

*The Cost of Discipleship, Part 2*

Acts 21:17-39

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What would you do if you knew that if you signed your name on the dotted line to identify yourself as a Christian you were going to be persecuted and perhaps arrested? Last summer, the world watched in shock as the U.S. military pulled out of Afghanistan and the Taliban began to regain control of the country. What was not reported was how the growing body of believers in Afghanistan was anticipating the coming persecution of a Muslim government.

Mindy Belz reported on the church in Afghanistan on a Breakpoint podcast with John Stonestreet last August. She said,

*"[The Afghan church] is a unique community, mostly aged 40 and younger. They are all Muslim converts. It's one of the fastest growing churches in the world. Since they are a tiny church, now doubled in size, they are considered very fast-growing. There are perhaps only 2,000 people. But they are an important force in Afghanistan simply because of the force that the Gospel is. Because of the love of Jesus, the reach they have is a real thing in a dark, Taliban-shadowed country."*

*She went on to say, "About two years ago, a number of these church community leaders did something amazing and brave: they decided to change their identity, their religious affiliation in particular, on their national identification cards. All Afghan citizens have a national ID card. They often show religious affiliation. That affiliation tends to be handed down by the father of the family. The new Christian church elders wanted to change their identification for the sake of their future generations. Not all Christians agreed that this was a good idea, but several dozens of them have changed their official identification to Christian. Now the government records show Christian affiliation. These are the Christians that have been targeted . . . At least one Christian that I know of has received a letter from the Taliban stating: 'We know where you are, and we know what you're doing.' The Taliban then showed up to this Christian's house the day before the full city takeover. [Some Christians] . . . have been hauled out of their homes and shot, and in one case beheaded."<sup>1</sup>*

Just like the Apostle Paul knew persecution and death were coming when he went to Jerusalem, these Afghan Christians who changed their religious affiliation on their ID cards knew that persecution would eventually come. They knew they were putting their lives on the line. They knew the cost of discipleship.

What would you do? The believers who changed their ID cards did not have to do that. They had the freedom to leave their ID cards as they were and continue worshipping Jesus. The government didn't ask them or force them to do it. Instead, they went to the government and requested it to be changed. Now their faith in Jesus had become public in a very different way.

There were others who decided not to change their government ID cards. They exercised their freedom to leave things as they were, and yet they continued to attend church and worship Jesus. They still made their faith public they just didn't change their ID cards. Which group made the right decision?

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<sup>1</sup> John Stonestreet & Mindy Belz, *The Breakpoint Podcast: Understanding What's Happening in Afghanistan*, August 16, 2021.

The Apostle Paul had a similar situation in Acts 21:17-39. So, let's walk through our text and make some observations and clarify the story. These verses can be a little hard to follow at points. Then I want to make a couple of observations about Paul's ministry and finally apply the text at the very end.

In v. 17, we see that Paul arrived in Jerusalem and that the church was glad to see him. Over the next few days, Paul met with James and the elders and gave a report of all that the Lord had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

Then we get to vv. 20-21, and if you are reading the *ESV*, the narrative gets kind of awkward in its sentence construction here. It seems to jump very quickly from one topic to another. I want to smooth out the translation here by giving you my amplified version of vv. 20-21:

*When James and the elders heard Paul's report of all the Gentiles that had been saved, they glorified God! Then the elders said, "Brother Paul, there are also many thousands of Jews there who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law because of the work of the gospel."<sup>21</sup> However, many of them have misunderstood your teaching about the gospel. They have been told that you teach the Jews who are among the Gentiles to abandon Moses. They believe that you are telling them not to circumcise their children and that they should not walk in our customs.*

Now, we have heard this earlier in Acts, haven't we? We heard that the Jewish Christians and the Jews, in general, misunderstood Paul's teaching on the gospel. This misunderstanding was what led the Jerusalem Council to provide clear teaching on the issue. They sent letters to the churches teaching the Gentile converts how they needed to live now that they followed Jesus. Then they sent Paul and Barnabas to the churches with letters explaining to the Gentile converts that they did not have to convert to Judaism in order to become Christians, nor did they have to adopt Judaism after they became Christians.

