

A Humble Solution

- Acts 21:17-26
- Last week we saw Paul's love for the people of God, and how he interacted with the disciples on his way to Jerusalem. Today we look at this amazing encounter between Paul and James in what could have been a clash of the titans but was instead a picture of humility for the sake of the Gospel. I know some people read this chapter and think, what in the world does Paul deciding to pay for four guys to get haircuts and make offerings in the temple have to do with me? Well, you may be surprised. Or...you may not! It is true that this is definitely not the most exciting passage of Scripture in the Bible, but remember that though all of the Bible is equally inspired, not all of the Bible is equally inspiring.
- Let's divide this passage into three points this morning and look at them in turn: they are, Paul's report, James' concern, and a humble solution.
- **Paul's Report**
- Notice that the first thing Paul did after spending a night with some of the brothers in Jerusalem, was go with some of his traveling companions to meet with James and the elders. In the minds of some of the Jews there, and maybe the Gentiles too, this was a meeting that was fraught with possibilities. Possibilities of conflict. Possibilities of division. Or possibilities of continued peace and unity. But Paul starts right in after the greeting (remember we talked about how important hellos are?) with a report. Notice that it is a...
- Thorough report. Paul didn't just mumble about a long trip, lots of miles, feeling a bit waterlogged, talked to a lot of people and saw a lot of people converted. No! They all settled in for what must have been a several hour story. (started to say a "three-hour tour") Verse 19, "he related one by one the things that God had done." He may have told them about the seven sons of Sceva and the reverse exorcism., and how the people in Ephesus responded with repentance. Or the miracle of an earthquake that God used to reach a Philippian jailer. Or the young man Eutychus who fell asleep during one of Paul's long sermons and was taken up dead. Until God gave his life back to him and all of Troas was shaken by that more than they were by the earthquake. And much more Paul could have shared! There were no power point slides or Polaroid pictures to look at, but James and the elders were clearly engaged as they heard the amazing things God had done. Because not only was it a thorough report, but more importantly, it was a...
- God-centered report. Notice that Paul talked about what God had done through his ministry, not what "Paul had done with God's help." If God is your co-pilot you're in the wrong seat. Now I know that it is perfectly natural for people to talk to others about their accomplishments. But who is interested in being perfectly natural when you can do what is supernatural, instead? Talk about what God has done. That's what Paul did, and notice that when he did, the listeners...
- Glorified God. (vs. 20) Notice that the Christians in Jerusalem were not threatened at all by the report of what God was doing with the Christians in other parts of the world. Again, it is natural to be jealous of other people's success, but as Paul told the church at Corinth, when one member rejoices, every member rejoices! When God is honored by the way we report His activity in our lives, it will result in more honor for Him. But if we make it about us, the whole thing is a shame. God will not share His glory.
- **James' concern**
- We see it expressed clearly in the end of verse 20 and in verse 21. Many of the Jews in Jerusalem who had believed in Christ and were now part of the Jerusalem church saw Paul as someone who had forsaken the law of Moses and were teaching other Jews to do the same! But what do we know about Paul from his own testimony in Philippians 3? **Look there at Phil. 3:3-6**. Paul says, you want adherence to the law of Moses? There's no one in all of Judaism who can match my record. I am the gold medalist in every event! Anyone who thinks he can boast about keeping the law needs to stop boasting, Paul says. It reminded me: I used to think I was pretty good at racquetball until I

played Jeremy several years ago. Now I know I am not that good. But Jeremy would tell you there are guys in Burlington who can beat him as easily as he beat me. We can all boast in the flesh about something, but for what purpose? Look at the rest of the passage in Philippians and see why Paul stopped boasting about how good he was at keeping the law. **Phil. 3:7-9**. Do you see? Paul had come to understand on the road to Damascus that his confidence in his ability to keep the law was a joke, and a deadly one at that. It could not save him. His works were as impressive to God as a paper airplane crudely folded together by a 4-year-old is to NASA. Paul had put the full weight of his life on Christ alone for salvation. BUT, what about the reports and the rumors? They simply weren't true. He had not at all done what was being reported of him. He still believed in the importance of the law of God and was more committed than any follower of Christ to personal and practical holiness.

