

Getting People's Attention

Acts 21:37-22:23

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If you've ever spent much time in a classroom, you know one of the big challenges is getting a class to pay attention. I was a substitute teacher for nearly 20 years, and I had a handful of tricks to get attention, but I always enjoyed seeing some of the creative methods teachers employ. There are the obvious options, like yelling louder than the class (which usually results in a hoarse voice by the end of the day), or standing silently in front of the class, waiting for the students to realize and quiet down (this can work with older kids, but isn't great with younger ones). Many teachers today have a unique call and response they use with the classes. They say something or clap a rhythm and the students are to respond back, at which point they quiet down. Managing a classroom of children who aren't always cooperative and eager to hear what you have to say is one of the biggest challenges of teaching.

The Apostle Paul was familiar with such challenges. While the people gathered to hear him speak usually were interested in hearing what he had to say, they were also often hostile to his message. He had to be intentional about how he went about getting people's attention and then holding it. He knew that force might gain compliance, but it wouldn't draw the people in as he really needed to do. Paul was brilliant when it came to finding ways to draw people in to what he was saying. Today's passage is a great example of how he did that.

When we last left Paul, he had arrived in Jerusalem, where the elders of the Jerusalem church had asked him to participate in and foot the bill for a Jewish ritual. Their concern was that there was a pretty vocal group of people in Jerusalem who didn't like Paul and the church hoped that by Paul participating in this ritual, it would silence those who might unjustly attack him. Unfortunately, their calculations were incorrect. Some Jews from the province of Asia (likely from Ephesus) stirred up a riot in the temple, and Paul was dragged out and nearly beaten to death. The only reason the crowd didn't kill him was because of the quick thinking and intervention of the Roman military commander, Claudius Lysias. He took Paul into protective custody and removed him from the crowd so he could figure out what was going on and restore peace and order to the city.

Paul and Claudius Lysias

That leads into the beginning of our passage this morning, where we see Paul in a conversation with the Roman commander, likely just out of reach of the riotous crowd.

³⁷ As Paul was about to be taken inside, he said to the commander, "May I have a word with you?" "Do you know Greek?" the commander asked, surprised.

⁸ "Aren't you the Egyptian who led a rebellion some time ago and took 4,000 members of the Assassins out into the desert?"

³⁹ "No," Paul replied, "I am a Jew and a citizen of Tarsus in Cilicia, which is an important city. Please, let me talk to these people." ⁴⁰ The commander agreed, so

Paul stood on the stairs and motioned to the people to be quiet. Soon a deep silence enveloped the crowd, and he addressed them in their own language, Aramaic. (Acts 21:37-39, NLT)

After being dragged from the crowd, Paul addressed the commander who had saved his life. He seems to have still been outside, and likely still visible to the crowd. Paul spoke to the commander in Greek, which would have likely been the commander's primary language. The commander was surprised, as he had assumed Paul was someone different.

He told Paul he had thought he was the Egyptian who had led a rebellion some time ago. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded such an uprising, led by an Egyptian, in 54 AD (about 3 years previous). Governor Felix had killed many of the man's followers, but the leader escaped into the desert. The commander assumed Paul was this man, which was why he was so surprised when Paul spoke to him in Greek.

Right away, the commander was caught off-guard. The situation he thought he was dealing with was actually something completely different. He hadn't quite made sense of things yet though.

After building this bridge with the commander, Paul asked for permission to address the crowd. This was a strange request, but the commander realized it was a strange situation. Clearly, he had misjudged Paul, so maybe the crowd had as well. Paul did not seem to be interested in creating a riot, so Claudius Lysias permitted him to speak. His primary concern was restoring peace and order, and if Paul could help him in that process, so much the better.

Paul stood on the stairs, in full view of everyone and motioned for the crowd to be quiet. Amazingly, the people quieted down so they could hear him. Paul then began to speak to them in Aramaic, the common language of the Jews at this time. Suddenly, the crowd became even more quiet.

Remember, they had assumed Paul hated Judaism. They assumed he was an outsider, not one of them. So they were just as surprised as the Roman commander was when Paul spoke to them in their own language. And so, they quieted down to hear what he had to say.

Paul was a brilliant man. He seems to have spoken several languages quite proficiently and was well-versed not only in the Jewish law, but also in the common philosophers and poets of the day. He had a brilliant mind for arguing and often used his logic to guide people along the paths they needed to travel. Paul understood the importance of speaking the language of his audience. We should do the same.