Essentially, the letters were a summary of v. 25. They basically said that upon repentance of sin and faith in Jesus, they should not eat what has been sacrificed to idols (which involved eating blood and eating animals that had been strangled) and from sexual immorality. They didn't need to convert to Judaism in order to be a follower of Jesus, but they did need to pursue holiness.

However, as our narrative unfolds, we find that some Jewish Christians still misunderstood Paul's teaching. Sadly, they were not the only ones.

The Jews and their leaders were the ones who were really after Paul. They hated him. They hated Jesus, and they hated Christianity.

These Jews were jealous. They thought Paul was stealing their sheep and their influence. They accused him of abandoning the Law of Moses and leading people into a false religion. They wanted him dead.

This was the dilemma for James and the elders upon Paul's arrival in Jerusalem. The leaders of the Jerusalem church loved Paul, and they wanted to protect him. However, they knew there were radical Jewish leaders who would be out to get him.

This is the question they ask in v. 22,

*So what is to be done? They will certainly hear that you've come.*

Here was their counsel in vv. 23-24. The elders requested that Paul show the Jewish Christians and the radical Jews that he was not opposed to the Law or their Jewish customs. They counseled him to take a vow of purification with four other men. He was to cover all of their expenses to take this vow with him. Verse 24 concludes by saying:

*Then everyone will know that what they were told about you amounts to nothing, but that you yourself are also careful about observing the law.*

Essentially, the elders counseled Paul to take a Nazirite vow, which was a very strict vow. They wanted him to show all of the Jews that he was not opposed to their Jewish law and customs. Therefore, by taking this vow, he could show that the freedom and grace of the gospel allowed him to take this vow and yet still trust in Christ alone for his righteousness.

Scholars tell us that it was not uncommon to take this vow and fund another to do the same. To take the Nazirite vow with one man was serious business because it displayed a very high regard for the Law. It was also a serious sacrifice of time and money to cover the expense of that one man. However, to take the vow with four others was an incredible commitment. It would have been super expensive for Paul to take this vow with four other men. It was such an amazing practice of the law that it would have been all over social media. Everyone in Jerusalem would have been talking about Paul's Nazirite vow and how he paid for four other men to take it with him.

The elders hoped to show the Jewish Christians that Paul did not oppose the Law. They also hoped to pacify the jealous Jewish leaders who hated him.

Next, in vv. 27-29, we see that when the seven days were almost complete, Jews from Asia realized Paul was in Jerusalem. Most likely, these were Jews from Ephesus. This group of Jews had a special hatred for Paul. They wanted to kill him, but he had escaped. Now they had him, and it did not matter to them that he had taken a Nazirite vow.

These guys must have been good at starting riots because they started another riot in order to kill Paul. They accused him of speaking against the law and also said that he had brought Greeks into the temple. They had seen him earlier with *Trophimus, the Ephesian*, so they assumed and accused him of taking him into the temple.

Remember, the Gentiles could not enter the temple. There was a special court for Gentiles, but they could not get any closer to the Holy Place than that. If Gentiles went beyond the Gentile Court, it was a death sentence for them and whoever was with them.

When these Jews saw Paul, they began to accuse him of speaking against the Law and of breaking the Law by bringing *Trophimus* into the temple. These Jews didn't just want justice. They wanted blood, so they seized him and shut the gates of the Gentile Court. No one could not get out, and then they began to beat him.

Eventually, word reached the Roman cohort that there was a riot. The centurions and soldiers finally got control of the riot, and the Jews quit beating Paul. At this point, we see that the words of the prophet Agabus were fulfilled. The Jews had seized him, and now they were handing him over to the Romans. He was arrested and bound with chains.

Finally, in vv. 37-39, we learned that the Romans thought Paul was an Egyptian who had stirred up a revolt in Jerusalem. When he asked to speak to the crowd, they realized he spoke Greek and that he was, in fact, not the criminal they thought he was, but he was a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia. Then he adds that he is a citizen of Tarsus, meaning that he was also a Roman citizen.

Now I want to make a couple of observations about Paul's life by asking the question: *What do we learn from Paul's arrival in Jerusalem, where he took a Nazirite vow and then was eventually arrested?* These observations will help us make our application in just a moment. Here is what I think we see.

