

*Words and Deeds: When In Rome...*

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*John 10:11-16; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Acts 21:15-26*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 21:15-26. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His holy and perfect word. “After this, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Mnason, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples. When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.” The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.”

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Most of us have heard the phrase; at least three movies have been titled, “When In Rome.” The idea is pretty self-explanatory. But where did it come from? It turns out it has a much longer history than I ever expected, and from a surprising place. Back in 390 AD, the theologian Augustine was planning to travel with his mother to Rome. He found out that in that era, the Roman church fasted every Saturday, which was not the custom of Augustine’s church. He asked the bishop of Milan, Ambrose, what they should do. Ambrose’s response was, “When I am here in Milan, I do not fast on Saturday. When I am in Rome, I do as the Romans do. Follow the custom of the church where you are.”

The phrase has never gone out of style. Back in 1777, in the letters of Pope Clement XIV, there’s a discussion that the pope had with a priest in the church who seemed shocked that everyone slept the afternoon away on his visit. Clement wrote, “The siesto, or afternoon's nap of Italy, my most dear and reverend Father, would not have alarmed you so much, if you had recollected, that when we are at Rome, we should do as the Romans do.” When it comes to taking naps, the pope and I agree!

Today’s passage is a surprise given that Paul came to Jerusalem expecting to be hauled off in chains and possibly executed for his faith in Christ. Nothing happens at first. And yet there’s still a major issue in the Jerusalem church that Paul needs to address. We can learn a lot from it as well, because many of the splits in the modern church have to do with issues of understanding culture rather than true theological disagreements. We can follow in Paul’s steps.

So the time has come, and Paul, Luke, and their companions head on foot for the final stretch of their journey. They reach the home of Mnason, an early disciple, and the greeting in Jerusalem is warm. So much has happened over the years here. Paul once had to be escorted by Barnabas through Jerusalem because all the believers were so scared of him after the persecution he once brought upon them. He had to flee Jerusalem because of threats on his life; he had to come back again another time when there was trouble in the church about how to deal with all the Gentile converts. Ever since his conversion, Paul and Jerusalem didn't get along too well! And yet the church is so happy to see him now.

Paul's mission to the Gentiles has been an overwhelming success. When he meets with James and the elders, they praise God that so many have come to trust in the Lord. This shows just how much the Holy Spirit has worked in their hearts too. Jesus was the Jewish messiah promised to the Jewish people, and yet He had also become the Savior of the hated pagan people as well. The Jews saw everyone who wasn't Jewish as unwashed, unholy enemies, invaders and occupiers of the Holy Land who didn't know God and didn't deserve His blessings.

It says something about the Jewish believers because in this era, the late 50s AD, Jewish animosity towards the Romans was only getting stronger and stronger. It would eventually turn into full-blown revolution by 67 AD. In comparison, the Jewish Christians have grown to accept and even love the Gentile believers in their midst. As Paul would say in his letter to the church in Colossi, "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all." The fact that the Jewish elders in Jerusalem would welcome Paul and company so eagerly in light of all his ministries to the Gentiles says a lot.

Thousands of Jews in Jerusalem and the surrounding area of Judea have become believers. The movement of Jesus-loving Hebrews has grown massive. But there is still a problem, a big one. Paul is among the best-known leaders of the church; he is deeply respected. But reports have been coming out that Paul has been urging Jews of the diaspora – the area outside Israel proper, the Jews who live among the Gentiles – to stop following the law of Moses and the customs that come from the law. It's sending shock waves through the community and endangers the mission of the church.

Now this part is a little hard to understand, because the complaint is wrong but is based on a real misunderstanding. Paul had written a very strong letter to the church in Galatia that if the Gentiles started following the Jewish law and all of its ritual demands expecting that it would save them, they would be placing their hope in something other than Jesus and would be rejecting their salvation through Him. Paul argued that obedience to the Law wasn't where our salvation lies; it's in the work of Christ on the cross and faith in His sacrifice to cover our sins once and for all. The law represented God's covenant with the Jewish people as a nation for a time, not the world as a whole for all eternity. Paul did say that if a Gentile entered into the Jewish legal covenant through the sign of the covenant – through circumcision – he was obligated to follow the whole law perfectly.