Now, most of us in this room do not speak multiple languages. Unlike many parts of the world, in the United States, most people speak only English. But even when we're

communicating with other English-speakers, it's important that we speak in a way they can understand.

We grasp this intuitively when we speak to children. When talking with children we use a different, simpler vocabulary, and we use images and analogies they would understand. The same is true when we talk to others about Jesus. We should avoid using terms or concepts that are foreign to people outside of the church. We cannot talk about atonement, sacrifice, or even sin or love without defining these terms. We must not assume people understand these concepts. We must explain them in a way they can understand.

In the same way, the approaches and illustrations we use must change depending on our audience. We wouldn't share the gospel with a lawyer the same way we would with a mechanic or a teacher or a banker. We must find a way to communicate clearly with each person we interact with.

When people discover that you actually care about them, you've taken the time to hear them, know them, and understand them, then you'll often be able to have a real and genuine dialogue with them. We have to earn trust, and we can do that by taking the time to understand our audience and meet them where they are.

People often tell me, "You don't seem like a pastor." Any time I hear that, I get worried, thinking that maybe I'm not doing what I should be. But it is usually intended as a compliment. I think most of the time what people mean is that they have a negative impression of pastors and I've helped to break down that wall. Most of the time, when someone says that it's because I've taken the time to listen to them and understand where they are coming from. They feel understood and feel comfortable talking to me. This is exactly what Paul did, and it's what we should strive to do as well. If we want to have real dialogue, even with people who are hostile to us, we must work to understand them and help them feel heard first. The fact that when we listen and understand people takes them off guard is a sign that we need to do better in this area.

Paul's Appeal

After the crowd quieted down, Paul began his speech. As we look at what he said and how he said it, I think we can learn much about how we ought to approach people as well.

"Brothers and esteemed fathers," Paul said, "listen to me as I offer my defense."

² When they heard him speaking in their own language, the silence was even greater. ³ Then Paul said, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. As his student, I was carefully trained in our Jewish laws and customs. I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did, just like all of you today. ⁴ And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison. ⁵ The high priest and the whole council of elders can testify that this is so. For I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in

Damascus, authorizing me to bring the followers of the Way from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished. (Acts 22:1-5, NLT)

We should notice a couple of things in Paul's approach. **First, we see his heart.** It would be easy for us to forget that Paul was addressing the same people who, only moments before, were beating him senseless! He was likely bloodied at this point, sore, and maybe already starting to show signs of swelling. He would have been dirty, and maybe even covered in spit from the crowd he now stood before. And yet, Paul wanted to address these people, in hopes of introducing them to Jesus!

Paul was not one to write people off. He understood the grace God had extended to him, and he wanted to extend that same grace to others. Though it would have been much easier for Paul to just give up on the people and walk away, he still loved them.

Often, we do not love those who have hurt us or who are hostile to us, or even who are different from us. We find it easier to call them names and belittle them. We treat them as though they don't matter. That's certainly the easier course, but I do not think it is the Christian one. We should see that each person with whom we interact has intrinsic value and is worth investing our time in. Each person needs Jesus, just as we do. Paul's heart was in the right place—we must make sure ours is too.

Second, we see his approach. Paul could have begun by attacking the people as they had attacked him. He could have said, "Listen, you morons. Don't you know I'm God's messenger? Don't you know I'm actually trying to help you? Why can't you see how foolish you're being?" But Paul was smart enough to know that wouldn't go over well.

Instead, he treated them with respect. He addressed them as "brothers and esteemed fathers." He didn't belittle them, but treated them with a respect they had not afforded to him. This should serve as a reminder to us that we should choose to be respectful and kind, even to those who are not that way to us. Lashing out at others may feel good, but it rarely leads to any sort of meaningful dialogue. A better approach is respect and gentleness.

In addition to treating the crowd with respect, he also sought to build a bridge with them. Paul started by showing them that he was one of them. He told them about his background. He had already shown that he spoke their language, but he also pointed to the fact that while he was from Tarsus, he had been raised in Jerusalem and educated under Gamaliel, who was a well-respected rabbi of the day.

He even said that he was like them, very zealous for the law. He had once even opposed Christians! Paul was trying to show them that he understood where they were coming from. They had common ground. They were not as different as they might have thought.

Again, this should be the same approach we take with others. You may imagine that you don't have anything in common with people who are hostile to the Christian faith,

but you might be surprised. Do you have children or grandchildren? Do you share similar interests (sports teams, hobbies, etc.)? Do you know some of the same people or from similar backgrounds? Often, the biggest hurdle to being heard is simply finding common ground. Once we do that, we discover we're maybe not as different as we imagine, and it opens the door for genuine conversation. We must do the hard work of building bridges if we hope to reach people with the gospel.

