

## **Paul Loves the Church More Than His Own Name**

Acts 21:17-26; Colossians 3:11

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The Lord Jesus emphasized a particular characteristic of those who are the children of God: “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). Likewise one of the fruit of the Spirit that Jesus has purchased for all whom He has redeemed and that He has implanted in them when they are brought to faith by the Holy Spirit is peace (“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace” Galatians 5:22). Because God whom we have offended by our sin more greatly than anyone could ever offend us has graciously in everlasting love sent His only begotten Son to remove the sinful offenses we have committed against Him in order to establish peace with us (which the Scripture calls reconciliation), we must likewise do all within our power to remove those offenses that separate us from those within our family, church, and work.

Even if you believe the other party is clearly in the wrong, you reveal you are a child of God and have the fruit of the Spirit by seeking peace and reconciliation. To harbor resentment and bitterness or to cherish and nurse an offense committed against you is worldly—that is what the world does. However, it is the work of the Spirit in the life of a Christian that seeks by God’s grace to remove the offense by either allowing love to cover a multitude of sins (and moving on from the offense) or by following the steps ordained by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17 (one-on-one; two or three witnesses to hear and bring reconciliation; the eldership). We are either seeking by God’s grace to remove offenses or we are by worldly pride propping offenses up and fortifying them because we are not taking steps to tear them down (no neutrality).

Paul was falsely accused of causing division in the Church of Jerusalem, but though he was not at fault, he was willing to humble himself and take steps to cover the offense, because unity within the Church was of greater value to Paul’s than his need to be vindicated. The main points from our text are these: (1) A False Report Is Brought to Paul’s Attention (Acts 21:17-21); (2) Paul Submits to Remove the False Report and Promote Unity (Acts 21:22-26).

### **I. A False Report Is Brought to Paul’s Attention (Acts 21:17-21).**

A. As we saw in the previous sermon (Acts 21:1-16), the Apostle Paul was courageously committed to doing the revealed will of God whether it meant chains or even death to him. His apostolic team of ministers from various churches that he had planted in Greece, Macedonia, and Asia are ready to face with Paul the trials that await him in Jerusalem. They have collected a financial love gift from Gentile churches for the impoverished Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, and together Paul and his team leave Caesarea for Jerusalem.

B. They arrive in Jerusalem (Acts 21:17) and are warmly and gladly greeted by the brethren with whom they are staying (Acts 21:16). This was no doubt a welcomed reception to Paul and the others in light of the prophecies of danger he had received along the way in various churches. There are few gifts that delight the heart of brethren more than the glad hospitality (not the mere duty of hospitality) of those who open not only their homes to us, but their hearts to us as well (not feeling as intruders, but as family). It is they that have learned, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Such gifts truly bind the hearts of Christians together.

C. The next day, Paul and the ministers with him from the Gentile churches met with James and the elders for a more formal meeting (Acts 21:18—note the “us” which includes Luke and the other ministers).

1. Paul likely brought the financial love gift from the Gentile churches and set it before James and the elders as a token of their unity and love with their Jewish brethren. It was Paul’s purpose to tear down the walls and barriers that separated Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Paul did not come to Jerusalem to divide the Church or to offend the Jewish portion of the Church, but to supply evidence through their love gift of the unity that existed between Jews and Gentiles within the Church of Christ.

2. James was called by Paul one of the pillars of the Church in Jerusalem along with Peter and John (Galatians 2:9), and is also identified as being “the Lord’s brother” (Galatians 1:19). Though this James was not one of the original 12 apostles, he was after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus called by the Lord to be an apostle (Galatians 1:19), for Jesus specifically appeared in His resurrected body to James (1 Corinthians 15:7). It seems that James is presently the lone apostolic representative serving in the Church at Jerusalem with the elders (*prebuteroi*) of the Church (Presbytery). There must have been many elders present (perhaps a hundred or more) because there were “many thousands” of Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem Church (Acts 21:20). The other apostles were likely engaged in similar apostolic work in various parts of the world as was the Apostle Paul. The Lord Jesus knows their work even if we do not, and that is what is important (faithfulness is what is important, not headlines in the news or names upon people’s lips).

