
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 2)

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; and they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; 21 and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. 22 “What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. 23 “Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24 take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. 25 “But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.” 26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.

For the past two weeks we have been looking at the subject of humility and noting how this quality or characteristic of humility revealed itself in and through the life of Paul; particularly as he enters Jerusalem and faces some rather difficult circumstances.

Let me remind you that humility is not thinking less of yourself, but rather of yourself less. To borrow from Philippians 2:3-4, humility is seeking to put the interests of others before your own interests. Beloved, biblical humility is never timid, but seeks to boldly live for and live out the very attitude and actions of Christ before others. Humility is not a single thought or action, but rather is multi-faceted, meaning it will and must cover every area of your life. Humility is to permeate everything we do and everything we think. In this sense, humility is comprehensive, meaning that no area of my life is to be unaffected by it.

This humility we have been considering is not simply to affect what we think and what we do *personally*, but it is also to affect how you interact and respond to others. Humility is the very basis of our relationship to God; to the Son of God; to the Spirit of God and to the very people of God. Humility is relational, impacting every relationship we have.

Humility is a fundamental characteristic of the Son of Man. There never was a time in which Jesus was not humble and so, in following His example, we are to strive for there never being a time in which we are not pursuing the practice of the humility of Christ. Humility is not timidity. Quite the opposite, humility allows one to be bold for God and bold for others. For when the world thinks to retreat into self-centeredness, humility seeks to reach out and consider the interests of other as more important than its own.

We need to learn and practice the art of humility. We have already noted two ways in which the apostle Paul practiced this kind of humility. Let us review those two and then finish up these verses noting the last two ways in which Paul exemplified for us this kind of biblical, Christ-like, humility.

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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.

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

Humility recognizes the need and benefit of continual participation in the body of Christ. Pride tells us that we either do not really need the church or that the church really does not need me. Humility recognizes and receives each saint with gladness.

B. **Accountable to submit to church leaders (18)**

Humility recognizes the biblical command and biblical benefits of working with and submitting to God’s appointed spiritual leadership. Pride sees no responsibility or benefit in being engaged with church leaders. Rather than placing himself above the church leadership there in Jerusalem, Paul actually presents himself and gives his testimony to the church leadership.

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...

A. **Acknowledging God; not self (19)**

Humility seeks to point others to God rather than to self. Humility puts the things that interest God above the things that might otherwise preoccupy the heart.

III. **Auditing the concerns of others (20b-22)**

and they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; 21 and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. 22 “What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.

One aspect of humility; of regarding the interests of others as more important than your own is actually taking an interest in the cares and concerns of others. Notice how verse 20 ends; **“and they said to him...”** - revealing that these church leaders, James and the elders now speak directly to Paul. The inference here is that Paul is now auditing, he is listening to the concerns of these believers. Beloved, pride says, “I should not have to deal with problems like this.” But humility says, “I will listen and respond to the cares and concerns of others.” So just what was the concern of these church leaders?

These leaders call Paul to reflection saying, **“You see, brother...”** The verb “see” is *“theoreo”* in the Greek, to theorize, to reflect upon and develop an understanding. What was Paul to understand? There were many thousands (did you catch that – thousands, literally thousands of thousands) among the Jews who had come to believe in Christ, yet they were also **“zealots for the Law.”** The concern was this, that while these Jewish believers had indeed trust in Christ alone for salvation, they were, out of this new found love for God and Jesus more desirous than ever to obey God and thus were observing the OT ceremonial laws; the dietary laws, the keeping of the feasts, honoring the Sabbath and such. It would appear that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem did not oppose the practice of such ceremonies. We might be inclined to “judge” these

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Jewish believers as being wrong for doing such things. But let me point out that nowhere in the NT are Jewish believers ever condemned for doing such things so long as their faith was in Christ, not Christ plus such works of the law for salvation.

Remember back in Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council where the question was this, “Do Gentiles need to observe OT laws in order to be saved?” What was the answer? No, that faith alone in Christ alone brought salvation to all who believe. And so, while forbidding the imposition of OT ceremonies on the Gentiles for salvation, the Council did not prohibit Jewish believers from continuing to practice them.

