
Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

R2L: Practicing the Art of Humility – Acts 21:17-26 (Part 1 – Acts 21:17-20a)

Acts 21:17-20a

17 After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 19 After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 And when they heard it they began glorifying God...

From Acts 9 up to our current text of Acts 21 we have been exposed to the powerful character and testimony of a person, who more than anything else, wanted to proclaim and reflect the person and work of Jesus Christ. Of course, the person we have been exposed to is the apostle Paul. Think with me about just some of the words we might use to describe the character of this former blasphemer of Christ and persecutor of the church. Do you not agree that Paul was; relentless, persistent, resolved, persevering, steadfast, immovable, unwavering, undeterred, determined, bold, inspiring, restless, fearless, single-minded; uncompromising, self-disciplined, unflinching, faithful, stubborn, intent, constant, tenacious; and, if I might borrow from the noted preacher Steven Lawson; Paul could be described as not being simply dogmatic, but rather as bull-dogmatic when it came to proclaiming the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I remind you again that Paul himself exhorted the Corinthians church and Christians of all ages to be imitators of his faith and life even as he imitated Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). Oh that you and I could be described in such terms; an admirable goal, is it not? But even with these adjectives, there is at least one word that is missing from such a list; one that for some would not seem to fit with all these other words and yet one that reveals the nature of his character both in our text this morning as well as that of his coming to Christ back in Acts 9. What is that word; that quality of Paul's character that made him worthy of imitating? That word is “humility” – which, as used in the NT means meekness, lowliness and absence of self. Or, as C.S. Lewis makes a bit clearer, “*True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.*” In the life and ministry of Paul, we find a believer who has learned the art of selflessness; of thinking of himself less and less so that he might be focused more and more upon making the Lord Jesus Christ known.

Beloved, we live in a culture that does not understand biblical humility. To many in the world, humility, this idea of thinking of yourself less; is actually thought of in terms of humiliation; of being put down; trampled on; to be nothing more than a mat to be walked on. But humiliation is not humility. When you examine the lives of those who were regarded as humble in the Scriptures, you do not see people who timid, mousey, and simply allowed others to walk all over them; rather we see humility demonstrated among those who knew what they believed, and were not afraid to live according to what they believed. In addition to men like Paul, we have life of John the Baptist, someone with whom we must not only be impressed by his boldness in proclaiming the good news, but also by his great humility. We see it demonstrated when John replied to the crowd wondering if he was the Christ. His reply in Luke 3:16 is telling. He said, “**As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals...**” Maybe this is not all that impressive to us; particularly to us men until we stop to realize that in the culture of John's time, it was the task of the lowliest house slave to remove the sandals of a guest and wash his feet as an act of hospitality. How many of you, particularly you men, would rush in for such a job? But of course the greatest practice of the art of humility; that which Paul was seeking to imitate, was that of our Lord Jesus Christ who demonstrated this ultimate act of servitude and humility by washing the feet of His own disciples (John 13:12-16). To further emphasize the point, we see God's approval of the humble in James 4:6 we read, “**...God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.**” In 1 Peter 5:5-

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6, the apostle Peter exhorts, **“You younger ones in the faith, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you; clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. Therefore, be humbled under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.”** (personal paraphrase).

Again, to the world, this is foolishness. The attitude of "looking out for number one" is the rule, and being a "self-made person" is the highest compliment of the world. And too many in the church have either bought that lie or are unwittingly living much of their lives according to that lie. I believe that humility is such a necessary and yet too often missing attribute of a Christian's character. Without such humility, we will never truly point people to Christ; rather we will be pointing people to ourselves. You see, the person who is full of himself has no room for Christ. You and I need to learn the art and practice of biblical humility; of being filled less with ourselves and more with Christ. To do this, we need to spend some time considering what it means to practice humility. The apostle Paul will provide us a needed example of biblical humility.

As we come to Acts 21 and our text; let us realize that the days of Paul's missionary journeys are over. Having traversed the northern portions of the Roman empire some three times; Paul had now entered Jerusalem, the very origin of not only his own heritage, but also of Christianity. The verses that we look at this morning and continue to study through the rest of the book of Acts depict Paul not as a free traveling itinerate preacher for the gospel; but rather as Paul describes himself in Ephesians 6:20, as an **“ambassador in chains.”** Yet, in all of this, as well as in our text of Acts 21:17-26, we see exemplified in Paul the attitude of humility.

