

This morning, I am continuing to go through the Book of Acts, the story of the early church. In the previous chapters, Paul has been turned over by the Jews to the Romans. In this passage, he goes on trial before three Roman leaders: Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa. We're not going to read the whole passage, which is three chapters long, but we'll read 24:1-21 in order to understand what Paul is being accused of.

*Acts 24:1-21 - Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. <sup>2</sup> When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. <sup>3</sup> Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with **profound gratitude**. <sup>4</sup> But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly. <sup>5</sup> "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect <sup>6</sup> and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. <sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him." <sup>9</sup> The Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these **things were true**. <sup>10</sup> When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: "I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. <sup>11</sup> You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. <sup>12</sup> My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. <sup>13</sup> And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now **making against me**. <sup>14</sup> However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, <sup>15</sup> and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. <sup>16</sup> So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man. <sup>17</sup> "After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and **to present offerings**. <sup>18</sup> I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. <sup>19</sup> But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. <sup>20</sup> Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin-- <sup>21</sup> unless it was this one thing I shouted as I **stood in their presence**: "It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today."*

Notice the accusation they make of Paul in this passage:

<sup>5</sup> *"We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect <sup>6</sup> and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. <sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him."*

They accuse Paul of being a troublemaker and of sedition, which is engaging in speech and conduct that incites people to rebel against Roman authority. Paul defends himself by letting them know that he had gone to worship, to share the good news about Jesus, and had not brought any crowd with him. He claims that he is a good and loyal Roman citizen who believes what the Jews believe but also believes in Jesus as Lord and Savior. He worships God and hopes in the resurrection of the dead. The Roman leaders don't find any basis for the charges against him, but he appeals to Caesar, and so he will eventually go to Rome. Incidentally, the record of church history proclaims that Paul went to Rome and was eventually executed by Nero, the Caesar at the time, during Nero's persecution of Christians.

If you're been reading Acts, you can clearly see that Paul is telling the truth and that he is not guilty of what they are accusing him of. True, there are riots everywhere he goes, but the riots are caused by those who are opposed to what he is teaching. And so, on the one hand, **he is not a troublemaker**, in that he is not intentionally trying to incite people to rebel against Roman authority. But on the other, **he is a troublemaker**, in that he is preaching a message that is counter-cultural and dangerous and stirs up a lot of anger and hostility in many who hear it.

We may live 2000 years after Paul, but the reality is that if you are following in his footsteps or in Jesus' footsteps, you are going to cause trouble in this world. You will likely stir up hatred and opposition from others. In fact, this is what Jesus promised to His followers:

**John 15:18-21** - *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. <sup>19</sup> If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. <sup>20</sup> Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. <sup>21</sup> They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.*

This is hard for people-pleasers like me to hear. But Jesus tells us that if the world loves you, it is probably because you are more concerned about your reputation than you are about God's reputation. If you are following Jesus, then you will be persecuted and hated just as He was. The world will see you as a troublemaker.

What I want to do is to look at the message Paul preached, which is the same message we still preach, the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that we can understand why it is such a troubling and offensive message today.

### 1) God created us and we are accountable to Him

The gospel begins with the truth that in the beginning, God created everything, including us. He created us, He designed us, and because He designed us, He knows how we should live.

***Revelation 4:11** - "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."*

In the beginning was the Triune God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Jesus is the eternal Son of God, and He has the authority over everything.

***Colossians 1:15-16** - He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.*

God is the Lord and has authority over everything. Think about the main implication of that. **You are not God.** You are not in charge. The world does not revolve around you or exist to serve you; it revolves around him. We are not, as William Ernest Henley wrote in *Invictus*, **"the masters of our own fate or the captains of our own soul."**

Do you understand how troubling and offensive this message is? Our culture is moving further and further away from belief in a creator, a designer. An increasing number of people believe and live as if they have the freedom to be self-creators, self-designers, to be whoever they choose to be and to live however they choose to live. This is a very attractive message, because it is a message that declares that you answer to no one, that happiness is found not by conforming to some external

standard, but rather by looking inward, figuring out who you are and what you want, and then giving expression to that, and expecting the world to affirm that.

Charles Taylor called this a mark of the age of authenticity, which he explained this way:

*I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.*

Another great term for this is “expressive individualism.” As Carl Trueman puts it, “*Expressive individualism particularly refers to the idea that in order to be fulfilled, in order to be an authentic person, in order to be genuinely me, I need to be able to express outwardly or perform publicly that which I feel I am inside.*”

This belief is the cultural water in which we now swim. Nowhere is this more evident today than in the confusion around gender. Now, to be clear, there are men and women who experience gender dysphoria and feel as if they are in the wrong body. There are some who live in that tension, and some who undergo surgery so that they can feel more at home in their body. That is undoubtedly a difficult thing to experience, and these individuals deserve our empathy and not our judgment or condemnation.

Having said that, what is happening in our culture is not about clinical gender dysphoria but about an increasing belief that we are self-created and should be free to live however we please. For example, in 2014, Facebook changed to offering 58 options for gender: Agender, Androgyne, Androgynous, Bigender, Cis, Cisgender, Cis Female, Cis Male, Cis Man, Cis Woman, Cisgender Female, Cisgender Male, Cisgender Man, Cisgender Woman, Female to Male, FTM, Gender Fluid, Gender Nonconforming, Gender Questioning, Gender Variant, Genderqueer, Intersex, Male to Female, MTF, Neither, Neutrois, Non-binary, Other, Pangender, Trans, Trans\*, Trans Female, Trans\* Female, Trans Male, Trans\* Male, Trans Man, Trans\* Man, Trans Person, Trans\* Person, Trans Woman, Trans\* Woman, Transfeminine, Transgender, Transgender Female, Transgender Male, Transgender Man, Transgender Person, Transgender Woman, Transmasculine, Transsexual, Transsexual Female, Transsexual Male, Transsexual Man, Transsexual Person, Transsexual Woman, Two-Spirit.