Let me put it in New Testament terms. Does partaking of the Lord’s Supper save a person? No, only faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross for one’s sins brings salvation. Participation in the Lord’s Supper is commanded, it is an act of obedience, but it does not save. Over the course of my experience as a Pastor, I have known a number of people who partook of the Lord’s Supper, thinking themselves saved, but they were not; thinking that by doing this act, this work, they were being made right with God; but it was not. Then God saved them and the Lord’s Supper took on a whole new, more meaningful light. They became more zealous than ever to share in the experience that pointed them to Christ. We would not ask them to forsake the Lord’s Supper simply because they did not rightly understand its significance before; rather we would rejoice that they were seeing Christ more clearly through the practice.

As the church was in transition, moving away from Jewish practices, God patiently worked with the Jewish people, revealing to them in the Word, particularly a book like Hebrews in the New Testament, that Christ was the fulfilment of the OT sacrifices and practices.

But for now, around 57 AD, the Jewish believers still experienced Christ largely through the OT practices and principles. And the problem was that misinformation about what Paul was teaching was circulating around Jerusalem. They were saying what we read in verse 21, that Paul was **“teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.”** This misinformation would be used by Jewish false teachers, called Judaizers, who would oppose the teachings of Paul and the Church saying that in order to be saved, a person, whether Jew or Gentile, must believe in Christ plus keep the works of the Law in order to be saved. These false teachers denied that salvation was by grace through faith alone and insisted that keeping the Mosaic Law was necessary for salvation. The phrase “have been told” in verse 21 speaks of repetition, of drilling such false information into the hearts and minds of the people. The Greek verb is “katecheo” – where we get our word “catechism.” These false teachers used this misinformation about what Paul was teaching in order to destroy his credibility as both a good Jew as well as a teacher. There is no way for me to over-emphasize the anti-Gentile sentiments among the Jewish people and the thought that a Jew like Paul might be undermining Jewish heritage and preferring fellowship with those “Gentiles” stirred up emotions among the Jews.

But why was this such a concern? If such misinformation was allowed to stand, then the Jerusalem church’s ability to evangelize unbelieving Jews would be threatened. Remember that one of the main reasons for Paul coming to Jerusalem was to evangelize his brethren according to the flesh, the Jews. These church leaders knew why Paul was there and they wanted him to be successful in proclaiming Christ to the Jews, but first this concern needed to be addressed.

Before moving on, let me be clear that these charges against Paul were utterly false and could be easily demonstrated so. Paul never taught Jewish people to abandon their Jewish heritage. For if Paul had really opposed the OT command of circumcision, why then did he

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circumcise Timothy in Acts 16:1-3 (Timothy was half Jewish and half Greek)? And if Paul had been teaching others not to observe Jewish customs, then why did he take a Nazarite vow in Acts 18:8? The point is all of this was cooked up to destroy Paul's credibility and thus it posed a threat to the well-being and success of the church. These church leaders introduce their proposed solution to Paul by asking a question they fully intended to answer saying, **“What, then, is to be done? They (these Jewish false teachers) will certainly hear that you have come.”**

Through all of this it appears that Paul simply listened. There is no indication that he became defensive, irate, or unreasonable. This formidable apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ quietly and carefully listened to the concern of others. How about you? How are your listening skills? Do you truly seek to audit the care, concerns and interests of others? Paul did not interrupt; he did not tune out. Humility seeks to concern itself with the interest of others. In just a few years from this event, Paul, in prison would write the familiar words of Philippians 2:3-4 –

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.

Beloved, whatever else is included in the idea of humility, know that listening to the cares and concerns of others is paramount. We need to work on not so readily dismissing the concerns of others. Parents, are you really listening to the concerns of your kids? Their issues may seem immature or light in comparison to some of the things you are dealing with; but are you teaching them the humility of listening and then working through the answer to the question, “What, then, is to be done?” Husbands, are you listening to your wives? Wives, are you listening to your husbands? Beloved, do you actually take time to listen to the concerns of one another? This is a mark of a truly humble person.

So then, humility recognizes the need and benefit of continual participation in the body of Christ. It recognizes the biblical command and biblical benefits of working with and submitting to God's appointed spiritual leadership. And it audits or listens to the concerns of others. Finally then, true biblical humility seeks to be....

IV. Accepting and acting on godly counsel (23-26)

What is presented to us in these verses may seem to be strange counsel and yet it clearly teaches us another aspect and characteristic of humility. Humility accepts counsel from godly people. As we look at verse 23, notice that these church leaders did not make a suggestion to Paul but rather gave him direction and instruction. The fact that Paul obeyed this counsel reveals once again that even an apostle is under authority. Paul humbled himself. We see this counsel in verses 23-25:

We have four men who are under a vow; 24 take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. 25 “But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.”

