Ministry of the Holy Spirit
Acts 21:17-26
Lesson 39 – When Being Right Is Not Enough

Acts 21:17-26 (NIV)

17 When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. 18 The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. 19 Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law.

21 They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. 22 What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, 23 so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow.

24 Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. 25 As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

26 The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

Discussion Questions

1. Giving God the Glory (Acts 21:17–19)
   Paul reported what God had accomplished through his ministry rather than emphasizing his personal achievements.
   a. What does this teach us about humility, and how can we recognize when our desire for recognition is competing with our desire to glorify God?
2. Celebrating Different Assignments (Acts 21:19–20; 1 Corinthians 12:4–6)
   Paul ministered primarily among Gentiles, while James led Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

   a. Why do Christians sometimes struggle to celebrate God's work when it happens through people whose methods, traditions, or approaches differ from their own?

3. Unity Without Uniformity (Ephesians 4:3–6; Romans 14:1–4)
   a. What is the difference between Christian unity and uniformity?
   b. How can the church maintain unity in essential beliefs while allowing differences in personal preferences, worship styles, and traditions?
4. When People Misrepresent You (Acts 21:20–21)

   Paul was accused of teaching Jewish believers to abandon Moses and their customs, even though his message concerned salvation through faith in Christ.
   a. How should Christians respond when their words, intentions, or actions are misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented?
5. Choosing Your Battles Wisely (Proverbs 15:1; James 1:19–20)

   Not every criticism deserves a response, and not every disagreement requires confrontation.
   a. How can we distinguish between situations where we should defend the truth and situations where responding would only satisfy our pride?
6. Being Right Versus Being Righteous (Philippians 2:3–5; Proverbs 16:18)
   a. Is it possible to be factually or biblically correct but spiritually wrong in how we handle a situation?
   b. What attitudes or behaviors might reveal that our desire to win an argument has become more important than demonstrating Christlike character?
7. Convictions Versus Preferences (Acts 21:23–24; Romans 14:13–19)

   Paul was willing to participate in Jewish purification practices without abandoning the gospel.
   a. How can we determine the difference between a biblical conviction that must be defended and a personal preference that we should be willing to surrender?
8. The Responsibility of Christian Freedom (1 Corinthians 9:19–23; Galatians 5:13)
   a. Paul understood that freedom in Christ gave him the opportunity to serve others rather than simply insist upon his rights. When might exercising a legitimate personal freedom create an unnecessary obstacle for someone else's spiritual growth?
9. The Limits of Accommodation (Galatians 2:11–14; Acts 21:24–25)

   Paul accommodated Jewish customs in Jerusalem, yet previously confronted Peter when his conduct compromised the truth of the gospel.
   a. What principles help us recognize when accommodation promotes unity and when compromise threatens our faith, integrity, or commitment to justice?

10. Humility That Costs Something (Acts 21:24–26; Philippians 2:5–8)

    Paul agreed to participate in purification rites and pay the expenses of four men, even though he did not need those practices for salvation.

    a. Why is humility often more difficult when it requires us to surrender something we believe we have a right to keep?

11. Obedience Without Guaranteed Results (Acts 21:26–30; Galatians 6:9)

    Despite Paul's willingness to cooperate, he still encountered opposition and was eventually arrested.

    a. What does this teach us about obedience when doing the right thing does not produce the outcome we expected?
    b. How can we remain faithful when our efforts to make peace are rejected?

12. Protecting Your Assignment from Your Ego (Philippians 2:3–4; 2 Timothy 4:7)

    The sermon declares, "You can win the argument and lose the assignment."

    a. What are some ways pride, resentment, the need for validation, or the desire to have the last word can distract us from God's purpose?
    b. How can we recognize when our ego is interfering with our obedience?

Takeaway Challenge

Choose Purpose Over Pride

During the next seven days, identify one relationship or situation where you have been determined to prove that you are right. Before responding or revisiting the disagreement, prayerfully ask yourself three questions:
Am I defending a biblical conviction or protecting my ego?
Will my response promote understanding or create additional division?
What response would best represent Jesus Christ?

