

Paul and the Politics of Rome

Series: *God & Governance*

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This morning we continue in this series of *God & Governance* as we look at what it means to live as a Christian who is also a citizen of the United States. As we participate in what it means to be citizens of this country, what does it look like for us to be engaged in the world around us but faithful to our calling as Christians. And when politics and governance are such a central topic in so many conversations, both from our media to our social networks to our daily conversations, what does it look like for us to be faithful. As we've been looking at this series, we've been looking at the overview of the Christian scriptures of the direction and the approach in our engagements and the importance of God as King, and what implications that has for us as we live in this world under particular governments, in particular places, in particular times. We've looked at some broad subjects, and we've been looking at some specific subjects like Joseph last week. This week we look at "Paul and the Politics of Rome" to help us understand and see how Paul is both a model of what it means to be a Christian in a very difficult time, but it also points us to something greater than Paul himself, and that is the hope of the resurrection. That because Jesus has been raised from death to life, that changes everything. It changes us from the inside out, and it changes the way in which we engage the world. And hopefully it better informs the way in which we talk about politics and governance. May this help us to do that this morning.

We're going to see in these various passages, which stretch from Acts 22 all the way to Acts 28—though I'm not reading all of that; we have segments, and I will not be reading the whole of each segment, because we'll be here all afternoon. But it's certainly there for you to pursue. But this is perhaps the best selection of the book of Acts, the best part of Paul's life, that helps undergird where we began a couple of weeks ago in Romans 13, of why Paul would call us into submission to earthly governors, but at the same time recognizing that our ultimate king is the Lord Jesus. Where did he find that message of the gospel? He found it because he had to live it out himself, and we see it here. And as we do so, we'll see if a number of things. You'll see in your outline "Gospel Shrewdness" on the part of Paul, but also how he functioned as a "Witness to the Light," and how all of that demonstrated and revealed what his "True Interest" was, and then what implications that has for us. "Gospel Shrewdness," "Witness to the Light," and "True Interest."

First let's begin with "Gospel Shrewdness." In Acts 22 I want you to hear these verses from 22 to 29. It reads like this:

²² Up to this word they listened to him. [That is, Paul was giving a defense of his faith. He was giving a defense to fellow Jews and Jewish leaders.] Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."²³ And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air,²⁴ the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this.²⁵ But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?"²⁶ When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen."²⁷ So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes."²⁸ The

tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth." ²⁹ So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him. [ESV]

So we learn from this entrance into Paul's trial. Let's look at a brief historical sketch. Why was Paul being tried? Paul had been given false charges before the Jewish leaders. They had accused him of doing something that, in the Roman government, they were completely allowed to charge someone with and to adjudicate and to bring him up on charges and to bring it to completion, even to the point of discipline. It was this that they were allowed to have governance over, and it was the temple. The Roman government was not allowed to dictate what the Jews were allowed to do in or out of the temple and around it. So what they had done was, they had accused Paul, who had been teaching in the temple, they had accused him of taking Gentiles from the Court of the Gentiles, which was the outer ring of the of the temple, and they had accused him of bringing them beyond that outer ring into the inner courts, into these other places where only Jews were allowed to congregate, and even that only specific Jews. Now Paul actually never did this. In fact, all the way through this trial they could not give one shred of evidence that he was guilty of this. But here was the key: They knew exactly what they were doing. Paul was preaching Christ and His crucifixion and the resurrection from the dead, that Christ was the Redeemer and Savior of Israel. This was to them beyond their understanding; they were enraged by it. But they knew that if they bring him up on the charge of bringing a Gentile into the inner courts, that the Roman government could say nothing—that they would be able to take care of him and do away with him. But every time they tried to bring him up on trial and he began to testify, over and over again Paul would just simply give testimony that they couldn't bring any shred of evidence. And you can see from the text that they got so angry that it was a dust up; it was practically a riot. And if there's one thing that the Roman governing structure did not want, it was a Jewish riot, because they couldn't keep it under control. So they grabbed Paul, and he said, *What's the deal?* And so Paul gives testimony.

What that demonstrates for us is something very key. And it's not in the text that I read, but it's around it, and it includes this—that a part of Paul's shrewdness is this: He spoke the language. Paul spoke, we know, at least four different languages. He spoke Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin. At one point during his trial, after they're all crazy and going after him, he stood up before them and he spoke to them in Aramaic, and the entire audience hushed. He understood that if he knew the language, not only of his mother tongue, but he knew the language and the politics of Rome and the interaction between his Jewish heritage and the Roman culture. If he was able to speak the language shrewdly, he would be able to get a hearing. And at every specific juncture in which he opened his mouth he said essentially one thing (paraphrasing): Christ crucified, Christ raised from the dead. And he appeared to me, and I was transformed. I persecuted the church, I was there approving of Stephen's death, and yet now I am preaching about the very one that I persecuted. And they couldn't stand it. But he knew that if he could speak the language, he would be able to get a hearing. That is gospel shrewdness.

