

Beware of the Soul-Destroying Sin of Flattery

Acts 24:1-9; Proverbs 29:5

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The Holy Spirit warns us against the sin of flattery that is seen in this lawyer, Tertullus, who sought to ingratiate himself to Felix, the Roman governor, so as to obtain a favorable judgment from Felix against Paul. Flattery is in effect a deceptive bribe through words rather than money in order to get what we want from others. Flattery is always condemned by God in Scripture (Proverbs 29:5). And as we shall see from our text, after Tertullus flatters Felix, he then outright lies in the charges he brings against the Apostle Paul. For if one will exaggerate what one says in praise of another, that same one will usually have no problem falsifying the truth (Psalm 5:9; Psalm 78:36).

Do we make comments to others that are highly exaggerated (if not outright false) so as to place ourselves in a more beneficial position with them? This is an appeal to their vanity, to their pride, to their appearance, to their knowledge, to their wealth, or to their gifts and graces, in order to puff them up for our own advantage. It is assisting Satan in tempting one to pride and vanity. God help us to be those who speak the truth in love at all times.

The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) Flattery Seeks to Pervert Justice (Acts 24:1-4); (2) Outright Lies Follow Flattery (Acts 24:5-9).

I. Flattery Seeks to Pervert Justice (Acts 24:1-4).

A. As we consider today our text beginning in Acts 24:1, we see Paul brought before Felix, the Roman governor. How did Paul get to this place? When Paul arrived in Jerusalem to bring diaconal help to needy Jewish Christians, he was attacked by Jews in the Temple and would have been murdered on the spot had it not been for the swift response of the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, who rescued him out of the hands of the Jews, who falsely accused Paul of bringing a Gentile into the Temple. The Roman commander sought to know why Paul was so viciously attacked and brought him before the Jewish Sanhedrin, which resulted in Paul being again physically attacked. A Jewish conspiracy to assassinate Paul was discovered by Paul's nephew and revealed to the Roman commander, who swiftly escorted Paul out of Jerusalem under the cloak of darkness accompanied by a heavy military guard, and brought Paul to the Roman governor, Felix, some 60 miles away in Caesarea. Paul will now face his accusers, the Jewish Sanhedrin, in Caesarea, before Felix.

B. Five days after Paul was escorted to Caesarea under military guard, his accusers appear, being led by Ananias, the high priest, whose unlawful authority Paul had resisted (Acts 23:2-5). The Jewish Sanhedrin has hired a professional orator, Tertullus, who leads the prosecution in bringing charges against Paul (Acts 24:1). Acts 24 may be broken down into three parts, to which separate sermons will be devoted: (1) The Prosecution by Tertullus (Acts 24:1-9); (2) The Defense by Paul (Acts 24:10-21); (3) The Judgment by Felix (Acts 24:22-27). Let us now consider the opening statement by Tertullus.

C. Tertullus offers Felix glowing accolades and manifest exaggerations in flattering the Roman governor, so as to obtain from Felix a favorable decision on behalf of the Jewish Sanhedrin against Paul.

1. **Flattery #1** (Acts 24:2). Felix was the Roman governor of Judea (52-59 a.d.), and it was through the influence of his brother, Pallas, who was a friend of the emperor that he came into power (not because he had shown himself to be qualified). Felix was a corrupt man. Tacitus, the historian, said about Felix, he "thought that he could do any evil act with impunity, backed up as he was by such power" (*Annals*,

12:54). Likewise, Tacitus writes, “Felix practised every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave” (*Histories*, 5:9). That is the evaluation of a Roman historian. According to Josephus, the Jewish historian, Felix had Jonathan, the previous high priest, murdered by assassins (*Antiquities*, xx.8.5). Felix’s term of office was practically a reign of anarchy, says Josephus; for even the high-priestly families were at war with the lower priests (*Antiquities*, xx.8.8). The injustice and cruelty of Felix was certainly not hidden under a bushel, but was well known to these very Jews who accused Paul before Felix, and yet they flatter him to his face with words exalting peace and prosperity through his kind providence (provision). These words are mere flattery.

2. **Flattery #2** (Acts 24:3-4). Tertullus lays it on even thicker as he thanks Felix, on behalf of the Jewish Sanhedrin, at all times in all circumstances for his rule. Felix actually left Judea not in peace, but in disorder, which Festus (who succeeded him) sought to repair. Tertullus lays his case before the “clemency” of Felix, i.e. before the customary graciousness of Felix (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, p.292). This is flattery of the highest degree intended only to receive a favorable decision from Felix.