3. Paul greets the Presbytery in Jerusalem (Acts 21:19), and then reports to them “particularly” (literally “one by one”) what God had done through his ministry in bringing Gentiles to Christ, in disciplining them, and in establishing churches by the mighty power of Christ. No doubt Paul included in his report the earthquake that brought the Philippian jailer to Christ; the sermon he preached from Mars Hill in Athens; the riot in Ephesus that led many to burn their books on magic arts; and the prophecies he had received of his imprisonment in Jerusalem. What is very telling about Paul is that this is not a report about all that he himself had done, but was rather a report about what God had done through him (Acts 21:19). Ministry and service were not about Paul, but were about the Lord and His power, His grace, and His righteousness. Paul was just a tool in the hands of the Lord. There is nothing more sickening in our lives (and especially in the speech and conduct of ministers) than boasting about what we have accomplished and how successful we have been and what promotions we have received and what others have said about us. We see it so clearly in others, but are we aware of it in our own thoughts, words, and deeds? This is robbing the Lord of His glory. It is saying, “It’s all about me”, rather than, “It’s all about Thee, Lord Jesus”.

D. The Presbytery in Jerusalem rejoiced and glorified God for what God had accomplished (Acts 21:20). They were not jealous over the mighty way in which the Lord had used Paul to establish Gentile Churches in Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Greece. There was not among the leadership some rivalry of Jewish Christians against Gentile Christians.

1. Not in any way to diminish their joy at the gospel that had been taken to so many among the nations, the Presbytery now turns to more distressing news to the ears of Paul (Acts 21:20). A false report and lies about Paul had been circulated among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. We are not told by whom this was done, but from previous opposition that Paul faced, the source of these lies was likely from Jews or Jewish converts that were committed to observing the ceremonies of the Old Testament and that despised the ministry of the Apostle Paul, because he taught that these Old Testament ceremonies were no longer necessary (for justification or sanctification). It was on account of such adversaries that Paul had penned the Letter to the Galatians and that the Synod in Jerusalem was convened (Acts 15). More often, those who resisted Paul’s message of justification by faith alone were Jews and professing Jewish converts rather than Gentile idolaters.

2. As Paul listens to the false accusations brought against him, which alleged he was

destroying the unity of the Church, he must have thought how ironic that he was so charged. No one taught more clearly Jewish-Gentile unity in Jesus Christ than Paul. And yet, he was falsely attacked. Any way that Satan can stir up opposition within the Church, he will do so. Any lies he can spread within the Church, he will do so. If Satan did so with Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul, let us not think ourselves above such treatment—in fact, let us find comfort that we are found in such ranks.

E. What were these false accusations brought against Paul? They are listed in Acts 21:21. Paul allegedly taught all the Jews in Gentile nations to entirely forsake Moses by not circumcising their children and by not walking after the customs or ceremonies found in the Old Testament for any reason. These are not true but are false because they do not accurately represent what Paul taught. What did Paul teach?

1. First, Paul taught (as does the Old Testament and the New Testament) that Jews (or Gentiles for that matter) are not justified before God on the basis of their keeping the Mosaic Law (whether the Ceremonial, Judicial, or Moral Law). Note Galatians 2:16. Why? Because acceptance and justification before God requires sinless perfection in thought, word, and deed. Any violation of God's Law condemns the person and makes him/her guilty before God and subject to God's just condemnation in hell. There is nothing that a person can do to remove that guilt. It is a stain that no one here on earth can remove from the soul. It can only be removed by the sinless Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who forgives all transgression of God's Law and imputes His perfection righteousness to the one who trusts alone in Jesus alone for his/her eternal salvation (Philippians 3:9). Paul even cites the patriarch, Abraham, to demonstrate to Jews (in particular) that it was not Abraham's circumcision (or any other ordinance) that justified him, because Abraham first believed and was declared righteous by God, and then circumcision was appointed by the Lord for him and his infant posterity as a sign and seal of the promise of God's righteousness to all who believe (Romans 4:11). Thus, Paul taught that if one was trusting in the Mosaic Law to justify him/her, it would fail to do so; for the law shows us our sin and our need of a Savior, but it cannot justify us. It condemns us, but it cannot save us.

2. Second, Paul taught that there is **no necessity** for Jew or Gentile to observe the ceremonies of the Mosaic Law for justification or sanctification and growth in Jesus Christ. The ceremonies of the Mosaic Law were intended to be temporary (not permanent), for they pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work upon the cross (Ephesians 2:14-15). They were shadows that were cast into the Old Testament from the body of Jesus Christ that hung upon the cross in the New Testament, fulfilling redemption for His elect, chosen in Christ Jesus before the world began (Colossians 2:16-17; Hebrews 10:1). Though the Moral Law (as summarized in the Ten Commandments) is the rule of righteousness for our obedience, it is not able to justify or sanctify the Jewish or Gentile Christian because there is no power in the law to accomplish what it commands. The power is in the gospel of Jesus Christ, in His death and resurrection alone, which is applied by the Holy Spirit to all who are united to Christ by faith alone (Romans 7:22-25).

