



Are You a Threat? (Acts 25)

Date: *August 13, 2023*

Series: *Acts of Paul*

Passage: *Acts 25*

Speaker: *Steve Howell*

Before we Begin...

Good morning. I have to laugh a little bit as we start, because today is so unique. Good, but unique!

Two weeks ago, Michael Smith stood on this stage to give an update on the Senior Minister search. He outlined the steps that were taken, and he announced the elders' selection for our church's next senior minister (Phew!).

The outpouring of support we've had, both before and after the announcement, has been amazing. We love you guys, and I don't say that lightly. Thank you for the prayers and encouragement and comments and hugs and conversations as we waited and as we celebrated. Know that we can't express our appreciation enough!

That was the good part!

But it's unique because days like today rarely happen. Typically, in searches like this, the leaders announce an *outside* candidate, and their family makes the trip for a visit. They are given the tour of the church and community, and then during the Sunday services, the candidate preaches a "trial sermon" so the church can get a feel for him and his style before confirming him with a vote.

Good candidates often go for a relatively safe, "meat and potatoes" sermon with a sprinkling of personal info mixed in...and (there's no way around it) such a message always feels a bit awkward, like a first date. The preacher is still a stranger to the church; the church is still a sea of strangers to the preacher.

But with me standing up here after 16 years at TCC...it's not the typical "intro" sermon experience! This is unique because we know each other! You know what to expect from me, and I know what to expect from you. None of you will be surprised if I make a hockey reference, or draw a map, or if I single out [Brian Lee/Ralph Miller/Malia Pebley] in the crowd because I'm making a [tractor/Chiefs/powerlifting-goat] joke. Likewise, I won't be surprised if you make a reference to the Tongie Split, if I see [Andy Pierson/Wanda Jeannin/Cindy Lindsay] [playing guitar/pulling weeds/teaching a women's study], or if you tease me about cheering for the Broncos.

How awesome is that!?!

So, this morning, I laugh because on the Sunday where we vote, I get to skip the intro!!! Instead, we can just get right into the Word, focusing on Jesus and preparing to hit the gas pedal!!!

Amen? Amen!

[Pray with me]

If you have your Bible with you, please turn to the book of Acts, chapter 25, as we continue digging into this amazing book of church history, learning from the examples of the apostles, and being inspired by the activity of the Holy Spirit! We're getting closer to the end, but there is still more truth to discover!



Previously, in Acts...

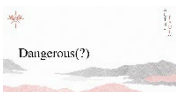
A lot has happened in the last few weeks and chapters. Paul has gone from missionary to prisoner!

After being falsely accused of wrongdoing by a Jewish mob, Paul was rescued out of immediate danger by the Roman military. Yet the commotion he created has been problematic for the Romans – they just don't know what to do with him!

Paul has been questioned by the soldiers, questioned by the soldiers' leaders, questioned by the Jewish council of leaders, and questioned by the Roman governor! The Jewish leaders want him dead, but the Romans are confused about the threat that he poses.

Is Paul dangerous or not? Is Paul's message scary or safe?

No one knows how to answer yet! And so, as we turn to chapter 25 this morning, here is where we find Paul: Paul sits in a jail cell, waiting for justice and for Jesus...a danger (maybe?) to the world.



Dangerous(?)

Can you relate to Paul, minus the jail cell? As you sit here this morning, are *you* dangerous?

Look around at the people you're sitting next to. Are *they* dangerous? And what does that even mean – to be "dangerous"?

Danger Illustrated

"Dangerous" is difficult to define.

For instance, you've probably been warned before about the "dangerous" food ingredient, DHMO, aka *dihydrogen monoxide*, and its effects.

DHMO is colourless, odorless, tasteless, and kills uncounted thousands of people every year. Most of these deaths are caused by accidental inhalation of

DHMO, but the dangers do not end there. Prolonged exposure to its solid form causes severe tissue damage. Symptoms of DHMO ingestion can include excessive sweating and urination, and too much can cause a bloated feeling, nausea and even vomiting.

For those who have become dependent on the substance, DHMO withdrawal means certain death. Dihydrogen monoxide:

- Is the major component of acid rain.
- May cause severe burns when its gas comes in contact with skin.
- Accelerates corrosion and rusting of many metals.
- May cause electrical failures and decreased effectiveness of car brakes.
- Has been found in tumors of cancer patients¹

[TAKE A DRINK OF WATER]

DHMO sounds *dangerous*, right? But if you pay attention to your chemistry notes, you realize what I'm describing. "Dihydrogen" = 2 hydrogen; "monoxide" = 1 oxygen; in other words, H₂O...good 'ol water, one of the most necessary and safe chemicals in the world!