First, from the time Paul arrived, he worked with the leaders of the Jerusalem church to present an accurate gospel witness to the Jews. They asked Paul to exercise his *liberty in Christ* to live as one under the Law while he was in Jerusalem so that Jewish Christians, the strict Jews, and even the Gentiles would see that while he trusted in Jesus alone for salvation Paul's freedom in the gospel allowed him also to respect Jewish laws and customs and live as one under the law, although he did not see Jewish laws and customs as a means of righteousness or salvation.

Second, we know that Paul was passionate that both Jews and Gentiles come to faith in Jesus alone for salvation. This past Thursday morning, my men's Bible study worked through Romans 10, and we marveled at vv. 1-4, where Paul says:

*Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.  
<sup>2</sup> For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. <sup>3</sup> For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. <sup>4</sup> For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*

Paul genuinely wanted his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters to come to saving faith and see Jesus as their righteousness and as the fulfillment of the Law.

He desires it so much that in Romans 9:3, he says,

*For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.*

Yet, Paul not only wanted Jews to come to faith in Christ, but he wanted Gentiles to come to faith in Christ too. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, he wrote about his approach to see both Jews and Gentiles saved:

*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

I think what we find here in Acts 21:17-39 really is 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 put into practice so that his fellow Jews might come to faith in Jesus.

Now let's make some applications. Here is our main point this morning: *Gospel freedom means we have the liberty to do what we ought to do in order to help the lost to come to faith in Jesus.*

First, let me clarify the word "liberty." Liberty does not mean we can do anything we want. The correct definition of liberty means the freedom to do what we *ought* to do within the bounds of God's word. So, as Christians, the word "ought" constrains us to live within the proper bounds of God's word. In other words, our liberty as Christians constrains us to use our freedom to be holy as God is holy.

Here are our two principles to help us apply the liberty of our gospel freedom:

1. We should celebrate the *priceless* gospel-freedom of the salvation and sanctification we have because of Jesus (vv. 19-20a, 25).

*After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. <sup>20</sup> And when they heard it, they glorified God.*

They glorified God for what He had done through Paul to bring the Gentiles to faith in Jesus. There were acts of power like casting out demons, raising the dead, and healing the sick and the cripple. All of these opened the door for the Gentiles to listen and believe in Jesus.

But most importantly, the Gentiles learned that they did not have to become Jewish in order for God to save them. All they needed to do was repent of their sin and trust in the completed atoning work of Christ on their behalf. They did not have to go through all of the conversion rites and customs. They didn't have to adopt Judaism as their faith. They were free in Christ because Jesus had done everything to save them.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus has done everything to save and sanctify us. We do not have to work because our salvation is an act of the Holy Spirit whereby we are born again. Our repentance and faith in Christ are evidence of our new birth. It is evidence of a new heart and love for God. Jesus has done it all for us.

It is not our law-keeping that makes us right with God. It is not our striving to be perfect that makes us right with God. It is not our attempts to make up for our sin and cover our shame that saves us and makes us right with God. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. We cannot earn our righteousness that will commend us to a Holy God.

We need a Savior who is Holy and who is the very God Himself. We need a sinless Savior to break into the muck, mire, and sin of this world and live the perfect life we could never live and die our death on the cross as our Substitute. On the cross, Jesus bore our shame. He took our sin upon Himself and paid the debt we owed for breaking God's laws. Then He was buried, and He rose again on the third day, thereby breaking the power of sin over us so that we may live a holy life. His death and resurrection purchased new life, new hearts, and new minds and put in those who trust Christ a new love for God that can only come from God. From beginning to end, Jesus saved and sanctified us. He did it all. Our part is to place our faith in Him alone for our salvation and sanctification.

Brothers and sisters, we have a priceless faith that we should celebrate. We need to allow Romans 10:4 to sink deep into your heart this morning:

*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*

Marvel, and be extremely grateful that Jesus has fulfilled the Law for you. *He is the end of the Law because He has fulfilled the Law*, and you and I do not have to do anything but exercise the faith and repentance He gave us by the grace He has given us as well.

2. We have *costly* gospel-freedom in Jesus to help others come to faith in Christ (vv. 22-24, 26-39). *Costly gospel freedom* means that we exercise our liberty in ways to help others come to faith in Jesus even when it is costly for us.

