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Sermon Series: *Acts – The Cure Goes Viral*

Sermon Title: *Misunderstood*

Scripture: Acts 21-22:29

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Knowing he will face arrest and trial, Paul resolutely travels to Jerusalem and is taken into custody after Jews from Asia stir up trouble against him. Paul was repeatedly misunderstood, often willfully. Should we expect anything different? Christians today can learn how to handle being misunderstood by examining Paul's example.

We all make mistakes

We live in a fallen world in which people are prone to make mistakes. For example, I remember riding in the back of our family car as a child, when my mom, who was driving, asked me to hand her a tissue. *"Kevin,"* she said, *"Will you please hand me a tissue?"* She often elongated the 'a' sound, and I misheard her, thinking she said "eight." Since that was also about how many years I had been alive, and common sense wasn't my strong suit at the time, I proceeded to happily pull out eight tissues for her. Her response was not the appreciation I expected for having so carefully followed her instructions but rather one of frustration for bungling the request. Throughout history, misunderstandings have led to disastrous consequences, many of them becoming international incidents. We know that World War I began with the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand and his wife. The initial attempt was botched, and the archduke traveled away from the scene. His driver misunderstood the roads, made a wrong turn, and stopped on the side of the road to ask for directions. The man he sought help from was the earlier assassin, who made use of his second chance. Another issue occurred after the Second Balkan War ended, but tensions still simmered between Greece and Bulgaria. All it took was a soldier's dog to cross over the border to start what was called "The War of the Stray Dog." The owner ran over to rescue his dog, which proved to be a fatal mistake, and Greece used it as a pretext for invasion. Remember to keep your pets on a leash. Finally, a near miss occurred during the high tensions of the Cold War, when Communist leader Nikita Khrushchev was giving a speech in the Polish Embassy in Moscow. What he said was a common Russian idiom, which could be translated, *"I feel badly about your ignorance, but it's your funeral, not mine."* This was mistranslated to quote Khrushchev, who had the authority to unleash the USSR's nuclear arsenal, as saying, *"We will bury you."* It's not hard to imagine the panic that came from having misunderstood this quote.(1)

Today, one of my goals is to not provoke any major misunderstandings - remember to think before you tweet, folks. More importantly, we will look at one major event in Paul's ministry in which he was misunderstood, and we will look at the implications that come from it. There is more to misunderstandings than initially meets the eye. Like the misunderstanding Paul faced, many of ours relate to how we live out our faith.

The faithful Christian responds to misunderstandings by standing firm in faith.

How exactly can we stand firm like this?

Overcoming mis-understanding is found in its opposite, understanding.

Understanding important principles helps us faithfully stand firm, even in a world that seems driven by misunderstanding.

Our text today is lengthy, covering Acts 21 and most of Acts 22. Please turn there in your copy of Scripture. Before I read a portion, I'd like to summarize these two chapters. Paul and his companions are returning from their third missionary journey that Pastor Mark covered last week. He had already left the region of Macedonia further west, which is where modern-day Greece and Bulgaria are. I'll just mention that Philippi was near the border of these two countries, and when Paul wrote to the Philippian church, he clearly said to *"look out for dogs."* If they heeded his words, maybe that War of the Stray Dog could have been avoided! Anyway, Paul sailed across the northeastern Mediterranean, made landfall, and traveled southward toward Jerusalem. Along the way, people were given prophetic words by the Holy Spirit to warn of the dangers Paul would encounter in Jerusalem. Knowing this, Paul nevertheless continued, and when he arrived at Jerusalem, he followed the advice of the church leaders there.

The accusation against Paul by many Jews was that he encouraged converted Jews to forsake their former Jewish customs. This wasn't true. Paul and the early church ensured converted Gentiles understood they were not bound to follow such laws, but they did not try to sway their own Jewish people away from them. To prove this, Paul agreed to participate in a purification vow with some others as a public show that he had not abandoned the tradition. Before he could complete this, he was spotted in the temple courtyard, and an uproar ensued. Jews who opposed Paul claimed he had brought Gentiles into the inner court of the Temple, which would have been a no-no, but Paul hadn't done this. The scene turned so chaotic that Roman soldiers became involved. The cohort tribune had Paul arrested. Before leaving the scene, Paul convinced the tribune to let him speak and bring calm to the situation. He told his story, which went well until Paul mentioned God eventually sent him to share the gospel with the Gentiles. To this Roman crowd, this was an abomination, which is a bit ironic, since they wanted no part of Paul's message anyway.

To learn more, the tribune resorted to standard Roman soldier protocol, which was to have Paul flogged in order to get answers out of him (waterboarding had yet to be discovered). Before this could take place, Paul informed the tribune that he was a Roman citizen, and our passage ends with the tribune fearful for having mistreated Paul, the Roman citizen.

How to respond to being misunderstood

As you can see, there were several moments where Paul was misunderstood, some of them willful and even malicious.

With this big picture in mind, I'd like to zoom in on one passage during Paul's journey to Jerusalem. At this point he was free, but he was continually told his voyage to Jerusalem would lead to his imprisonment and worse. Stand with me, please, and follow along as I read Acts 21:7-14

Acts 21:7–14 ESV

⁷ When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. ⁸ On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. ¹⁰ While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' " ¹² When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated.

