoke to them, or preached to them, or said things to them regarding himself. Beginning at Moses, and all the prophets, and in all the Psalms, he showed them out of the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

What a great sermon. Not recorded. That's all it says. Just a brief summary. But what a sermon that must have been, where Christ himself, taking them through the Old Testament, Moses, the prophets, the Psalms, he showed them in the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

And here also, you find Paul preaching to the governor, Felix. As we say, there are three headings, but we also have a description of how he delivered the sermon, and a description also of Felix's response.

So, not only are you given the headings, and we can then go into the headings and look at what Paul would have said there, comparing this with his epistles, for example, where he further elaborates on these three great themes of righteousness, and self-control, and judgment to come.

We're also told the effect it had, the preacher's delivery, rather, first of all, how he reasoned about it, and the effect it had in the hearer's response. Felix was alarmed and said, go away for the present.

[3:22] When I get an opportunity, I will summon you. And one interesting thing is that as you begin the passage, you're very conscious that Paul is here bound as a prisoner before Felix.

But actually, before you end the passage, things have switched around spiritually. Paul is still bound. He's still physically a prisoner, but you know from reading the passage that the prisoner spiritually is actually Felix.

He has become enmeshed in conscience, in feeling the weight of his sin, his debauched and miserable life.

And Paul, although he's chained and physically a prisoner, spiritually he's the man who's free, while his examiner is actually the prisoner in a spiritual and moral sense.

And that's something that really is an interesting facet of the passage as you read through it and realize that that's what's going on. But let's look at these three things.

[4 : 36] First of all, the sermon's content, and then the preacher's delivery, and then the hearer's response. First of all, the sermon's content. We mentioned these three points, these three headings, if you like.

Righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment. But before we look at them in more detail, just look at the first bit before that. He sent for Paul. When he came, Felix came, he sent for Paul.

He heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. Now, you see, that's interesting, and that's significant, because the three points that he goes on to elaborate on in the presence of Felix's righteousness, self-control, and coming judgment, that is part of the content, three of the main strands, if you like, of what faith in Jesus Christ is about.

When he reasoned of faith in Jesus Christ, these were the things that he said before Felix belonged to this faith.

He didn't tell him everything about faith in Christ Jesus and the content of that. He couldn't, of course, in that short a time. But what we're saying is that the core of faith in Jesus Christ includes these three great elements, righteousness, self-control, and judgment to come.

[6 : 02] If you evacuate faith in Christ of any of these, even one of them, you're taking away something that's integral to what faith in Christ Jesus is about.

Because you cannot understand faith in Christ Jesus without including righteousness, self-control, judgment to come.

Righteousness. Paul reasoned of righteousness. He began with the standard. He began with the standard. He began with what characterizes God himself as God.

Righteousness. Righteousness. Absolute perfection. Integrity. He began with the uprightness. The purity.

The perfection of God himself. Righteousness. And the righteousness that he speaks of in terms of righteousness required of us has to correspond to that righteousness of God.

[7 : 07] When God created human beings, he created them in perfect righteousness. They were righteous in a way that corresponded exactly with the righteousness of God.

There was no flaw in their thinking. There were no bad thoughts. There was no rebellion against God. There was no alternative to loving God and to holding precious what God himself meant to them.

But after man fell. We became unrighteous. We became the kind of people Isaiah describes as having no righteousness of our own.

But our righteousnesses are as filthy rags, polluted garments. And when Paul here brings Felix face to face with righteousness, that's really the standard of God that Felix has to face up to there and then as Paul began preaching the gospel to him.

He preached to him righteousness. He preached to him God's standard. He preached to him what God requires of his people. What God expects and demands indeed of every human being, not just his people.

[8 : 30] And you can see how that is in some ways displaced, in different ways displaced from people's thinking today. One of the most effective ways of doing it is to just put the Bible aside.

If you can't get rid of it altogether, at least undermine it. Or put something else along with it. Or something else in its place. When you do that, you're actually putting away the revelation of God's righteousness as he's given that to us in the scriptures.