In vv. 22-24, we see how Paul humbled himself and listened to the counsel of the elders in the church in Jerusalem. They wanted him to have his Nazirite vow show he had great respect for the law and Jewish traditions. But we must remember that Paul did not place faith in the Law for salvation or his righteousness. He was able to live as one under the Law but knew that the grace he had received in Jesus earned all the righteousness he needed to stand justified before God.

The question is: *Was Paul compromising the gospel and his faith in Christ by submitting to the elders' request?* Bottom line: Paul was not compromising the gospel by living as one under the Law. On the contrary, he was doing this for the sake of the spread of the gospel. The gospel was his ultimate motivation for following the elders' counsel.

Remember Paul's words at the end of 1 Corinthians 9:22-23,

*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. <sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

So, Paul was not sinning or compromising the gospel by living as one under the Law because he was not trusting in the Law for his righteousness. What he did was sacrifice his freedom at great cost so for the advance of the gospel.

As Pastor Tony Merida says:

*This passage reveals the heart of this great missionary. Paul's passionate about God's glory, the unity of the church, and the evangelization of all people. He's literally willing to do anything for the sake of the gospel—as long as it does not compromise it. Paul offers a powerful picture of Christians liberty in this passage, showing us spiritual maturity.<sup>2</sup>*

Costly gospel freedom means we are willing to sacrifice our liberty at times for the sake of those who need to hear the gospel. It does not mean we compromise the gospel and participate in sin, but it means our liberty is sometimes limited for the sake of the gospel in order for unbelievers to hear the gospel.

If you have talked to missionaries before, you perhaps have learned that they learn how to live in different cultures in order to share the gospel. They perhaps will dress certain ways and eat only certain foods. They will do things on certain days and then not do things on days that might offend those they are trying to reach. They have the liberty to do what they want in those countries and cultures, but they choose for the sake of the gospel to limit their liberty in such a way as to win those to whom they are witnessing.

There may be times when you and I need will need to limit our liberty in order to evangelize those with whom we live. The challenge for us in the West is that while we may limit our liberty in order to be a witness this does not mean that we should expect every Christian to live as we live. In the same manner, we should not expect those who have yet to believe to live as we live either.

It was in humility that Paul practiced his liberty. In humility, he received the counsel of the elders as to how he should live in Jerusalem. He didn't cheapen God's grace. Instead, he practiced a costly grace in order to be a biblical witness to the lost.

We must be wise and humble when exercising our gospel freedom. The fact is there is this tension between practicing biblical evangelism and watering down the gospel. Beware that you do not cheapen the grace of the gospel with your gospel freedom.

Finally, one of the obstacles that may prevent us from exercising our gospel freedom is that our liberty can often be misunderstood. No one wants to be misunderstood, especially when it comes to the gospel. It can be a frustrating and lonely experience.

As the Apostle, Paul preached the gospel and lived in his gospel freedom. Yet, he was misunderstood by the Jewish Christians and by the Jewish people and leaders. This had to be a difficult experience for him.

Let me give you three quick observations from our text that will help us when our gospel freedom is misunderstood.

First, at some point, our gospel freedom will be misunderstood. The Apostle Paul did all he could to avoid the danger of being misunderstood, but he was misunderstood anyway. The only way to avoid the danger of being misunderstood is to drift along with the culture and do what everyone else is doing. However, if you want the gospel to make an impact, then at some point, you will be misunderstood. Just count on it.

Second, we cannot fully anticipate the reaction of others when they misunderstand the gospel and our gospel freedom. Paul was beaten and arrested for his faith in Christ, for his liberty in Christ, and for teaching the freedom from the law that Jesus brings to His people. We can do very little to prepare for how people will respond. We may hope for the best. I'm sure our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan were hoping for the best and are still hoping for the gospel to change hearts and lives. When we take a stand for Christ and live in the freedom, He gives us, it may cost us dearly, but it will also advance the message of the gospel.

Finally, we must decide how we will respond to these misunderstandings. Fight or flight are two common responses. We can yell and scream, or we can run and hide. However, what we see Paul doing as our narrative

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Merida, *Christ-centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Acts*, 338.

concludes is seeking to reason with the people. He wanted to have a discussion with his fellow Jews. He sought to speak to the people and defend the person and work of Christ. Paul's approach is the path we should follow.

*Brothers and sisters, may we celebrate the freedom we have in the gospel and use our liberty to help the lost to come to faith in Jesus.*