

Are Patriotism and Nationalism Good or Bad?

Acts 22:22-29

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... And he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live." And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air" - Acts 22:21-23, ESV

What is the difference between patriotism and nationalism? These words are sometimes used interchangeably, but there does seem to be a significant difference between them. Essayist Sydney J. Harris explained, **"The difference between patriotism and nationalism is that the patriot is proud of his country for what it does, and the nationalist is proud of his country no matter what it does; the first attitude creates a feeling of responsibility, but the second a feeling of blind arrogance that leads to war."**

We see nationalism on display in the crowd that wants the Apostle Paul dead. It is displaying the same ugly and violent spirit that another, similar crowd in Jerusalem displayed years earlier when it shouted "*Crucify Him! Crucify Him!*" The Jewish nationalists of Jesus' day were happy to cheer Him when He rode into Jerusalem, waving palm branches and shouting, "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*" But once Jesus criticized and attacked the false worship of the Temple and not the Roman garrisons, they knew He was not going to be their nationalist political Messiah, and so they were done with Him.

Similarly, when Paul addressed the crowd in Hebrew and listed his Jewish resume, they were happy to listen to him. Once he got to the point in his testimony when Jesus sent him to be a witness to the Gentiles, they had heard enough. Suddenly this Jewish man who had been taught by Gamaliel had to die. He was a threat to their nationalist agenda: "*Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.*"

As the Roman tribune took Paul and prepared to flog him, Paul saw an opportunity to appeal to the tribune's patriotism, his sense of Roman justice and ethics. So, Paul told the man he was a Roman citizen, and he was unbound and unharmed. While there is an overtone of nationalism in Paul's conversation with the tribune, he is really appealing to the commander's sense of justice and allegiance to the rule of law.

When we are connecting with people from our broader culture, we can identify many of our shared values, but we need to be careful not to connect on the darker side of some of those shared values. Just as patriotism's dark side is nationalism, so anything we love can have a dark side when we make it an ultimate standard or the source of our identity. God had given Israel their identity as a nation, and they had taken that identity and made it more important than God Himself. May the Lord have mercy on us and keep us from a similar idolatry with any of His good gifts.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You for all of Your good gifts. We thank You for blessing us with life and liberty, our country and our families. May we love You for Your good gifts and never make Your gifts more important than You! In Jesus' name, Amen.