You see, Paul is using the scriptures. Paul, he knows that Felix, as a man who knows the way, that's the way of faith, the way of Christ, the way of righteousness.

He knows that Felix will have an understanding of these things. And so he comes to reason of righteousness. Now, people have a mistaken idea that if it's really left to yourself, you don't really need to think much about righteousness.

Isn't it just up to yourself, people will tell you? Isn't it just a matter of making up your own standard? Isn't that what the world tells you? Isn't that what, by and large, you find in the philosophies of the world tonight, where righteousness, if you like, the standard of people's lives, is self-determined?

[9 : 56] That's why people will say to you, as you witness to Jesus, as you witness to God, as you witness to his righteousness, what right do you have to tell me how to live?

Well, we don't have the right as Christians or as preachers to tell anyone how to live. We are exercising our responsibility and duty to say, this is God's right.

This is his standard. It's not something the church has made up. It's not something that Christians have put together over many generations, so that now the gospel is really Christians setting out, this is how we think you should live.

This is God saying, this is my standard. This is righteousness. This is what I am like. And this is what I require you to be like.

And you see, that's the wonderful thing about it, as I'm sure Paul would have taken Felix towards this in some way or other. And that is that the righteousness that God requires of us, as it must correspond to his own, is actually the righteousness, the standard, the standard of relationship with God, and the standard of life or pattern of life that God has, in fact, made available to us in Jesus Christ.

[11 : 27] Because when you come to place your faith in Christ, that's why we've said that faith in Christ Jesus must include righteousness, because the righteousness that God requires of us, that we can't create for ourselves, God has created for us through the work of Christ.

Which is why when you put your trust in Christ, when you receive Christ, whatever way you put it, but when Christ is your Savior, when your faith and trust is in Him, when you accept Him as the way to God, the exclusive way to God, then God says, you are now righteous.

I have marked you down as righteous. I have marked you down as fitting my standard. Judicially.

I know we have to go on and speak about righteousness of life, which is really pretty much the same as what the Bible calls holiness. And that's something you pursue. That's something that you have the Holy Spirit given to you, so that in your sanctification, you are increasingly moving towards that time when you will be righteous in that sense too.

Right now, God's people, those who are justified by faith in Christ, are righteous, if you like, in God's books, in the way in which God formally looks at them, and accepts them as righteous with the righteousness of Christ.

[13 : 03] But along with the justification comes sanctification. It begins in the same rebirths and it ends in perfect holiness of life, of conduct, of thought, where God's people will be, as He Himself will see to it, perfectly righteous.

So we see all of that, however much of it Paul built into this first point in his sermon, all of that is involved in the Bible's way of telling us about righteousness, the doctrine of righteousness, if you like.

It's God's standard. It's what He requires of us. Not just of Christians. He requires it of others too, in their personal conduct, in their relationship with God.

The fact that we are fallen and unable to produce it ourselves has not removed our responsibility or God's right to demand this righteousness of us.

And if you turn to God and say, well, Lord, how can I? Well, God is going to say, well, you don't need to. I've done it for you, but you do need to take it to receive it.

[14:22] It's my gift of grace to you. And if you don't receive it, you remain unrighteous. And the moment you receive it, you become righteous in God's eyes.

That makes all the difference. He reasoned of righteousness. righteousness. And it's not a true version of the gospel that leaves out righteousness and the demand of God that we be righteous.

Secondly, there's self-control. And in fact, self-control is very closely connected to the standard of righteousness because it takes you into behavior.

It takes you into lifestyle. It takes you into choices of how we live. Self-control is used by Paul throughout his epistles as something that he again and again emphasizes is a characteristic or should be a characteristic of the Christian, of the person who is saved, who is in Christ.

But it's very interesting when you think who his audience was on this occasion. You read there that Felix came after some days with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish.

[15:46] Drusilla was a member of the Herod family. And the Herod family were not known for self-control, the very opposite. They were a debauched lot. They were an unholy lot.