It is important that we come to know what biblical humility looks like; what it seeks to accomplish; and specifically for us, how we can imitate this quality of Paul so as to bring glory to God in our worship of Christ, in our fellowship with one another and in our seeking to reach Northwest Arkansas with the truth of the gospel.

My main idea this passage is this: *that God's purposes in reaching people with the gospel of Christ are advanced as we humbly submit ourselves to God; to one another; to godly leaders; and to the spiritual needs of others.* This is what we find in the life of Paul and is revealed here in our text in a unique way. Over the next couple of weeks, I want to challenge our thinking regarding what it means to truly practice biblical humility. What I need for you to do through this mini-series I am entitling, “Practicing the Art of Biblical Humility” is to ask yourself if you are doing these things we find in the life of Paul. For as we do, we put ourselves in the heart of God's will, placing ourselves in a position of seeing the gospel advance.

It is significant to point out that there was much in Paul's life that could have easily caused him to be proud, arrogant, boastful and self-centered. He had his upbringing and heritage as a **“Hebrew of Hebrews.”** His conversion to Christ was nothing short of extraordinary as he was met by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). He had unique opportunities and revelations giving to him to reach people for Christ. Yet none of this went to his own head. He always regarded himself as but a slave of Christ. As Christ would say that He would do nothing but that which He saw His Father doing; Paul would say that he would do nothing except that which He saw His Savior doing. Paul was, like his Lord Jesus, a gentle, gracious and humble man; something of which we see in our text.

We all need lessons in biblical humility; some of us more than others, but we all need to think of ourselves less and of Jesus and the spiritual needs of others more. What such a humility looks like is at the heart of this series of messages from Acts 21:17-26. This morning, we will examine two of the ways in which we might better practice biblical humility. I can describe them

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to you but you will need to put them into practice, into your own daily routines. Let us begin by noting first of all that true, biblical humility and thus service to God is seen in...

I. **Accountability to practical fellowship (17-18)**

17 After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

Let me point out to you that humility; this practice of thinking of yourself less can only be experienced and revealed in the context of relationships. You cannot be regarded or known as humble outside of interaction with other people. Humility that is merely theoretical; simply a construct in your own mind, is not biblical humility. Humility is seen and practiced in the context of relationships and the two most common relationships that the New Testament points to in this regard are in your relationships with God's people and in your relationship with God. Time does not permit us to examine the many verses that show this; but consider just one; 1 Peter 3:8 where Peter declared; ***“To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit.”*** Here is the call to practice humility, with all its accompanying attributes in the context of fellowship with the saints.

Then, just over in 1 Peter 5:6 we read, “Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt you at the proper time.” Here is the call to practice humility in the context of fellowship with God. Now the question is; how does our text reveal these two practices of humility in fellowship in the life of Paul?

A. **Accountable to participate in the fellowship of the church (17-18)**

Let me remind you that Paul had a desire to get to Jerusalem before the feast of Pentecost. He had two reasons for this. First, Paul knew that there would be literally tens of thousands of Jews gathered for the feast making this a fertile ground for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. This reminds us that we, as a church as well as individuals, should be keeping our eyes open for times when people are gathering at parks, city squares and such so that we might actively share Christ in such venues. Some you need to consider organizing such outreaches.

The second reason why Paul wanted to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost was because of the love offering he had been collecting from the Gentile churches in places like Corinth, Athens, Thessalonica, Philippi, and Ephesus. While not explicitly state here in our text, it would have been at this time that Paul presented to the Jerusalem church this offering. His prayer and desire was that this monetary would help unite the two growing aspects of the church; half being Jewish, and very skeptical and paranoid of Gentiles; and the other half Gentile, which sometime looked down on the Jews. Paul wanted there to be solidarity and unity in the church. He believed that the offering from the Gentiles would demonstrate their love and concern for their Jewish brothers and sisters, breaking down walls of suspicion and hostility.

As we come to verse 17 then, we see that the ***“brethren”*** – that is most likely a reference to a large contingency of the church at Jerusalem, ***“received us gladly.”*** The warm reception of Paul and his companions was due not only to the generous love gift and offering given by the Gentile churches, but noticing the “us” in the text reveals that they were delighted to see these Gentile converts who had traveled with Paul to Jerusalem. There was a true sense of fellowship; of partnership. I have no doubt that at some point in all of this, these Jews and Gentiles partook of communion, the Lord's Supper together. The sharing of such a meal signified acceptance, fellowship and unity. In addition, for the Jewish Christians, these Gentiles with Paul were firsthand evidence that God was graciously working salvation not only in Israel, but throughout the Roman world. Truly a cause for gladness and worship of God. This reminds us that our fellowship with

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one another ought to always be in the context of remembering the greatness of our salvation and our saving God. We ought to be in awe of the God that has saved each one of us; how He saved us and then worship Him who has saved us.

