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WHEN A GODLY MAN ERRS

Acts 21:15-40

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Acts Lesson 57

When a Godly Man Errs Acts 21:15-40

Most of us are familiar with the term “armchair quarterback.” An armchair quarterback sits in his comfortable chair, favorite beverage in hand, munching potato chips and watching the quarterback on TV as a herd of 300-pound giants rushes furiously towards him. The quarterback desperately throws the ball down field, but instead of connecting with his receiver, it gets intercepted. The armchair quarterback shakes his head and laments, “He never should have thrown that pass. His other receiver was wide open. He should have thrown to him.”

It’s easy to sit in your comfortable chair and give advice to the guy who is down on the field facing 300-pound gorillas. But it’s an altogether different matter to be the guy down on the field, making split-second decisions under incredible pressure. It’s easy in that situation to make mistakes. So we need to be careful about judging someone who made a mistake in the midst of such pressure.

I don’t want to play armchair quarterback on the apostle Paul here today. It’s easy to second-guess what he did. And yet I believe that he made a serious mistake in the story before us. Luke recorded it for our instruction and encouragement. We can all be instructed if we learn how prone we all are to make mistakes when we’re under pressure, and thus to be on guard. We can be encouraged because if even the most godly of men, such as Paul, make mistakes, and yet God uses them mightily, perhaps there is hope for us all! God is not thwarted by our mistakes. Rather,

When a godly man errs, God will work it together for good
according to His loving purpose.

We all err in our personal lives. Sometimes we err in discerning the will of God because, as we saw in our last study, it is at best an imperfect and tentative process. We err in our ministries, sometimes misjudging people or situations. We err in our marriages. All of us who are married can look back and think, “I wish that I had said this or done that in my marriage years ago. If I had, I wouldn’t

be having my current problems.” We err in rearing our children. We have to raise them at a time when we have no experience raising children. By the time we have the experience, they’re out of the nest! Every parent can look back and lament, “If only I had done some things differently!” We’ve all made financial errors that we wish we could undo. We’ve made major decisions that turned out to be major mistakes. Our text offers three lessons for us who are seeking to follow the Lord, when we err:

1. Even the most godly of men err.

Paul and his delegation from the Gentile churches arrived at Jerusalem, bearing the gift for the poor that had been collected from the Gentile churches. The next day, they met with James and the elders from the Jerusalem church. This James was the Lord’s half-brother, author of the Epistle of James, who was obviously the main leader of the church. The apostles must have all been out on various missionary enterprises by this time. Luke himself was present at this meeting, and he mentions the warm welcome (21:17-18).

It is odd that Luke does not mention the presentation of the gift or the response of the Jerusalem leaders to the gift. Different theories have been proposed for why Luke omits what to Paul was so important. F. F. Bruce suggests that the Jews may have viewed Paul’s gift as undermining or competing with the temple tax. Thus Luke did not report it so that it would not be used against Paul when his case was referred to the emperor (*Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* [Eerdmans], pp. 296-297). I’m inclined to agree with James Boice, that Luke may not have shared Paul’s enthusiasm toward this scheme (*Acts* [Zondervan], p. 358).

Paul proceeded to share with the Jerusalem church leaders what God had accomplished through his ministry among the Gentiles. Their response has always struck me as a bit odd. First, they glorify God; but in the next breath they tell Paul about the thousands of Jews who have believed and are zealots for the Law. These people have been told that Paul was teaching the Jews who lived among the Gentiles to forsake Moses and not to walk according to the Jewish customs. Then they propose their scheme, which obviously they had concocted beforehand. In my opinion, it is political posturing at best. To avoid a backlash from the Jewish faction of the church on account of the leaders’ welcoming Paul

and his Gentile converts and accepting their gift, they propose that Paul join these four men in their Jewish vow and sacrifice. Then it will look to everyone as if Paul himself keeps the Law.