They were full of all kinds of corruption, of seedy goings-on, of immorality. This Drusilla was a sister of the Agrippa, the king that's mentioned in the next chapter and also a sister of the Bernice who was the queen accompanying Agrippa.

They were all the same family and yet Agrippa and Bernice were living together as man and wife. They were brother and sister. And this Drusilla was their sister too.

She'd been married before. She was married when she met Felix. Felix was married when he met Drusilla. She was a beautiful woman and he decided he must have her not instead of his first wife but along with his first wife.

That's the kind of people that Paul was preaching to. And just imagine the situation. Here are these deeply immoral flawed people. These people who have taken it on themselves because they're in power to just demand anybody else's wife or something like that just so that they can follow out that inclination, that preference themselves.

[17:07] And here's this man with his chains brought into his presence and he's going to speak to him about faith in Jesus Christ and he begins with righteousness and he moves to self-control. And whether he likes it or not, Felix is going to have to listen while Paul tells him what the standard of his life should be, what should set it, righteousness.

He's also going to tell him what his lifestyle should be in relation to that self-control. That's why you find Paul in the likes of Colossians, for example.

His argument is, of course, that these great doctrines that he has to set before the Colossians, similar in other epistles, there's the resurrection of Christ, there's the person of Christ, there's what he calls there being raised with Christ, your life is raised with him, so you are to seek the things which are above, and so on.

But then when you come to verse 5, you find a therefore. In other words, he's saying, seeing this is so, seeing you are united to Christ, seeing you are united to him as your Savior, therefore, put to death sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth, do not lie to one another, seeing you have put off the old self, and all the way through, then he just builds up these words that have to do with lifestyle, and with lifestyle choices, and he says, you're a Christian, therefore, it follows that you put off these things, that you live in accordance with the righteousness that God requires as your standard, that you exercise self-control.

Now, I need not tell you this evening that we don't live in a generation that likes the idea of self-control.

[19:31] You don't have to go very far in listening to the way that people think and the way that certain movements pressurize people in government and so on. You don't have to go very far to see that their idea of self-control is, well, just control what you like and exercise your individuality in just living the life you want to live.

You're in control of your life. You can determine what is right and what isn't wrong for yourself. That's the species of self-control, if you can call it that, that you actually see so much of in our day and in our generation.

And the things which are traditionally understood and practiced from the standard of the gospel have been eroded, are being jettisoned, are being put aside.

That's why I said earlier on that the most successful way of doing this is to undermine the Word of God itself. To displace it or to put it aside or to alter it in some way that takes out these offensive terms like righteousness and self-control.

Well, you don't have faith in Jesus Christ without them, Paul is saying to Felix. That self-control is absolutely vital. And it doesn't matter what our appetites are naturally.

[20:58] I know there are complexities in this whole area of personal ethics. There are complexities because some people have addictions. There are complexities because some people do have real difficulty and struggle in seeking to maintain self-control, whether it's with that or with sexual morality, whatever else it might be.

But God is clear. As Christians, we have a standard. I have a standard. Every Christian is a standard. And that standard is righteousness and righteousness of life.

And very much related to that is self-control. If I have an appetite strongly towards something I know is wrong, it's my responsibility to exercise self-control, independence on God, pleading with God for His Spirit.

But not to say, well, this is just how I am, this is just how I was made, this is how I was born, therefore, I cannot avoid it. This is my way of life and I'm going to choose this way of life and I'm going to follow this way of life.

No, Paul is saying, faith in Christ Jesus, self-control, they belong together. And you young people especially, you must remember that too as your own life develops, as you face, those of you who are Christians especially, as you face the difficulties of teaching that is deliberately designed to undermine such things as the Bible's emphasis on self-control.

[22:46] You have to say, well, which standard do I follow in my life? Is it God's or is it society's? Is it God's or is it my own?

