

“Unlikely Allies”
Acts 23:1-10
(Preached at Trinity, April 30, 2007)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. We've been looking at this passage that gives the account of Paul before the Sanhedrin. After Paul arrived at Jerusalem he soon found himself in trouble with the Jews who mobbed him and sought to kill him. He was quickly taken into custody by the Roman authorities who were anxious to put the issue to rest and restore peace in the city. The day after Paul's arrest the Romans brought him before the Sanhedrin in an effort to discover the reason for the uproar.
2. Immediately there was an uproar among the Sanhedrin. Paul had no sooner begun to speak that the high priest ordered a bystander to smite him on the mouth. Paul then railed upon the high priest for his complete ignoring of the law. Paul admitted the respect due to the high priest and continued make his observation of the body of rulers.
3. In **Verse 1** Paul is described as “earnestly beholding the council”
 - A. Many things might have been going through his mind. He was a former Pharisee. Perhaps he was looking for any familiar faces. This was also the body that had granted him letters authorizing him to arrest and bind Christians for transport to Jerusalem for prosecution.
 - B. Paul also noticed something else about the current makeup of the Sanhedrin. The body was comprised of both Sadducees and Pharisees.
Acts 23:6 – “But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees”
4. What Paul did next was truly brilliant. He knew the distinct theological and political differences between the Sadducees and Pharisees.
 - A. The Sadducees were a Jewish sect, much smaller in number than the Pharisees. They were powerful as a political party and part of the aristocracy. They had good relations with the Romans which made them hated by the Jewish nationals. They dominated the Temple and the priesthood.
 1. Theologically, the Sadducees denied the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body. They believed the soul dies with the body. They also denied the existence of angels.
They believed that reward or punishment of sin only takes place in this life.
 2. The Sadducees also denied the oral traditions accepted by the Pharisees.
 3. Peter and John were confronted by the Sadducees because they preached the resurrection of Christ.
Acts 4:1-2 – “And as they spake unto the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them, ² Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead.”

4. Many people today would be in this camp – religious but thoroughly secular. While many today profess to believe in the resurrection their lives prove it has no impact upon them. They live as if Jesus does not exist. They live only by what they can see.
- B. The Pharisees were also a religious/political party. They were noted for their strict observance of the rites and ceremonies of the written law as well as the validity of their own oral traditions.

Mark 7:9 – “And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.”

 1. In contrast to the Sadducees who were the priestly elite, the Pharisees were primarily scribes and devout laymen. The Pharisees are credited with the development of the synagogue.
 2. Theologically, they believed in the resurrection and the immortality of the soul and the existence of a spirit world. They also believed in future reward and punishment based upon their works.
- C. Jesus condemned both groups.

Matthew 16:6 – “Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.”
5. In a brilliant move Paul turns the two groups against one another.

Acts 23:6-7 – “But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men *and* brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. ⁷ And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided.”
6. Although the Pharisees hated Paul they hated the Sadducees more. The suddenly became Paul’s ally.

Acts 23:9 – “And there arose a great cry: and the scribes *that were* of the Pharisees’ part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God.”
7. Seeing the situation in the Sanhedrin was quickly getting out of control, the Roman captain ordered Paul to be removed and taken back to the castle.
8. Some say it was beneath Paul to behave in such an unscrupulous manner purposely causing a divide in the assembly. Some question his honesty since he wasn’t currently a Pharisee. But it is certainly true that Paul *was* a Pharisee and that he certainly retained their creed as it pertained to the resurrection of the dead, although the Pharisees did not believe in the Christian resurrection but the transmigration of the soul from one body to another.
9. Paul simply used sound prudence and took advantage of a situation in order to avoid personal harm.

Tonight I want to examine this wisdom that must accompany the life of a believer. As Jesus sent forth the Twelve into a wicked and dangerous world He told them, **Matthew 10:16** – “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”

We must take the same care.

- I. The first truth we can see here is that no Christian should ever court suffering or martyrdom
- A. Suffering for Christ is honorable and a high calling
1. The presence of suffering in the life of the Christian is a consistent teaching of Scripture
Philippians 1:29 – “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake;”
2 Corinthians 4:17 – “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory;”
2 Timothy 3:12 – “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”
Acts 14:22 – “Confirming the souls of the disciples, *and* exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”
 2. But we must never seek to suffer as if there is virtue in suffering for the sake of suffering
 3. Sometimes Christians have suffered because of arrogant or bad behavior
Sometimes they have suffered because of foolish behavior
- B. God expects us to protect our life
1. This means that whenever possible we should avoid suffering. We must not place ourselves in needless danger.
 2. If we are called upon to dishonor Christ by forsaking Him or His Word we must stand firm even if it means our life, but when possible we must seek peace.
 3. John Dick, Scottish pastor of the 18th century: “Our Lord has recommended to his disciples enlightened prudence, which knows how to improve favourable opportunities, and to avoid danger without a desertion of duty. No man is required to die for religion, unless he cannot live, but by renouncing and dishonoring it.”
- C. God expects us to be wise.
1. Paul didn’t place himself in unnecessary danger
 - a. When facing scourging he mentioned his Roman citizenship.
 - b. He was always ready to suffer and did suffer much. He always fulfilled his duty before God. He went to Jerusalem knowing he would probably suffer if he went.
 - c. But there were times he wisely fled for his safety
Acts 9:23-25 – “And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him: ²⁴ But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. ²⁵ Then the disciples took him by night, and let *him* down by the wall in a basket.”
 2. Now as he stands before the Sanhedrin he shrewdly uses the prejudices of his judges in his favor.
 - a. Paul knew he wasn’t going to get justice before this court
 - b. They were not going to allow him to speak. The wisest thing was to seek to escape from their wicked plans.

