

Sermon Title: “**Identity *During Conflict***”

Series: *Learn, Live, Lead*

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Text: Acts 21:27-40

Introduction

*“Stand firm, and you will win life.” **-Luke 21:19***



Problems rarely go away on their own. Sometimes addressing a problem can seem like it makes things worse. Last week we looked at the Leadership at the Jerusalem Church giving Paul wisdom as they address the elephant in the room. Early followers of Jesus did not ignore the elephants, realizing that often things will get uglier before they get better. *Pride doesn't go down quietly.* Conflict can happen, and often the greatest contribution we can make is choosing our ***identity during the conflict.***



I. When Problems Hit the Fan (Acts 21:27-28)

“When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, “Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place.”

-Acts 21:27-28

At the direction of the Jerusalem church leadership, Paul submits to the purification of the Nazarite ritual for himself and four others as their sponsor. As we noted last week, Paul's desire is to address the elephant that is in the room regarding the growing pains as Gentiles are becoming a part of God's Kingdom. While some were feeling threatened by this, Paul was seeing this as the fulfillment of what God promised and gave vision to their forefather, Abraham.

*“By faith...Abraham was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” **-Hebrews 11:10***

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers (Gentiles), but are fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him (Jesus) the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

-Galatians 2:19-22

What made the Ministry of Jesus and His Apostles so radical is that He *did* come to destroy what divides us from God and each other. Namely, sin and death- beginning in each of us- *Jew and Gentile alike*. The Kingdom Jesus is bringing was not fitting the vision the Temple leadership had, *nor was it accommodating their lifestyle*, and therefore they were rejecting it. **The entrance into God's kingdom is repentance through Christ for all, and therefore citizenship granted to all.** The universal application of this invitation was outrageous and therefore refused by many in the Temple leadership.

This was no small problem and could not be ignored. *When something causes a relationship to stop maturing, it becomes stagnant and diseased.* As Jesus overturned tables that were preventing people from coming to God, followers of Jesus address with the same passion *any rules, customs, traditions, beliefs, and vision* that would seek to come between people and Jesus.

While God is patient, longsuffering, and full of mercy- His heart drives Him to step in and break the bondage leadership-even the leadership of *families, governments, temples, and churches*- places upon those they are meant to serve, for selfish gain. Pride doesn't change, God's heart doesn't change, and deliverance will continue to come. 600 years earlier, God said this through the Prophet Isaiah to the *then* Temple leadership and those who were being appressed,

"But whoever takes refuge in me will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain." And it will be said: "Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people." For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy:

"I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse them forever; nor will I always be angry, for then they would faint away because of me—the very people I have created. I was enraged by their sinful greed; I punished them, and hid my face in anger; yet they kept on in their willful ways. I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners, creating praise on their lips. Peace, peace, to those far and near," says the Lord. "And I will heal them." But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked." -Isaiah 57:13-20

This message from God through Isaiah resulted in **conflict** between Isaiah, the King, and the Temple leadership then. 600 years later this same message from God's Son, Jesus, resulted in **conflict** between Jesus, Empires, and Temple leaders. 20 years later in our text today, this same message is resulting in **conflict** between Paul, Empires, and Temple leaders. And the same is true for you and I who address the problem of sinful pride in ourselves and others- **conflict** can arise between us and others-including family, neighbors, coworkers, government, and religious institutions / leaders.

As was feared by the Jerusalem church, that despite Paul's genuine motives for his Jewish brethren to see Jesus as the Messiah, those who were against him and his message arrived on schedule. This was not a small crowd, for Pentecost was one of the required Feasts all of the males of Israel were to attend. Those most devoted to the Law and Custom were there. And it is this crowd the Judaizers stir up, causing the atmosphere to get muddled. Paul is demonized and identified as a heretic, *and the conflict begins. Problems have officially hit the fan!*

II. Scented Play-Doh (Acts 21:29)

(They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.) -Acts 21:29

These *Judaizers* from Asia were most likely from Ephesus. Ephesus you'll remember was where *Paul* resided the longest out of all his missionary journey's as well as the place *Trophimus* was from. Having spent so much time there, even shaved Paul would be recognized along with his Ephesian traveling companion. Even more so, the Judaizers were looking for Paul.

This was no small accusation against Paul. Rome granted the Jewish Temple Leaders authority to kill in judgment Gentiles who crossed the outward courtyard of the Gentiles. (This was the place Gentiles could come to worship God- like attending service outside with the windows open). To intentionally do this would have been contrary to the heart of Paul- *his message and example*. In fact, he publicly went through the Nazarite vow to both ***purify*** himself having been away in Gentile rejoinings for so long as well as ***demonstrating*** his commitment to his Jewish family.

Why was everyone so eager to jump on this riot against Paul? Remember, the Nation of Israel had experienced an spanking of epic proportions for their problem with idols and now they have ***generational PTSD***. They believe God is allowing their enslavement to the Roman Empire because of personal failure and further believe it will get worse with God if they continue in error. Sort of the like "how many days since an accident" boards at work. The longer the better for God's favor to tip on them. So not only the Law had to be followed, but all of the added traditions to the Law to keep everyone from even coming close to breaking the Law. And it is in this the shackles come out and bind what Jesus has liberated.

Smells like a heretic- but does he taste like a heretic? We've have all been there before.

Where? *Playing with scented Play-Doh*. I even watch and witness my own children's struggle with it. It ***smells*** like real food. You can make it even ***look*** like real food. But when you give in to the temptation to eat it, it does not ***taste*** like real food!

