

Can You Hear Me Now?

Acts 28:17-28

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This morning as we are together looking at the Book of Acts, I ask you to cast your minds back—way, way back—for some of you it might be hard—to yesteryear 2002, long time ago—at least, in cell phones. 2002 was still five years before the iPhone. I know, young people, that's hard to believe. There were days before the iPhone. But the interesting thing about 2002 is, it was still relatively new in the cell phone era. There was really one big company that had a lot of attention—at least, had a lot of network—and it was Verizon. But a lot of other, smaller cell phone companies had come online, and they wanted a piece of the action. But what they were able to do was they were able to offer phone and plans at a much less—or at least, a reduced rate against Verizon. And so Verizon, 2001, 2002, was seeing its users leaving. They were not signing up for new contracts. And so they decided on an ad campaign, featuring an engineer type who worked for Verizon. And it went from fairly mundane situations to the absurd, and he simply uttered one thing with a cell phone to his ear. He said, “Can you hear me now?”

You see, Verizon had realized that there was very little to distinguish them from these other cell phone companies except for price. And they realized something—that just because you have a cell phone, just because you have the connectivity to a particular cell tower, and just because you have a plan, doesn't mean you're getting all the phone calls you need to get. It doesn't mean that the most important phone calls of your own won't be dropped. You want to be able to say, “Can you hear me now?” regardless of where you are. And so that ad campaign went from 2002 to 2009. And Verizon quickly saw the results. People leaving Verizon went way down. It brought a lot of attention to them as a company. It was effective. It went to the absurd—on the top of a mountain, in the middle of a desert, underground—the same old question, “Can you hear me now?” Then it became a joke.

But it actually is a pretty interesting way of asking the question that Paul was asking of these Jewish leaders at Rome, now that he is finally there, though he is bound in a chain. He's asking them, “Can you hear me now?” And the question is to us. Can we hear who Christ is, and what hope and treasure he is to be to us? You may have an intellect. You may have a history and a tradition in the Christian faith. You may have a Bible. You may even have faith and be a Christian. But do you know that if you're a Christian, your faith is not in your faith? It is all about the object, for Paul, the object of faith—the object of the fulfillment of all the Scriptures. And it is this: Jesus Christ. Can you hear him now? Let's look at the story of what Paul did once he reached Rome. Acts chapter 28, verses 17 to 28.

Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: “My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.”

They replied, “We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.”

They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: “The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet:

“Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

“Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Lord, speak to us, and enable us to listen as those who are waiting to hear what you have for us. Open your Word by your Spirit. By opening your Word, I mean apply it to our hearts, our minds. Open our eyes and our ears to apprehend Christ, who is seated on the throne, sitting at your right hand—who even this very moment is interceding for your church. He’s interceding for us even now. So Lord, hear our prayers as you receive the intercession of your Son. We pray these things in the might name of the lordship of Christ, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Paul is dealing here with a group of people that he had been waiting to see, who wanted to hear from him. Paul is sitting there before them as one who is imprisoned. He has a chain about him. And yet, he is the freest man in Rome. By free, I mean he has the clearest of consciences. This is something that has been important to Paul. He’s repeated it over time. He stands and sits before them as a free man, knowing that he is guilty of no charges, and yet he appeals to them as one who has come to them, as he says, with the message of the hope of Israel. In other words, he’s come with a message of freedom. He, a prisoner, is speaking to those who, in essence, he is saying—without Christ, you are the ones who are in chains. I bring to you the message of the hope of Israel. And so he uses the irony of his predicament with the wisdom of Paul, and he uses it to speak to them. He does not begrudge this ironic situation, but Paul uses it with leverage, and he appeals to them. And when he appeals to them, he appeals to them first with clarity of his message, but then he challenges them with this quote from Isaiah. Clarity and challenge.

You hear the clarity as Paul begins in verse 18. He first wants to clear some things up—what he’s doing there, why he’s there, and what he wants to do. Those are not all separate points, but that’s essentially saying he’s explaining himself. He wants to be very clear that though he is in chains, he is guilty of no charge. He’s not sought to bring any charges against his own people, though as a Roman citizen, Paul can make things very uncomfortable for his Jewish brothers, his fellow Pharisees. And were he to bring a charge as Roman citizen in a Roman court against false accusation, he could make things very difficult. But he chooses not to. And yet he wants to use his predicament. And so he says, I’m guilty of no charge. Nobody actually is able to bring a charge that can be actually founded on the facts.