I mentioned earlier that the key to overcoming misunderstanding is found in understanding. These two chapters reveal three main areas to understand. The first is to

1.) Understand the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit can and does guide us. Acts is the perfect place to consider the Spirit's ministry. Spirit is mentioned in nearly every New Testament book, but Acts has far more references than any of them. Spirit is mentioned seventy times compared to 1 Corinthians, which is the next closest at forty. Paul's return trip to Jerusalem contains five references to the work of the Holy Spirit. What does the Spirit do in these passages? Acts 20:23 says He testifies, as in providing prophetic speech.

Acts 20:23 ESV

²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

This prophecy speech is repeated in Acts 21:4

Acts 21:4 ESV

⁴ And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

and Acts 21:11

Acts 21:11 *ESV*

¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' "

In that one, the Holy Spirit used a prophet named Agabus to remove Paul's belt - imagine being in Paul's sandals as this happened - and then tie Paul up - perhaps hog-tied - in front of everyone present. This extreme visual accompanied the proclamation.

The Holy Spirit also exercises authority and carries out God's will. Paul shared with the Ephesian leaders that the Holy Spirit had made them overseers of the church in Ephesus. Acts 20:28

Acts 20:28 *ESV*

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

You might wonder then why Paul continued to Jerusalem even though, in his words, ***"the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me."*** Did Paul ignore the Holy Spirit's words and commands? He didn't.

Paul explains this in Acts 20:22, saying,

Acts 20:22 *ESV*

²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there,

So under the obedience of the Holy Spirit Paul was traveling to a place where, the repeated warnings would show, imprisonment and afflictions awaited him. God told Paul to do something, and then God warned Paul to prepare himself for the trouble that would come. In our world, in Christian circles, there are many who subscribe to a prosperity theology and treat the Holy Spirit like a magical guide who leads us toward greater happiness, success, and wealth. Ironically, they're almost right. They just apply that prosperity to this life rather than the next, and so they miss the boat entirely. We rightly repudiate that, but how many of us, given the warning of coming affliction, wouldn't take that automatically as a call to take steps to avoid what's coming?

We live in a culture that puts risk mitigation at the top of the list. We have made personal safety our top-tier goal at the expense sometimes of accomplishing the mission. But what if God is leading us toward something dangerous?

I'll confess it grates under my skin when I hear phrases like *"safety first."* If priority number one can be accomplished in a recliner, something's wrong. Have you ever been on a plane and heard, *"Your safety is our top priority"*? Weren't we trying to go to Denver? I guess we're never getting off the ground. If you are about to ride a metal tube with wings over five hundred miles an hour at thirty thousand feet above the earth's surface, safety by definition cannot be the highest priority.

Our objective is not safety. Our objective is to accomplish God's mission and to do so safely if we can.

There were plenty of times when Paul did flee an area because of danger, sometimes through prophetic warning, but this time was different. This time the Spirit led him toward the danger. God leads us through his Spirit toward God's plan. It may involve comfort or discomfort, danger or safety, but we will never be able to mitigate all risk. One of the Spirit's jobs is to come alongside us and give us the right response when trouble comes.

So to understand the guidance of the Holy Spirit is to understand that God sometimes leads us into risk, pain, and disruptive misunderstandings. That leads us to consider a second need.

2.) Understand the nature of misunderstandings.

Misunderstandings in our context are the natural responses of unbelievers who encounter the faith-filled lives of believers in Christ.

This calls for understanding on our part when these misunderstandings occur. If we can see clearly when others are not, we can handle an issue better. In a dark world, we can don spiritual night vision to see clearly. Our text suggests three ways we can do this. First,

a.) Expect to be misunderstood.

We cannot live as Christ-followers without being misunderstood. It is going to happen. A few passages bear out this point.

In Matthew 5:10-12 Jesus finishes the Beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount like this:

Matthew 5:10–12 *ESV*

¹⁰ ***“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

¹¹ ***“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.***

Then, before Jesus went to the cross, he told his disciples,

John 15:18–20 *ESV*

¹⁸ ***“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...***

Paul picked up on this penchant for misunderstanding when he wrote to the Corinthian church. 1 Corinthians 1:18

1 Corinthians 1:18 *ESV*

¹⁸ ***For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.***

1 Corinthians 1:22–23 *ESV*

²² ***For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,***

So do not be surprised. Misunderstandings will come, and they can get ugly and hate-filled. You might want to say, “I didn’t sign up for this!” But you did when you chose to follow Christ. We follow him all the way to the cross. Do you remember that Tim Allen movie, *The Santa Clause*? He accidentally offs Santa and is convinced by the instructions on a small card to put on Santa’s suit and finish the delivery of Christmas presents. What he missed was the fine print on the card. It reads,

“In putting on the suit and entering the sleigh, the wearer waives any and all rights to any previous identity, real or implied, and fully accepts the duties and responsibilities of Santa Claus in perpetuity until such time that wearer becomes unable to do so by either accident or design.”