A few years later, they pared that list down to 14 plus a custom field. And new pronouns are being invented every week. My point in bringing up this example is that, as a culture, we have blown way past gender dysphoria to a whole other level. You see, if there is no creator, and we are all self-creators, self-definers who choose for ourselves who we are and how we live and how people should refer to us, then first of all, there are an infinite number of pronouns and identities and ways you expect people to refer to you. But more importantly, no one can tell you that you are wrong without “doing violence” to your identity, without you feeling as if they are questioning your very existence. Our culture is no longer about learning what a Creator has deemed to be right and wrong. **Today’s culture is all about personal preference.** It is a world of competing tastes. I like this, you don’t. I think this is good, you don’t. And no one knows what is true or right or good. Reminds me of one of the most chaotic periods in Israel’s history:

***Judges 17:6*** - **In those days Israel had no king;** everyone did as he saw fit.

Preaching a message that there is a God who created us, who decides what is right and wrong, and who in the end will judge us is troubling and offensive to many. To claim that we are not self-created beings but are created beings who are accountable to Him is something that will increasingly cause a great deal of hostility to come your way, and, like Paul, you will be blamed for speaking things that stir up riots. But the truth is that there is a God who has created you, who has communicated what is right and wrong. There is a judgment day, and you are accountable to Him for everything you say and do. As Jesus said:

***Matthew 12:36*** - *But I tell you that you will have to give account on the day of judgment for every **careless** word you have spoken.*

Now, if that wasn’t offensive enough:

## **2) Our sin has separated us from God**

***Romans 3:23*** - *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

***Romans 6:23*** - *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

God created us in His image, to enjoy a relationship with Him. But we have all sinned, rebelled against God, decided that we wanted to be our own gods and do

what we wanted to do. But this sin has separated us from God, and we are all heading for not just a physical death but eternal separation from God.

**John 3:16-18** - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

Why is this offensive? For one, it's offensive because it does not seem fair. We do not know how God will judge, but clearly a person's response to Jesus seems central to the decision.

It is also troubling and offensive to claim that we are all sinners separated from God because it means that no one is "perfect just the way they are." And the path to happiness will not be found in "following your heart." And "I was born this way" is not a justification for anything, for we were all born twisted by sin. "To thine own self be true" is terrible advice.

**Jeremiah 17:9** - *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*

**Mark 7:20-23** - *He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' <sup>21</sup> For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"*

**Romans 7:18** - *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.*

What is wrong with the world? Yes, there are bad systems. Yes, there is racism. Yes, there are corrupt politics or bad leaders. But these are just symptoms of the deeper problem, manifestations of the true cancer of this world. The real problem is sin, which has corrupted every human heart and every facet of our world. The problem is that we are all out of step with God's good intention for us.

As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart.”

3) Jesus, the eternal Son of God, died on the cross to take the penalty we deserved for our sins and to offer us forgiveness and a restored relationship with God

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The solution is found in Christ, in His life, death and resurrection. He forgives our inability to measure up, and He gives us a new heart that gives us the ability to do what is right and to live justly.

**Romans 3:20-24** *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. <sup>21</sup> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

Why is this troubling and offensive? **The problem is sin, and the only solution is Jesus Christ.** If it was about being a good person, you could follow any number of approaches. But Paul tells us that no one will be right with God by observing the law. The gospel tells us that we are so sinful that nothing less than the death of God's Son could save us. But we are so loved that He willingly gave His life for us.

As Peter said about Jesus:

**Acts 4:12** *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*

And as Jesus said about himself:

**John 14:6** *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

That is offensive. It is seen as disrespectful and dangerous. That will cause trouble. But it also beautiful. It humbles us yet gives us tremendous confidence and peace at the same time to know that while we were sinners, Christ died for us.

The answer is not found in politics, in education, in any system of this world. The problem is sin, and the answer is Jesus. And so, we are called to preach this gospel to all the earth.

**Matthew 28:18-20** - *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

**This is a troubling and offensive message.** The temptation will be to smooth the rough edges off. To tell people that they are perfect just the way they are, that they can choose to be or live whoever they want. Or to downplay sin, judgment and Hell. Or to open the doors to a salvation by works, in which as long as you are a good person, that is all that matters. But if you do those things, you will be preaching a different gospel than Jesus dying for our sins. You will be prioritizing your own comfort and reputation over God's honor and people's salvation.

Like Paul, if you preach the gospel, you will be seen as a troublemaker. Don't go out looking for trouble. We should take no pride in being accused of being bad for the world if that is how we are indeed acting:

**1 Peter 2:20** - *But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating **for doing wrong** and endure it? But if you suffer **for doing** good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.*

It is hard to thread the needle of being a troublemaker for the right reason. Go out preaching the gospel and making disciples, and trouble will find you, just as it did Jesus, and just as it did Paul. We preach in humility, knowing it is by grace we are saved and we have no reason to boast.



***Ephesians 2:8-10*** - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.  
<sup>10</sup> For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.