

## A Study in Contrasts

- Acts 25:1-27
- John Ortberg tells of a man in a church he once pastored whom he called Denny. Denny was not a happy man. He had attended church his whole life, but he had never been happy. Even the expression on his face was perpetually negative - so much so that one day a deacon asked him, "Denny, are you happy?" Denny answered, "Yeah." The deacon replied, "Then tell your face."

Now, one of the MANY things Denny did not approve of was contemporary music in the church. He often complained that the music was too loud. But no one realized how far he would go until one day a man came to the church office, flashed his badge, and announced that he was from OSHA. He was under orders to investigate a complaint someone had made about the decibel levels at church services. Of course, it was Denny who had registered the complaint. The staff could only laugh--and the agent could only join them.

But actually, Denny's attitude is no laughing matter. Listen to John Ortberg's observation as he looked back on this situation: "Denny is not changing. He is a cranky guy. He has been cranky his whole life. Not just about church - he does not effectively know how to love his wife; his children cannot tolerate him; and he has no joy. He's been going to church his whole life, sixty years. And nobody in the church is surprised that he stays cranky year after year. It is as if we expect a bad attitude - that's just Denny. Nobody is expecting him to be more like Jesus year after year."

- That story made me think. What do people mean when they shake their heads and say, "That's just Mark." What do they mean when they say, That's just (fill in your name)? We are going to look at two characters today in this story and see what the word on the street was about each one.

- We saw last week that Felix kept Paul in prison for two years, even though the charges against the apostle were without merit and could not be proven by his accusers. Why did he keep him there? First, because he was hoping for a bribe. Second, as the last verse of chapter 24 says, he was “desiring to do the Jews a favor.” The character of Felix the freed slave turned governor is clear from Scripture and from the historical record. Well, now he is replaced by Festus, who unlike Felix, was a member of Rome’s nobility. Whereas Felix was greedy and contemptuous, Festus had a reputation for being wise and honorable. And we see a glimpse of that right off the bat when Festus travels to Jerusalem after only three days as governor. He wanted to take care of this matter of the Roman citizen named Paul, being held for charges that were brought by the Jews. He goes to Rome to find out what the charges are and how it can be resolved. And eventually he will get Herod Agrippa involved, and then he will be shipping Paul off to stand before Caesar in the imperial city of Rome. So even though nothing really dramatic or even very exciting happens in chapter 25, Luke wrote it to explain part of the transition between Paul’s two years in Caesarea and his two years under house arrest in Rome. But I think he also wrote it to put on display the contrast between the characters who walk across this stage. The main characters of chapters 25 and 26 are Festus, Paul, and Agrippa. There’s a cameo appearance by the three stooges (and there were probably more than 3), otherwise known as the clowns who come down from Jerusalem “bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove.” But we will focus our attention on two leading actors today. There’s Festus the double-minded. There’s Paul, the truth-teller. And there’s Agrippa, the almost-Christian. Lord willing, we will look at his character next Sunday as we study chapter 26.
- **Festus, the double-minded**

- It actually looks promising for Festus in the beginning. He takes justice seriously, as a leader should do, and travels to Jerusalem to meet with the Jews who had charges against Paul. He stayed there 8-10 days, according to verse 6, and he refused to give in to them on their request to “do them a favor” and have Paul brought back to Jerusalem to stand trial. They wanted to ambush the prisoner bus and kill Paul on his way, and it is possible that Festus heard that and refused to give in to their demands. Whether he knew about the ambush or not, he stood up to the Jews and said, No, this is my case now and we will try him in my courtroom. You come to where Paul is. Plaintiffs come to the courtroom, not the other way around! You read this far and you say, “Go, Festus! That’s the way to stand up to the murderous clowns.”
- But then the Jews come to Caesarea and the trial begins. Festus calls the court to order, and asks the Jews to present their evidence against Paul. They stand up and say, He has done some really terrible things judge, and here they are. Festus says, fine, those are your charges. What is your evidence? The clowns stand up and say, “Well, your honor, we are just a little bit short on evidence. We just know that we could, uh, make our charges stick if you would bring the prisoner to Jerusalem.” Of course I am using poetic license here. All we know is what Luke said about the case of the prosecution: that they brought many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. So Festus says, “that’s it?” Yes, your honor, we rest our case. Festus turns to Paul and says, “Who is representing you?” Paul says, “I am.” Festus: OK, make your defense. Paul stands and says, “I haven’t done anything wrong.” Festus: That’s it? Paul: Yes, your honor. The defense rests. Now at this point in the drama, the super trooper spotlight in the balcony is on Festus, and sweat is beading up on his forehead, and he has only one way he can go here that would be just and fair. The prosecution HAD no case and made no arguments, so the defense really did not need to

say a word. All Festus has to do at this point is rap his gavel and say, "Case dismissed." But he doesn't. WHY NOT? Because he wants to do the Jews a favor. Look at verse 9. He has already told the Jews that he would not do them the favor of sending Paul to Jerusalem. But now, facing an embarrassing outcome of a trial that has gone nowhere, Festus is ready to do the Jews a favor and send Paul to them. He is a double-minded man. He is weak when he needs to be strong. He takes a seat when he needs to take a stand. Os Guinness gives a very helpful definition of this character trait in his book In Two Minds. He says, "When you believe, you are in one mind and accept something as true. Unbelief is to be of one mind and reject that something is true. To doubt is to waver between the two, to believe and disbelieve at the same time, and so to be in 'two minds.'" That is what James calls, in Chapter 1, a "double minded man," whom James says is unstable in all his ways. The Chinese say, "Doubt is standing in two boats, with one foot in each." You ever tried to stand with one foot in the boat and one foot on the dock, and then the boat starts to drift away? Can be painful. Not only that...

