

# Speaking Truth to Power

Acts 25:23-26:32

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People have all sorts of fears in life. Statistically speaking, the most common fear is the fear of public speaking. Supposedly, fear of public speaking actually ranks higher than a fear of death! Comedian Jerry Seinfeld once observed that this means at a funeral most people would rather be the guy in the casket than the guy giving the eulogy!

I might suggest that even among those who aren't bothered too much by public speaking, sometimes we still fear speaking truth to people if we think that truth is going to upset them. It doesn't matter who it is, many of us struggle with speaking up when we aren't sure how we will be received. One thing we can say about the Apostle Paul is that he didn't let fear keep him from speaking the truth. No matter where he was, what the odds were, or who he was speaking to, Paul continued to speak the truth, because he understood what was at stake.

This morning we're going to see a great example of Paul's boldness in sharing the gospel. My hope is that it will give us the encouragement we need to be bold in sharing our faith as well. Being bold doesn't mean being mean or offensive, but it does mean speaking the truth clearly, winsomely, and unapologetically. As we look at Paul's approach, we can glean some principles for how we should approach the people we encounter in our lives.

## Setting the Scene

When we last left Paul, he had appealed his case to Rome to be heard by the emperor. He had done so because even though he had been in prison for two years, the Jewish leaders still wanted to kill him. Though the new Roman governor, Festus, didn't see any grounds for their charges, he was unwilling to release Paul for fear it would upset the delicate balance he needed to maintain with the Jews. When he asked Paul if he would be willing to stand trial back in Jerusalem, Paul appealed to Caesar, as he knew he would not survive a trial in Jerusalem; he would likely either be killed on the trip there or railroaded in their court system.

Festus agreed to send Paul to Caesar, but he was faced with a problem. He didn't know what to tell Caesar about why he was sending him. He didn't think writing "I'm too scared to do my job, so I'd like you to do it for me" would be good for his career. Fortunately, the man known as the king of the Jews, Herod Agrippa II, had come to visit, so Festus asked him to hear Paul speak, hoping he could offer some insight. Luke sets the stage for us.

<sup>23</sup> So the next day Agrippa and Bernice arrived at the auditorium with great pomp, accompanied by military officers and prominent men of the city. Festus ordered that Paul be brought in. <sup>24</sup> Then Festus said, "King Agrippa and all who are here, this is the man whose death is demanded by all the Jews, both here and in Jerusalem. <sup>25</sup> But in my opinion he has done nothing deserving death. However,

since he appealed his case to the emperor, I have decided to send him to Rome.  
<sup>26</sup> “But what shall I write the emperor? For there is no clear charge against him.  
So I have brought him before all of you, and especially you, King Agrippa, so that  
after we examine him, I might have something to write. <sup>27</sup> For it makes no sense  
to send a prisoner to the emperor without specifying the charges against him!”  
(Acts 25:23-27, NLT)

The way Luke records this story leads us to believe he was probably present and saw all of this with his own eyes. The details he includes sound like the details of an eyewitness. He paints a vivid picture of what this scene would have looked like.

Luke said King Agrippa and Bernice (his sister/lover) entered the auditorium with great pomp. The word in Greek is the word *fantasia*, which is where we get our word *fantasy*. They contrived to make themselves look important and powerful, but this was a mere fantasy. They were hoping to convince everyone they were more important than they were. They were likely arrayed in flowing purple garments and seated in elevated positions above everyone else in the auditorium, showing how important they were.

Also present were military officers. These were men who oversaw 1,000 troops each. There were 5,000 troops stationed at Caesarea, so it's possible the five most powerful military leaders of the city were there. Luke also said many of the prominent men of the city were also in attendance. I believe he included these details to be ironic. These individuals were parading themselves as powerful and important, but we are about to see that the most powerful person in the room was the man who had likely been unceremoniously dragged from prison in tattered clothing, in need of a shower, and looking anything but majestic. But the Lord was on his side. The Holy Spirit is the source of true power, and Paul was about to demonstrate that to everyone gathered there that day.

## **Common Ground**

After Agrippa gave Paul permission to speak, Paul said that Agrippa was well-acquainted with Jewish customs and controversies. This was not mere bluster or flattery. Agrippa was the expert in the region on the Jewish people. He was in control of the temple, the temple treasury, and the appointment/removal of the high priest. Though Agrippa was not moral (as evidenced by his relationship with Bernice), he was not nearly as ruthless and evil as many of his family members. And he'd been in the region for a long time. He knew the history of the area. Paul was correct in pointing out that Agrippa was knowledgeable of Jewish affairs—far more so than Festus was.