Danger Defined²

What makes something *dangerous*? We must be more specific. Danger increases when certain things are present or absent. I've broken it down into the following categories:



- **Potential for harm.** Dangerous items have the **power** to harm you. The greater the potential damage, the greater the danger.

Your arm gets... *A kitten bite* < *A tomcat bite* < *A bobcat bite*
< *A tiger bite*



- **Likelihood of harm.** Dangerous items have the **probability** to harm you. The more frequently the item produces harm, the greater the danger.

Your finances get hacked by... *Rita Bailey* < *A mugger on the street* < *An online store like Teemu* < *A professional scammer based in India*



- **Targeting of harm.** Dangerous items have the **intention** to harm you. The more focused the item is on harming you *specifically*, the greater the danger.

Your likelihood of being used in a sermon illustration... *New Visitor to Church* < *Regular Attender* < *Friends* < *Deb/Jacob/Chaynee*

¹ https://web.stanford.edu/class/cs1c/dorms/flomo_west/handouts/04bandihydrogenmonoxide.pdf

² Idea: Change the color of the lights/cross from green to yellow to orange to red then back to white...



- **Absence of protection.** Dangerous items have the power to **bypass** your safety precautions. The less defended you are, the greater the danger.

You get rear-ended driving ... an M1 Abrams tank < A Chevy Silverado truck < A Tesla sedan < A Vespa moped

Those four categories give us a sense of the danger we face in any situation. And they can help us consider Paul's situation as he sits in jail, waiting for God to act.

A Dangerous Faith?

Let's read a little bit of today's chapter and talk through Paul's situation.

A New Authority Figure (25:1-5)

The chapter begins with the arrival of a replacement governor. Governor **Felix** is out, removed from office due to his failures to keep peace in the region. And Emperor Nero in Rome has just sent in **Porcius Festus** as his successor, around AD 59-62.

“Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.”” (Acts 25:1–5, ESV)

Knowing that two years have passed since Paul's supposed crimes, you might wonder if the Jewish fervor against him had dissipated. Well, clearly it had not!!! They still wanted him dead, and they continue to plot to assassinate Paul.

The Jews try to take advantage of new governor Festus as he makes a goodwill tour to get to know his new province. The Jewish leaders conspire to get Paul out in the open so they can kill him.

It is only by divine providence that Festus chooses not to transport Paul to Jerusalem. Instead, he naively invites the Jewish leaders to bring up their charges on his home turf in Caesarea, the Roman seat of power in the region. They have no choice but to accept.

A Sham Hearing (25:6-12)

“After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him



that they could not prove. Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?” But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.” Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”” (Acts 25:6–12, ESV)

Paul’s hearing feels like a Washington, DC, trial...don’t you think? Lots and lots of accusations against a political opponent but not a ton of evidence to back up the charges.

Paul sits back and lets them talk...and talk...and talk. But despite their talk, they cannot *prove* anything. Finally, when Paul has a chance to respond, he asserts his innocence.

“Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” (25:8)

Festus sees that there is no case, but as the new guy he’s trying to score some political points. He offers to send Paul back to Jerusalem for a formal trial there. But Paul knows that would be suicide. His only recourse is to send the case in another direction. Instead of Jerusalem, Paul chooses Rome!

“I appeal to Caesar” (25:11)

Roman law allowed citizens (like Paul) to appeal to the emperor in extraordinary cases (*Fun Fact: “extraordinary” comes from the Latin extra ordinem, a legal term meaning “outside of jurisdiction”*). Since the charges involved political sedition, Paul’s request was “extraordinary” enough to honor.

And yes, this means he’s appealing to have his case go before Emperor Nero – the famed persecutor of Christians. That might sound scary, but at this point in his rule, Nero’s opposition to Christianity wasn’t as evident as it was later. To Paul, it seemed safer to have a glimmer of hope in Rome than to face certain death in Jerusalem!

“To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.” (25:12)

An Uncertain Allegation (25:13-27)

Both Paul and his faith are on trial here. The courts are trying to decide how dangerous Paul and his beliefs are.

As the chapter continues, Governor Festus wrestles with Paul’s appeal. He had already granted the appeal to Caesar, but the rules require that he send the prisoner to Rome

along with an *explanation of the charges*. That posed a problem because Festus still couldn't figure out the danger or the crime.

As he explains his dilemma to a political ally (King Agrippa II and his wife – more on them next week), Festus is at a loss. He tells them,



“So when [the Jews] came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man [Paul] to be brought. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar....”

“But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him.””

(Acts 25:17–21, 26-27 ESV)

Is Christianity dangerous? Is Paul dangerous? Festus doesn't know. Agrippa doesn't know.

But...if we go back to our definitions and compare them to Paul's answers...maybe WE can know. Maybe we can find an answer.



Christianity is Safe

Think about the categories in our definition of “dangerous” and apply them here.