Their accusation against Paul was an assumption; not eyewitness account or even anything near the truth. It smelled real, maybe even looked real, but it was not. ***We must remember, even as adults- lies can smell and look like truth, but when eaten can make you sick and cause you to miss out on so much!*** This conflict originated on lies. ***Beware of scented Play-Doh!***

“Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.” -Psalm 34:8

III. Why Are We Fighting? (Acts 21:30-31)

“The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar.” -Acts 21:30-31

The number of Play-Doh eaters was rising as the majority of the city was jumping on the rioting bandwagon. Like a playground fight, everyone stops what they are doing to gather around to either observe or jump in on. Many would have heard about Paul by this point, and while not recognizing him personally (remember this was way back when people did things without documenting every moment on social media) an opinion about him would have been embraced by what parents, leaders, people of influence had said about Paul. If parents, teachers, or church leaders have issues with someone or something, that is often transferred to the child, student, or parishioner sadly. *Oh dear saints, let us be wise about who and how we influence others- including our children!*

Gates being shut means the Temple went on Lock Down- most likely in an effort to prevent anything from happening to further desecrate the Temple. The level this conflict was escalating to was catching the attention of Roman Leadership now, and troops were soon to be deployed. *Someone in the crowd dialed 9-1-1.* Being ***seized*** and ***drug*** shows that this was a brutal assault against Paul with the endgame for him from this crowd being death. A man was about to die based on an unproved accusation. ***As happens too often in conflict, there is that immediate avalanche of built-up emotion- whether from present situation or previous that has built up- and is now pouring out over the accused to the point the reason for the conflict may be uncertain or lost for many!***

IV. When Family Drama Goes Public (Acts 21:32-36)

“He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, “Get rid of him!”
-Acts 21:32-36

Family drama is one thing, but having that drama break out of the house and become public is another. This is no longer a Jewish conflict, but has now involved the Roman Authorities. *How did they get there so fast?* While this is horrible for Paul, these sorts of riots were an *all too common occurrence* in the Temple. In the northwest corner of the Temple wall (referred to as the Herodian fortress) was a tower named the Tower of Antonia. This tower provided a full

view of the Temple area, and it was consistently patrolled especially now due to how many visitors the Feast of Pentecost brought. ***If there was going to be a riot against Paul, this was the best time to have it done!***

Family drama going public is often *embarrassing* and *frustrating*. **Embarrassing** because it reveals non facebook worthy posts about who we try to be verses who we really are. We try to keep our messes to ourselves in case it's worse than someone else's. **Frustrating**, because it often brings in other people now to share an opinion or enforce an action. Further, the other party now involved may not see things the way we do and may call us out for being the reason for the conflict, or the reason the conflict continues unresolved.

On a side note, pride thrives in the privacy of our heart- in its darkest corners. When it is *grabbed and drug out* like the people did to Paul, to light in confession to others, that is the beginning of the end of its grip on us. Jesus knows this, and so does the Devil.

“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” -James 5:16

However, Paul may have been pretty banged up at this point. From fist to clubs- anything in hand to hit along with the dragging may have torn his clothing and broken his skin to the point he would have soon died if Roman authorities had not arrived. Even armed soldiers struggled to get to Paul and get him out of the conflict- he was bound (as Agabus prophesied) and had to be hoisted above heads to secure in the Roman barracks. ***Get rid of him*** echoes their cries against Jesus 20 years earlier. ***Remove Paul, and there is no conflict!***

As much as we may want to forget, many if not all of us recall the vivid video and narrated unfolding of events that resulted in the death of Americans in Benghazi. ***Conflict of this nature between Paul and the Jewish community quickly leave the reach of reason and possibility of resolution, and become riots that are only stopped by a greater physical power. In this case, Rome steps in to clean up the Jewish family drama happening.***

V. Who am I in the Conflict? (Acts 21:37-40)

“As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, “May I say something to you?” “Do you speak Greek?” he replied. “Aren’t you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness some time ago?” Paul answered, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people.” After receiving the commander’s permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic:” -Acts 21:37-40

This brings us to the heart of this message- ***who are we during conflict?*** Paul started out with the purest of motives and the greatest of Truth- there is no way to be right with God outside of Jesus Christ! Paul understands the fear in the Jewish community to disobey the Law; he knows very well the pride in the heart of the Temple leadership. He has been there and even was the greatest in pride against anything contrary to his understanding of the Law.

*“If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” **-Philippians 4:4-11***

If we share in this desire that Paul has, if his Jesus is our Jesus, we cannot avoid conflict arising at times we address problems only Jesus can fix.

The Roman commander seeks to understand who Paul is in this conflict? Was he the notorious Egyptian that led thousands to revolt against Rome rule? The person referred to here was a leader who had led a group of dessert assassins to kill Roman sympathizers by stabbing them while in public crowds. Paul and this present riot may bear some similarities to what had all to recently been experienced.

Rome sees Paul as an *insurrectionist*. The Judaizers, Temple Leaders, and many in the riot see Paul as a *heretic*. Regardless of the title, ***Paul is viewed as the reason for the conflict.*** Sometimes, we can get lose our identity during times of conflict. We may just ignore the problem to avoid it, or maybe come to believe we are the reason for the problems. We may get to the point where we start to believe the lies. *This really does taste like it smells!*

Who are we in times of conflict?

*“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” **-2 Corinthians 5:20***

For Paul, the problem had to be addressed, *because Jesus is our Savior.*

Conflict arose *because Jesus is the Lord.*

Lies smell like truth but are not, *because Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.*

Fighting can happen *because Jesus alone is our Refuge for Peace.*

Pride goes kicking and screaming, afraid to lose out, *because Jesus gave His life to receive what can only be given.*

Drama goes beyond the people involved *because Jesus is bigger and wants more for His Kingdom.*

Who we are in conflict reflects who Jesus is to us.