D. It is clear what Tertullus is doing here, but are we careful to avoid the same sin in our own lives? There are two aspects to all flattery.

1. **Flattery Is a Deception.**

a. It intends to disguise and cover the truth either by outright falsehood or deliberate exaggeration. Flattery always makes one look much better than they really are. “How is that so bad”, one may ask? “I have made someone feel better about himself/herself not worse.” It is bad because it is a violation of the Ninth Commandment (“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor”). We are not intentionally to distort what is true in our use of words. God cannot lie (He cannot flatter) and neither should we. The Larger Catechism lists flattery as one of the sins forbidden in the Ninth Commandment.

b. Dear ones, flattery is so easy and acceptable to us as sinners because we always like to be told that we are more righteous than we are, more attractive than we are, more intelligent than we are, more athletic than we are, or more gifted than we really are. Flattery feeds our pride and by nature we love to hear it even if it isn’t accurate or true. That is why flattery is such a terrible enemy to our souls—it pretends to be our friend and lavishes us with kisses. But secretly it lies to us in distorting the truth. Dear ones, true friends don’t lie to one another (they don’t flatter one another); they speak the truth in love (because they sincerely care for one another). They don’t act like Judas in betraying the Lord with a kiss (Proverbs 27:6).

2. **Flattery Is a Manipulation.**

a. Flattery is a deliberate attempt to butter someone up for the flatterer’s own advantage. The flatterer hopes to secretly gain the help, wealth, favor, or support of others at the appropriate time.

b. The flatterer is like Absalom courting the favor of Israel, pretending to sympathize and agree with all the cases that came to King David. Absalom would take the people and insincerely kiss them as if they were his friend and equal. The Scripture says that Absalom “stole” the hearts of Israel through his flattering manipulation. How often do we try to gain the favor of others by manipulating them with some exaggerated report about themselves? We may say, “They asked me what I thought and I just told them what they wanted to hear.” We should tell what is right to hear.

3. **Flattery is not the same thing as a sincere compliment or an earnest encouragement given in all honesty.**

a. The Lord Jesus in His letters to the 7 churches in Revelation (chapters 2-3), begins with a note of sincere commendation wherever He can. Paul commends many in the church (Romans 16).

b. Dear ones, there is nothing at all sacrificed when we begin a rebuke or correction

with sincere words of commendation or thanksgiving where we are able. This is not manipulation, but an act of love that one be not overcome with grief from the rebuke or concern that is stated. Such a practice actually brings balance and truth to the context. For we do not want a person to think that this one concern or one area of sin necessarily overshadows every other area where there is good work and faithful service being performed. In fact, to avoid proper commendation may itself distort the truth of the matter.

c. In order to avoid flattery, you do not have to be brutally honest and cruel in your responses (“You are terrible at that or this” or “You are the worst”). You are not called to keep those in your family humble by being overly critical and never finding any reason to commend and build up your wife or your husband or children or parents. Perhaps it is not the sin of flattery into which you are tempted to fall, but rather the sin of always finding fault, the sin of being overly critical, the sin of never encouraging those you are called to love, support, and strengthen. Flattery is a lie, however, always finding fault is also a lie when you can encourage and strengthen the service, love, faith, and perseverance in those around you.

II. **Outright Lies Follow Flattery (Acts 24:5-9).**

A. Now we see in the accusations brought by Tertullus how his flattery of Felix leads him to lie about Paul. That is simply to say that when you are given to flattery, you will also be very likely to outright lie or misrepresent the truth. For here we see how Tertullus moves from exaggerating the truth in flattery to falsifying the truth in lying. There are four lies in misrepresenting the truth found in these general charges brought against Paul by Tertullus (and the Jewish Sanhedrin).

1. **Paul is like a spreading pestilence (plague) going about to infect all that come in contact with him with his disease (Acts 24:5).** Actually, Paul was not the spreading pestilence, but rather had the healing remedy in the gospel to the sin that destroys the human soul. The gospel of Jesus Christ is so often identified as the disease by the world because Satan hates it and deceives those in the world, that the gospel enslaves a person when in fact it sets the sinner free from sin and condemnation. Believe not the lie of the enemy that the gospel or God’s holy commandments are the problem. No, your sin is the problem, and the gospel is that alone that can heal the terminal disease of sin. The first charge of Tertullus was a lie.

2. **Paul is seditious and rebellious against Rome (Acts 24:5).** There is no evidence that Paul ever sought to stir up an insurrection against Rome. He resisted the tyranny of Roman officers when his lawful rights were deprived, but he did not gather a mob to overthrow Roman injustice. The second charge of Tertullus was a lie.