Paul then began to share his testimony. We've heard Paul's resume before, but he reiterated it for this audience once more. He pointed out that he had been educated as a Jew both at his home (in Tarsus) and also in Jerusalem. He had trained as and became a member of the Pharisees. Paul described them as the strictest sect of the Jewish faith, which was true. The Pharisees were the religious conservatives of the day. They were very diligent in trying to obey every aspect of the law (at least outwardly) as they understood it.

Not only was Paul a member of this group, he had viewed Christians the same way they did. He saw them as blasphemers who needed to be rooted out once and for all. He shared that he had supported the execution of Christians in Jerusalem and had even traveled to foreign cities to find Christians and have them beaten to get them to deny Jesus. Not long ago, Paul was just like these men. But then something changed.

## **What Happened**

Paul then shared what changed his mind. He knew the facts of the Christian faith. He knew what they believed, but he hadn't been convinced. Then one day God blinded him...so he could see clearly. God spoke directly to Paul and told him he was playing for the wrong team. Not only that, He gave Paul marching orders! These marching orders are significant, because they explain why Paul had continued to do the things he was doing. Paul records the Lord's instructions to him in verses 15-18.

<sup>15</sup> “Who are you, lord?” I asked. “And the Lord replied, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. <sup>16</sup> Now get to your feet! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and witness. Tell people that you have seen me, and tell them what I will show you in the future. <sup>17</sup> And I will rescue you from both your own people and the Gentiles. Yes, I am sending you to the Gentiles <sup>18</sup> to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me.’ (Acts 26:15-18, NLT)

The Lord told Paul he was to be his servant and witness. He was to testify that he had encountered the Lord (which was what he was doing before Agrippa now) and to teach the things the Lord would reveal to him in the future. He told Paul He was sending him to the Gentiles, so they would turn from darkness to the light, and that the Gentiles would receive forgiveness of their sins and be given a place among God's people.

These were earth-shattering words, especially the idea that the Gentiles would be accepted as God's people just as the Jews had been. But Paul was very clear in why he had come to believe this—it was because the Lord Himself had told him these things!

Paul also pointed out that after this experience he went back to the scriptures and studied them with fresh eyes. And he discovered this had been God's plan all along! Through the Old Testament, God had said the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead. Paul knew the notion of a man coming back to life was incredible, because he had once deemed it impossible as well. But then he remembered something: with God nothing is impossible!

## **The Effect**

Anyone can say they've had a change of heart. We hear from people all the time, “I've changed!” But Paul's life was evidence that he had believed the gospel so strongly it changed everything about him. It wasn't just a sales pitch, it was something he leaned upon heavily as well! Don't underestimate the power of a changed life in demonstrating the truth of your beliefs!

This is also a reminder that if you cannot point to a change in your life because of Jesus, you may not have genuine faith. If going to church or reading your bible doesn't begin to affect who you are, you should question whether you really believe. Merely knowing the facts about Christ saves no one. But genuine faith in Jesus leads to genuine life-change. One of the best evidences for the truth and power of the gospel is how God has worked in and through you.

Paul had such evidence. After the Lord appeared to him, he did what he had been told! He preached in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and even traveled throughout the Roman world sharing the gospel with people everywhere he went.

Paul gives us a great example of how to share your testimony with people. A good testimony isn't a story about how bad we are or how great we are now. A good testimony tells us three things: who you were before Christ, what happened that convinced you to follow Him, and the difference He has made since. This is what Paul did, and he did it to great effect. We can do the same.

Sometimes I hear people lament that they don't have a dynamic testimony. I understand that. I was not a bad kid growing up. I didn't party or get into trouble. Sometimes I wished I had a cool story of a dramatic turnaround like I've heard others share. But I've learned that my story still carries power. I was raised in the church. I was a preacher's kid. I was in church every Sunday. I knew the Bible stories and knew lots of Bible facts. But I didn't know Jesus. I was still destined for Hell. Here's the power of a story like that: lots of people are in that same boat! Don't be ashamed to tell your story, because you never know who might have a similar experience to yours!

Paul shared his testimony not only to exonerate himself, but as a bridge to sharing the gospel. He pointed to God's protection and provision as evidence of the truth of his vision. To Paul, even the failed attacks of the Jews was evidence of God's provision! He explained that he wasn't inventing stories or a new religion, he was preaching what was already written in the law and the prophets. Finally, he explained that Jesus rose from the dead and that while He was the first to rise, because of Him, He wouldn't be the last.

## **Confrontation**

Paul's talk of resurrection was more than Festus could bear. As a good Roman, he was convinced that this life was all there is. The notion of people coming back to life seemed utterly insane to him. So, he could no longer permit Paul to keep speaking, so he interrupted him, saying, "Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!" (Acts 26:24b, NLT)

Paul was not insane, but Festus had decided the gospel was crazy and his heart was closed off. But he knew Agrippa was still listening (along with the others in the room), so he turned his attention directly to the king. He became suddenly bold, though he never became disrespectful.