This isn’t that much different for believers, who are told to “put on Christ” several times in the New Testament. We, the believers in and wearers of Christ waive any and all rights to any previous identity, real or implied, and fully accept the duties and responsibilities of following Christ in perpetuity until such time that we become unable to do so by either accident or design.

The second thing to understand about misunderstandings is that

b.) **Emotional responses do not clear up misunderstandings.**

Facing misunderstanding is often stressful. God designed our physiology such that stressful situations activate our Lymbic System. This is where fight, flight, or fright response comes from. Responding out of these emotions often only exacerbates the situation. Let's use an example and look at some potential responses to see how this might play out. Let's say you have an office cubicle and you have decided to put up some artwork, a verse. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). And let's say you receive a complaint for posting religious material. Now, I can't say what the right response is in every situation, but my imaginary situation shows some sample responses.

Some respond with **fearful capitulation**.

Out of fear - not faith - they apologize profusely and remove the offending inspirational Scripture. Maybe you replace it with some inspirational office artwork, like an eagle swooping down to snag a lake trout in its talons, with the caption, "You can succeed," underneath. I'm focusing on the motivation more than on the action. This is fear-based, and you're the lake trout.

Others may respond with **angry retaliation**.

In righteous indignation, they mouth off about religious rights, file a complaint with HR, make photocopies of the art to tack all over the cubicle, and imagine their eventual oral arguments before the Supreme Court. Anger doesn't win converts.

Believers often simply hide all vestiges of their faith through **censored suppression**.

They only stick to the inoffensive elements of the faith and strip out anything else that might be controversial. Then you have a watered-down faith.

c.) **Misunderstandings require the truth, spoken in love.**

No, the only right response is to follow Paul's example and **speak the truth in love**. Paul's response was exactly opposite that of the outrage mob he faced. He spoke clearly and calmly and even got their attention. In Acts 22 he recounts his testimony in the common spoken language of Aramaic, not Greek, identifying himself as a fellow Jew. The crowd listened with attention and perhaps understanding, until Paul recounted in Acts 22:21-22 what God said.

Acts 22:21-22 ESV

²¹ *And he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'* "

²² *Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."*

Paul didn't censor his message, because he knew to humbly speak the whole truth in love. The primary goal is to honor God faithfully, even knowing it will lead to clashes with those who misunderstand the message, often willfully. Because we know this will come, we must also understand one more thing.

3.) Understand your **true citizenship**.

I mentioned earlier the Roman tribune wanted to have Paul flogged to figure out what was going on. Paul knew his rights as a Roman citizen and ensured the tribune understood those rights were being violated. Here is how Scripture records these events.

Acts 22:25-29 ESV

²⁵ *But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?"* ²⁶ *When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen."* ²⁷ *So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes."* ²⁸ *The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth."* ²⁹ *So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.*

Christianity had yet to mature in its spread, so there was no concept of rights universally applied to all. Roman citizens had more rights than others, and the tribune became afraid, because he violated those rights. The tribune had already misunderstood Paul once - our passage was too large to cover it, but Paul was essentially mistaken as an Egyptian terrorist. He had apparently been upgraded to common trouble-making criminal until this moment. Yet the tribune was not yet ready for the final reveal, Paul's true citizenship. The big deal was not that Paul was a Roman citizen but rather that he was a citizen of heaven.

Earthly citizenship and earthly pursuits are not meant to be the big deal in this life for believers, yet it is hard because this life is what we see. We care about approval in *this* life.

We care about success in *this* life. We care about freedom in *this* life. We care about material success, advancement, enjoyment in *this* life. This comes because we do not understand our true citizenship. Christian, you are a citizen of heaven! You have the hope of eternity planted in your heart, sealed by the Holy Spirit. You have a home prepared for you by Christ. You'll have millennia to reflect on God's goodness he displayed amid the trials and misunderstandings of *this* life, because we aren't living for *this* life. We aren't storing up treasures in *this* life. We aren't setting our sights on *this* life. We're setting them on things above, in the next life!

And how did this citizenship come to us? The Roman tribune was not a full-class citizen, like Paul was by birth. He had to pay a large sum of money to be granted citizenship. And what he received was small compared to what we have. Our citizenship cost a large sum, too, but it wasn't paid by us. It was paid by Jesus, by every rich, costly drop of blood spilled from his body on the cross, when he gave his life for us. He bought our citizenship so we could belong to the kingdom of heaven.

When you understand your citizenship, it's okay to be misunderstood like Paul was. It's okay to be misunderstood like Jesus was. When you understand your citizenship, those other misunderstandings fade in importance because you begin to look forward to the brilliance awaiting you because of Christ.

That's why we come to the table today, in an attempt to understand the costly sacrifice of Jesus to buy our citizenship. We come now to observe the Lord's Supper. This is open to all present who have placed their faith in Christ, even if you aren't a member of this church. If you are his, this is yours.

(1) These illustrations were accessed from TopTenz.net on 10/12/2021, <https://www.toptenz.net/top-10-times-miscommunication-had-awful-consequences.php>.