- The problem with double-mindedness is that it often means that OTHERS suffer the consequences. I think of the brothers of Joseph with their plot to first kill and then sell their brother. Reuben was double-minded. He didn't want his younger brothers to kill Joseph. But he didn't have the backbone stand up to them and say, "This is wrong. Leave him alone." We know what Joseph suffered as a result. Or remember Rehoboam, Solomon's son and the third King of Israel after his father died. On the one hand, he wanted to honor his father and hear what the old men had to say about how to lead, the men who had stood before Solomon. But what he really wanted to do was honor himself, and so he rejected their counsel for the counsel of his contemporaries. As a result of his double-mindedness, the nation was torn in two.
- **Paul the truth-teller**

- In sharp contrast to the double-mindedness of Festus, we turn now to the single-mindedness of Paul. He was a truth teller because he was single-minded in his devotion to Jesus Christ. He never had to weigh out the consequences in his mind over which course of action to take if one of the two choices was wrong. Do we realize how much time that saves? If we never have to deliberate about a decision where one of the two choices would put us in a place where we have to sin, we save so much time! Not to mention heartache. Let's imagine this scenario. You are a mom, working at a school where your child, who has special needs, is a student. There is a man at the school who starts to pay you special attention, to flirt with you, and his hints get stronger and more obvious. You are married, have been for years, are a professing Christian, go to church every Sunday. What do you do? Here are your choices: 1- You don't give in to his advances. Instead you either report the man, or you have your husband confront him, or you quit your job. 2- You give in to his advances. WHAT? If you are a truth-teller, you don't have a decision to make. It's already been made for you. You don't have to pray about it. You don't even have to crack open your Bible to know the answer to that one, do you? Well, this is not hypothetical but a true story about a friend of mine who lives in another city. She chose option two. She gave in to the relationship and ended up leaving her husband and taking her special needs child away from her Daddy, whom she has deeply loved all her life and who loves her.
- Most of the times, the choices we face are less obvious. More subtle. Daniel and his three buddies were faced with the decision of whether to eat what all the other guys at the Babylonian boys' school were eating. But they had been raised on God's Word as devout Jews, and so they chose not to defile themselves with the Babylonian diet. That was a little test for a truth-teller, but still an important one. They had a choice to stand out or to fit in. Many times we take the path of least

resistance simply because we don't WANT to stand out, we want so badly to fit in. When these four made that decision about food, God gave them favor, and we know the rest of the story. The little decision to stand up for truth led huge decisions to stand up for truth. In Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, it literally prepared them to stand up for truth when the King issued an edict that every person would bow to his golden statue at the sound of the royal orchestra. Or they would be thrown into a "burning, fiery furnace." The orchestra hardly even started tuning up, and the whole nation fell on their faces! The three Hebrew boys stood ramrod straight, knowing that their God could deliver them either from or through the flames. Or in Daniel's case to continue kneeling. The command came down from the King that every person would stop making petitions to any god or any man EXCEPT the King, and those who refused would be thrown into the lion's den. Daniel had seen God provide for him in the matter of what he would eat. He had seen God provide for his three friends in the matter of worship. He believed without doubt that God would now provide for him in the matter of prayer and devotion. So he stayed on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks to God. It's the little decisions we make every day to do the right thing, no matter the cost, which mold our character and prepare us to be able to make the big decisions to do the right thing, no matter the cost, if and when the time comes. You say, well I have blown it so many times even in the little things. I am not sure that God could ever use me to be a man or woman of character. I want to be a truth-teller like Paul. I just don't know how to get there. Here's where you start. By confessing to God what you just said in your brain that I overheard. Tell Him what He already knows and ask for His grace to set off in a new direction. Then put on the single-mindedness that Paul talks about when he says, "I do not consider that I have made it on my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies

ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:13-14)

- We are about to take communion together. It’s a monthly reminder in this church of how much God loves His church. And how much He loves each person here. So much that He paid for your salvation with His own blood, the blood of His Son. It cannot be entered into lightly, but it should be entered into joyfully. It is a celebration of the truth that the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people. And a reminder of the explosive power of the grace of God. We come to the table this morning not proud of what WE have done, but grateful for what God has done for us. We come to the table because we want to continue in His salvation through the process of Him changing our hearts, our thoughts, our speech, our behavior.