And then he finds something very interesting. Nobody’s actually told them about Paul. All these people have been going on about how bad he is and what he’s been doing. Nobody’s sent any letters, though they’ve traveled from Jerusalem. Clearly people are hearing of the message, because they tell us that there are those who have been speaking against Christianity. And so he says, okay, this is why I’m before you. And so he starts a day-long seminar. Come to see me. So they set up a time, from morning until evening. What could that have been like? Fellow Pharisees in Rome, come to see this man.

And so he lays out for them what is the clarity of his message. He says, I want you to be able to hear what I have to say. They say, we want to hear your views. And then what he does is he says very simply, Luke does in describing what took place with Paul in Rome, he says, “he declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the law of Moses and from the prophets.” The words used there, declaring and convincing—those two verbs used to describe what Paul was going to say to them are words that are used generally in a court of law. He’s making a defense. But in so doing, what needs to be understood about their meeting together is that it is not necessarily that Paul is coming to them with great complexity of message. But rather, he wants to make things clear.

This whole idea of declaring and convincing means he wants to boil it down. Not that it is a simple message, but rather, it is meaning simplistic. Rather, it is a very basic message. And so he lays it out—the kingdom of God. We don’t know all that he taught there. What we can discern is that Paul would have received from Jesus what Jesus declared to his own disciples when he was with them. That is, the kingdom of God is not a realm of this world. Rather, the kingdom of God is the presence of God in the midst of his people.

Jesus, knowing that he would leave his people by way of the crucifixion and resurrection and ascension, he said, the kingdom of God—you will know it, because the kingdom of God is in you. Meaning, it is a fundamental relationship with the person of God at the heart level of being a human being. He’s not saying it is not of the mind, because remember, the biblical picture of the heart has both the will—the idea of the intellect, the notional sense of what we need to do, what we ought to do, what we should do—but there’s also the sense in which it is the emotive, the relational side of the heart. The Bible holds those two things together. It is the enlightenment that wanted to put the higher order of thinking and reason in the brain, with the lower order of things that can’t be measured of the emotion and the will. But the Bible understands them to be together.

And so Paul makes the appeal in saying the kingdom of God is not like the kingdom of Rome. We have a king, but he’s a very different kind of king. He’s not ruling by fist. He’s ruling by humility. And he came to bring forth the kingdom of God—that is to bring freedom to Israel. Not to restore Israel as a mighty nation, but to restore Israel in its relationship with God. Because remember, he’s speaking to Jewish leaders. So the kingdom of God, Israel would have understood or they would have believed it to be Israel being returned to its former glory and having all of its power be clear to the world, a city on a hill. In other words, free us from the tyranny of Rome. That is what the kingdom of God would have been understood to be at this time for the Jews. But Paul says, no, the kingdom of God has always been not about worldly power, but about a relationship between a God who is there and the humans whom he has created, and the nation of Israel who he called to be his own. And he’s saying, you’re the ones who are still in exile. I’m in chains, but I bring to you the hope of Israel to return you from exile, from brokenness in your relationship with God. The kingdom of God is calling you back into relation.

Secondly, he says—not only was he declaring to them the kingdom of God. He was seeking to convince them of what? Convince them about Jesus from the law of Moses and from the prophets. The kingdom of God is God restoring the relationship with his people Israel, drawing them back into relationship through Christ alone. But then he leads them to Christ, and he explains it from the law of Moses and the prophets. Here, Paul does what theologians call biblical theology. He would have gone back to the Ten Commandments.