B. Accountable to submit to church leaders

We read next in verse 18 is that on the following day, Paul and the others **“went...to James, and all the elders were present.”** This is a remarkable statement that demands some attention. You might remember that as the church started on the day of Pentecost, back in Acts 2, that the primary leaders of the church were the apostles. As the church grew, the apostles knew that they would need to have help as well as have the need to train and appoint new leaders. In Acts 11:30, we find the very first reference to “elders” – spiritually gifted and called men to shepherd and pastor the flock of God. But now, here in Acts 21, rather than the church being under the leadership of the apostles, the church is under the leadership of James and all the elders. The James here in our text is not James the brother of John and apostle of Jesus Christ, but rather James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, author of the NT book that bears his name; and, as our text indicates, an elder in the church in Jerusalem.

Now, we might make a cultural and experiential mistake when looking at this text if we are not careful. Hope CBC has been blessed to maintain herself with two elders for some time. This is not the desire of or the goal of your elders, to operate with such a small plurality of leaders; which is why we established the church leadership team which consists of elders, deacons and a couple of members-at-large from the congregation. Our prayer for the men of Hope is that they would aspire to and prepare themselves to become elders. But at current there are two elders here at Hope. The church in Jerusalem numbered in the thousands and there is some speculation that the church set up their elder leadership like the Jewish Sanhedrin or ruling counsel; which would have meant there were at least seventy men. Considering the size of the Jerusalem church, I would speculate there were even more than seventy. But the point of all of this is two-fold. First, the church was establishing the pattern of elder rule as the form of church government; and second, more pertinent to our text, that the formidable and eminent apostle Paul made himself accountable to these men.

Paul came to them. Paul reported to them. Paul presented the monetary gift of the Gentile churches to them. Sometimes we can feel one of two ways when it comes to church leaders. One way we can feel is as though our lives are really none of their business; that what God does or doesn't do in my life is of little consequence to make known to them. Let me remind you that your elders will give an account for each and every one of you that have become in some way regular attenders of this church. Your spiritual life and well-being is your elders' business. But that presents a second attitude that can develop and it is this, that it is the sole responsibility of the elders to come to me; to check up on me; to reach out to me concerning my spiritual well-being. Beloved, what do we find Paul doing? Paul is going to the elders. He came to them. He sought them out. He prepared to give to them his testimony of what God had been doing in his life. While elders will seek you out at times, never forget that you bear the responsibility to seek your elders out; to report to them what is going on in your life; good or bad; that they might pray, give counsel or guidance.

So, if you are to practice true biblical humility in the context of the local church; are you participating in the financial needs of the church; are you seeking the fellowship and edification of the church; and are you reporting and submitting to church leaders? Ultimately, Paul's humility was seen in that he never saw himself above, beyond or without the need of church leaders. How about you?

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But there is a second way in which we see Paul's humility and thus in which we can practice the art of humility ourselves. All that true, biblical humility and service to God is seen in...

II. Acknowledging the providence of God in life's happenings (19-20a)

19 After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 And when they heard it they began glorifying God...

So, I have just one point to make here with regard to acknowledging the providence of God in life's success and it is this; we must be...

A. Acknowledging God; not self (19)

The heart of biblical humility is thinking of yourself less so that you might think about God and the needs of others more. Here in verse 19 we find Paul presenting himself to the elders and then following that up by giving his testimony. Notice that Paul gave specific incidents, noting **“one by one”** the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. The phrase “one by one” implies a thoughtfulness; a thorough consideration of the work that God had accomplished. And this points us to something we need to see regarding Paul's humility. Rather than boasting in which “he had” accomplished through the past 15 some years of his own hard work, he rather recounted **“the things which God had done among the Gentiles...”** Beloved, biblical humility is always God-focused; God-exalting, seeking to give the credit and glory to God and God alone. Biblical humility is delighted to be but a tool used by God.