3. God expects us to be wise
 - a. For example, sending untrained, unprepared missionaries into danger is foolish
 - b. Sending a couple of ladies into a bad neighborhood is foolish
 - c. Speaking the Gospel to someone who is openly hateful and vindictive towards the Gospel will bear little fruit and may place you in needless danger.
Matthew 7:6 – “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.”
 - d. Matthew Henry: “Our zeal against sin must be guided by discretion, and we must not go about to give instructions, counsels, and rebukes, much less comforts, to hardened scorners, to whom it will certainly do no good, but who will be exasperated and enraged at us. Throw a pearl to a swine, and he will resent it, as if you threw a stone at him; *reproofs* will be called *reproaches*, therefore give not to dogs and swine holy things.”
4. Paul had already seen that speaking before this group was a fool’s folly – It was time for him to make an exit if at all possible.

II. The second thing we can see in this passage is that the Christian’s life in this world should be resourceful – We should be “wise as serpents”

- A. We should seek to find common ground with other believers with whom we may not agree on every point of theology
 1. We all know believers that don’t embrace our theology
 - a. We may work with them or go to school with them
 - b. They may be family members
 2. First, we can fellowship together in Christ. We share the same love for our Savior.
 3. Second, we can encourage and strengthen one another
 4. Sometimes it means giving up our rights for the sake of a weaker brother. This is what Paul did when he entered into Jerusalem. At the request of James and the rest of the elders he accommodated these weaker brothers.
 5. We can always labor together to promote holiness and love for our Lord.
- B. In our Christian work we may at times enlist the aid of unbelievers
 1. In this passage Paul is taking advantage of common ground he shares with the unbelieving Pharisees.
 2. Lost people and Christians share some of the same interests
 - a. All of us want peace
 - b. All of us want liberty and justice
 3. In addition many lost people share our values
 - a. Many support traditional marriage
 - b. Many are pro life
 4. We can work together to achieve some common goals – this means that we must be wise and resourceful.
Matthew 10:16 – “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”

- C. While we must be wise in our dealings with unbelievers which sometimes brings us into cooperation with them, the Bible makes it clear that we are to remain separate and apart from this world.
2 Corinthians 6:17 – “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you,”
James 4:4 – “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”
1. The Bible teaches that we must live in this pagan world but we must stand apart from it.
 2. While we should build relationships with unbelievers so that we might bring them the Gospel we must not be united to them in close relationships.
 They shouldn’t be our bosom friends.
 We must not enter into close covenant relationships – marriage, business partnerships, etc.
- D. While we must be wise and prudent in this dangerous world we must also be gentle and mild.
1. James Montgomery Boice – “The world is a dangerous place, and Christians are vulnerable, like sheep among wolves. Yet in spite of the danger they are to remain sheep. It is always a problem when ministers of the gospel resort to power or savage behavior to accomplish spiritual ends, for then they are like wolves themselves. We cannot forget that we are sent not to overpower the wolves or destroy them but to convert them.”
 2. God has filled us with His Spirit. He has given us great wisdom. We must use that wisdom with the lost as we deal with them with mercy and love.

Conclusion:

1. Paul’s behavior here is a great manifestation of the words of our Lord.
Matthew 10:16 – “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”
 - a. We are in the presence of dangerous, vicious wolves.
 - b. God demands that we be both wise and cunning as well as gentle and meek.
 Harmless as doves – a dove is a symbol of peace.
Romans 12:18 – “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.”
2. Christ forever serves as our example.
 - a. He overpowered them with His wisdom.
Matthew 22:46 – “And no man was able to answer him a word, neither durst any *man* from that day forth ask him any more *questions*.”
 - b. He rebuked them with His meekness.
Matthew 27:12-14 – “And when he was accused of the chief priests and elders, he answered nothing. ¹³ Then said Pilate unto him, Hearest thou not how many things they witness against thee? ¹⁴ And he answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly.”