

Text: Acts 21: 17-26

Target audience: Christians

Topic: Humility

Theme: Humility seeks God's glory.

My purpose for this message: To help Christians learn to comply with what others want if it serves God, not if it somehow serves self.

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## The Difference Between People Pleasing & Humility

PRAY.

Children learn defiance young. Before the days of mandatory child seats and seat belts, 4 year old Roger was riding in the back seat of the car and stood up. Dad saw him in the rear view mirror and told him to sit down. Roger ignored him.

Daddy warned, "If you don't sit down immediately, I'm going to pull over and spank you." Roger solemnly slid down into a sitting position. For a minute things were quiet until Roger put Daddy on notice, "I may be sitting down on the outside, but inside I'm standing up!"

Even as adults, we don't sit down easily at someone else's command, or even suggestion. Frank Sinatra sang...

*For what is a man, what has he got?*

*If not himself, then he has naught.*

*To say the things, he truly feels,*

*And not the words, of one who kneels.*

*The record shows, I took the blows ---*

*And did it my way!*

My way? Pride. What if God wants it to be someone else's way? Ahh, that's Humility. A very unnatural response. But Jesus told his disciples, *"...whoever wants to become great among you must be yours servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.* (Mk.10:43-44)

Today we return to the book of Acts (ch. 21). Let's review a bit. Acts is the story of the early Church and what God did with it. It begins with just before Jesus returned to heaven and ends with the closing chapters of the apostle Paul's life. The main character throughout the book is the Holy Spirit, but his front man in the first 12 chapters is Peter, and in the rest of the book, Paul. Both men were authorized by God to be apostles, gospel tellers and church planters. Peter worked mainly with Jews, Paul mainly with Gentiles (non-Jews).

Paul had just wrapped up his 3<sup>rd</sup> mission trip, working his way through Galatia, Asia, Macedonia and Achaia. Mostly, what's today Turkey and Greece. And now he was returning to Jerusalem, the mecca of early Christianity. On the mission trip, Paul had been collecting money to take to Jerusalem. He had two purposes:

- 1) Aid the poor in Jer. church (church likely huge with many needy people).
- 2) Send a message to *Jewish* Christians from *Gentile* Christians: we are all one. In 2 Cor.8:1-4 Paul described how bad off some of these Gentile Christians were who were nonetheless contributing; sacrificially helping strangers.

Now, as we're about to see, when Paul got to Jerusalem, he was asked to do something that was not his conviction, not something he believed was necessary: participate in a Jewish rite to silence the chattering masses who thought he'd sold out his people and their customs. The question that occurred to me is, "Was this humility, or people-pleasing?" One's honors God, the other idolizes people and manipulates them to get their approval. Which was Paul? READ Acts 21:17-26.

### Story

Not all Bible students agree as what Paul did here: some think he was humbling himself. Other's think he violated his own conscience and convictions just to keep the big guns in Jerusalem happy. Which was it?

While there's nothing mentioned here about the offering, we know from Acts 24:17 that Paul *did* deliver it at this time—probably as soon as he arrived in town. Perhaps that helped earn him the warm reception he got.

Which Paul wasn't necessarily *expecting*. He was nervous the offering might be snubbed. READ Rom.15:25-28, 31. Apparently Paul feared the Jerusalem Church might have mixed feelings about his arrival. Which they did. How do you receive a generous gift like Paul brought when what you're prepared to do next, is give him negative feedback?

After my wife and I had been dating about 4 months, she wanted to break up with me. In fact that had been her plan for some time but it seemed like every time she'd try, I'd give her a gift. So, she felt badly and would put it off again. In December there was a Christmas gift and a birthday gift in January. She thought she'd beat me to the punch in February and break up before Valentine's Day. I got her present early!

She looked at that stuffed red dog and said, "Thank you very much; I want to break up" or something like that!

James and his elders put Paul's gift aside and came right to the point:

"Paul, we hear that on your mission trips, you're urging Jews who come to Christ, not to observe the laws of Moses; ignore the feasts, the rules about Sabbath, or circumcise baby boys. We've got to nip these rumors in the bud."

There's no evidence any of this was true. Paul never told a Jewish convert, "Now that you're a Christian, forget about the Law of Moses altogether." True, he told *Gentile* Christians they didn't need to obey *much* of it, just what the Jerusalem Council had mandated in Acts 15: don't drink animal blood, don't eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, or the meat of strangled animals, and no illicit sex. But there's no sign Paul tried to unJew the Jews.

Still, the scuttlebutt in Jerusalem persisted. Exchanged whispers and dark mutterings escalated in the markets and temple: "Did you hear that *Paul's* back in Jerusalem. The *nerve* of him to show his face after what *he's* been doing!"

The elders *do* seem more worried about the whispers than any actual offense. Didn't *ask* Paul if he was teaching this, just said "do this and you'll put the rumors to rest." The scheme was for Paul to join some Jewish Christians making a vow of dedication as prescribed by the law of Moses, to pay his *and* their expenses. End of gossip. Simple enough, but is this people-pleasing? Is this compromise, Paul's attempt to win somebody's approval at the price of his convictions?

Paul *didn't* think circumcision was necessary. READ Gal.6:15. Paul *didn't* think observing feasts or *Sabbath* laws, was necessary. READ Col.2:16. And, it seems that he *didn't* live like a Jew when he was roaming the globe (Gal.2:14).

So why do this? Why agree to do something that means nothing except placating others? None of the laws that James and the Jewish Christians were clinging to, are observed by Christians today. You don't keep Sabbath laws do you? If you did, it would mean you don't do *any* labor of *any* kind from Friday sundown until Saturday sundown. You don't spend the Sabbath in frivolity—like watching baseball or Nascar—or playing games, or traveling, or going out to eat.

You don't observe the Passover or the Feast of Trumpets and neither do I. I'll bet the last time you discovered mildew in your shower you didn't grab your Bible so Lev.14 could tell you how to handle it. And I'm sure none of you who've owned land for decades, have any intention of returning it after owning it 50 years, to the person you bought it from. Yet, this is all right out of the law of Moses.

None of the teachings James apparently wanted to keep have been kept by the church. So, Paul could have legitimately said, "Jimmy, you and the elders are the old guard. The new wave understands that these things are on the way out. Your boys will have to pay for their own purification rites. That's part of the past too."

Instead, Paul quietly agreed. If he did because he was a people-pleaser, his rationale might have gone like this: I'll comply because I want James and the elders to think well of me. And because if I say no, they might not help me with ministry money. Or get mad at me and not let me speak here in Jerusalem." There could have been many self-serving reasons to simply go along with the program.

But I don't think that's what was going on. Paul had no time for people-pleasing. READ 1 Thess.2:4-6. This apostle *was* humble; I don't think it came *naturally*, but by choice. Deciding to join these men in their vow came not from calculating how it would benefit him, but how it would benefit God—and the cause of the gospel. READ 1 Cor.9:19-22. Also, he was mindful of the weaker brother (READ Rom.14:14:15-21).

### Concl:

Excellent definition of humility (with qualifications: Phil.2:3): *Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself at all.*

Being humble is not a matter of putting our inferiority complexes on display, "I'm garbage, I'm garbage!" Or protesting, "I can't really do much, not very good at anything" and pointing out all their flaws. Humble people are not those who either let—or actually encourage others to mistreat them. These are people-pleasers. God-pleasers are those who are most freed from thinking about themselves at all.

In humbling himself Paul said, "I'm going to do what you asked because I do not want to unnecessarily disturb Jewish Christendom: that would not please God. I am willing to become all things, to all people, to glorify God.

That's humility. Freedom from thinking about yourself at all.