Your assignment: Make one intentional decision to prioritize peace, humility, or reconciliation over winning an unnecessary argument. This does not require accepting abuse, overlooking injustice, or compromising truth. It means choosing a response that reflects spiritual maturity.

Share your major takeaways from the Lesson/Sermon this week.

Commentary

Paul's Reluctant Decision: A Picture of Compromise, 21:17-40

(21:17-40) **Introduction**: peace is necessary for the preaching of the gospel. Paul compromised, hoping to secure peace with those who opposed him so strongly. Why? So that he might be able to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ unhindered and unhampered.

1. (21:17-18) **Paul**: Paul was in Jerusalem and was well received by those with whom he stayed. This was apparently the unofficial welcome by a handful of believers. Paul requested an official meeting with James the next day. Note: all of Paul's companions and all of the Jerusalem elders were present at the official meeting, but the whole church was not called together. The rumors about Paul had probably affected the congregation so much that it would have been unwise for them to be present. The apostles were probably away on evangelistic missions at this time.

2. (21:19-20) **God— Praise**: picture one is the work of God being reported and God being glorified. Note three striking points.

1. Paul covered the events of the third mission tour in detail. The word "particularly" means one by one, in detail, step by step. Note: it had been about five years since Paul had last visited in the Jerusalem church.

2. Paul gave all the credit to God for what had been done—without exception. It was what God had wrought, not what he had done nor what anyone else had done. The churches and the believers were the result of God's glorious grace and power.

3. It was James and the Jerusalem elders who glorified God, not Paul. It is important to note this, for it shows that they supported Paul and were not among those who opposed Paul.

Thought 1. Note the lessons for churches and believers of every generation.

1) Churches should be informed of mission tours in detail.

2) God alone should be recognized and credited with being the Person who does the work.

3) God alone should be praised for what is wrought.

"Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples" (John 15:8).

"By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name" (Hebrews 13:15).

3. (21:20-26) **Compromise— Weak, Support**: picture two is that of God's servant compromising in order to secure peace. James brought up a serious problem. The Scripture and outline give a clear overview of the problem and compromise Paul made. Note these facts.

1. Thousands of Jewish believers were disturbed with God's minister. The Greek word for "many thousands" (*posai muriades*) means thousands upon thousands, myriads upon myriads.

2. The disturbance was caused by rumors. Some were lying, saying that Paul was teaching false doctrine, that the law of Moses was no longer to be kept, nor was circumcision to be observed. The word "forsake" (*apostasian apo*) is the word for apostasy. This is the most serious accusation possible to a Jew, apostasy from Moses and the law of circumcision. Of course, Paul never said this. He said that...

- a person could be circumcised and keep the customs of the law if he wished.

- a person, however, did not have to be circumcised or keep the law *to be saved*. The law is not what saves a person. Christ alone saves.

3. The compromise suggested was a Jewish vow and rite. Apparently it involved some Nazarite vow such as shaving the head and making several offerings (Numbers 6:1-21). It was suggested that Paul pay for the animals or incense needed for the other four men as well as for himself. Often the poor were unable to undergo these expenses, so some wealthy benefactor paid the fees for the poor. This was highly commendable to the Jews. The attempt was to do everything possible to show that Paul was a true Jew, and was not teaching that Moses' law was to be forsaken. Contrariwise, he was even obeying the law himself.

4. James pointed out that he and the Jerusalem church had compromised with Paul before, and his suggestion now did not violate that compromise (Acts 21:25). The need now was for Paul to compromise and help bring peace. As expected, Paul did.

Thought 1. Note four important lessons.

1) Paul never taught that customs and rituals could not be practiced if a person wished. He only taught that they were not necessary to salvation. In fact, Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3) and taught throughout his epistles that ritual and customs were a matter of personal preference

2) Even true believers can be tragically influenced by rumors and untruths. We must always be on guard against troublemakers.

3) When believers become legalistic and begin to live by rules and regulations, they often become *witch hunters*. They seek out those who fail to meet their standards. Their very attitude creates an atmosphere ripe for rumor.

4) Paul was willing to become all things and to do anything not contrary to God in order to reach men for Christ.

"Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations [argue different opinions]" (Romans 14:1).

"We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves" (Romans 15:1).