Paul's Testimony

The rest of Paul's speech to the crowd recounted his testimony of his conversion on the road to Damascus. We have already heard Luke's retelling of the story, and we will hear Paul retell it several more times in the book of Acts. Each time Paul tells the story, he emphasizes different aspects, designed to build a bridge with his audience. Here, he emphasized several Jewish aspects, connecting his experience with the things God had said in the Old Testament.

Why share his testimony? Because Paul understood that the crowd didn't just need to understand *what* he believed, they needed to understand *why* he believed it. He was trying to help them enter into his own experience and give validity to the truth he was proclaiming. He even wanted them to see how much he desired to share the message with the Jewish people. He wasn't against the Jews, he loved them! All of this was the goal of his testimony.

We can share our own experience with the Lord with people as well. Some people have a dramatic story of how the Lord delivered them from a life of sin and put them on a different path. But testimonies can be much simpler as well. You can tell someone about how God recently answered a prayer. You can talk about what you learned in your Bible reading today. You can share something profound you heard in church, or something you learned recently. Each of these are simple ways we can testify to the reality of our faith. They build trust with others and help us bridge the gaps between us.

The People's Response

The people had listened quietly and intently, but ultimately cut Paul off.

²¹ "But the Lord said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!'"

²² The crowd listened until Paul said that word. Then they all began to shout, "Away with such a fellow! He isn't fit to live!" ²³ They yelled, threw off their coats, and tossed handfuls of dust into the air. (Acts 22:21-23, NLT)

Paul wasn't about to water down the message. The message was still the same, but he was doing everything he could to connect with his audience. Unfortunately, the crowd was so primed to be against anything Gentile at this point, that at the mere suggestion that God would reach out to the Gentiles, they began to riot once more.

The irony of this, of course, is that God had said repeatedly throughout the Old Testament that His plan included Gentiles, and that He was going to work through the Jewish people to reach them. But at this point, the people's hearts were so hardened that they were unwilling to even consider such a notion. So they shouted Paul down.

Conclusion

Paul didn't get to finish his message. He didn't get to share with them about their need for a perfect sacrifice, and how Jesus was that sacrifice. But he had shown great care for these people who wanted to kill him. Paul will speak many more times in the remaining chapters, and we will see similar patterns in each one. As we conclude today, I want to draw some lessons we should remember.

First, everyone needs Jesus. This seems like an elementary notion, but it's foundational to everything else. There is no other way for people to be saved than through Jesus Christ. Every other approach simply doesn't work. Jesus said that He was *The Way* to Heaven. As such, we should see people around us not as obstacles to be overcome or people we must endure, but men and women created in God's image who are in desperate need of a Savior. God loves them dearly, and so should we. We must not simply write people off, but our goal should be to reach everyone—even those who may attack us—with the truth of Jesus Christ.

Second, we must approach the world with love. Many people today are hostile toward Christians. The Christian faith, as revealed in the Bible, is probably under attack more now than at any other time in our nation's history. People mock us, ridicule us, mistreat us, and sometimes outrightly try to hurt us (physically or otherwise). But we should learn from Paul's example the importance of choosing to love these people instead of responding in-kind. It is far easier to attack those who attack us, or to mock and ridicule them, or talk about them as though they are dumb, but those things do nothing to bring them closer to Jesus. We must work to build bridges to people, showing them that they aren't that much different than us, and that apart from Christ, we'd be in the same boat. We must look for common ground and then seek to build from there. It isn't easy. It's definitely the harder course. But it's also the better one.

Third, we must work to communicate clearly. The best way to get better at explaining the gospel to people is practice! Talk to people about your faith and see what they understand and what they don't. As you do this, you'll learn how to communicate more clearly and accurately. You'll learn the things that people get confused by the most and what they resonate best with. And the more you share the message, the more you'll come to understand and appreciate it yourself.

The world today is full of division. And, there are lots of things that can (and should!) divide us. There are many things people believe today that we would vehemently disagree with. But what unites us is the fact that we are all created in the image of God. We all need a Savior. And Jesus is the One who can save us all. When we choose to view non-Christian people in this way, it will necessarily change the way we interact with them. It will cause us to be gentle and loving rather than hard and cruel. And it will make us people who seek to build bridges rather than walls. We must never water down the truth, but we must also recognize the world around us needs to hear it, no matter what they may say (or do) to (or about) us. So we should do everything we can to make it so they are able to hear it, understand it, and believe it for themselves.

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