But second to this: Not only did he speak the language, he understood the game. It's not that Paul was ignorantly walking into this political issue of watching what the Jews thought they could do, what the Romans thought they could do. He knew it before it all happened. He understood the tension. He knew the law. He knew the game of the political engine that was before him. And as such—because he knew the game—he understood who was fighting for power, he understood the

political reasons for why he was being trumped up on these charges, and he understood the value of timing. Do you see it? At no point does Paul claim to be a Roman citizen until his clothes are practically all removed and he's bound up ready to be flogged. You know why he waited to that moment? It's because Paul shrewdly understood that he was safer in the hands of a Roman garrison, strapped and ready to be flogged, than he was in the hands of his own Jewish people. That's why. You see, Paul didn't claim his Roman citizenship when he was giving testimony before the Sadducees and the Pharisees, because he knew that wouldn't help him. He wasn't a dummy, he was wise. But at this moment, at the moment that he probably looked his worse, it was there that he said, *Hey, guess what? Do you know I'm a Roman citizen? Aah.* But he also understood something else. He didn't give away at that moment why he was a Roman citizen. Because he understood that people would spend half their life savings, if necessary, to gain Roman citizenship. That's specifically what's said to him. The guy's looking at him. He's in charge. He's getting ready to have Paul flogged, and this guy's claiming citizenship? He probably looks like a bum who's been left out on the street. He's been roughed, up torn up, and now he's getting ready to be flogged. And [the centurian] says, *Hey, I used a large sum of money to buy it. Who are you?* And Paul says, *Oh, I got it by birth.* I bet you could have heard a pin drop. It's because Paul understood timing. He understood the politics. He understood the power game. He was shrewd.

But understand this. Paul didn't learn the language and know the language—he didn't understand the power game—only because he was simply doing it to be interesting. It's because Paul deeply understood God's providential, sovereign hand that had rescued him from death and brought him to life on the Damascus Road. And the resurrected Christ—the One who he knew had been buried—was now appearing before him and struck him blind. And that resurrection changed everything in his understanding about the world: Who upheld it, Who was in charge of it. And it was that that he deeply understood. And if God had allowed him to come to this point, he had one reason why he would understand the language, and one reason why he would employ wisdom and shrewdness: It's because the Lord's will was in it. He knew Joseph's story that you heard about last week, that what men meant for evil, he was going to claim, by Christ's name, for good—to make Christ known, even if that meant going to the point of being flogged. Paul understood God's purposes, therefore he understood his calling. And he took all of that he was, and in essence he's asking, *How then should I live?* I will live with wisdom and gospel-empowered shrewdness, not for my sake, but for the sake of the gospel.

But he doesn't just employ gospel shrewdness for the sake of it, he says for the sake of the gospel because he sought to be a "Witness to the Light." And being a witness to the light took two things for Paul. One, it was telling about the light, and also showing the light. Please understand, for Paul and for the Christian church those two should always go together, and I'll point us to that in just a moment. First he tells about the light in Acts 23. We know this. In verse 6 of chapter 23 it reads here:

⁶ Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial." ⁷ And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. ⁹ Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, "We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?" ¹⁰ And when the

dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks. [ESV]

Paul understood what verse 6 is trying to imply, as he understood that the message of the gospel of Christ crucified and raised from the dead was a stick of dynamite. And he understood that the gospel message and all that it meant would be a dividing point between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. But he saw it as a moment to proclaim, because if he could get them arguing, they would be arguing about whether Jesus was raised from the dead. That's exactly what you want people arguing about. So much so, that the Pharisees—some seem convinced! *He's done nothing wrong*. But [Paul] understood, because he took the moment not just to cause an argument—so they could argue about Jesus—it's so that he could boldly proclaim. . . and it's right there in the middle when he says, "It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection from the dead that I'm on trial." Forget bringing any Gentiles into the temple; that's not what it's about. It's about whether Jesus was raised from the dead, so therefore we, too, will be raised from the dead—like he was—who believe in Him by faith. He told the truth—with shrewdness.