However, Paul never argued that the Gentiles shouldn't follow the moral law. He stated in Romans 1 that the moral law of God was written on every human heart, and that while we all traded it away for our sins, we all knew we were supposed to keep it. Every Christian is supposed to be obedient to the basic morality found in the Law of Moses. And what's more, Paul never told any Jewish person to disown their heritage and stop following the customs and teachings handed down through the generations.

This was extremely important for the Jewish people. Their ways, their festivals and feasts, their practices, they meant something to them. We might ask, "Well, what's the big deal?" And yet we have the exact same sort of things.

Can you imagine having Christmas without a Christmas tree? To me, it's unthinkable. Now everyone here probably has a tradition – maybe you set your tree up the day after Thanksgiving, maybe the day before Christmas, maybe you get yours from a tree farm. But that tradition helps to define the season. Or Christmas Eve candlelight service? Christmas without the Christmas Eve service just wouldn't be Christmas. Now Bethel didn't ever have a service until we joined forces and did ours together. It wasn't their tradition. But it was one that I needed to continue for me. (I hope the rest of you enjoy that service too!) Celebrating Father's Day today, maybe Father's Day means a big steak on the grill or a family get-together. We have a lot of rituals and traditions and customs we don't even think about until they go away.

And you know what? Scripture doesn't say, "Thou shalt have a Christmas tree." It doesn't even say, "Thou shalt celebrate Christmas!" They are our things, our expectations, not ones laid down by God. And the law of Moses? It was handed down by God, and preserved for close to 1500 years before Jesus came. The traditions and laws and customs were handed down generation to generation, taught to you before you could even walk. No wonder the Jewish Christians were worried that their ancient traditions were being thrown into the garbage.

So James has a plan for Paul. James' conversation with Paul goes something like this: "The best way to fix this, Paul, is to show the community that you're still a Jew as well as a Christian. Go through a Jewish ritual purification at the temple from being away from Jerusalem. Then help these men who have taken the Nazarite vow, this solemn promise before God, help them pay their expenses so they can complete their pledge. It's a lot of money, sure, but it will show the community that you still live as a part of the Jewish people. And you know we don't have any issue with the Gentile believers – we are still in agreement with our decision years ago that the Gentiles need to follow the moral law and stay away from things that are just absolutely offensive to the Jewish people in their midst."

Paul goes along with it. He does his own purification ritual; he helps the other men with their vows. He goes to the temple in order to let them know when to expect the vows to be over and the offerings to be made because this is a big deal; the end of a Nazarite vow includes a lot of gifts and sacrifices. In the end, Paul shows that he hasn't forgotten his heritage and respects the faith and beliefs of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

While I don't want us to read too much of the racial implications into today's passage, I do want us to see what it is saying about how we treat one another in the larger scope of the Christian church and how we reach others outside the church. So here's the first takehome point for today: *God makes His Kingdom full of amazing variety we can learn from and respect.* God gave the Jewish people a fascinating culture that still exists in the present day. Many Jewish traditions shed light on our own beliefs – and while modern Jews don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the traditions many carry on still point to Him. But God gave so many nations so many different ways to worship and praise Him, to understand Him, and each brings something special to the table.

The worldwide church has sadly split over so many different things. Should members speak in tongues or not? Church split. Should we only sing Psalms a cappella, or should we sing hymns with an organ, or can we use a piano, or can we go full contemporary? Split split split split. Are we restless if the service goes over an hour, or does it not feel like you've worshipped unless you're there half the day? Do you raise your hands? Do you kneel? Do you greet one another with the peace of Christ? Do you have communion every week or once a month or once a quarter? The list just goes on and on.

But God has put those differences in the church for a reason. Revelation 7 states that in heaven there will be people from every nation, tribe, people, and language praising God. I think we'll be surprised how few of them are using English! Every culture has been in some way corrupted by sin, but when the Holy Spirit comes and redeems that people group, I am convinced that God will show us another facet of His love for us in their culture's addition to His Kingdom.