- **Potential for harm.** Paul and his faith have little power to attack and harm the Empire
- **Likelihood of harm.** Paul doesn't make a habit of causing problems for the Romans
- **Targeting of harm.** Paul doesn't single out the Roman Empire as his enemy
- **Absence of protection.** Rome can squash Paul in a second if the leaders choose to – they have the ability to protect themselves from any supposed Christian “threat.”

The categories make it clear that Christianity is SAFE, not dangerous. Paul (as he practices his faith) is *blameless*, so he is *harmless*.

“Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” (25:8)

Paul says that his faith is no threat. He is blameless of any real harm, and he points out areas where he is innocent. He's innocent in:

- **Ethics (the law).** Christianity isn't a threat to law and order, nor is it a threat to the civil responsibilities that govern good and right behavior among people.
 - o This is still the case. We don't see a lot of faithful Christians instigating strife or riots in the community. Most strive to live peaceful lives within the law, as they are able.
- **Religion (the temple).** Christianity isn't a threat to other worshipers, in terms of disruption of their practice.
 - o This is still the case. We don't see a lot of faithful Christians attacking mosques or Buddhist temples...at least not nowadays.
- **Culture (Caesar).** Christianity isn't a threat to art, music, literature, or politics.
 - o This is still the case. We might argue about the appropriateness of such things, but we aren't murdering singers who use profanity or artists who create blasphemous works.

While church history shows that we have made such mistakes in the past, *danger* is not the norm. Christians try to be *safe* as they try to be *blameless*. In Paul's answers, we hear echoes of other blameless defenses throughout Scripture:

- **DANIEL:** *"Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm.""* (Daniel 6:21–22, ESV)
- **DAVID:** *"I do not sit with men of falsehood, nor do I consort with hypocrites. I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked. I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, O LORD, proclaiming thanksgiving aloud, and telling all your wondrous deeds."* (Psalm 26:4–7, ESV)
- **PETER:** *"Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil."* (1 Peter 3:13–17, ESV)

Those who follow God strive to be *blameless* so we can be *harmless*. As Luke records this information in Acts, the harmless nature of Christianity is a message he is trying to convey! One of Luke's purposes in writing Acts is to show that Christianity is not a

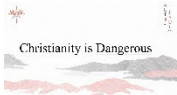
Daniel 6:14-22
"Then Daniel said to the king, 'O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm.'"

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threat to the Romans, but that Jesus should be treated as a safe option for its population to worship!

Christianity is blameless, so Christianity is safe. But on the other hand...



Christianity is Dangerous

Christianity is dangerous! Christianity is *blameless*...but that doesn't mean it is *toothless*. Despite being generally safe to those around us, a faith in Jesus presents immediate and personal danger to those who follow Him.

The only thing that Festus could say about Paul's conduct was this:

"Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive."
(Acts 25:19, ESV)

All Festus could point to was Paul's proclamation of a risen Lord! Jesus died and was raised to life! It's just a doctrinal point, right? It's just a theological statement, isn't it?

No!!!! What Paul proclaims is *immediately* and *personally* dangerous to anyone who takes it to heart. It is not a toothless faith that requires nothing from its followers. No, following Jesus involves some dangerous changes.

- **Potential for harm.** To follow Jesus means to follow this path of death and life. We give up our own rights, take up our cross and follow Him.

"[We are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."
(2 Corinthians 4:10–11, ESV)

To follow Jesus means *realized danger* to our present autonomy.

- **Likelihood of harm.** To follow Jesus means to be treated as He was. We ensure that the world will reject us.

"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."
(John 15:19, ESV)

To follow Jesus means *certain danger* to our present comfort.

- **Targeting of harm.** To follow Jesus means to be treated as a child of God. We ensure that God will make some targeted adjustments to MY heart, mind, and behavior.

2 Corinthians 4:10-11
"We are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

John 15:19
"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."

Hebrews 12:5-6
"And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.'"

*"And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?
"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary
when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and
chastises every son whom he receives.""*
(Hebrews 12:5–6, ESV)

To follow Jesus means *targeted danger* to our anonymity.

- **Absence of protection.** To follow Jesus means to follow a God who is unconstrained by limits. We can't avoid him, escape him, or stop him. (Which would be scary if he wasn't so amazingly good!)

Psalms 139:7
"Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?"

*"Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your
presence?"*
(Psalm 139:7, ESV)

To follow Jesus means *unprotected danger* to our solitude.

Paul may not create any existential danger to the Roman empire, but to individual Romans who listen to Paul's gospel message and accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior, his message is absolutely unsafe! It required a total change in priorities, habits, speech, thoughts, and love.

There is nothing more dangerous to your old self.

2 Corinthians 5:17
"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

*"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed
away; behold, the new has come."* (2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV)

Are You a Threat?