<sup>25</sup> But Paul replied, “I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. What I am saying is the sober truth. <sup>26</sup> And King Agrippa knows about these things. I speak boldly, for I am sure these events are all familiar to him, for they were not done in a corner! <sup>27</sup> King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do—” (Acts 26:25-27, NLT)

Paul was not going to give up. I don't know if he saw something in Agrippa that made him think he was tracking with him or whether he just saw an opportunity and seized it. But he told Festus that Agrippa was familiar with all that Paul was talking about. None of this was new information to him. So Paul did what he always did—he turned the conversation to how God had chosen Jesus to be the perfect sacrifice for our sin!

He asked Agrippa directly if he believed the prophets. Agrippa claimed to be a Jew, so he would have to say yes. Paul knew that and planned to use it to build a case for Jesus from the scriptures. This would have been something he had done many times before, so he knew exactly the direction he wanted to go.

Unfortunately, so did Agrippa. Remember, Agrippa had entered the auditorium with great pomp and fantasy. He was not about to let this little man in the grubby clothes show him up! He saw his power slipping away, so he decided to reassert himself.

<sup>28</sup> Agrippa interrupted him. “Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?” <sup>29</sup> Paul replied, “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains.” <sup>30</sup> Then the king, the governor, Bernice, and all the others stood and left. (Acts 26:28-30, NLT)

Agrippa asked a rhetorical question—do you really think you can convince me to become a Christian in one conversation? The answer was implicit—I find you interesting to listen to, but I'm not about to follow you. After all, I'm the king, and I know best! He dismissed Paul's efforts out of hand.

Paul, to his credit, was undeterred. He boldly told Agrippa that indeed, his hope was that he would come to embrace Christ as well. He wanted him to experience everything he had—except for the whole being in prison thing.

But Agrippa was done. This was no longer fun. Now Paul was meddling, and Agrippa didn't like that. He and Bernice stood up, and together with Festus they left the auditorium. As they left, they concluded that Paul really hadn't done anything wrong. Agrippa rightly remarked that if Paul hadn't appealed to Caesar, he could have been set free. But Festus had been unwilling to do what was right. So now, Paul would soon be on his way to Rome, but it wouldn't all be smooth sailing (literally!)

## **Conclusion**

So, what does this passage teach us? What practical applications can we draw from this account of Paul speaking truth to power? Here are some ideas.

**First, we see the value of sharing your testimony.** Paul was not shy about sharing his testimony; he did it often. If you're afraid of telling people the gospel story, an easy thing is to tell them your story instead. You know it well! Tell them how you were before Christ, what convinced you to follow Him, and what your life has been like after. It's an easy way to share your faith and open a conversation. Once people know your story, you've got an open door to talk about your faith. It's an easy and effective way to introduce people to the gospel message.

**Second, the gospel is the same no matter the audience.** We cannot water down the gospel message based on whether the person before us is rich and famous or someone we see as unimportant. The message is the same regardless. Everyone needs Jesus, so wherever we are, we should speak the truth, even if the odds are stacked against us. This whole situation was designed to intimidate Paul and make him back down. But Paul remembered a truth we should as well: the greatest power comes from the Lord! We should speak truth to all people in all circumstances.

**Third, the Christian faith demands setting our pride aside.** One of the greatest obstacles to faith is that we have to admit we can't do it all on our own. We have to admit we don't know it all. We have to admit it's not all about us and that we don't know best. This is a huge obstacle. Many will take time to overcome it. Some of you today may still be wrestling with it. Be patient with those who are still wrestling. Remember how hard it is to give up and submit to the Lord. Keep loving them and keep pointing toward the truth. You never know when God may finally break through.

**Fourth, we haven't failed when people don't respond positively.** No one can call Paul's encounter with King Agrippa a failure. No, Agrippa did not believe during that conversation, but Paul stood toe-to-toe with him, looked him in the eye and shared the truth with him. I think Paul's boldness rattled the king. I wonder if Paul's words continued to echo in his ears long after. We don't know. We also don't know how many of these other "important" people in the room may have taken his words to heart. Just because someone doesn't respond positively in the moment doesn't mean they won't respond. Share boldly, knowing God can work through you long after you're gone.

**Finally, living for Christ seems insane to non-believers. Do it anyway!** Paul pointed out in his writings that the gospel seems foolish to outsiders. They may scoff at us, call us old-fashioned, or believers of fairy tales. To those who do not understand Christ, that's an understandable response. But don't let the scoffers keep you from following Christ. If you know He's real, you know He's worth following—no matter what.

My hope is that each of us will look at Paul's example and be encouraged. No matter the stakes raised against us, no one is more powerful than a person with the Spirit of God working through them. If we can grasp that truth, it will give us the boldness we need to live for Him, reach the lost, change the world, and glorify our God.

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