

Almost Persuaded to Become a Christian

Acts 26:19-32; 1 Chronicles 29:14

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Children, how do your parents know that you trust them and love them? It's not simply your words ("I love you"); it is your obedience without complaint that speaks most loudly that you love and honor your parents.

Children, what if instead of obeying your parents, you make excuses for your disobedience ("I don't like that kind of work"; "I had something more important that I wanted to do"; "I didn't like how I was told to do it"; "I almost did it, but was distracted from doing it"). Does making excuses for your disobedience demonstrate that you love and honor your parents, or more importantly, does it show you love and honor God?

Dear parents, if it is so clear to you how children should love and honor you in all that is lawfully commanded, is it not even more aggravated of a sin when you dishonor your Heavenly Father by your disobedience and then make excuses why you cannot obey the God you profess to serve and love? Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). It is not your mere profession of faith that evidences saving faith, but it is your loving obedience (especially when it is hard and difficult) that evidences your saving faith in Jesus Christ—"faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). Even when you sin, loving obedience is rising again through faith and repentance to renew your obedience.

The Apostle Paul evidenced his faith in Jesus Christ by his willingness to obey the Lord Jesus Christ, to submit in humility to Jesus Christ, and to do so even when it was hard and was painful. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) The Christian Evidences Saving Faith by Humble Submission to Christ (Acts 26:19-23); (2) The Lost Who Hear the Gospel Evidence Unbelief by Making Excuses (Acts 26:24-32).

I. The Christian Evidences Saving Faith by Humble Submission to Christ (Acts 26:19-23).

A. As we begin today's sermon, the Apostle Paul continues the good fight of faith in his defense of the truth before King Agrippa (which began in Acts 26:1).

1. Paul had thus far related to Agrippa, Festus (the Roman governor), and all the VIPs present how the controversy between himself and the Jews (particularly the Sanhedrin) centered primarily on the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Jews rejected it; Paul and his fellow Christians rested their entire faith, life, and death upon the fact that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, the Son of God, who had accomplished redemption for all who trusted Him, and this was proven by Christ's resurrection.

2. Jesus was either a liar or the Lord depending upon whether He remained in the tomb or was gloriously raised in resurrection power. Paul's defense to Agrippa (who is a Jew) has therefore focused upon how he, the arch-persecutor of Christ and of Christians, became the arch-defender of Christ and the Christian faith.

3. Paul said it was because the resurrected Jesus Christ appeared to him in a brilliant light as he was going to Damascus to arrest Jewish Christians there (Acts 26:1-15). He was not looking for Jesus, but Jesus was looking for Paul and found Him (just as He finds every single soul that God chose from all eternity and gave to the Son to redeem and save). This same resurrected Jesus Christ then commissioned Paul to preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 26:16-18).

B. Paul next testifies to Agrippa that he was not disobedient to the commission given to him by the risen Jesus Christ in the vision (Acts 26:19), but began preaching to the Jews in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then went forth into Gentile nations preaching the same message of turning to God in faith and away from sin in repentance and to demonstrate that repentance by the good works that

follow (Acts 26:20). Whereas Jonah fled God's calling, Paul pursued the calling of God. Jonah made excuses; Paul didn't. Let's apply this to our own lives.

1. How did Paul demonstrate his faith in the resurrected Christ? By his obedience to the commands of Jesus Christ. Right? It was Paul's loving obedience that gave flesh to his faith in Jesus Christ. Dear ones, **how did Abraham** reveal his faith in Christ? He obeyed the Lord and left the comforts of home to find a new home. **How did Noah** reveal his faith in God? He obeyed the Lord and took the next hundred years to build the ark in the face of all manner of opposition. **How did Moses** reveal his faith in the Lord? He obeyed the Lord and opposed Pharaoh in leading Israel out of Egyptian bondage (and suffering with God's people). **How did Daniel** reveal his faith in Jehovah? He obeyed the Lord and would not cease to pray unto the Lord his God even being thrown into the den of hungry lions. **How do you** reveal your faith in Jesus Christ? In the same way as these faithful forefathers; you obey the Lord in love (even when it is hard and is unpopular, even when you are mocked and criticized for doing so); and when you fail, you arise in faith and eye the mercy of God in Christ Jesus in renewing your loving obedience to Him.