We'll come back to Paul's conversation with Governor Festus, King Agrippa and Agrippa's wife Bernice next week. But as we wrap up this chapter today, I want to circle back to the question I asked earlier.

As you sit here this morning, are *you* dangerous?



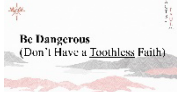
Be Safe (aka Have a Blameless Faith)

I hope that you're safe in the way Paul was...that your conduct in the community is *blameless*. Please remember that your reputation is not your own. You represent yourself, but you also represent your church...and ultimately Jesus!

That's why we get so frustrated and angry at the parade of pastors and priests who have become bad ambassadors for Christianity. Every scandalous divorce, every hidden affair, every financial mismanagement, every political sellout vandalizes what should be a blameless, pure Bride of Christ.

It's obvious when it's a leader, especially on a national scale, but the same applies to you. On the jobsite, in the office, with your family... YOU are the representatives of Christ to a watching world.

If we were ranking your danger in terms of: Offensiveness, Violence, Disdain, Rudeness, Abuse, Outrage, Etc...then you should be a safe “green” (and the occasional misstep should top out at yellow or orange, not red!). Those who know you should think of you as a safe person to be around!



Be Dangerous (aka Don't Have a Toothless Faith)

People should never feel threatened by your presence...but they should feel threatened by your character. Billy Graham is quoted as saying:

“A true Christian, living an obedient life, is a constant rebuke to those who accept the moral standards of this world.”

So, I challenge you to be dangerous in the way Paul was...that the one thing people know you for is the one thing that could absolutely destroy their world (for the better!).

Don't settle for a toothless gospel (“just love people,” “be a nice person”). Preach the good news of JESUS.

Jesus should be on your mind. Jesus should be on your heart. Jesus should be on your lips. And Jesus should be the one thing that the people around you can't escape. They might say “no, thanks” and avoid the dangerous obligations to follow...but that's on them, and they'll have to face the consequences of that choice later.

But if YOU can share Jesus and be used in the process of salvation, you can be a very dangerous person.

If we were ranking your danger in terms of: Honesty, Faithfulness to the Word, Boldness in Proclaiming, Transparency to see Jesus instead of You...then you should be a blazing “red.” Satan should think of you as a dangerous person to be around!



Closing

So be blameless, and don't be toothless!

Look around at the people you're sitting next to. I hope their conduct makes you feel loved and safe. Pray for them to be good ambassadors for Christ. Encourage them to live blameless lives!

But I also hope that they make you a little uncomfortable. I hope their commitment to putting Jesus first seems bold and unsafe. Pray for them to preach the gospel of Christ in their areas of influence. Encourage them to boast only of Him!

Be blameless, and don't be toothless! Let's be the most dangerous, safe church that Tonganoxie has ever seen!

SERMON NOTES

Previously, in Acts...

Dangerous(?)

Danger Defined

Potential for harm

Likelihood of harm

Targeting of harm

Absence of protection

A Dangerous Faith?

A New Authority Figure (25:1-5)

A Sham Hearing (25:6-12)

An Uncertain Allegation (25:13-27)

Christianity is Safe

(Daniel 6:21-22; Psalm 26:4-7; 1 Peter 3:13-17)

Christianity is Dangerous

(2 Corinthians 4:10-11; John 15:19; Hebrews 12:5-6; Psalm 139:7;
2 Corinthians 5:17)

Are You a Threat?

Be Safe (aka Have a Blameless Faith)

Be Dangerous (aka Don't Have a Toothless Faith)

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Fellowship – Relationships with a Purpose

- What's the most dangerous thing you've ever done? Share a story!

Growth – Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- Look over Acts 25. List all the phrases and verses where Paul's conduct is shown as blameless (or could not be proven a threat).
- Why might it be important for the early church to establish the fact that it was no threat to the Roman Empire?
- Would you have appealed to Caesar or gone back to Jerusalem (Acts 25:9)? Why?
- In what ways is the church today viewed as a "threat" to our culture or nation? Is the threat physical, intellectual, or spiritual? Explain your answer.
- How can you show that the Christian faith is "safe" for everyone? Are words or actions more effective in communicating this truth?
- What is the one fact that Festus could say Paul proclaimed (Acts 25:19)? Review several of Paul's speeches in Acts 17:22ff; 20:17ff; 22:1ff; Acts 23:6. How is Jesus emphasized?
- In what ways is faith in Jesus a "threat" to your lifestyle? Has that threat ever made you reconsider your faith? Why or why not?
- How does being "blameless" help you share about Jesus? Can you be blameless without coming across as judgmental? Explain.
- What is an example of a "toothless" presentation of the gospel? What gives the full gospel message its power? Do you present a gospel that isn't watered down?

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Pray for God's help to share Jesus...unfiltered and unashamed...in all of your relationships.