

PAUL AND OUR MODELS OF SPIRITUAL SERVICE
ACTS 21:17-40

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Our world is always looking for heroes. Unfortunately good heroes may seem hard to come by in our day. In the Las Vegas area we are inundated with entertainers and celebrities. We do have some philanthropists, but there are not enough models of great character and virtue.

Working in government was once regarded as involving a life of public service. For many who work in government, perhaps even most, that is still the case. But it is easy to become cynical when we read about congressmen who come out of long terms of office in Washington much richer than when they went in. And there are too many stories like Congresswoman Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick from Florida who was recently indicted for taking \$5 million in FEMA money and using it to fund her campaign and to spend on personal expenses. And we all scratch our heads and wonder how public officials in Minnesota allowed billions of dollars to be involved in fraudulent schemes.

Many of us look to the world of sports for heroes. No doubt there are just as many athletes today with genuine skill and talent as there ever were. But there may not be as many who are worth emulating, not enough Tim Tebows. Certainly there seem to be fewer with commitment to their teams and to their communities. Rosters on professional teams change so quickly that it is hard to keep up with who is playing for whom. Now that is true even on the college level.

There are heroes in our world who are worth emulating. We have looked at a couple of them as we have studied the Book of Acts. We have talked about the life of the Russian dissident Alexander Ogorodnikov and the opposition politician Alexei Navalny who was recently killed in a Siberian prison camp. But I doubt that we can find a better model of service than the man we are looking at in our passage this morning. The verses that we are going to consider this morning highlight the Apostle Paul as a model of spiritual service.

I.A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. SERVING THE CHURCH) In the first half of our passage we are going to look at Paul as he was SERVING THE CHURCH. In vv. 17-19 we will consider his example of BEING RESPONSIBLE TO FELLOW CHRISTIANS. (I. SERVING THE CHURCH A. BEING RESPONSIBLE...) The chief reason that Paul made this trip to Jerusalem was to bring financial aid to the Jewish Christians of Judea. As Paul was involved in planting a church in Ephesus in Asia Minor, he apparently heard about the famine in the Jewish homeland. Knowing that Christians would be cut off from sources of aid that might come from Jewish religious and civic institutions, Paul set about encouraging the churches of Asia Minor and Greece to take up a contribution for the Christians of Judea. After visiting churches in Greece and Asia Minor he brought along

representatives of the churches with this collected money to distribute to the needy Christians of Judea.

The Book of Acts doesn't actually talk much about this famine relief aid. Our passage doesn't make any reference to it at all. Perhaps that part of the trip is overshadowed in Luke's mind by the arrest of Paul. We know about the food relief from the epistles that Paul wrote during this time.

Soon after Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he had a meeting with the Christian leaders of the church. James was the half brother of Jesus and the apparent leader of this group of elders. Paul gave a report about what had happened in the course of his three missionary trips in the past decade. Probably it was now that he gave the elders the collection from the churches in the west.

In giving this aid to the church in Jerusalem Paul was showing responsibility to his fellow Christians. He was showing that he and the newer Christians of Greece and Asia Minor had a genuine concern for their fellow believers. That is a concern that we Christians should always have. We should have that kind of concern for fellow believers in our own midst and for fellow believers in other parts of the world. Institutionally we try to do that through our deacons fund, through our missions program, and through outreaches like Operation Christmas Child.

Harvard professor Arthur Brooks has studied the charitable habits of Americans. He found that religious conservatives are 20 per cent more likely to give than secular conservatives. They also give nearly four times more dollars per year and volunteer more than twice as frequently. (*World*, 12/9/2006)

Paul showed responsibility toward fellow believers not only by meeting their physical needs but also by demonstrating accountability to the Christian leadership in Jerusalem. In his encounter on the road to Damascus Paul had been commissioned directly by Jesus Christ to be an evangelist to the Gentiles. So his first accountability was to Christ. But he also had a certain accountability to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Some years earlier we saw him go to Jerusalem with leaders from the church in Antioch to find agreement on their method of approach to Gentiles. Now he demonstrates a certain accountability in making his report to the elders in Jerusalem and in listening to a suggestion that they make.

Christian leaders often get into trouble today when they lose accountability to other Christians. We cut ethical corners, or we head out in directions where we don't have proper support. Christians often buy into the thinking of our culture that we are our own bosses and don't have to answer to much of anyone for our behavior. We leave our families or we switch churches if we take flack for being guilty of wrong behavior.

B.

In vv. 20-26 we find Paul serving the church not only by being responsible to fellow Christians but also by PRESERVING UNITY AMONG FELLOW CHRISTIANS. (I.

SERVING... A... B. PRESERVING UNITY AMONG...) Part of Paul's reason for coming to Jerusalem with food aid was to help preserve the unity of the worldwide church. Paul realized that there were doubts among many of the Jewish Christians of Judea about the acceptability of Christian Gentiles. By bringing much needed practical help to Jerusalem from mostly Gentile Christians there was the hope that unity within the universal church would be promoted. Here we see Paul's willingness to go to greater lengths to encourage that unity.

The Jerusalem elders glorified God when they heard Paul's report about the advance of the kingdom of God in regions to the west. These men were genuinely supportive of Paul's ministry, and they were no doubt thankful for the financial gift that was probably given in this meeting. They were also concerned about unity, and they realized that there were some Jewish Christians in their midst who had wrong attitudes about Paul and the spread of the gospel among Gentiles.

Beginning in the middle of v. 20 they state the problem: **"You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, 21 and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. 22 What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come."**

These charges against Paul were not true. He was not telling Jews to forget Moses, to stop circumcising their children, or to dump all of their customs. Probably it was the unbelieving Jews who were making these charges. Unfortunately many of the Christian Jews were believing them and perhaps even passing them on to others.

Buying into malicious rumors without having first hand information always tends to promote disunity in a church. Years ago when I was a youth pastor there was one family in the church who blamed me because their son didn't turn out well spiritually. At one point they somehow came up with the idea that I wasn't spending much time with the young people in the church because I was working on my Masters degree. Two families in the church told me that this is what this one set of parents told them. It was just factually untrue. I already had my Master's degree. I was not going to school. But rather than check out the facts, they spread false stories and managed to cause me grief and to produce disruption in the church.

The Jerusalem elders suggest a way of dealing with their false rumors that is described in vv. 23 & 24: **"Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24 take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law."**

In v. 25 the elders make reference to the earlier Jerusalem council visit where it was recognized that Gentiles should not have to follow the Law of Moses but that they

should show sensitivity to behavior that might offend Jewish sensibilities. Perhaps mention of this was made for the benefit of the Gentile representatives from the western churches who were also present.

Verse 26 indicates that Paul accepted the suggestion of the elders and set about to carry it out. It is unclear as to the nature of the purification requested for Paul. Some suggest that it was purification required in Jewish tradition from being in Gentile lands. The four men with Paul were probably fulfilling a Nazarite vow, which is described in the Old Testament in Numbers #6. This was a voluntary vow whereby a Jew could express his devotion to the Lord for whatever length of time he chose. During the time of the vow he could not eat or drink anything that came from grapes. He could not cut his hair. And he could not touch a dead body. In Paul's day it was typical for men who took this vow to do it for a period of a month. At the end of the designated time the person was to go to the temple, offer animal sacrifices, have his hair cut off, and perform a couple of other rituals.

The animals required for the sacrifice were a male lamb, a female lamb, and a ram. To pay for this for four men was very expensive. To expect a guy on a missionary budget to cover the cost was a bit much. So some commentators suggest that this purification was for violations of the vow, probably unintentional, which would require a much less expensive sacrifice.

The theological issue sometimes raised is whether Paul and the Jerusalem elders were right to do this. Was Paul violating his own teachings about how the Law of Moses was obsolete? Was he putting himself back under the Law when he should have been living according to a new principle? One noted commentator calls what Paul did here the greatest mistake of his ministry.

The high position which Paul had did not make him sinless. But I am inclined to think that he was not sinning in doing what he did. Earlier in #18 we saw that Paul apparently made a Nazarite vow himself. In #24 we will also see in a couple weeks that Paul will make reference to this incident without expressing any sense of shame about it. It seems that Paul treated these rituals and sacrifices not as means of gaining God's favor, but rather as customs to be observed in appreciation of his religious heritage. Paul saw himself, now that he was a Christian, as having freedom to live like a Gentile when among the Gentiles, and to live like a Jew when he was living among Jews.

(ROMANS 14:3) In Romans #14 vv. 3-6 Paul wrote, **“Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. (ROMANS 14:4) Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (ROMANS 14:5) One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. (ROMANS 14:6) The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God,**

while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.”

Some Jewish Christians are still going to feel that they should observe the Sabbath day. Some will see that as unnecessary. Some are going to still have a hard time eating pork. That's OK. Don't be judgmental toward each other. Paul saw himself as having freedom to observe Jewish customs and freedom not to observe them. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The difficulty was that some Jews who came to identify themselves as followers of Christ came to be so wrapped up in their continued observance of the Old Testament Law that that they failed to grasp and practice the distinctives of the Christian life. They failed to fully comprehend that salvation from God is based on faith in the sacrifice of Christ for their sins plus nothing else. That is the only way that any of us can get to heaven. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. Our responsibility is simply to put our trust in Him and what He did for us. The overdependence that some of these Jewish Christians had on Jewish traditions would prompt the writing of the Epistle to the Hebrews a few years later.

While Paul may not have been sinning in observing these Jewish ceremonies, we are still left with the question about whether he and the elders did the wisest thing in having him go into the temple. We know from the rest of the story that he ended up in jail because of it. Acts and the New Testament do not give any indication about whether Paul's participation in these Jewish rituals served to make Jewish Christians in Jerusalem more positive about his Gentile ministry. So that question cannot be decided with certainty.

We can appreciate the high priority that the apostle placed on the importance of preserving unity in the church. He was willing to go to great lengths, even to risk his life, for the sake of church unity. How often do we think about how our behavior or our speech affects the unity of the church? ---- Wouldn't it be great if we could get into the habit of responding when we are tempted to say something negative about another Christian, or to pass on a negative rumor that we don't know to be factual, by asking ourselves how this behavior will affect the unity of the church--- the unity of this local church, or unity among Christians generally?!

In His prayer at the Last Supper, recorded in John #17, Jesus prayed earnestly that his followers might be one **“that the world might believe that You sent Me.”** So our responsibility in regard to unity should involve not just avoiding negative behavior, but also to be positively involved in doing what we can to help Christians get along with each other. Such is our example from Paul of spiritual service.

II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. SERVING THE LOST) In verses 27-40 we move from a consideration of serving the church to SERVING THE LOST. In verses 27-36 we are going to look specifically at Paul as a model of BECOMING ALL THINGS TO ALL

PEOPLE. (II. SERVING THE LOST A. BECOMING ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE)
Paul's primary motivation in following the suggestion of the elders was to promote the unity of the church and gain a positive response from the Jewish Christians. But Paul was at heart an evangelist and had as a mindset thoughts about how his actions would affect unbelievers and how he could get more opportunities to share the gospel. So I suspect that as he followed the requirements of this ritual he was also thinking about how he could serve these lost Jews.

Paul was willing to go to great lengths to bring the gospel to lost people. He traveled over much of the Roman world. He endured persecution, and he sought to live according to the cultures of the people he was seeking to reach. (1 CORINTHIANS 9:20) In 1 Corinthians #9 vv.20-22 he wrote, **"To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. (1 CORINTHIANS 9:21) To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. (1 CORINTHIANS 9:22) To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some."** So if participating in this religious ritual would also help to gain a hearing from these religious Jews, that was an added benefit for Paul. (PROJECTOR OFF)

According to v. 27 then, **"When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him..."** Asia was the name of the province in Asia Minor of which Ephesus was the capital. Some Jews had come to Jerusalem from there to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. Perhaps a few were even on the boat on which Paul and his friends traveled. Obviously these guys were not Christians and obviously they resented his ministry in Ephesus, where Paul had lived for almost three years.

Verse 28 says that these guys cried out, **"Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."** Verse 29 adds, **"For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple."**

Some of these Ephesian Jews knew Trophimus from Ephesus and falsely assumed that Paul had brought this Gentile into the temple with him. The Asian Jews also made other wild charges and false accusations against Paul. The most serious charge was that Paul had brought a Gentile into the temple. (TEMPLE 002) The area in the middle of the temple compound marked off by a low gate on the north and the south was restricted to Jews. Gentiles were allowed in the area outside of the two low walls.

(TEMPLE.JPG) The gate on the right in this picture, called the soreg, separated the Court of the Gentiles from the Court of the Jewish Women. In 1871 and then again in

1935 inscriptions were found in Greek and Latin which came from this wall and contained this warning (SOREG INSCRIPTION): **“No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”** We know from sources outside of the Bible that the Romans allowed the Jews to execute any Gentile who came within these sacred precincts. (TEMPLE 5) Any Jew who brought a Gentile within this area would also be subject to the death penalty. The mob here wasn't going to bother with the niceties of any kind of trial or with any effort to find out if the charge was really true.

Verse 30 says, **“Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.”** It is not clear which gate it was which was shut.

The author Luke continues in vv. 31 & 32 (TEMPLE 009): **“And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. 32 He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.”** The Roman soldiers were stationed in a building on the northeast corner of the temple compound known as the Fortress Antonia.

(FORTRESS ANTONIA) Herod the Great built this building when Mark Antony was vying for control of the Roman Empire. Mark Antony had affirmed Herod in his position of kingship in Judea. Thus Herod named the place Fortress Antonia.

The fortress was built here because Herod and the Romans had seen that the Jews were volatile people. If there was one place where trouble could start, it was in their holy temple. So there was always a garrison of Roman soldiers stationed here to keep an eye on things. During the Jewish feasts extra troops were always sent down from the Roman capital of Judea, Caesarea. When the Romans saw a riot developing their commander quickly interceded with his officers and soldiers. A centurion at this time probably commanded only 80 men rather than 100. But the use of “centurion” in the plural indicates that there were at least 160 legionnaires who got involved now, and perhaps many more. (PROJECTOR OFF)

God had originally intended that Israel should be a light to the nations. The Jews had done a lousy job of bringing the good news about their God to the Gentiles. Most of the religious Jews were so concerned about their own piety and holiness that they wanted as little to do with Gentiles as possible. Now Paul had come on the scene as a Jew who was bringing the truth to the Gentiles in other parts of the world. These religious Jews were so enraged by his involvement with Gentiles that they wanted to kill him. Paul was willing to become all things to all people for the sake of his God. These people were willing to become all things only to themselves.

As we have seen several times in the Book of Acts, which was written to a Roman official for purposes of showing the legitimacy of the gospel, the Romans rescue a

messenger of the gospel from the Jews. Beginning in v. 33 we read, **“Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. 34 Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. 35 And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, 36 for the mob of the people followed, crying out, ‘Away with him!’”**

Paul became all things to all people that he might win some to Christ. He would not compromise the standards of the Bible in seeking to identify with the people he wanted to reach. But he would sacrifice his Christian freedom and his own cultural ways of being to serve the lost. It is a challenge for missionaries who go to significantly different cultures today to shed their own cultural background and live in other cultures. Some missionaries in the 1800s didn't always do such a good job of that. Sometimes they tried to get colonial people to adopt western culture along with the gospel. That at times produced resentment. Generally foreign missionaries are more tuned in to not making the same mistake today.

We can make some applications ourselves to our own efforts to serve the lost. On a simple level it means that try to be aware of cultural sensitivities and we don't do things like invite our Mormon friends over for coffee or our Jewish friends over for a roast pork supper. At another level it means that we need to go where lost people are to reach them. We have to meet them on their turf. It's great if they will come to church with us. But they won't always be willing to do that, and we shouldn't necessarily expect that they will.

Paul went to the synagogue to reach the Jews. He went to the market place to speak to the Gentiles. So it is that we as a church go to nursing homes, the Veterans Home in town, jails and prisons. We send a group of people into the public school for Good News Club. As individuals we look for other opportunities to connect with lost people around us.

B.

So it is that Paul served the lost by TAKING ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE THE GOSPEL. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. SERVING THE LOST A. B. TAKING ADVANTAGE OF...) That is what vv. 37-40 show us. Notice how Paul responds in vv. 37 & 38: **“As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, ‘May I say something to you?’ And he said, ‘Do you know Greek? 38 Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?’”**

The Jewish historian Josephus makes reference to this incident in his writings. In 54 AD, which was about three years before the time of our story, an Egyptian showed up in Jerusalem claiming to be a prophet of God. He led his band of followers to the top of the Mount of Olives to the east of the city. He said that at his command the walls of Jerusalem would fall flat and then they could capture the Roman garrison. For some

unknown reason the walls failed to fall down flat. The Roman governor Felix sent his troops to the top of the Mount and killed and captured many of these followers. The Egyptian leader disappeared.

The Roman commander's first reaction is to wonder if Paul is that Egyptian. Verses 39 & 40 tell us, **"Paul replied, 'I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.'** 40 **And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language..."** It is actually the Aramaic language which our text says that Paul used. This was the first language of most of the people of the entire Near Eastern area. Next week we will look at what he said.

This guy had just been rescued from certain death at the hands of an angry mob of fellow Jews. They hated him and wanted him dead. So what does he want to do? Preach the gospel to them. This guy was so tuned in to opportunities to share the gospel that he couldn't let a crowd like this get away without giving them a shot, and the Roman commander let him do it.

What an example! What a model of a Christian who served the lost, taking advantage of opportunities to share the gospel. I'm embarrassed sometimes at the opportunities I let pass me by.

Paul is a great example of a Christian whose mind was always searching for opportunities to share the gospel. We will see next week that he tells them about Jesus by means of telling about his own testimony, his own experience in becoming a Christian. That is something that any Christian can do. You don't need to know a ton of theology. We don't have to know much about the Bible. All that we need to do to share the gospel is to describe how Jesus entered our life and made a positive change in us.

In fact newer Christians are often more effective in evangelism than us who have been Christians for a long time. Peter Wagner was a scholar who has studied the subject of church growth a lot. In a book that he wrote entitled *Your Church Can Grow* he says, **"The highest potential for evangelism through the role of witness comes from new converts who still have natural bridges to unsaved friends and relatives."** So Paul's example of boldness and sensitivity to opportunities to share the gospel has application to all of us who have trusted in Jesus as our Savior.

The attitude all of us Christians are called upon to cultivate is one of humble service. Christian editor Mark Galli provides us with these words of wisdom: **"Instead of a life of experience, Christ calls us to a life of love. And a life of love for the most part means attending to the tedious details of others' lives, and serving them in sacrificial ways that most days feels, well, not exciting at all. Rather than sweeping the kitchen, cleaning the toilet, listening to the talkative and boring neighbor, slopping eggs onto a plate at the homeless shelter, or crunching numbers for another eight hours at the office--- surely life is meant for more than this. We are tempted to wonder, 'is that all there is to the 'abundant' Christian life? Shouldn't my life be more adventurous if God is in me and all around me? How am I going to be all I'm supposed to be if I have to empty bedpans in Peoria? I would just die if I had to do that. Yes, you would. Jesus called it dying to self. Love is precisely denying**

the self that wants to glory in experience. The cost of discipleship most of us are asked to pay is to live the life God has given us, serving in mundane ways the people he has put in our path.”
(Christianity Today, May, 2013)