

Series: "Finishing What was Started"

C.R. 4-7-24

"The Misery of Misunderstanding"

Text: Acts 21: 15-39

Intro: We start today the final section of the book of Acts. While we have moved slowly, I promise the pace is about to pick up significantly. As Paul enters Jerusalem things are about to change drastically. He will spend the rest of his days imprisoned, on trial, but never relenting. Today we will watch as New Covenants and Old Covenants collide, and what happens when you are misunderstood.

Paul is faced with difficult decisions. He is lied about, and even beaten. All because He preaches Christ and Christ alone. Let's take a closer look at the misery of misunderstanding.

1) The Recounting (V.19-20)

- a. Paul sits down with the elders at the church in Jerusalem and gives them a detailed account of all that God had done.
- b. It had been quite some time since they had seen Paul, and they must have sat amazed as they heard what had transpired in all of the cities Paul had been to.
- c. Years before they had agreed that Paul should minister to the Gentiles, and the scriptures say here that they rejoiced when they heard it.

2) Paul's Reputation (v. 20-21)

- a. The elders of Jerusalem were happy for what God was doing among the Gentiles. Yet in Jerusalem the Christian community was almost entirely from a Jewish background, and these Christians

still valued many of the Jewish laws and customs. They were still zealous for the law.

- b. They have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses: The Christian community of Jerusalem heard bad, false rumors about Paul. They heard that he had become essentially anti-Jewish, and told Jewish Christians that it was wrong for them to continue in Jewish laws and customs
- c. When the Lord confirmed His covenant with Abraham for the third and final time (Gen. 17), He commanded that each male living in the covenant community was to be circumcised as a symbol of his participation (cf. Lev. 12:3; Luke 1:59). Refusing circumcision (for oneself or, more often, one's male children) was tantamount to divorcing oneself from the community and rejecting God. Therefore, such a rebel and his family were to be removed from Hebrew society and regarded as outsiders. Such a rejection of God and His covenant was a mark of condemnation. The faithful observance of circumcision, on the other hand, allowed one's male offspring access to all the rights and privileges of Hebrew society once he came of age.
- d. **Swindoll:** *These tens of thousands of believing Jews were enthusiastic about keeping the Law of Moses (21:20). In fact, it seems that the believing Jews, saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, had a renewed joy in the Law—not as a means of salvation, but as a means of demonstrating their love for God and for others within their unique Jewish cultural and religious context. This doesn't necessarily identify them as legalistic. Their decision to keep the Law was an authentic act of worship and devotion, not a way to please God, and not something to force upon Gentile converts as their legalistic, Judaizing counterparts were eager to do.*
- e. But rumors started flowing into Jerusalem stating that Paul lambasted Jews who wanted to keep the Law, even to the point of forsaking the rite of circumcision.
- f. This is where Satan excels. In the rumor mills.
- g. There was a great deal of evidence to the contrary of these rumors. The circumcision of Timothy, The vow that Paul had taken in Corinth.
- h. But rumors are not based on fact. They thrive in half-truths and out right lies. (Wiersbe).

3) The Recommendation (v. 22-25)

- a. They advised Paul to both join and sponsor these four Christians from a Jewish backgrounds.
- b. Paul, Show them you are still a Jew and put an end to these rumors about you.
- c. **Swindoll:** Funding one Nazarite demonstrated a high regard for Jewish tradition; funding four would have made front-page news.
- d. Paul is in a tough spot. He would agree to do this so that he could show support for Jewish law without compromising his stand on grace.
- e. **Illustrate:** When I am going to preach in a church I like to talk with the Pastor. What version does he use. Does he wear a tie.
- f. But I am going to still preach Jesus as the only way, the truth and life, and the Bible as inerrant. Law cannot save only Jesus can.
- g. Paul agreed to do this, to demonstrate that he never taught Christian Jews to forsake Moses and not to circumcise their children and that they were required to ignore Jewish customs, as he had been false accused by some among the Jerusalem Christians.
- h. “He had shown them that their ceremonies were useless but not destructive; that they were only dangerous when they depended on them for salvation.” (Clarke)
- i. Many commentators believe this was a terrible compromise on Paul’s part; that he was a hypocrite. Yet the motive behind Paul’s sponsorship of these Christian Jews completing their Nazirite vow is explained in **1 Corinthians 9:20:** And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law.
- j. It’s important to understand that this offering — an animal sacrifice — was not in any way for the purpose of atonement or forgiveness. Paul absolutely understood that only the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross atones for sin. Yet not every sacrifice in the Jewish system was for atonement; many were for thanksgiving or dedication, as this one was.