But in this passage he shows us the other side. He also showed, he showed the light. Look with me again. Acts 23:1 and following [You can put that text up, that might be helpful for folks]:

¹ And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day." ² And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. ³ Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" [Now watch what happens.] ⁴ Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?" ⁵ And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" [ESV]

What the text is telling us is Paul broke the law, unknowingly. He broke the law by speaking evil to the high priest. But when he was told of what he had done, what does he do? Does he turn up his nose and say, *Well, pfft, not my problem*. He didn't disown the high priest. He didn't say, *Well, hey, he's not my priest anymore*. No, he humbles himself, and he acknowledges his wrong. In the midst of being threatened, in the midst of being insulted, Paul commits error, and then he humbles himself. This is why Paul could then say to us Romans 13 we're to respect all those who are in authority. It's only because Paul himself had been challenged with that truth, that he then humbles himself and acknowledges his wrong. What does this mean? What am I trying to say? It's because we were called to be faithful witnesses to the work of Jesus Christ, but that doesn't give us a free pass for ever doing it in the context of disrespect towards those that we disagree with, even those who may violently disagree. Violently disagree, insult the intelligence, insult the church, insult Christ, insult you, insult your family, insult who you are—it doesn't matter. At the end of the day the call of the gospel, as Paul tells us here, is not to, then, in anger or in revenge or in arrogance to tell the gospel, but is to show the love of Christ, even if that means we have sinned against those that we're trying to tell the gospel to, and to ask them for forgiveness.

What would it be like if more and more churches became like a small Baptist church in Texas. After being insulted by a very well-known, anti-Christian atheist, who had spoken against them and against the church, this little Baptist church learned that this outspoken atheist had come down with a serious illness. So this little church raised funds and sent money to this man to help care for

him. That is a demonstration for what it looks like not just to tell of Jesus, but to show him. That is an enormous challenge in our increasingly divided culture, in our increasingly politicized people. It's like everything is so politicized, and it's so easy to get drawn into it. And we then use our Christian faith as a shield for sour attitudes and name calling and saying, *Good riddance*. What would it look like for us to take up something, which my friend Scott Sauls wrote about this year. His calling to the church is this when he says:

“We need to move away from moral-majority thinking and instead embrace our identity as a standout, life-giving minority devoted to the common good. We need to learn from history, lest history repeat itself. Biblical Christianity has *always* thrived when Christians were in the political minority, and has *always* languished when Christians were, or attempted to become, the dominant political majority...the saltiness of Christianity in Rome lost its savor when a later Emperor, Constantine, tried to impose Christianity — a “moral majority,” so to speak — on all of Rome as the State religion. The results were disastrous. It's all there in church history. When we remember that we serve a King and his Kingdom, that Jesus' Kingdom is *not* of this world, we will be for the world in every possible way. We will seek the peace and flourishing of our cities and our neighbors. The presence of Christians in the world then becomes not only good news for Christians, but for everybody. God has left us in the world, in the name of Christ and with the resources he has availed to us, to leave the world better than we found it.

It means an opportunity to show Christ as much as we seek to tell the world of him. How could Paul be a witness to the light? Jesus told him. Verse 11 of chapter 23. After all this had taken place, he'd been taken back into the Roman legal protection.

¹¹ The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.” [ESV]

You know that that's important; it's because Paul understood that the Lord would be with him. And ladies and gentlemen, this isn't just a message to Paul. Because it is being read to the church, the message of Jesus to Paul is also a message to you, if you are professing Christian. We are called to testify of Christ, and we will do so, but he is with us. He has not left us alone. And he calls us to take courage as he did Joshua. He told Joshua, *I will be with you*. And the Lord is indeed with us, but it doesn't mean we won't suffer insult and trial, even persecution. But our calling is to tell him to show the gospel.

The final point is not only do we see Paul learning gospel shrewdness and being a witness to the light, it all demonstrates what was his “True Interest. His true interest as a Roman citizen and all the rules and all the blessings that that afforded him, and as one who was a Pharisee of Pharisees, and all the respect and all the history and all the training and all that that afforded him—he has all of these things, and he doesn't look at them and say, *Look at me*. He uses all of these things—and the gifts and the experience and the history and what Jesus has done for him—to demonstrate what is his true interest. His true interest is not his own skin. It is not his own rights for the sake of them being his rights. It is for the sake that the gospel may go forward.

