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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
July 24, 2016
10th Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 17:1-7, Matthew 14:22-34

Hymns: 24; 427; 759; 48 (242:1-3)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Acts 24:22-26

But when Felix heard these things, having more accurate knowledge of *the* Way, he adjourned the proceedings and said, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will make a decision on your case." ²³ So he commanded the centurion to keep Paul and to let *him* have liberty, and told him not to forbid any of his friends to provide for or visit him.

²⁴ And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. ²⁵ Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you." ²⁶ Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore he sent for him more often and conversed with him. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God my Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Distressing times

We all face distressing times in our lives. Sometimes they are very intense, at other times the distress that comes in life is prolonged. Oftentimes the distress of life can test not only to one's patience, but also to one's faith. Our Scripture lessons presented examples of such distress in the lives of the Children of Israel, and also in the lives of the disciples. In the one instance the trial was about possessing an essential for life. The children of Israel had no water, no water for their flocks and herds who were traveling with them, and not even for themselves and for their children. Indeed any parent can sympathize with that kind of distress and how agitating it might be. It was a trial of faith.

For the disciples it was more of a sudden and intense trial when they found themselves caught in a storm and unable to make any headway to the safety of shore. As it turned out, it was a trial especially for Peter who in an instant of panic failed to trust in the Lord. The danger of the wave coming toward him seemed far more real to him than the Jesus' power to save.

So often that can be true for us also that the circumstances of life take on a greater sense of reality than does the saving power of Christ. And yet the Lord has us living in this world with all its trials and tribulations so that we should be His witnesses, testifying to the truth of the gospel. He would have us tell others who are distressed by sin, distressed by the world, about the life and salvation we have in Him who alone can deliver us from all distress. It should not surprise us then that the Lord would allow adversity into our lives. At times this adversity may come in response to our testimony. That may challenge our faith that we are tempted to wait for a better time, for only the ideal conditions for sharing our faith in Jesus. While we may find such occasions presented to us by the Lord, there will be many others opportunities that are less than ideal. So on the basis of our text this morning we shall be --

THEME: Examining Paul's Example of Testimony in Adversity.

The incident in our text comes early in Paul's first prolonged imprisonment. This certainly wasn't the first time Paul had suffered adversity in his apostolic ministry, or even been thrown into jail. The divine record tells us of many incidents of Paul suffering for

the sake of the gospel; he had been beaten, and stoned, and imprisoned before. This time it happened because Paul had been determined to bring the offering of love, the assistance for the Christians suffering want in Jerusalem, to them personally. He had been given this charge by the apostles in Jerusalem, and Paul desired to see it through. He had gathered this offering from the churches throughout Asia Minor and Greece, predominately gentile congregations, and carried it to Jerusalem for their Jewish brethren.

While in Jerusalem Paul was accused of desecrating the temple by escorting gentiles into the inner courts of the temple, something which he had not done. In the uproar that ensued Paul was arrested, and ultimately, for his own protection, Paul was transported to Rome's regional capital of Caesarea. There a hearing was convened before the governor, a Roman named Felix. Felix knew this was a religious dispute that didn't concern Rome. He knew Paul had done no crime. However, Felix was indifferent to Paul's situation, as well as the Jews. This is where our text picks up the account, and we learn of Paul's --

I. Testifying to the Indifferent.

Felix's initial response served his purpose of getting rid the Jews who had come to Caesarea and disturbed his peace. So he dismissed them with the statement that when Lysias, the centurion who had taken Paul into custody, arrived from Jerusalem, then Felix would settle the matter. Felix never summoned Lysias, so Lysias never arrived, and Felix didn't really care one way or another if Paul stayed under arrest. He was considerate enough to allow Paul some liberty, so that this was more like house arrest, with visitors able to see Paul freely and bring him whatever he needed, but Paul remained bound, and under guard. The Lord's providence is evident in this for Paul was going to sit there for the next couple of years until Felix was recalled to Rome and another governor took his place.

Apparently Paul aroused Felix's curiosity. He returned a few days later with his wife accompanying him. She was Jewish. It is assumed that this was the connection that made Felix more knowledgeable about the Way, an early reference to the followers

of Jesus before the word Christian was used. So Paul was summoned and spoke to them concerning “the faith in Christ.”

It’s important for us to see how Paul took up this opportunity to speak about Jesus and salvation in His name. Paul didn’t dismiss this opportunity because Felix was Roman, or refuse to share the truth with Felix because Paul was being unjustly held. He shared the truth about Jesus, even though these were rather difficult circumstances, an adverse situation for Paul to be in.

The effect of that first meeting on Felix was that what he heard frightened him. Paul had spoken of the judgment to come and Felix found that scary. So Felix ended that interview, but more meetings were to follow. However, it these meetings didn’t conclude with Felix’s conversion or Paul’s release. Felix found Paul to be a curiosity, and knowing the circumstances of Paul’s arrest, Felix hoped someone would come forward with a bribe for Paul’s release. Paul didn’t refuse to share the truth Felix. Time went on, and time and again Paul was summoned before Felix, and time and again Paul spoke the truth about Jesus, even as Paul continued to endure the adversity of arrest. For two years this went on. **Two years!** And then when Felix was recalled to Rome, he decided to do the Jews a favor and leave Paul a prisoner!

Opposition from the world will bring adversity into the lives of Christians even yet today. Those who should uphold justice may respond with indifference. How should we respond under such adverse circumstances as they come our way (and they will come our way)? By fulfilling the commission the Lord has given us. We are not to dismiss others as being indifferent or unjust or beyond hope. We are not to make those calls because it is not our powers of persuasion that convert lost souls to Christ. We are sent out with the truth of the faith in Christ, and the Holy Spirit will call to faith those who are to be saved. If we decide to play it safe, if we excuse ourselves by waiting for the right circumstances, or think we can judge when other’s will be more receptive to the gospel, we would be neglecting our calling. Seize the opportunity that is placed before you and allow the Holy Spirit to work through the testimony you present, yes even to those who are no more than curious or otherwise indifferent to the truth. But what to say? Again we learn from Paul’s example.

Paul stood before Felix and Drusilla --

II. Testifying to the Truth.

We are told in our text that Felix heard Paul “concerning the faith in Christ.” Our text continues to tell us that Paul reasoned with Felix regarding **righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come**. Paul explained these matters to Felix in the context of Jesus. That Paul reasoned with Felix allows for some give and take, questions and answers. The areas that are presented to us here are central to our Christian faith and also distinctly different from the religions of this world.

Consider righteousness. The world thinks of righteousness in terms of an individual’s ability to live a good and upright life. If you simply follow the golden rule: do to others as you would have them do to you. If you are kind and good and help the needy then you will be seen as righteous by the world. Indeed when you die there will likely be a long line of people who will be glad to speak of your righteousness. According to the Christian faith, **“we are all as unclean thing and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags”** (Isaiah 64:6). Everything that we do is not only slightly tainted by sin, but totally corrupted by sin, making our deeds totally unacceptable as works of righteousness before the Lord. Paul taught in no uncertain terms that **“by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:22).

What did Paul present as the source of righteousness for Felix? We can be sure it was exactly what Paul also taught the Galatians: **“a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified”** (Galatians 2:16).

True righteousness does not come from us but is imputed to us by God, coming to us from God through faith in Christ. Jesus kept the law for us, and endured the cross for us that we might possess that perfect righteousness through faith in His name.

Paul also spoke about self-control. Again there are a lot of different ideas about self-control. We use the expression in different ways. Here we are not talking about staying on a diet. Here we should think of it in terms of living a moral and upright life. Paul understood better than most what the natural man thinks about self-control in connection to man's relationship with God. Paul had been a Pharisee. Their philosophy was based upon a rigid adherence to Mosaic Law. It called for a great deal of self-discipline, along with a careful defining of what exactly was and what was not necessary for the fulfillment of the law. He had a clear understanding of how people understood that such self-disciplined life made them look better before the world, and it was an easy leap to conclude that this then also made them better before the Lord. This teaching was a cancer that was already at work in the early Christian church and which Paul repeatedly addressed in his epistles. It was falsely proposed that while Jesus did most of what was necessary for salvation, people needed to raise their Christianity to a higher level for it to be complete, to be more perfect and more acceptable to God through a careful observance of the law.

Some still confuse Christian self-control with self-deprivation and a strictly prescribed life style. It has been called pietism in the past. Today some think of it as "evangelical Christianity," though it truly isn't evangelical. It is proposed that if you only go to approved movies, and vote for the correct political party or candidate, and dress in a particular fashion, and abstain from certain foods and beverages you will make your salvation more sure. The result is a confusion of justification, (God's pronouncement of your innocence) and sanctification (the Spirit worked response to Christ's love in your life).

What would Paul have told Felix? Let's read again what Paul wrote the Galatians to find our answer.

Galatians 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

Christian self-control was not an exercise of self-will. It was an exercise of faith. It was no longer motivated by the acquisition of righteousness, or fear of condemnation. It was empowered by Christ. Through faith in Christ I died to sin. Faith and sin oppose one another, they are not compatible.

I live for Christ who died for me and rose again. It is all to Jesus' glory, to Jesus' credit that I say "no" to sin and "yes" to righteousness. It is by the Spirit's power that I love others even as Christ loved me and gave Himself for me. So then the exercise of Christian self-control is all about Christ and glorifying Him in all I do.

Finally Paul spoke of the judgment to come. Judgment Day is thought of as "dooms day" by many in the world. Many would rather deny that there is any accountability before God. It is a day when each man will be judged according to what he has done. Paul taught exactly what the Lord Jesus taught him, what we read for ourselves in John's gospel.

John 5:28-29 "The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice²⁹ and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation."

No wonder Felix was afraid! He knew his own sin. But how can it be that **we** are not afraid? Haven't we also sinned in every way, and each and every day, even after our conversion to faith? Yes, but the Lord has laid on Jesus all our sin, and this is our righteousness. And the Lord who is gracious looks upon our fruits of faith, frail as they might be, as being good and acceptable to Him because of our faith and only because of our faith in Jesus. So we look forward to that last day, and the accountability that it brings with the assurance that we shall be clothed with Jesus' righteousness and we shall stand boldly before God knowing that we shall hear that blessed invitation to come and enter into heavenly mansions prepared for us by Christ.

"These are the facts as we have received them. These are the truths that the Christian believes. This is the basis of all of our preaching,

(and our witnessing) Christ died for sinners and rose from the tomb!”

(Worship Supplement 2000 #759)

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.