- What was James' concern, then? 1-It was not about salvation but about discipleship. P & J both agreed that salvation was by faith, not works. (By the way, if Barnabas had stayed as Paul's right-hand man, this meeting could have been...) 2- It was not about what Paul was teaching Gentile believers, but about what he was supposedly teaching Jewish believers. 3- It was not about the moral law, but about customs and traditions. Should Jewish believers continue to follow Jewish cultural practices, like circumcision? The word on the street was that Paul was teaching them not to. That was not true. Paul was teaching the Gentiles that they did not need to become Jews in order to become Christians. He was not teaching Jews to repudiate their Jewish cultural beliefs. But that was the perception, and you know what they say about perception. It is...reality. So, what to do?
- **A Humble Solution**
- James says to Paul, you know we can't pretend we are not meeting today. It's all over the Twitter feed, and my phone has exploded. Everybody knows we are together, and everybody thinks you are a problem, so we need to come to a solution. Here's what we want you to do...
- There are four men who are under a vow. A Nazirite vow, which comes from the Hebrew word that means "separated." You can read about the Nazirite vow in more detail in Numbers 6, but here are the basics. It was taken by someone, man or woman, who wanted to be consecrated to the Lord, to draw closer to Him, if you will, for a season. Someone may have committed to it because they had had a special time of blessing from the Lord. Or because they wanted to hear His voice on an important matter. It meant you could not drink wine or eat or drink anything from the grapevine during this season. You also could not cut your hair at all, or go near a dead body. There were other prohibitions as well, but whom does that make you think of immediately? Samson! How long was Samson a Nazirite? For life. But generally the Nazirite vow was for 30 days. At the end of the period, the Nazirites were to shave their heads outside the door of the tent of meeting, and then offer their hair as a sacrifice...along with a male lamb, a female lamb, a ram, and other things. Some Jewish writings suggest also that the Nazirite could not work for the 30 days he was under the vow. So, add the loss of income to the expensive offerings that had to be made, and taking a Nazirite vow becomes an expensive proposition. Poor people simply could not do it, but often there would be wealthy individuals in the community who would sponsor someone who wanted to take the vow but could not afford it. This is what James is asking Paul to do. Become the sponsor for not one Nazirite, but for four. And not only that, Paul had to purify himself. Why? According to Jewish custom, he was unclean because of his extended time with Gentiles, so he needed to go through the Jewish ritual of being cleansed for 7 days. Why would James ask Paul to do this? "Thus will all know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you,..." vs. 24b
- As I asked the question, "What is surprising about this text?" I had to say, THIS: that Paul would so easily go along with James' directive. Verse 26, "Then Paul took the men, and the next day..." There was no discussion. No disagreement. No delay. Does that surprise you? Paul could have said a number of things in response.
- First, he could have said, "I am not going to do that because it amounts to admission of guilt, and I haven't done anything wrong!" Kind of like the person who refuses to take the first step to heal a

broken relationship because they are not the ones who broke it. Paul could have said that and he would be right in principle, but wrong in spirit.

- Second, he could have said, “Do you know who I am, James?” Paul could have had a highly inflated opinion of himself, even to the point where he might have thought, “There’s no one out there who is higher on the Christian totem pole than I am. I will give counsel, but I certainly don’t ever need to receive it!” Paul was used to being the one who gave the instructions and the directives. He was the one who was writing letters to the churches. We don’t have one letter in Scripture written to Paul, encouraging him to watch his life and doctrine closely. But was there anyone more humble? More approachable? More ready to spend and be spent for others? No. I have said it to you many times, but the greatest danger for any leader is to move out from under accountability and start believing that he is autonomous. Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” (Mt. 5:5)
- Third, he could have said, “I am free, James. I will not pacify the conscience of another by denying my freedom.” Paul was free! You could make the argument that there was never a man more free, who had either a broader understanding or a more practical experience of what it means to be free in Christ than Paul. But when Paul submits to James’ directive, he proves that freedom. He doesn’t deny it. FF Bruce said, “A truly emancipated spirit such as Paul’s is not in bondage to its own emancipation.”
- Why did Paul so easily submit in this matter? Because of two reasons.
- One, because of his love for the church and his commitment to its unity. Listen to what he would write a few years later from a prison cell, to the church in Philippi. **Philippians 2:1-4** Do you see this? He put it into practice here. Then he had the integrity to be able to tell others to do it as well!
- Two, he submitted to James because of his love for the Gospel. This is why the memory verse was from that great passage in 1 Cor. 9. Let’s look there. **1 Cor. 9:19-23**. Now don’t read that passage and say, “There you go! I can just fit in wherever I go and have no convictions at all and not worry about how I live. The key is to do whatever it takes wherever I am to make everybody LIKE me!” Is that what Paul is saying? No. “I do it all for the sake of the Gospel.” What compelled Paul in everything he did was the Gospel. The Cross of Jesus. Paul saw himself as a debtor to the Jew and the Greek, didn’t he? Because of the great debt Christ had paid for Him. That’s why when there was misunderstanding and misinformation, Paul did not bow up and refuse to budge. Instead he did what he did...for the sake of the Gospel. Now the opposite would be true if Paul were being asked to compromise the Gospel! That’s when he would refuse and stand tall and not budge an inch. But when it came to matter of tradition and culture and customs, Paul put the Gospel first.