Consider this. We see the true interest of Paul, that despite the political intrigue that he was getting ready to face—because what he was getting ready to face is this. . . He goes before one

Roman governor, [Felix], and [Felix] keeps coming back to Paul [over] a period of almost two [years] in hopes that Paul will bribe him to get out of jail, even though [Felix] knows that that's actually against Roman law. Meaning we have the same thing today—we can pay money to get our political interests heard. It all started back there. It's been going on a long time. Maybe we don't call them bribes, maybe you do. But our political systems around the world are full of corruption, and so was the Roman government. But Paul would survive the intrigue for the sake of the gospel. He didn't pay the bribe, even though that would mean that he would spend two years under house arrest. In fact, between the time he appeared before Ananias in chapter 22 and the end of chapter 28 is 4+ years—two segments of two year confinements to house. Over four years would [pass] between [chapters] 22 and 28 of Acts. So he would survive not only the intrigue, he would also keep his true interests, despite the danger: the shipwrecks, the being at sea, of being blown about not knowing if he would survive, not knowing if he would survive being under Roman guard. He kept his true interest despite the time, the four years of languishing. You see, the whole appeal. . . Paul's whole journey, his shrewdness and his wise strategy in telling and showing the gospel was for this reason: How can I best appeal and witness to Christ.

If you are a believer, then you are a citizen of heaven first. You're a citizen of God and Christ's Kingdom first. And if you're a citizen of the United States, or whatever country, that's secondary. And what that means is we hold these things in tension. That what defines you as a human being, what defines you as a person is not what the Constitution and the Bill of Rights say about you. No matter how wonderful, no matter how respectable, all those documents are—and they're wonderful, and we're going to celebrate what it means to be an American tomorrow—but I will tell you that doesn't define you. What defines you is what Christ has done for you on the cross and what he did for you being raised from death to life. That means that when we speak of the Constitution and when we speak of our rights, we do so not clinging to them as if they were ours. No, what is yours is your salvation in Christ. These things have been afforded to you as a citizen, and we ought to use them shrewdly and wisely, but not for the protection of our own skin first, but to make Christ known.

What if Christians individually and corporately made our one key message: We will pray for those in authority and we will conduct ourselves as American citizens, but we will pray that the United States—in every structure, in every government, every person in power and citizen of the United States will hear this—that we are sinners desperately in need of mercy. And we try and we try and we try to heal our brokenness through pleasure and escape. We cannot do it. We've tried—it doesn't work. The only thing that has saved us is Jesus Christ. And you know what? He died on the cross, and he was raised to life on the third day. Our king, our president, our ruler, is not in Washington D.C.; our ruler is in heaven. And by His grace we will seek to be the best citizens we can be, not for our sake, but for His glory.

But I say to you, if you are a Christian this morning and you wring your hands and you're worried and you're concerned about what you read around the world, and at times it feels like the cause of all the tension and all the excitement that is given to that tension, and it's splashed across every screen from our pockets to our TV's to techers everywhere, and that ramps us up and we feel as though the world is coming apart—may the Lord remind you that thousands of Christians have gone before you where the world was coming apart. Their world was being turned upside down. They were being strapped up and flogged, and yet they testified to this, so that we can read this: that Jesus Christ is Lord and His Kingdom is not of this world. Though the nations rage, the Lord is on the throne.

But if you are not a Christian and you find yourself also in worry and anxiety, I don't blame you. I completely understand. I remember what it was like not to believe. And when I didn't believe, I felt that my life was in the hands of myself and what others were seeking to do or to take from me. You may feel that, too. But I tell you, what you ache for most is what I came to realize I ached for—something that would not change, something that was completely trustworthy, and someone who completely loved me in all that I am and all that I was. Jesus has died for you. And he was raised from death to life to conquer all sin, to demonstrate his love for you, and to give you a hope that the resurrection will also be for you, that this life in this flesh is just the beginning of eternal life in His kingdom. And He wants you to know it. If you do not know it, know this: that no president, no leader, no pleasure will save you, but the Lord. Come to him, and he will give you a peace that transcends all understanding, that transcends elections, transcends arguments and differences, and puts you on a foundation that is pure and eternal. It is the rock of our salvation, Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Father, I pray for my brothers and sisters in Christ who are seated here this morning. I pray that you would help us to remember the model of Paul, because he points us to you. That all that we have and all that we have been given in this life, whether as individuals or corporately, are all a gift. So Lord, how can we then use the gifts that are afforded to us as citizens of the United States—not to build our own private economies alone, but rather to use all that we have been given to make Christ known, to tell and to show the love of Christ. Help us, Lord, to be rescued from anxiety and worry and fear and defensiveness. But also for those, Lord, who do not know you. None of my words can save anyone, but I pray that your Spirit would draw those who do not know you, who desire a peace that transcends all the turmoil. I pray that you would draw them to yourself this morning. And I pray you would help us to be faithful witnesses to Christ to them. We thank you and praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.