It seems obvious that James and the elders were not concerned over the fact that these believing Jews were still zealous for the Law of Moses. Not only that, but the leaders themselves probably would have been uncomfortable with Paul's view that Jewish Christians are free from the ceremonial aspects of the Law (Bruce, *Paul*, p. 347). Their citation of the Jerusalem decrees (21:25) shows that they were still, after all of these years, hung up over the details of what believing Gentiles should and should not do on these matters. Their focus should have been on Christ as "the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). But rather than seeing Paul's visit as an opportunity to teach the believing Jews these great truths and to clarify any misconceptions that they have about Paul's teaching, they are nervous about what they might think. So they propose this political scheme that will "spin" Paul in a different light. And, Paul submits to it!

I find it surprising that many commentators defend Paul's actions here. Maybe his aura is just too great to dare to suggest that he blew it. And, as I said, it is easy to play armchair quarterback by taking potshots at a man who was under a lot of pressure. We don't want to do that. But even so, I believe that Paul made a major mistake here. But before I tell you why, let me, in all fairness, state the arguments of those who think that he was right. (I'm combining here the arguments of Stanley Toussaint in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* [Victor Books], p. 416; and, John MacArthur, Jr., *Acts 13-28* [Moody Press], p. 254).

First, Paul himself had taken a Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18). Thus why is it wrong for him to participate in this ceremony? Second, Paul's participation did not compromise any biblical truth, but was a matter of Christian liberty. It fit in with his policy of becoming a Jew to the Jews, in order to win the Jews (1 Cor. 9:20). His offering animal sacrifices here did not deny the finished work of Christ, but were only memorials. Third, if Paul had made such a serious error, would not the Holy Spirit have made this clear in the text? Besides, Paul later states that he had not violated his own conscience (23:1; 24:16-18). Fourth, Paul's motives were pure. He

was trying to unify the Jewish and Gentile Christians and be a witness to the unbelieving Jews. Fifth, the negative results of his actions do not prove that he made a mistake. Such a pragmatic approach denies that Paul's arrest had been prophesied before his arrival in Jerusalem (20:22-23; 21:4, 11).

In response, first, the text never hints at whether Paul had been right or wrong to take a Nazirite vow. It is, at the very least, a debatable matter that he was right to do so. Second, it *is* arguable that Paul's actions compromised or, at the very least, clouded some crucial biblical truths. Why should believers in Jesus Christ, whose blood cleanses us from all sin, go through a ritual of purification involving animal sacrifice under the priestly system that put the Savior to death? As the author of Hebrews argues, Christ is the sum of everything that the Jewish sacrificial system pointed forward to. Why go back to the old system when the veil in this very temple had been torn? It is one thing for Paul to set aside his freedom in Christ and to adopt some neutral Jewish customs that might be a hindrance to the gospel. But to participate in a Jewish sacrifice for purification at the temple was at the least to cause confusion on what Paul elsewhere plainly taught, that the decrees of the Law were removed by being nailed to the cross (Col. 2:11-14).

The third argument was that there is no indication in the text that Paul erred or sinned, and that he later states that he had always maintained a clear conscience. But in light of Paul's epistles, verse 20 should jar any sensitive reader of Scripture. Paul taught that the law is our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. Thus the purpose of the tutor is done away with (Gal. 3:24-26). He taught that Christ is the end or fulfillment of the Law for righteousness to all who believe (Rom. 10:4). He exhorts the Galatians, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." He goes on to tell them that "in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love" (Gal. 5:1, 6). How the sum of Paul's teaching about not being under the Law can be harmonized with a favorable view of being zealous for the ceremonial Law, is beyond me!

Regarding Paul's clear conscience, he does not mean that he had never sinned or made a mistake. Rather, he is defending his

integrity, first before the Jewish Sanhedrin (Acts 23:1), and then before the Roman governor Felix (24:16). I would not agree with Donald Grey Barnhouse (*Acts*) that Paul deliberately sinned by going to Jerusalem and cooperating with this scheme. But I do contend that he made a major mistake, in spite of his sincere motives. To live with a clear conscience means that we confess our sins and acknowledge our mistakes, not that we live perfectly.