This also means that you can fully embrace the church culture you have and perhaps you grew up with while respecting others. I will always love the old hymns that I grew up singing each week. I'll love Christmas carols and Christmas Eve service. I'll always feel a little weird about Ash Wednesday because I didn't grow up with it and was taught it wasn't something we did. For me, church can easily include handbells once a month and bagpipes on Easter and hand-sewn banners on the back wall of the sanctuary. I never experienced burning incense in worship or baptism by immersion in a lake. That's my experiences and the ones that feel different to me. And that's all OK as long as I can stand by another believer who has very different experiences and say about us both, "I'm glad we're a part of God's Kingdom."

I love the fact that at the pregnancy center, everyone's very different. My director is a Missionary Church free-will all the way right up against my Calvinism. Our medical staff includes a Lutheran, a Pentecostal, and a Catholic. Our receptionists range from Latvian Orthodox to Charismatic and all points in-between. And yet we all work together every week to see God's will working out in the saving of lives and people coming to know Jesus. Our worship and cultures are quite different, but we are all united by the Holy Spirit. That's a picture of the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

And that leads me to our second and final point for this morning: *good outreach is intentionally cross-cultural.* In our reading from 1 Corinthians 9 this morning, we heard Paul say, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." He intentionally worked to be like the people he was trying to reach so they might hear the message.

Modern studies about church growth have proven this is true. People are most likely to find Christ in a group like themselves. No matter what demographic, it works. The poor, the rich, different ethnic groups, different subcultures – people hear the message of Jesus best when it comes from someone who looks like them, who sounds like them, and really most importantly, someone they can identify with.

Some churches have taken this to mean that each group should have their own church – the rich people have theirs, the Spanish-speakers have theirs, the blue-collar folks have theirs. But I don't think a homogenous church where everyone looks and sounds alike is what God had in mind. Instead, through His Holy Spirit, God wants to make us relatable enough that we're going to find ways to overcome the barriers of race and culture and whatever else might stand in the way.

I don't have any tattoos. Never been my thing. Not because I hate them, because I've seen some that look incredible, but because I'd want to be super careful about anything that would be a permanent message on my body. (I'm also cheap and hate pain, so there's that.) But there's a big culture divide between the tattooing community that loves them and those who think you can't get a job with a million tattoos. What about those folks who get tattoos not because they love them but because it gives them a place to relate Christ to those in that subculture?

I've never been on a motorcycle. People have a lot of misgivings about motorcycle gangs and some of the bad news that has come along with them at times. But there are folks who buy Harleys and get leather jackets and fifty patches because God has given them a love for the people who are lost who happen to be motorcycle enthusiasts. They see the average preacher in a three-piece suit and they expect a lecture on sin and bad behavior. But Joe who relates to them, who has no problem having a beer with them, who has a great bike and keeps a Gideons' Bible in his jacket pocket, him they might hear.

If we are listening to the Holy Spirit, we might be surprised at what He asks us to do to reach more lost people with the good news of Jesus. The prophet Jonah was asked to go preach to Israel's sworn enemies. The prophet Ezekiel was told to lay on his side for over a year as a witness against Israel. The prophet Hosea was asked to marry an unfaithful woman as an illustration of God's faithfulness to His unfaithful people. For us to wear a suit and a tie to reach businessmen, or jeans and a science-fiction T-shirt to reach gamers, these aren't a stretch!

We simply need to be mindful that God can and will use us as we are willing to reach all sorts of people for Him. We need to be less worried about their traditions or sub-cultures, less about how they look or dress, and more concerned that they know that God's forgiveness is available to them through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul wasn't worried about appearances. He was most interested in people being saved. He was willing to do whatever it took – aside from sin – to reach the people God was bringing into the Kingdom. May we have that same willingness, that same open heart, to set aside our preferences and biases and opinions so that others might see us truly as God's representatives of love and peace and joy and salvation to them.