
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 1b – 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...

Last week we spent just a bit of time in our text as I laid some groundwork for our considering a most fundamental characteristic and attribute of the Christian life. It is an attribute that is most essential for each and every one who names the name of Christ, and yet, it can far too often be more theoretical than practical; more “in our heads” than expressed by our lives. That attribute is humility, biblical humility.

The great American preacher/theologian, Jonathan Edwards, once noted, “*We must view humility as one of the most essential things that characterizes true Christianity.*” In other words, without the visible, tangible, outward expressions of humility; unless our lives actively demonstrate this biblical characteristic, we are betraying the very Savior we claim to serve. In fact, to not demonstrate, live out, and be noted as humble – are you ready for this? – such is a sin; since the Scriptures repeatedly call believers to be characterized by humility.

In Ephesians 4:1-3, Paul, writing to the believers in Ephesus, having just concluded a lengthy section of doctrine in the first three chapters of this letter, implores and commands these Christians to live out what they believe before others. Note what Paul lists as the high expression of living out what we believe:

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

In Colossians 3:12-13, speaking to Christians in central Asia Minor, Paul again lists this quality of humility as an example of being “***chosen of God...***” He wrote...

12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

If we are to resolve to practice this attribute of humility. We need to know at least two things. First, what is humility; and second, how do we “do” humility. We answered both of these questions in part last week. Let me remind you that humility is not putting yourself down; it is not having demeaning thoughts about yourself; it is not allowing yourself to be treated like some kind of doormat to be trampled upon by others. No, biblical humility speaks of lowliness of mind. Again, not thinking low of yourself, but rather of placing your thoughts, desires and interest lower on your personal priority list. In Philippians 2:3-4 we have an insightful explanation of what humility is. There we read...

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3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Do nothing from “selfishness” – that is placing your wants and desires before everyone else. Do nothing from “empty conceit” – that is thinking that your thoughts, your words, your needs, your schedule, your time, your ideas are of more importance than others. But with lowliness of mind – that is the reorganizing and rethinking of what is important, regard the thoughts, words, needs, schedules, time and ideas of others as more important than yourselves; thus, not only looking to take care of your own interests, but also the interest of others. Beloved, humility is not the neglect of personal interests, but it is the prioritizing of the interests of others above your own. And thus we agree with C.S. Lewis who said, “*True humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less.*”

So that is a bit of what humility is; but what of the question, “What does humility do? What does humility look like?” This is where our text comes in so providentially handy. For here we have the example of the apostle Paul, one who had so much potential to be (and at one time actually was) so prideful, conceited and arrogant. But here in our text, putting his own interests of preserving his freedom and even his life aside, marches into Jerusalem where it has already been prophesied that he will be arrested, all so that he might put the spiritual well-being of the believers in Jerusalem before his own interests. Also, having arrived before Pentecost, that great Jewish feast that would see tens of thousands of Jews flocking to Jerusalem, Paul was putting the spiritual needs of these unbelievers before his own needs, wanting to preach the gospel message of saving faith in Jesus Christ alone to his brothers in the flesh.

I believe it is imperative 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. Beloved, 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. Now, I am going to restate what we looked at last week from this text and try to make a bit more progress as we see what biblical humility looks like so that we might better practice biblical humility in our lives. As I said last week, I can point these descriptions out to you, but you will need to put them into practice, to live them out in 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.

If I were to put this another way, I would say that humility is relational; that is, it is only made known and practiced in the context of persons; or in fellowship. Humility is experiential; it is experienced. It is not to be an abstract theological term that runs alongside of

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“*supralapsarianism*” (something that is a theory of how God determined the order of events for our salvation; something that does not and cannot affect how we live). Humility is not like “*supralapsarianism*” – you and I are called to live it out among others; to experience it together. This is what we see Paul doing in verses 17-18. It is revealed in two ways:

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

We have already considered this last week, that Paul desired to be in Jerusalem for the two-fold purpose of fellowshiping with the believers there and presenting them with the offering of money from the Gentile churches to help alleviate the burdens that had come upon the Jerusalem church due to a famine as well as due to the influx of people coming for the feast of Pentecost. The second reason Paul was there was to evangelize, to speak to others who did not know Jesus about what Jesus had done on the cross.

Luke refers to the church in verse 17 as “*brethren*” – a reference to a large contingency of the church at Jerusalem who “*received us gladly.*” The idea of being “received” is that of being welcomed, being made to feel at home, being made to feel as part of the family. This is incredible as we stop to remember that Paul’s team was made up not only of believing Jews, but also of believing Gentiles. There was a true sense of fellowship; of partnership. These brothers of different cultural backgrounds, some Jewish and some Gentiles, would have all partaken of 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 one another ought to always be in the context of remembering the greatness of our salvation and our saving God. We are to be accountable to one another to talk about what God has done and is doing in our lives, particularly as it relates to salvation. 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. This is humility in practice, being accountable to such a fellowship with one another. But there is more...

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

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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 prayer, 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?

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,

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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 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?

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

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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 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

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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

Soli Deo Gloria

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