How do you view yourself? There are two extreme to avoid. The first extreme is that you are useless to God and to God's people. That is a very denial of the power and promise of God to equip his people for every good work. If you are a Christian, you have something to offer in the building up of the body of Christ. Of course the other extreme is that you are somehow God's gift to the church and somehow utterly indispensable. I know that such an attitude “seems” far-fetched to some of you; but be wary of how easily you can foster such an idea. All of a sudden that bible study you teach; that service to the children you participate in; that weekly task you perform on behalf of the church can give you an improper and inflated sense of who you really are. I love the story told about Winston Churchill, the great Prime Minister of England during WWII. Winston Churchill was once asked, “Doesn't it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?” He replied, “It's quite flattering. But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big.”¹

We need to be careful of an over inflated view of ourselves. Turn with me to Luke 17 where we see our Lord Jesus Christ address this very issue. In Luke 17:7-10 we find the attitude that needs to be found in us:

7 Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? 8 But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink'? 9 He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? 10 So you too, when you do

¹ Norman McGowan, *My Years With Winston Churchill*, Souvenir Press, London.

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all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'

When you “do” your service or ministry to God, watch out for an attitude that draws attention to yourself; to what “you” did. Your focus needs to be on what God has done and is doing in your life. Have you been successful in your job recently? Are you tempted to say, “All that hard work and long hours that I have put in have finally paid off; I have finally been recognized; I have finally been promoted?” What of your brother or sister who has been faithfully putting in the long hours? We are so prone to thinking we deserve something from God; or from others as God must direct. We forget Paul’s warning to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 4:6-7 Paul wrote:

6 Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. 7 For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

This attitude of acknowledging God in all things is found throughout the New Testament. It is a real issue for all Christians to remember. In James 1:12 we read:

17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

Let us not forget that anything and everything we do that is truly good; is truly a blessing; that comes to us even as we are being faithful and resolved to do God’s will is still a work of God within us. As we read in Ephesians 2:10, ***“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”***

When Paul gave his testimony to these church leaders, he acknowledged and then made certain that God alone received the credit; that God was the one glorified. Paul knew that apart from God being at work; his or any other believers work is counted as nothing. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 3:5-7. Here we see that an argument arose as to which man was more eminent, Apollos or Paul. Notice Paul’s response:

5 What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. 7 So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.

Notice Paul’s declaration; ***“it was God who causes the growth.”*** Humility is God-centered; God-exalting! But let me have you notice this humble character of Paul in one more statement. Turn to Romans 15:18. Here we read yet another revelation regarding the makeup of biblical humility. Here Paul wrote, ***“For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed...”***

Wow! There it is! According to Paul, it is arrogance to presume to speak of anything other than what Christ has accomplished through me; most especially by way of ministry. But since every aspect of the Christian’s life is to be ministry, of service to God; and biblical humility is the

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resolve to “relate whether on a Sunday morning in worship; on Sunday evening in Awana; to your spouse or children or parents day by day; to your neighbors throughout the week; since your life is a service to God and biblical humility is resolved to **“relate one by one the things God has done”** in your life.

We here at Hope, and at any evangelical; bible-centered; Christ-focused church, need to humbly fill our every testimony and relate to others “one by one the things which God” has done through our lives. In fact, I would give that to you as a working definition of biblical humility; **“the relating of all the things God has done through your life.”** We need more of this humility. We need to see and hear more of this kind of humility from one another. Will you resolve to include in your conversations an acknowledgement of something the Lord has accomplished through you? And just what is the result of acknowledging God in our endeavor in the context of fellowship with other saints. Notice in verse 20 that the result is the worship and glorifying of God. We read, **“And when they heard it they began glorifying God...”**

Let me make this rather sobering statement beginning with a question. How do you know if you are practicing biblical humility? Beloved, you know you are practicing biblical humility when other believers begin to worship God because of the things you are relating to them. If what you’re constantly talking about never moves others to praise God in some way; then you are thinking of yourself too much; pointing to yourself rather than to Christ.

With regard to Paul’s testimony, what was it that these elders were glorifying God for? The context of Paul’s message was that God was saving not only Jews, but also Gentiles; not on the basis of a person’s goodness, or merit, or keeping of OT law; but solely on the basis of faith in what Jesus Christ did on the cross.

Think about it; perhaps the reason why we do not see believers glorifying God as we speak to them is because we are not proclaiming the gospel enough to see people come to Christ; which in turn gives us a testimony that points people to the fact that God is working salvation; which would then result in believers glorifying God. To think of ourselves less, means that we are spending more time thinking about God, how to serve God; how to tell others about the gospel of Christ; how to serve others so that we might talk to others about the gospel of Christ. That is humility. To this cause and to this goal I ask you to join with me. How might you practice such a humility this week?

1. Resolve to be engaged with other believers at some times in addition to Sunday for the purpose of talking about what God is doing in your life.
2. Resolve to acknowledge God in the midst of your week and circumstances. Look for how He is working in your life and be prepared to share that with other believers

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