He would have gone back to the ceremonial law, the judicial law, and been able to show them and demonstrate to them that Moses and the law were always pointing forward to a greater fulfillment of the righteousness of God, being in the presence of his people—not on tablets of stone, but on the human heart, in fact, enfleshed in the person of Jesus Christ. That Christ would be the greatest expression of the purity of God, the ceremonial law. Jesus would be the greatest expression of the moral rectitude of God, the Ten Commandments. Jesus would be the perfect administration or demonstration of the righteousness or the justice of God, that is, the judicial laws. And that in all of these laws—the judicial, the

ceremonial, and the moral law—Christ Jesus, in his birth and in his life, would fulfill every single part. And then on the cross, all the purity of God, all the justice of God, and all the moral purity of God would find its home in Jesus Christ in the flesh dying on the cross for us who could not achieve any of those laws. God never once reduced his holiness, his purity, his justice, and his wrath against anything that would set itself against any of his laws. But in Christ, we would find the fulfillment in the second Adam—that is, another one who would come in our place to die in our place, though he was pure and innocent of all things. And God would pour out his wrath.

Christ is not only the fulfillment of the entire law. He also becomes the fulfillment of the promise of all the prophets, that God would send a suffering servant to suffer on behalf of his people, to return them out of exile and back into relationship with God. Do you see the connection? The law and the prophets. The law is the righteousness of God. The prophets announce the grace of God being manifested through God bringing a Messiah to return them back into relationship with God. So Paul declares the kingdom of God and seeks to convince them of Jesus as the one who is the perfect fulfillment of all that God is and all that he has said.

This is the beauty of biblical theology. It takes the great themes of Scripture—God’s purity, his holiness, his righteousness, his grace, and his mercy—and he shows it all from beginning to end, how it finds its point, its beauty, its zenith, in Christ alone. And so it tells us that when he does this, some were convinced. Some who heard him, heard this one who was a former Pharisee, the one who was, as we’ve heard Acts declare before—he was a persecutor of persecutors of the Christians. Now, this one who’s been completely reoriented to Christ is now declaring him. And some were convinced, it tells us.

Verse 23: “From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe.” Now, the word there in English, it says, “they disagreed.” That’s such a kind English word, isn’t it? They were fighting. They were incredibly agitated against one another, debating about this person of Christ, debating about what Paul was saying about this person. And they began to leave Paul, even after they were arguing, because of what Paul would say next.

So here’s Paul, at the end of a very long day. And he’s looking at them and all their arguing. He sees some who are being convinced of the message of the gospel, others who are clearly not there yet. And they’re arguing. And what are we to do with this guy? And he looks back, and by a moment guided by, we would say, the Holy Spirit, he delivers to them what is likely the fulfillment of what Isaiah would say at the time at which he uttered this oracle towards the beginning of the Book of Isaiah:

Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears.”

So he’s given them the clear message, but then he gives them the challenge. And it is in this: in announcing this oracle of Isaiah, that he’s trying to awaken them. He understands that by replaying this oracle of Isaiah, this may very well provoke them. This very well may hurt. But he’s trying to unstop their ears. And so he says these words.

And when he does this, what is Paul attempting to do? He’s attempting to, if you will, provoke their conscience. We’ve talked about this before in the Book of Acts. The conscience, according to Random House collegiate dictionary, defines the conscience as this: “The testimony and judgment of the soul, which gives approval or disapproval to the acts of the will. It is a special activity of the intellect and emotion which enables one to distinguish between good and evil.” This is why Paul would say in Acts chapter 24, “I strive to always keep my conscience clear between God and man.” As one writer said:

A conscience was given to every one of us as a kind of spiritual compass at the creation, the delicate magnet on the needle tip. Within the compass was carefully positioned by our Father the Creator to draw us in the right direction. But when man sinned in the garden, it fell dangerously out of place. And now as a result of the fall, there is a way that seems right to man, but in the end it is death, Proverbs 16:25.

The problem is, we all still have a conscience, but if not directed in the right way, our own conscience can deceive us. It can be incredibly confusing. And I do believe that one of things that Paul is trying to do by repeating this oracle from Isaiah is to prick their conscience, to awaken them, to say, do you realize what you're saying about the hope of Israel? Do you realize what you're doing? You're putting God as one who is being judged, and you are acting as the judge. Ah, I see.