4) The Riot (v. 27-36)

- a. As we have seen the devil excels at stirring things up as he did here.
- b. The crowd was enraged because it was feast-time (Acts 20:16). It was enraged because they believed Paul not only preached against the people, the law, and the temple, but also profaned the temple by bringing Gentiles into its inner courts (they said, "he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place").
- c. It was absolutely prohibited for Gentiles to go beyond the designated "Court of the Gentiles" in the temple grounds. Signs were posted which read (in both Greek and Latin): "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Any one who is caught trespassing will bear personal responsibility for his ensuing death." The Romans were so sensitive to this that they authorized the Jews to execute anyone that offended in this way, even if the offender was a Roman citizen.
- d. Paul had been seized by an enraged mob, and the mob didn't just want to take him out of the temple courts. They wanted to kill him, right there in the outer courtyard area of the temple mount.
- e. The multitude of the people followed after, crying out, "Away with him!" When the mob cried out for his death, Paul must have remembered when he was part of such a mob, agreeing with the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:54-8:1).
- f. **(v. 37-39)**. I implore you, permit me to speak to the people. At this moment, when his life was in danger from an angry mob and he was suspected of being a dangerous criminal, Paul had one thing on his mind: "Let me preach the gospel!"

Swindoll on Misunderstanding.

- 1) **The reality of misunderstanding is inescapable.** *If you want to have any kind of meaningful impact or cultivate significant relationships, you will be misunderstood. If you want to drift through this life, do what everyone else does, go along with the majority opinion, and avoid saying or doing anything of significance, then you'll never have to worry about being misunderstood. If, however, you expect to be different from the run-of-the-mill crowd, if you hope to achieve something that hasn't been attempted, if you try to improve upon the status quo, I repeat: You will be misunderstood. Count on it.*

Noah? That whole boat scene must have been unbelievable. Moses? He expected his people to understand God's purpose for his life, but they didn't. Joseph? He maintained the highest level of integrity and purity, yet Potiphar sided with his wife, who accused Joseph of attempted rape. In spite of his honesty, he landed in prison. And the Old Testament prophets? Ignored, marginalized, accused of disloyalty, mercilessly criticized, openly hated, often killed as enemies of Israel. John the Baptizer? Hailed as a prophet, ignored as a madman. The Protestant Reformers? Treated like heretics, cursed like devils, and hunted like animals. Anyone who has ever done anything worthwhile has been misunderstood.

2) Second, the reasons for misunderstanding are unpredictable.

Misunderstandings occur for many reasons, so we cannot anticipate how or when they will occur. Furthermore, most of them lie beyond our control. Snap judgments, pride, fear, prejudice, slander, pettiness, ambition, vainglory—the causes are too numerous and diverse to count. And when misunderstandings occur, we can do very little to resolve them. Most could be settled in a matter of minutes with a simple conversation, but only if the other party wants to listen. You can be responsible only to communicate clearly; the response of others isn't up to you.

3) Third, the reaction to misunderstanding is yours to decide.

Typically, people respond to misunderstandings in three ways. Some work themselves into a frenzy trying to get the other party to hear and acknowledge the truth. They scream, they plead, they repeat themselves endlessly, they live in anguished desperation to be heard. Others turn inward, sulkily determined to play the martyr and allow the acid of bitterness to eat away at them. I don't recommend either of these two responses. The best response to misunderstanding is to extend an invitation to discuss the matter, and then get on with life. Accept your helplessness, pray for strength to go on, allow God to handle the difficulty, expend no more energy to resolve it, and then devote yourself to fulfilling your purpose in life. These are true marks of greatness.