The fourth argument is that Paul's motives were pure. Granted, but sincerity and pure motives do not protect us from making major mistakes. Regarding the final argument, that the negative results are no basis for determining right or wrong, I agree. Sometimes we act in obedience and suffer terribly. Sometimes we disobey God and life seems to go well for a while. But the prophecies about Paul's imprisonment say nothing about whether the actions that led to that imprisonment were right or wrong. As James Boice argues (p. 364), the greatest proof that Paul was wrong was that God, who is sovereign over the details of our lives, intervened before Paul was able to offer the sacrifice in the temple and prevented him from doing it.

I see a parallel in the life of David, who was also a godly man who erred. On one occasion, after years of being hounded by Saul, David said, "I will perish one day by the hand of Saul" (1 Sam. 27:1). As a result of this thinking, which the text does not condemn, but which was clearly sinful unbelief in God's promise to David to sit on the throne, David went over to the Philistines. This wrongful alliance involved him in deception and murder. It culminated in his going into battle with the Philistines against the army of God under Saul and David's beloved friend, Jonathan! In His grace, God intervened and spared David from this terrible result. But clearly, David's wrong thinking and subsequent wrong behavior had led him to the brink of what would have been a disastrous compromise, even though the text of Scripture never says that he had done wrongly. I think that while Paul was not sinning here, but rather making a serious mistake, if God had let him go through with offering the sacrifice, it would have compromised the gospel.

How should Paul have responded to this scheme? He should have said to James and the elders, "Brothers, we need to have a long discussion." He should have found out exactly what they

meant by their statement about being zealous for the Law. He should have used this as an opportunity to educate the Jerusalem leaders that in Christ we are not under the Law, but under grace. And, he should have warned them of the danger that they were in of falling into the racist views of the unbelieving Jews against the Gentiles. In their effort not to offend these Jews so as to reach them with the gospel, the leaders had allowed them to come into the church and yet hang onto their Jewish ceremonies and customs without showing them that Christ was the fulfillment of these things. They should have been in the process of educating these Jewish believers that in Christ, there is no Jew or Gentile (Gal. 3:28). They should have been pointing them toward taking the gospel to every tongue and tribe and nation, and that God is no respecter of a man's race (Acts 10:34-35).

Why didn't Paul confront these church leaders? Why did he quietly go along with their scheme? There were two primary reasons, and both of them are good motives. First, Paul ardently desired for there to be unity between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. He taught in Ephesians 2:14 that the dividing wall between them had been broken down in Christ. He was referring to a short wall in the temple that kept Gentiles out of the sacred place upon threat of death. Ironically, Paul was falsely accused of bringing a Gentile inside this wall, leading to the riot and his arrest (Acts 21:28). But Paul's strong desire for unity in the church pushed him over the line in accepting this compromising scheme, rather than confronting the truth issues that were at stake.

The second reason Paul went along with this scheme was his deep burden for the conversion of the Jews (Rom. 9:1-3). But in his effort not to offend the Jews and to become a Jew to reach the Jews, I believe that he created confusion over the main issue of the gospel, namely, the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for our sins.

It is never right to maintain peace and unity at the expense of compromising or confusing major truth. And it is never right to leave out the offensive aspects of the gospel for the sake of winning those who would be offended.

Let me give an example of each error. King Jehoshaphat was a godly leader of Judah who sincerely wanted to bring about an alliance with the separated northern kingdom. But to bring about this

noble aim, he allied himself with the wicked northern king, Ahab. He married his son to Ahab and Jezebel's daughter, Athaliah. She later usurped the throne and almost succeeded in slaughtering the Davidic line of kings. It was an example of unity at the expense of holiness, and it had disastrous consequences.

In our day, we are being urged to set aside our differences and to come together with Roman Catholics on the matters where we agree, to demonstrate "our unity in Christ." But to do so will either result in compromising or seriously confusing major truth about the gospel. While unity is important, it must be based on the central truths of the gospel, or it is not true biblical unity.