3. **Paul is the ringleader of a divisive sect called the Nazarenes (Acts 24:5).** Actually, Paul was not the one who brought division among the Jews. To the contrary, the doctrine, worship, and truth of Jesus Christ were the realization of all that was taught in the Old Testament. Those Jewish leaders and Jewish people who resisted were the ones causing the division among the Jews. The truth of Jesus Christ does lead those who resist it and hate it to turn against those who uphold it and teach it. Although the truth of Jesus Christ ought to bring unity in families and in the church, the truth of Jesus Christ reveals the hardness of men’s hearts and reveals the error to which people cling (Luke 12:51-53). That doesn’t mean that the truth found in Scripture ought to be silenced and not practiced. The truth may be the occasion for a division, but it is error and resistance to the truth that is responsible for the division (1 Corinthians 11:19). The sectarians were the majority of the Jews that divided the Jewish nation against the truth of Jesus Christ—not the minority who followed Jesus Christ. The same is true today. The separatists are not those who stand for biblical truth and will not be moved from that which is given by way of testimony in faithful Confessions, Catechisms, and Covenants, the separatists that cause the division are those (even when they are the majority) who backslide and want to move the landmarks established by our faithful forefathers (Proverbs 22:28). As Samuel Rutherford has rightly noted:

When the greatest part of a Church maketh defection from the Truth, the lesser part remaining

sound, the greatest part is the Church of Separatists (*The Due Right Of Presbyteries*, p. 255).

The third charge of Tertullus was a lie.

4. **Paul is sacrilegious because he profaned the Temple by bringing a Gentile into it (Acts 24:6).** Actually, Paul did not bring a Gentile into the Temple. If in fact this was true, why didn't Tertullus produce the Gentile who allegedly entered the Temple? This was entirely contrived to justify the Jews attempt to murder Paul while he was in the Temple (Acts 24:7-8). The high priest and the elders who came from Jerusalem all partake of these lies and condemn themselves (Acts 24:9). The fourth charge of Tertullus was a lie.

B. Three Applications.

1. If we would not have others lie and misrepresent us in what we believe or in what we say (as Tertullus does here with Paul), let us be known as those who will not do so to others (even those who have lied and misrepresented what we believe or what we have said). The distortion of what we believe concerning the truth of Christ is sinful and wrong, but it doesn't justify us doing the same in return.

2. The sin of ministers flattering their congregations (Ezekiel 12:24). How many preachers today flatter their congregations with what the people want to hear: how to be successful in the eyes of the world, how to be wealthy, how to be free of illness, how to get what you want from others, how to feel good about yourself and flatter yourself, how to receive the applause of others, how to obtain miraculous gifts (and the list goes on). And how many people in those congregations flock to such preachers because they love it to be so (Jeremiah 5:31). The Apostle Paul foretold likewise that churches would turn away from the truth to false teachers who tell them what they want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3-4). In this case, the flatterer claims to speak on behalf of God. How flatterers hate sound doctrine, for those who know what they are to believe about God and man are far less likely to succumb to the smooth words of the flatterer. A minister should examine himself that he not preach according to the lusts of people to gain more members and a bigger church, but that he preach to the true spiritual need of his flock regardless of how unpopular the truth may be.

3. The sin of flattering yourself before God and man (Psalm 36:2). This is a soul-destroying sin. The Puritan preacher, Thomas Brooks (1608-1680), has stated so clearly the serious consequences of the sin of flattery (Works, 4:203):

Flatterers are devouring caterpillars: flatterers' tongues do more mischief than persecutors' swords, for their swords can but destroy the bodies of men, but flatterers' tongues destroy the souls of men. Flatterers are the greatest soul-cheaters and soul-undoers in the world.

Flattery is the soul-destroying sin of those who look to their own righteousness and good works as the reason why God should show them His mercy and grace (which is then no longer mercy and grace). This is the self-righteous pride found in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14). Dear friend, there is no reason for you to flatter yourself before God, for the Lord sees into your very heart and knows the evil and corruption of your heart. You cannot fool Him. It is that very pride and self-righteousness that will prevent you from being justified before God and will condemn you to hell. However, it is your humble confession of your sin and desperate need of Christ that will send you to Him to be justified now and for all eternity in the sight of God. No matter the life you have lived, no matter the sins you have committed—they qualify you to come to Christ, whereas your self-righteousness disqualifies and will condemn you.

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