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These four men had taken what taken a Nazarite vow. Just what was this Nazarite vow? The Nazarite vow is explained in Numbers 6. It was a vow taken in gratitude to recognize some special blessing from the hand of God. This vow included abstaining from both meat and wine for thirty days. During these days, those who took this vow would not put a razor to their heads. By the time of Paul, the last seven days of the vow would be spent entirely in the Temple courts. At the end of the time, offerings were to be given including a year old lamb for as a sin offering, a ram for as a peace offering, a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mingled with oil and a meat offering and a drink offering. The last act was the shaving of the hair to be burned on the altar with the sacrifice.

Can you imagine how costly this would have been? I was looking up prices for high quality lambs and found that for a registered lamb it costs \$550. A registered goat or ram costs anywhere from \$500-1000. This means that with all the other sacrifices, it would cost one person somewhere between \$1100-\$1600. That multiplied by four is \$4400 to \$6400. In Paul's day it was regarded as a true act of piety for a wealthy person to cover the expenses of someone taking such a vow. And just what was the plan these church leaders have for Paul? For Paul to participate in this very Jewish act by going through the final purification process with them and by paying their expenses to that everybody will know the rumors concerning Paul's teaching Jews to forsake the OT are false.

Beloved, I have come to understand something about humility that I think is easily overlooked. Humility involved sacrifice. It sacrifices personal self-interests in order to prioritize the interests of others. It sacrifices time, energy and, as we see here, even personal resources in order to meet the interests of others. I am not sure about Paul's fiscal standing, but can't imagine that he just carried with him around \$5000.

Now some might have expected Paul to respond to all of this a bit sarcastically. He could have said to the church elders, "Are you kidding me? You know that do not do things to appease the people. My only concern is what God thinks. I do not care what these people think of me." Of course, this is not how Paul responded. And we need to be clear that Paul did in fact care what people thought of him, listen, not for *his* sake but for the sake of the *gospel*. And I need to remind you and myself of something we tend to forget. Beloved, what we do as Christians affects the testimony of the gospel. Like it or not, to be a Christian is to live in a fish bowl. Our lives are to be transparent and the more transparent then the more consistent they must be to reflecting the attitudes and actions of Christ.

For Paul, what people were saying about Paul would produce a divisive effect when it came to the unity of the church and the believability of the gospel. All of this mattered deeply to Paul. His desire and prayer was to see Jews and Gentiles united together as one church, not fractured into two parties. Beloved, without compromising the gospel, we need to be willing to do anything we can to see the gospel proclaimed and practiced. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Even before arriving in Jerusalem, this was Paul's conviction. Just three years earlier, Paul wrote these words to the believers at Corinth saying,

19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are

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without law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. 23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

This is humility in action, the needs and interests of others, primarily the need for others to hear and respond to the gospel. While it was true that Gentiles who believed were under no obligation to keep such practices, since Paul was Jewish, his participation in the ceremony did not violate the Jerusalem Council and would demonstrate that Paul had nothing but respect for the Old Testament.

Finally, in verse 26, we see that Paul, in a marvelous display of humility and desire for unity, submitted himself to the ceremony. We read in verse 26,

26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.

Pride says, “I will not do anything I do not want to do or feel like doing!” To be sure, we must have convictions and they are good when they are solidly biblical. We cannot compromise and must have conviction concerning the deity of Christ. But a believer who says that God is only pleased by singing Psalms, when the Bible does not say; “Thou shalt only sing from the Psalms” is overstepping Christian liberty. If a person has that as a personal conviction to practice, fine; there is nothing evil or wrong in only singing from the Psalms any more than there is anything evil or wrong with singing new songs. But, for the sake of the body of Christ, there are times in which we must swallow our pride for the sake of the others, particularly when your conviction is based on a personal preference rather than on the clear teaching of the Word.

Paul knew this truth that a person is right with God solely on the basis of Christ’s atoning work at the cross, not the works of the law. He also knew he that he did not *have* to observe ceremonial vows to be right with God. But he chose to participate in this vow. There are some who believe Paul was wrong, actually sinning in doing this but I heartedly disagree. This is a matter of Christian liberty. The issue was not a matter of salvation but of liberty. Again, back in Acts 15 when the Judaizers said a Gentile had to be circumcised to be saved, Paul resisted dogmatically. Paul knew that such an act would violate the gracious nature of the gospel. Salvation is by faith, not by works. There in Acts 15 both James and the elders agreed.