2. Just as your good works done in love to the glory of God reveal your faith, so they also reveal your repentance (your sorrow and your grief over your sin)—“works meet for repentance” (Acts 26:20). Dear ones, when you repent for your sin and yet see no tangible efforts on your part to diligently fight and war against that enemy (sin) that has attacked you, what works then demonstrate the sincerity of your repentance? Let me suggest some steps that reveal genuine repentance.

a. You fall upon the mercy of God in Christ Jesus pleading for His help, His strength, and His perseverance never to give up until you are fully victorious in heaven. Repentance is life-long.

b. You look in faith to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as your death to that sin and your life of victory over that sin.

c. You make a plan to defend yourself against this enemy by recognizing how this enemy has attacked you in the past, and learning what most often triggers this temptation. Without a plan, there will be no lasting fruit of repentance.

(1) There will be no lasting fruit of repentance where there is no daily communion with Christ in prayer and the Word (particularly God's promises of deliverance, 1 Corinthians 10:13).

(2) There will be no lasting fruit of repentance if you place yourself into the same tempting situations that have led to your fall in the past. Flee the sin (as did Joseph) and replace it with that which is true and righteous (2 Timothy 2:22).

(3) There will be no lasting fruit of repentance if godly shame and sorrow do not fill your heart. If you take lightly the sin, if you play with it, do not expect the fruit of repentance. You must grow to hate it. You must by God's grace cut it off and pluck it out.

(4) There will be no lasting fruit of repentance if you live in the past, rather than living by faith in the present hope of Christ's power to deliver you, or if you do not live with a thankful heart in the light of God's mercy and grace in Jesus Christ. There is no power in your repentance, there is only power in Jesus Christ who gives you the grace to repent and to bring forth the fruit of repentance (Romans 8:37).

C. In returning to Paul's testimony before Agrippa, Paul declares it was not because he had committed some crime that the Jews sought to kill him in the Temple (Acts 21), but because he was faithful to the call he had received from the resurrected Jesus Christ (Acts 26:21).

D. Paul does not take glory to himself or boast in himself at all, but testifies that it was by the help of God alone that he was able to continue to bear witness to small and great through much tribulation (Acts 26:22; 2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

1. Dear ones, do you know with absolute certainty that you are what you are by the grace of God alone? Do you know that you would not be here feasting upon the Word of God apart from God's almighty work in your life, apart from God's most wise plan for your life, apart from God's preservation and perseverance in your life?

2. What is there to boast about that you have accomplished without God's almighty help? When you serve Him with you whole heart, you are only giving back to Him all that He first has freely given to you (1 Chronicles 29:14). You are not earning anything by your loving obedience. You can never repay Him for the infinite debt you owe. You can only humbly point to the cross and boast in what Jesus has accomplished in you (Psalm 44:8). Those who are humble before the Lord are daily amazed that God would save them and use them for His glory.

E. Paul did not preach anything that was contrary to what Moses and the prophets taught about the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ (concerning His virgin birth, His sinless life, His redeeming death, His glorious resurrection, and His ascension to heaven to be seated on David's throne there at God's right hand). Again Paul is proclaiming that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Christianity) is not a new religion, but is the same essential religion believed and practiced by Moses and the prophets (Acts 26:22-23). The Jews have left the faith.

II. The Lost Who Hear the Gospel Evidence Unbelief by Making Excuses (Acts 26:24-32).

A. There are two responses that we find in the next few verses to Paul's testimony: (1) The response of Festus; and (2) The response of Agrippa.

1. The Response of Festus (Acts 26:24-25).

a. Before Paul can even finish his testimony before Agrippa, Festus, the Roman governor, blurts out the words that we find in Acts 26:24. Paul denies that he is out of touch with reality, but speaks what is true and rational (Acts 26:25). Festus has heard enough. Either Festus has not followed or listened closely to Paul's testimony and wants Paul to stop, or Festus has followed and listened closely and wants Paul to stop because Paul is making too much sense. His reaction (regardless of what was going on in his head) was to stop Paul. Here is a clear rejection of the gospel and truth concerning Jesus Christ. Festus makes the excuse for his interruption and rejection to be Paul's problem (not his own) by claiming Paul is a learned man that has allowed this fantasy about Jesus to take over his whole life. Paul is beside himself, mad, crazy; he's not living in reality. He needs to come back to earth.

b. This is the excuse that unbelievers will use in some way blaming the messenger for their unbelief—in this case, blaming Paul for being out of touch with reality about the resurrected Christ. Perhaps you are listening to this sermon today and you too are rejecting the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ because of something I have preached that offended you (whether about your sin and being under God's judgment apart from Jesus Christ, whether about your pride that you cannot claim credit and glory for your accomplishments, whether my boldness and confidence that the gospel and Scripture is absolutely true and all men are liars). Regardless of what I may preach that offends you, know today that you have heard the truth, and it is only this truth that will set you free from your sin and from God's righteous judgment in hell. You can blame me, but that will not save you.