And in that moment, Paul, guided by the Spirit, utters these words of Isaiah, and he goes through the body parts. And though the word conscience never appears in this text, the Bible constantly uses body organs to represent things that we can't see. And so it uses things like eyes and ears and heart. And when Isaiah says their hearts are calloused, it means that their consciences are hardened, they are seared, they are rejecting. And in preparation for this sermon, I found this one writer who said this: "Paul seems to appeal to the human conscience, a calloused conscience, that yields individuals who are ever hearing but never understanding, ever perceiving but never really seeing. But Paul does."

And so the beauty of a clear conscience is having a depth perception. A clear conscience is being able to distinguish between right and wrong, but a conscience also serves as a judge, an arbiter. And depending on where your conscience is will determine on how you receive others and what truths you take in and adopt. So if you will, for the sake of discussion, consider with me at least four kinds of consciences that the Bible talks about.

First, there is an arrogant conscience. An arrogant conscience, think of it like a lens. An arrogant conscience simply looks out and judges everyone and everything outside of themselves. And they are the ultimate judge of those around them. That's the arrogant conscience. Those are the ones who are, at times, always hearing but never really perceiving, hearing but only judging others.

Secondly, there is the weak or wounded conscience, that instead of looking out and judging others, the weak or wounded conscience always believes—or at least, feels—this constant pang of guilt that maybe others are judging me. So the judgment is coming from the outside in, that makes them hypersensitive. That makes it a very hard place to submit to the grace of God, because how can a God really love me? Nobody else does. And on the one hand, it looks weak, but in some ways it's really about pride. It's an unwillingness to believe what God really says, that I have sent my Son to die for you. But the wounded conscience has a hard time hearing that. It becomes hardened to the idea that maybe God isn't judging you—he indeed loves you. And it makes it very hard to be in relationship with other people, because you're always afraid that others aren't really going to love you. They're just acting as if they do. This is one of the ways in which the Bible talks about the conscience.

There's a third, and that is what we see here. It is a seared or hardened conscience. Here, it is this: it isn't just arrogantly looking out at others. It is completely resistant to anything anybody else says. It's the ultimate judge. And it becomes so hardened and so seared that it begins to collapse in on itself, and it becomes like an incredibly high and thick wall. So as it turns out, William Faulkner said, "The human heart is always at conflict with itself." Nathaniel Hawthorne once said, "There is no greater unfathomable mystery than the human heart." Which means that other great character in literature, Jiminy Cricket, was wrong. He was only a quarter right. He was a quarter right, because your conscience can only be your guide if you have the fourth kind of conscience—a clear conscience.

A clear conscience is the fourth, and it is the one that the Bible calls us to in Christ. It has an honest self-assessment. We are sinners. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But it is also something else—that God in his grace is greater than all my sin. It's able to do both. It's able to be honest

about who we are and about the reality of our sin, but it's also able to have an honest assessment and recognition and apprehension of who God is in Jesus Christ. And the only way that the clear conscience can remain by having a holy God and a human sinner is by the beauty of who Christ is, and his cross. Because only there can the tension between a holy God and an honest view of myself find peace, because Christ in his life, in his death, in his resurrection, has satisfied all the law, and is the fulfillment of all that the prophets declared.

This is the conscience that Paul had been brought into. He had a clear conscience, which is why Paul would say later on in his ministry, I am the chief of sinners. Yet at the same time, he could say, yet Christ became sin so that I might become the righteousness of God. Do you hear the tension? An honest self-assessment and an honest apprehension of the glory of Christ.

This is what he's trying to draw out in them. How do I know that? Because of this oracle of Isaiah. In the first half of it, it's all about imperatives. You're ever seeing, ever hearing, ever doing these things—but you're never really seeing, never really understanding, and you're never really going to understand what I'm saying to you. Except then, right in the middle of the oracle, the mood changes from imperative, this is what you're going to do, to indicative, this is what I will do. The second part of the oracle reads this way: "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise"—now, here's the turn—"Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."