What was at stake now however was not the message of the church, but rather the very unity of the church. Paul knew he could go through this ceremonial rite; that there was no compromise of the gospel in it (for after all, the ceremony came from the Law of God!). He knew he did not need to keep this law for His salvation. Beloved, Paul did not do this for personal reasons, but for interpersonal reasons. And is this not the very definition of humility, regarding the interests of others as more important than your own?

Beloved, unity, the oneness, the togetherness, the solidarity, the cohesiveness of the body of Christ is a precious thing, an evangelistic tool to show the world the difference Jesus makes not just in personal lives, but also in the corporate lives of His people. This is why such unity is constantly under attack. Our enemy, the devil, knows that the church is marginalized where there is no unity. And unity in the church is developed and manifested where there is the practice of humility. I read about two congregations located only a few blocks from each other in a small

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community. The two struggling churches decided to unite and become one in order to be more effective. So far so good. But the merger never took place. Why? Because the two churches could not agree on how to recite the Lord’s Prayer. One congregation demanded to say, “forgive us our trespasses,” while the other preferred, “forgive us our debts.”

Beloved, we need men and women like Paul, those who, for the sake of the gospel, lay aside their personal opinions and submit their will for the good of the church! Music in the church has tended to be a contentious issue (thankfully not here at Hope. But I have heard people say, “I will not sing that song because its....to fast; too slow; too new; too old.” Do you see the problems with this thinking? What if there are others in that congregation who do worship God meaningfully through that song? Our hearts should celebrate the diverse backgrounds of the people in a congregation and we need to give preference to one another, singing such a song heartily unto the Lord.

Let me make this promise to you, ready? There will be misunderstandings in the church. Someone will misinterpret what you said; or take offence. Now, when this occurs you will have to make a choice. One is of prideful retaliation and the other is following the example of Paul, where we seek to do all we can to bring clarification and reconciliation.

Now some are tempted to say “But even when I do that Pastor, the other person might not respond, so why should I bother?” Why should you bother? Beloved, it is always right to do right; and when you do what is right, it will always make a difference. Really, can I promise it will ALWAYS make a difference to do what is right? Yes, it will always make a difference with the One that matters most, that is God. We must remember that our goal is not to be pragmatic, but rather to please God! We may not always see other people respond the way God would like, but that does not mean we are not to do what God desires. The humble person will always do what is right even if the only person that responds correctly is God Himself.

So then, humility recognizes the need and benefit of continual participation in the body of Christ; it recognizes the biblical command and biblical benefits of working with and submitting to God’s appointed spiritual leadership; it audits or listens to the concerns of others; and finally, true biblical humility seeks accept and act on godly counsel.

The question each of us needs to answer is this, “Am I seeking to be humble even as Christ was humble?” I know that we will struggle with answering the question on this side of glory, but how are you progressing? What steps are you taking to be increasing humble like your Savior?

In addition to what I have offered you from our text, let me share with you seven things you can do daily to practice the art of humility. Remember that humility is at the heart of Christlikeness. We follow the one who “made himself nothing.” To follow Jesus, sooner or later we must embrace the circumstances that seem to demean us. How can we practice humility?

- 1. Avoid taking credit.** This goes beyond saying, “It was no big deal” in order to deflect a compliment. Practice the discipline of secrecy by keeping one of your achievements from being known to others. That means not saying things like, “I fixed the copier, you can thank me later.” Rather, just praise God that somehow something was accomplished.
- 2. Praise others.** Pride makes us envious or resentful of another’s talents. The surest way to break that is to compliment others. Don’t pass up an opportunity to acknowledge what God has done through others.

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3. **Help others succeed.** Few things attack the ego quite as much as helping others succeed. Pride hoards knowledge and resources; humility shares them.
4. **Admit your mistakes.** Ugh. Nobody likes doing this, but the more quickly you are willing to say “I was wrong” the closer you are to humility.
5. **Learn from others.** This is another way to appreciate the value of others. When you acknowledge that they have advanced beyond you, you humble yourself – and be ready to learn
6. **Go last.** At a restaurant, at family dinner, in line at Wal-Mart, let someone else go first. It’ll do you good.
7. **Serve someone.** We instinctively resist serving because we believe there is a direct relationship between being served and being important. Jesus turned that idea on its head. Bring your spouse a cup of coffee, run an errand for a friend, give away some money.

The only way to be humble is to be humbled. Though that is difficult to accept, you can do it. Andrew Murray wrote, “The danger of pride is greater and nearer than we think, and the grace for humility too.” May we learn to practice the art of humility, pointing people to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria

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