Is it God's or is it my pals? Is it God's or is it anybody else? If you love the Lord Jesus Christ, if I love the Lord Jesus Christ tonight, I shouldn't have any doubts whatsoever about what He expects of me, what He demands of me.

It's righteousness of life. It's self-control. Whether publicly or privately, I'm always in the eye of God, I always have Christ's eye upon me.

And Paul is saying, that is for everybody. Remember, he's not talking to a Christian. And some people might take the view as they do with something like the Ten Commandments that it's really just for Christians only, surely.

Well, no, it's not. Paul is not preaching to a Christian. He's preaching to somebody he knows is not a Christian, not a believer, not faithful to God.

[24:06] But God still demands the same standard of him. Every human being is answerable ultimately to God.

and therefore must confront the standard of God in that answerability. Where am I tonight?

Where are you tonight? Does God say that you're righteous? Has he written down in his record over your life righteous?

In Christ righteous? Has he written over your record in his book righteous? But maybe in your personal life you know you've gone astray.

You know you're not being true to him. You know you're not exercising self-control. You have to bring that to God. You're going to meet with mercy, remember, with restoration like Peter did.

[25:12] But he's not going to actually renege, he's not going to actually give in, he's not going to actually change his standard to comply with our weaknesses.

He's given us his spirit to help us with our weaknesses, to overcome our weaknesses, to enable us to exercise self-control.

So that's the second thing, self-control. The third thing was coming judgment, just in a word. He spoke to him, he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and coming judgment.

Because Paul would not have Felix leave this important point in his life thinking that this life is all there is to it. That as you live well or try to do your best in this life, well that's it because there's nothing after it anyway.

That's what a lot of people will tell you. Paul's not in none of that. He's saying to this man, Felix, having reasoned about righteousness and reasoned about self-control, he brings him face to face with the coming judgment.

[26:19] Not with a possible judgment, not with a potential judgment, but with the coming judgment. With what God has told him is inevitable and unavoidable and sure and certain in the timetable of God.

we don't know when that is. We don't know when this world is going to end. We don't have the timetable of God in our hands.

But one of the days of earth, God is going to open his diary and say, this is the last day. I'll have to visit this earth as its judge.

And you cannot look into the descriptions of the Bible and think about that solemnity without really feeling something in your heart moved by it.

Especially your need of Christ. because if you and I go to that judgment with no righteousness in our hand but our own and no self-control but that which by our own efforts we were able to achieve, we know what's going to happen.

[27:43] God is going to say, do you think I'm going to accept that as my standard when I have provided you with everything you need in my Son as a Savior to you?

no, you want to go to the judgment of God whenever it comes with Christ in your arms, with Him as your sacrifice because you know that you are assured then that that judgment will not condemn you but will pronounce you finally righteous.

Just some time ago when going abroad had to leave the car at the airport in Edinburgh and of course went to a secure car park and paid up online before you went and everything was arranged, gave the car number plate, my name, address, so on, paid it online, arrived there, when we arrived there, a camera at the gate there, or it's actually a barrier, the camera read the number plate of the car, barrier opened, in we went, left the car, off we went on holiday, came back after a week, picked up the car after coming on the wee bus from the airport into the car park, picked up the car, reached the barrier again, confident it was going to open, it didn't open.

And a man came out of a little office at the side, of course he had my name from the record that came up, Mr. McKeever, he said, you have something still to pay.

And I said to him, but I paid online, I paid everything I needed for the days that I was going to have the car. Yes, he said, but this is Saturday and you only paid up to Friday. He had forgotten that coming from America, we left on Friday evening, didn't arrive until Saturday, that's a day extra in UK time.

[29 : 42] And I thought to myself, how blessed a thing it is to be in Christ. Because when you reach the barrier of eternity, if you're in Christ, God's not going to come up and say, Mr.

McKeever, you've still got something to pay. And you can put your own name to that. Because Christ has paid it all already.

No extras. Nothing else required. And the day of judgment will be a great day. for those who are righteous.