3. Third, Paul taught that he was able to temporarily use the Ceremonial Law of Moses to win Jews to Jesus Christ and to avoid offending Jews and Jewish converts (1 Corinthians 9:20,22). Paul circumcised Timothy to win the Jews, but would not circumcise Titus when Jewish converts urged it for justification. Paul took a Nazarite vow and shaved his head to win the Jews (Acts 18:18). In regard to Mosaic dietary laws and holy days, Paul taught that this was no longer a duty for Jews to keep, but those whose conscience was weak and not yet able to make that break, patience was to be exercised with them (Romans 14).

4. Thus, it was a lie circulated by Paul's enemies to stir up a division within the Church of Jerusalem to claim that Paul taught that Jewish converts were to entirely forsake, and to cease and desist from all ceremonies of the Mosaic Law. This was intended to cast aspersion and hatred upon Paul and to bring a divisive scandal into the Church.

## II. Paul Submits to Remove the False Report and Promote Unity (Acts 21:22-26).

A. The Presbytery offers to Paul a means to silence the lying voices of these adversaries and to restore the Church of Jerusalem to a unity in voice and practice.

1. They want Paul to take four members of the Church in Jerusalem who are under Nazarite vows to the temple to shave their heads and follow the steps prescribed by the Mosaic Law for those who have taken Nazarite vows to express thanksgiving or great need before the Lord (Numbers 6). During the Nazarite vow (ordinarily a temporary vow), men or women were not to eat any grape product, they were not to cut their hair, and they were not to come near and touch the dead (not even for a father or mother, son or daughter, wife or husband). These steps expressed a willingness to be separate from that which ordinarily was cherished. It demonstrated what they were willing to give up in this world for God's blessing. This was a tangible commitment to put to death anything in this world that would stand between them and the Lord.

2. The Presbytery makes clear that it had not forgotten the decree from the Synod of Jerusalem (Acts 15), that Gentiles were not being asked to follow the Mosaic ceremonies—they were only to avoid those practices associated with idolatry (Acts 21:25).

B. What does Paul do? He, an apostle of Jesus Christ, submits himself to the plan presented by the Presbytery (Acts 21:26). What I find amazing here is the humility manifested by Paul, and the subduing of his own pride. There is no resistance with shouts of his own innocence.

1. Paul was not guilty of any sin, false teaching, or causing a scandal in regard to this matter. It was entirely organized and spread among the Jewish brethren in Jerusalem by adversaries of Paul (whether outside or inside the Church). And yet it is not his first response to the Presbytery to vindicate himself, but rather to do nothing that would unnecessarily destroy the unity of the Church, or divide Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians. As long as the Presbytery commanded not what was unscriptural (by way of doctrine or practice), Paul would place the good of Christ and His Church ahead of his own. Paul did not first demand that these adversaries be sought out and brought to trial. His first thought was not himself, but was the peace and unity of Christ's Church.

2. Beloved, what is first and most important to you and to me, when our name, what we believe, and what we have practiced is misrepresented, thus bringing division within the Church? Is our chief concern with vindicating ourselves, or with protecting and preserving the unity of Christ's Church (even if it means taking steps like Paul that do not directly address those who have misrepresented us). Paul makes it clear from his response that it was not all about him, but was rather all about Jesus Christ and preserving the peace, purity, and unity of His Church. Paul was not easily offended. Paul was not licking his wounds. By his actions (and not even by way of his spoken testimony), he showed everyone that his adversaries had lied about him (that's maturity and humility). I dare say that Paul convinced more of the Jews in Jerusalem by his actions than he could have by his mere words. God help us to do likewise! We are to have a care for our name, but we are to have a greater care for the unity of the Church. May our love for Jesus Christ and for His Church which He purchased with His own blood be of greater value to us than even our desire to vindicate ourselves. That opportunity will usually come, but let us not allow personal disagreements or even personal attacks to take our eye off of what is most important: to preserve the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's Church. Let us be willing to sacrifice our names and personal offenses committed against us for the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's Church.

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