2. The Response of Agrippa (Acts 26:26-29).

a. King Agrippa's response is like that of Festus: a rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, it is a more sophisticated response (not brash and aggressive like that of Festus). Paul challenges Agrippa that he knows (as a learned Jew) that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ were not hidden from the public notice of all who lived in Israel. Paul was not making up the person of Jesus Christ who based His Messiahship and Divinity upon His death and resurrection (Acts 26:26). For skeptics to now act as though Jesus was a mythical legend is simply an unreasonable theory and a lie that is contrary to the

historical record of Scripture and of both Jewish and Roman historians living at that time (Josephus and Tacitus).

b. Paul is not finished challenging Agrippa as he asks Agrippa if he believes all that the Old Testament prophets have prophesied concerning the Messiah (which likely means Paul had given to Agrippa some of those prophesies that pointed to Christ). Then Paul answers for Agrippa, “I know that thou believest” (Acts 26:27), which interestingly Agrippa does not deny.

c. Agrippa is so gripped with conviction at Paul’s testimony that he utters these words in Acts 26:28. Paul replies with a largeness of heart desiring that they would all be altogether a Christian as was he, yet without the bonds on his wrists (Acts 26:29).

(1) Agrippa was not an almost Christian. There is no such thing. One either is or is not a Christian. Just as you are either born or not born; or just as you are either married or not married; so likewise you cannot make yourself feel good as if you are an almost Christian.

(2) That is not what Agrippa said. He said that Paul had almost persuaded him to become a Christian. He was convicted. He was almost persuaded. And yet he rejected Jesus Christ. Whereas Festus rejected the gospel and directed his excuse toward Paul’s being out of touch with reality, Agrippa rejected the gospel and directed his excuse toward Paul’s being in touch with reality and making a well-reasoned presentation of the gospel. And yet Agrippa still rejected it.

d. If Agrippa was convicted and if Paul argued so soundly, what prevented Agrippa from trusting alone in Jesus alone?

(1) Clearly, it was his unbelief, but was it also due to his incestuous relationship with Bernice, (who sat beside him) and his unwillingness to confess that sin as evil and needing the forgiveness of God, but rather wanting to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a moment?

(2) Was his unbelief due to his wanting to impress Festus and craving the approval of men more than the approval of God? Was he clinging to his position and status as king, which he would likely have to cast away if he confessed that Jesus was King of kings?

(3) Was his unbelief due to his unwillingness to let go of his religion in which he held a significant position of status? Regardless of what it was that influenced his unbelief, his sin in being convicted, in seeing the reasonableness of the Christian faith, and yet rejecting it makes his sin of unbelief even more aggravated than that of the unbelief of Festus (just as does your sitting, listening, and appreciating much of what you hear, but all without faith in Jesus Christ). The conversion of souls is not the work of man, but the work of God.

B. We read that both Festus and Agrippa agreed that Paul was innocent of any crime and that had he not appealed to Caesar, he would have been released (Acts 26:30-32). Paul was not suffering for any crime he had committed, but was suffering persecution for the truth and righteousness of Jesus Christ. So let that be true of us as well.

In closing, dear children, young people, young adults, and parents, you have set before you two examples of men who rejected Jesus Christ and the good news of salvation. They excused their unbelief in different ways: (1) Festus accusing Paul of being out of touch with reality—a rude guy; (2) Agrippa complimenting Paul on a job well done—a nice guy. Dear ones, nice guys as well as rude guys will suffer eternal condemnation for their unbelief. Take no comfort today that you are almost persuaded to be a Christian. That is yet to say you are not persuaded to be a Christian. Cast yourself upon the mercy of God right now. God justifies only the ungodly.

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