A great day when they will be ushered through into the presence of the King. But it will be a terrible day. For those when God comes out of his office and says, you still have something to pay.

And you'll never be able to pay it for all eternity. he reasoned of righteousness, self-control, coming judgment.

[30 : 57] I must hurry. The next point was the preacher's delivery, just on this word reasoned. He didn't just speak to him about righteousness and self-control and coming judgment. He reasoned.

And it's a word that means he really got through into the mind of Felix. And that's what the gospel is really for. The gospel is not just so that you can read the Bible and just inform yourself intellectually.

The gospel is not just nice stories. The gospel isn't just a teaching that is there just to make you feel good. The gospel is there to inform your mind and the gospel is there to reach your conscience.

That's what it did when it was used in the way that Paul used it. He reasoned of righteousness, self-control and judgment to come.

He got into Felix's mind. And God has given us a reason. You can train a dog, you can train an ape, you can train a monkey, you can get them to do remarkable things, but you can't reason with them.

[32 : 10] You can't discuss theology with them. You can't discuss the things of eternity. with them. Human beings have reasons. And God has given them reasons.

And the gospel is addressed to your reason to make you think, to make you contemplate, to make you meditate, to make your conscience come alive. Paul reasoned of these things.

That's why tonight under the gospel you mustn't think that it's just fine to turn up under the word. God, if you've gone away from this place tonight, and the gospel hasn't reasoned its way into your conscience, then something's wrong.

Something's wrong somewhere. Maybe it's in me, maybe it's in the delivery. It could very likely be, I'm no apostle, I'm not the apostle Paul. but it could be that you've just come and not really reckoned with the truth, and you don't want to really exercise your reason to think deeply as you should of the things of God.

That's what the gospel is for. That's what your mind is for. And you'll find that consistently in Paul's letters. Third heading was, our third heading, the hearer's response.

[33:31] Well, Felix was alarmed. And he said, when I go away for the present, when I get an opportunity, I will summon you. Now this word alarmed is very strong.

It doesn't mean that he had a little shiver go up his spine. It means he was seriously afraid. We don't set out in preaching the gospel just to make people afraid.

but unless we've come to feel the weight of our sin in some measure, unless we know what it's like to confront God in the gospel and our own need of salvation, we haven't really exercised our minds as we should.

He was alarmed. He was really terrified. And what did he do? He cut off the source.

He said to Paul, go away. When I have a better opportunity, I'll send for you again. He didn't like this. He didn't want this to go on. Please don't, if tonight you've been moved by the gospel and you're not saved, if you're in this place tonight and God has addressed your need and this emphasis of God of righteousness, self-control, and coming judgment, don't leave this place and try to just wash this out of your mind.

[35:03] You can't do that. You can't choose just to ignore it and by the end of the way just fill up your mind. By the end of the week it'll have pretty much evaporated.

good. But what good will that do your soul? If God has spoken to you tonight, speak back to him. Go to him.

Don't let go of this. Remember, these are things of eternity. Things more serious than anything else in the whole world.

Because Felix, you see, remained unchanged. And one of the most solemn points in the passage is this. He was two years under Paul's teaching.

That's what you read there. He conversed with him over the space of two years. And he still wasn't changed.

[36:08] In fact, he was as corrupt as he had ever been because all he wanted from Paul was a bribe, a payment, something by which he might secure his release, or something like that.

But no change of heart, no change in relation to God. It was J.C. Ryle, I think you said, nothing so hardens the heart of man like a barren familiarity with sacred things.

Not a familiarity, a barren familiarity with sacred things. Has your familiarity with sacred things been a fruitful one?

Is it bearing fruit in your life of righteousness, of self-control, of preparation for judgment to come? It didn't do that for Felix.

He said, when I have a more convenient time, I'll send for you. Friends, let's remember that the road called tomorrow, the tomorrow we promise ourselves, when we say, well, I know I want to be a Christian, but not right now, the road called tomorrow all too often leads to a tone called never.

[37:46] Today is God's right time. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord,