

SERMON

“INTEGRITY: PAUL ON TRIAL”

ACTS 24:1-27

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Acts 24:1-27. ¹ Five days later the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and an attorney, a certain Tertullus, and they reported their case against Paul to the governor. ² When Paul had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying: "Your Excellency, because of you we have long enjoyed peace, and reforms have been made for this people because of your foresight. ³ We welcome this in every way and everywhere with utmost gratitude. ⁴ But, to detain you no further, I beg you to hear us briefly with your customary graciousness. ⁵ We have, in fact, found this man a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. ⁶ He even tried to profane the temple, and so we seized him. [⁷ *But the chief captain Lysias came upon us, and with great violence took him away out of our hands,*] ⁸ By examining him yourself you will be able to learn from him concerning everything of which we accuse him." ⁹ The Jews also joined in the charge by asserting that all this was true.

¹⁰ When the governor motioned to him to speak, Paul replied: "I cheerfully make my defense, knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation. ¹¹ As you can find out, it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem. ¹² They did not find me disputing with anyone in the temple or stirring up a crowd either in the synagogues or throughout the city. ¹³ Neither can they prove to you the charge that they now bring against me. ¹⁴ But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets. ¹⁵ I have a hope in God-- a hope that they themselves also accept-- that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous. ¹⁶ Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people. ¹⁷ Now after some years I came to bring alms to my nation and to offer sacrifices. ¹⁸ While I was doing this, they found me in the temple, completing the rite of purification, without any crowd or disturbance. ¹⁹ But there were some Jews from Asia-- they ought to be here before you to make an accusation, if they have anything against me. ²⁰ Or let these men here tell what crime they had found when I stood before the council, ²¹ unless it was this one sentence that I called out while standing before them, 'It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.'"

²² But Felix, who was rather well informed about the Way, adjourned the hearing with the comment, "When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case." ²³ Then he ordered the centurion to keep him in custody, but to let him have some liberty and not to prevent any of his friends from taking care of his needs.

²⁴ Some days later when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him speak concerning faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ And as he discussed justice, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, "Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will send for you." ²⁶ At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul, and for that reason he used to send for him very often and converse with him.

²⁷ After two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and since he wanted to grant the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison. (NRSV)

A. Introduction

In the passage we read this morning, we hear Paul say, "I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people." That should be our goal too, "to have a clear conscience toward God and all people." That is integrity.

But first, let's step back and see what led Paul to make that statement. In the Book of Acts, we have seen Paul traveling throughout Asia Minor preaching about the messiah Jesus bringing many Gentiles (non-Jews) to faith. However, Paul's method and message about including Gentiles into the people of God angered some Jews.

At one point, Paul returned to Jerusalem to bring the news that many Gentiles have converted to the Messiah Jesus (21:19).

But, when Paul goes to the Jerusalem Temple, certain Jews recognize Paul and shout out something worse than “Fire!” in a crowded room. They shout out—in the Temple, very center of Judaism—that Paul teaches against the Jews, speaks against the Temple, and has defiled the Temple by bringing a Gentile (21:28).

This causes a riot. The violence became so great that a Roman tribune came and arrested Paul. And in short order, we find Paul defending himself before Felix, the Governor of Palestine.¹

B. Accusations by Tertullus (1-9)

When Felix convened the court, the High Priest and members of the Sanhedrin came to with a prosecuting attorney named, Tertullus, who was probably a Hellenistic Jew with extensive legal training.

Tertullus begins his prosecution by flattering Felix, the Governor—“Your Excellency, because of you we have long enjoyed peace, and reforms have been made for this people because of your foresight [which was a lie]...., I beg you to hear us briefly with your customary graciousness” (24:2-4).

The original readers would have recognized this as sheer flattery, because Felix was known to be corrupt and cruel, and made no known reforms benefiting the Jews.² In other words, Tertullus he is sucking up to Felix. Tertullus is without integrity.

Tertullus makes two basic charges against Paul:

First, Paul is accused of being an agitator among the Jews and a threat to the stability of Rome (24:5). He is called a “ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (24:5) and a “pestilent fellow” (λοιμός), which refers to someone who transmits a disease or plague. Paul was a political threat to Rome and was inflecting the Roman world with his teaching.

Second, Paul is accused of trying to defile the Temple (24:6). Had he defiled the Temple, it would have created widespread unrest among the Jews, which would have alarmed the Roman “peacekeepers”.

C. Paul’s Defense (10-21)

Next, Paul defends himself. Notice that Paul didn’t hire a lawyer. Why? Paul didn’t need a lawyer to spin his case. He was intent on telling the truth. He was a person who strove to have a clear conscience toward God and all people.

1. Honesty and the Holy Spirit

¹ Procurator of Palestine from 52-59/60, a time of growing Jewish unrest for which his administration was blamed; see James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 311.

² Josephus, *Ant.* 20:1-8.

First, Paul relies on the Holy Spirit. One of Luke’s major themes is that people who witness to Jesus have the Holy Spirit guiding their testimony.

Luke 12:11-12. 12:11 When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; 12:12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say. (NRSV)

When Paul begins his defense, he doesn’t flatter the cruel and corrupt Governor, Felix. He honestly states the facts: “I know for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation...” which was true. Felix governed Palestine from 52 to 59/60 AD.

Paul didn’t resort to flattery or spin. To use flattery or spin is not to trust the Holy Spirit. Using flattery or spin indicates you are trying to control the events, rather than trusting that God is in control and allowing yourself the opportunity to feel the ebb and flow of events.

2. Not a threat to Rome

Second, Paul argues that he and the “sect of the Nazarenes” have peaceful intent—they are not threat to Rome. In fact, he couldn’t be starting a revolution, since he’d only been in the city twelve days (24:11). He has never stirred up a crowd as alleged (24:12).

3. Not a threat to the Temple

Third, Paul argues that he never desecrated the Temple. Rather—as Luke’s narrative bears out—Paul purified himself and then blessed the Temple by bring offerings and alms.

In fact, Luke is making the case that Paul an observant Jew. At this point in history, “this movement/sect is still thoroughly Jewish in religious practice and ethos.”³

4. Worships the One God of Israel

Fourth, Paul links the followers of Jesus with all Jews. Both worship the One God of Israel. Paul says, “I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets” (24:14).⁴

Early Christianity was a form of Early Judaism. Christianity and Judaism are sibling religions. What distinguished Early Christianity from other Jewish groups was belief that Jesus was the Messiah and Agent of God’s Kingdom.

5. Resurrection

³ James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 314.

⁴ Jesus’ followers were called a “sect” (αἵρεσις; from which we derive the word “heresy”). To call Christianity a sect actually serves Luke’s purposes, because it presents Christianity as a “sect” or group within Judaism, a legal and protected religion within the Roman Empire; so James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 314. Still, Paul prefers to call the Jesus movement, the “Way” (ὁδός), which was the insider designation, whereas the “sect” (αἵρεσις) was the designation by outsiders; so Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 412.

Fifth, Paul says there was only one thing that might incriminate him. He said he declared that he believed in the resurrection of the dead (24:20-21). By bringing up the resurrection, Paul does two things:

One the one hand, he is appealing to Pharisees to support him, because they believe in the resurrection; in contrast, the Sadducees did not. In this way, Paul is driving a wedge between members of the Sanhedrin.

On the other hand, he is reminding Felix that “he is not being charged with any real crimes but with disagreements over religion and particularly over the resurrection of a certain man named Jesus (cf. 25:18-19).”⁵

Paul thinks that resurrection is important. Whatever people sow in this life, they will reap in the next. The Sadducees, who don’t believe in the resurrection, thought they could live immoral lives and pay for it. Paul disagreed. What we do in this life will influence the next.

Romans 2:6-8 ⁶ For he [God] will repay according to each one's deeds: ⁷ to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸ while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. (NRSV)

6. Clear conscience (integrity)

Sixth, Paul argues that he strives to have a clear conscience (ἀπρόσκοπον συνείδησιν) with God and all people.

Acts 24:16. Therefore, I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people. (NRSV)

What does Paul mean by “clear conscience”? It means living with integrity. It means to be whole, complete, unbroken, where you walk the talk. If you say you follow Jesus, then you live that way. Integrity is honesty, where in the inner and the outer match.

Paul knew the value of integrity. In the darkest moments of his life, when his life was in the balance, he chose integrity—he strove to have a clear conscience with God and all people.

Paul believed that if we lack integrity, it will be exposed eventually by the principle of sowing and reaping:

Galatians 6:7-8. ⁷ Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. ⁸ If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. (NRSV)

⁵ Chalmer E. Faw, *Acts*, 263.

You cannot fool Mother Nature or God. If you plant an acorn, you'll get an oak tree. If you plant thorn seeds, you'll get thorn bushes. If you sow love, joy, peace, patience, you'll harvest the fruit of the Spirit. If you sow hatred, strife, insults, and violence, you will reap that too.

That's why Paul strives to have a clear conscience. He believed that whatever hidden seeds you sow—thoughts, attitudes, and deeds—you will reap it and it will show.

D. Delay by Felix (22-27)

At the end of the story, Paul seems to have won his case, because Felix puts the trial on hold. Paul is not a criminal. The Way is not outlawed. Still, Felix keeps Paul confined.

Felix has mixed motives. On the one hand, Felix wants to keep up good relations with the Jews, so the text says, "he wants to grant the Jews a favor" (24:27). But, on the other hand, Felix wants to get a bribe from Paul (24:26). Just like Tertullus, Felix is corrupt and has no integrity.

As a result, Paul is needlessly kept in prison for two years.⁶

In this way, Luke's account of the early Christian movement is *an apology* or defense Christianity in that it was neither evil nor a threat to the Roman Empire.

E. Reflections on Integrity

1. The divided life

The divided life is a life that lacks integrity.⁷

We pay a steep price when we live a divided life. We feel fraudulent, anxious about being found out, and depressed when we deny our own selves.

People around us pay a price too. When we lack integrity, it destabilizes our relationships. Others are left guessing and anxious by our dividedness. And we cannot trust either. How can we trust another person's integrity, when we deny our own?

The divided life comes in many forms. Here are a few examples:

- When we refuse to invest ourselves in our work, we diminish its quality and distance ourselves from those it's meant to serve.
- When we make our living at jobs that violate our basic values.
- When we remain in setting or relationship that kill off our spirits.
- When we harbor secrets to achieve personal gain at the expense of other people.
- When we hide our beliefs from those who disagree with us to avoid conflict or change

⁶ Later, Paul and the Way are exonerated: In Acts 25:25, Festus spoke on Paul's behalf: "I found he had done nothing deserving of death." In Acts 26:31, King Agrippa II defends Paul and says: "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment."

⁷ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life* (San Francisco: John Wilery & Sons, 2004).

- When we conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized or attacked.

2. Integrity

I think Paul was a person of integrity. His internal convictions matched his external behaviors. He was transparent. He was not afraid of letting you look into his soul, because he trusted God and believed there was nothing he could hide that would not also be revealed.

I believe that people with integrity would endorse these kinds of statements:⁸

- It is more important to be myself (values) than to be popular
- When I practice telling the truth, things work out for the best
- I would never lie to get something from someone
- My life is in God's hands
- I am open and honest about everything, unless I think it might harm someone else
- I always follow through with my commitments, even when it costs me

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the story of Paul's trial shows that Paul was a person of integrity, in contrast to Tertullus and Felix. Paul strove to have a clear conscience before God and all people. In the same way, we are invited to be people of integrity, because whatever hidden seeds we sow—thoughts, attitudes, and deeds—we will reap.

⁸ Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford, 2004) 250.