Regarding the second error, of leaving out or tiptoeing around the offensive elements of the gospel in order to win people, it results in people coming into the church who are not truly saved. I think there are reasons to question whether these Jews who had believed and were zealous for the Law were truly converted. At best, they were very immature believers who desperately needed some straightforward teaching. If they had heard Paul preach as he does in Galatians, it would have separated the genuine believers from the false!

In our day, if in our attempt to reach Muslims, we tell them that we both worship the same God, and we are silent about the deity and lordship of Jesus Christ, we may succeed in getting them to "accept Christ." But if they can accept Christ and yet hang onto many of their Islamic beliefs, they have not believed the gospel! Or if in witnessing to a Roman Catholic, we do not make plain the difference between works-righteousness and the righteousness that is imputed through faith in Christ alone, we have not presented the gospel clearly. Any decision that comes out of such unclear witness is suspect at best.

So the first and major lesson of our text is that even the most godly of men can err, and so we must be on guard against making serious mistakes, especially when we're under pressure.

2. The errors we make always carry negative consequences.

This scheme did not produce the intended results, to say the least! As I already said, we cannot judge any actions by the results, but only by whether or not they line up with God's revealed truth.

But when we do err, even if we do so with sincere and good motives, there will be negative consequences, either immediately or later.

Paul's error in going along with this scheme resulted in the Jewish leaders and church at large missing a vital lesson about law and grace. They missed a badly needed correction about their view of Gentiles. Rather than clearing up a problem, it only resulted in greater confusion and misunderstanding. Paul himself got beat up and almost killed. He spent almost the rest of his life in confinement because of this mistake. And seeing Paul in the temple going through these Jewish rituals did not soften the hearts of the Jewish unbelievers towards the gospel. So we should never just shrug off mistakes as if they do not matter. They do matter, and inevitably both we and others get hurt by our errors.

3. God is able to make our errors work together for good according to His loving purpose.

Even though Paul erred, God graciously spared his life and gave him the opportunity to preach to the mob that had just attacked him (22:1-21). As a result of his imprisonment, he was able to present the gospel to governors and rulers with whom he otherwise would have had no contact. He eventually got an all-expenses paid trip to Rome and was able to witness to many in Caesar's household. He had time to write his prison epistles, which are in our New Testament. All of these positive results illustrate the abundant grace of our God, who works all things together for good to those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).

Conclusion

Everyone makes mistakes. Some examples: In 1899, the director of the U.S. Patent Office stated, "Everything that can be invented has been invented." About the same time, Lord Kelvin, the President of the Royal Society, said, "Heavier than air flying machines are impossible." In 1905, President Grover Cleveland said, "Sensible and responsible women do not want to vote." In 1921, baseball great Tris Speaker said, "Babe Ruth made a big mistake when he gave up pitching." In 1923, the Nobel Prize winner in

Physics stated, "There is no likelihood man can ever tap the power of the atom."

D. L. Moody said, "If you don't go to work for the Lord because you're afraid of making mistakes, you will probably make the greatest mistake of your life—that of doing nothing." He's right! We should get out of the armchair and into the game!

The point of this message is not to play armchair quarterback on Paul, but to get us all to play armchair quarterback on ourselves! We all should constantly be examining our lives to identify our sins and mistakes, including the mistake of not serving the Lord. When the Lord graciously opens our eyes to errors that we have made, we should learn from them and, if possible, try to correct them and ask forgiveness of those whom we have wronged. We should submit humbly to the trials that may be in our lives as a consequence of our mistakes and sins.

But, we should not despair that we have somehow thwarted God's plan for our lives. Without minimizing or excusing our mistakes, we should realize that in His grace, God works around and through our mistakes for His own glory. We should trust Him, move on in obedience to His will for our lives, and marvel that He can use stumbling sinners such as we are!

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that Paul erred by going along with this scheme? Why/why not?
2. What is the difference between a mistake and a sin? Where do motives fit in?
3. How can we discern which issues to compromise on and which issues require taking a stand even if it creates conflict? (Study the life of Jesus in this regard.)
4. Some professing Christians try to defend racism biblically. How would you refute them? How can our church practically show that God's mercy transcends racial boundaries?

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