So at the same moment that Paul is trying to challenge and diagnose their conscience as being hardened, he also invites them into the cure. And that cure is to turn—to turn to the Lord and hear that he is representing and declaring the gospel, the hope of Israel, to free them from hardened hearts and to see what God has declared—that we are sinners saved by grace and I have come, and if you turn to me, I will heal you. And so he calls them into the cure of humility and honest self-assessment, but also repentance. Lord, I cast myself on you, the God of mercy. I am a sinner in need of grace.

He diagnoses but calls them into the cure. It's purposefully open-ended. Some see the next verse as, "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles and they will listen" as somehow Paul is turning his back towards the Jews, or that God is turning his back towards the Jews. Not so. The invitation is still there. God is still saying, turn to me and I will heal you. But know this—I will not just wait. I have work to do, and my Word will be declared to the Gentiles as well. And so he calls them as he calls us.

And so this morning, the question is: can you hear the Lord? Where is your conscience? I imagine, with a room this large, all four kinds of conscience are before me. Some of you right now are—I wish this guy would shut up. Others of you are like, I hear grace, but all I see is judgment. Others of you have gotten so hardened. And some of you may even be professing Christians, and yet you come in week after week, and you go about the religious motions, but in your heart you've become hardened to the Word of God, because inside you want to go ahead and do what you want to do. But on the outside, nobody really knows. But you do. Left to your own, you're just going about your ways. I tell you, I know that this is possible, because I've seen it time and again. It is possible to profess Christ on the outside, but be hardened in the heart. Is that you?

Others of you are so hardened against Christ, and you're here because somebody dragged you here. But know this. I'm glad that you are here. And if you want to argue with me, I invite you. Please come. Let's argue. I'd rather have argument than a kind handshake and the words, "Nice to meet you." Yell at me. Let's talk about Christ.

And then some have been so tenderized by the Spirit that you sit here this morning as those with a clear conscience. Not in and of yourself, but you know you're a sinner, and you know that God is gracious, and you need that gospel every day. And everybody around you knows that you need it. And they know you know you need it. But do you know, even there, you can have a clear conscience. But even as Paul

says, even that does not recommend us to God. Let me use a different word. You may have great faith, and you may have very small faith. And all you seem to hear from preachers or books or whatever the case may be is that you need to get more faith. I say to you, no. Whether you have great faith, little faith, or something in the middle—guess what? It's not about your faith or my faith. It is about the object of the faith, Jesus Christ.

And I leave you with this metaphor this morning, from Martin Luther, who said these words:

In Christianity, there are many brothers who possess different depths of faith or conscience. Saint Peter or Saint Paul have no more than Mary Magdalene or you or I. To sum up, taking them all together, they are brothers, and there is no difference between the persons Mary the mother of the Lord and John the Baptist and the thief on the cross. They all possess the same self good which you and I possess, and all who are baptize and do the Father's will. And what have all the saints? They have comfort and help promised them through Christ in every kind of need against sin, death, and the devil. And I have the same, and you and all the believers have. But this is also true—that you and I do not believe it so firmly as John the Baptist or Saint Paul. Yet, it is the one and same treasure.

It is the same as when two men hold a glass of wine, one with a trembling hand, and the other with a steady. Or when two men hold a bag of money, one with a weak and the other with a strong hand. Whether the hand be strong or weak, as God wills, it neither adds to the contents of the bag or the glass of wine, and it does not take away. In the same way, there is no difference between the apostles and me than that they hold the treasure firmer. Nevertheless, I should and must know that I possess the same treasure as all the holy prophets, apostles, and all the saints have possessed. Dear Christian, it is this truth: it is not we who hold the treasure, it is the treasure that holds us.

Can you hear me now? Let's pray.

Holy Spirit, fall fresh upon us. Awaken our consciences to the death of being lead around by a conscience that is not bridled by your grace. Enable us, O Lord, to have an honest assessment of who we are as sinners before a holy God, but an honest apprehension of the cure—Jesus Christ, his life, his death, and resurrection. Holy Spirit, blow through this room. Blow through our hearts and awaken us to our hardness, to our lack of hearing, to our lack of sight. The distractions are a legion, and our own hearts deceive us. O Lord, who can provide the cure? Only Christ. Now, Holy Spirit, enable us to hear and to turn. In Jesus' holy and matchless name. Amen.