

How to Handle Relational Disappointments

Acts 21:15-27

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 2-15-2009

Introduction

Max Lucado told a very unique story about a Mr. John Blanchard. In fact, to me the story seemed so much like an urban legend that I had to check it out. Snopes does trace it back to Collier's Magazine. But if it sounds unbelievable to you too, just treat it as a parable. Blanchard was waiting in Florida, ready to be deployed in Europe to fight in World War II. He had checked a book out of a library there and found all kinds of notes neatly penciled in the margin. He was so intrigued with the thoughtfulness of the notes, and so impressed with the character that these notes showed, that he looked in the front cover to see if he could find the name of the previous owner. It was owned by a Miss Hollis Maynell. Well, he couldn't find any Hollis Maynell in the phone book. So he did some research at the library on where they got this volume, and he finally tracked her address down to New York City.

He wrote her a letter and introduced himself and asked if she would be interested in corresponding about subjects of interest. And she indicated that she was interested as well. He then travelled to Europe to fight in World War II. But over the next thirteen months they developed a very strong relationship through correspondence. You could say that they were kindred spirits – they thought alike and shared a common vision and passion. And he became more and more interested in actually meeting her. So when he returned from Europe they scheduled a meeting at 7pm at Grand Central Station, New York. He was going to take her out for dinner. He wanted a picture of her so that he could recognize her, but she refused. Instead she said, "You'll recognize me by the red rose I'll be wearing on my lapel."

At Grand Central Station, as a new crowd arrived, he stood up and looked around with great anticipation. He was blown away by a beautiful young blonde who was looking at him and walking straight towards him. And he thought, wow, if this is the one, this is amazing. And when she smiled at him and said, "Going my way sailor?" he felt his heart thumping – till he noticed that she wasn't wearing the red rose. But right behind this lady was the one he had come to see. The woman with the red rose was not ugly, but she was way older than him, had graying hair, was significantly plumper

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than he had imagined, and was a striking contrast to the blonde who had by this time walked past him and across the street. Let me read you Blanchard's remembrance of this meeting that would change his life (as written by Max Lucado):

And there she stood. Her pale, plump face was gentle and sensible, her gray eyes had a warm and kindly twinkle. I did not hesitate. My fingers gripped the small worn blue leather copy of the book that was to identify me to her. This would not be love, but it would be something precious, something perhaps even better than love, a friendship for which I had been and must ever be grateful. I squared my shoulders and saluted and held out the book to the woman, even though while I spoke I felt choked by the bitterness of my disappointment. "I'm Lieutenant John Blanchard, and you must be Miss Maynell. I am so glad you could meet me; may I take you to dinner?" The woman's face broadened into a tolerant smile. "I don't know what this is all about, son," she answered, "but the young lady in the green suit who just went by, she begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said if you were to ask me out to dinner, I should go and tell you that she is waiting for you in a big restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of a test!"¹

And Paul faced yet another test in this chapter. In his mind's eye, Paul was anticipating an exciting meeting with the leaders in Jerusalem. The offering he was bringing was designed to show the love the Gentiles had for the Jews, and he hoped that the Jews would reciprocate a love for the Gentiles. But the reception was so disappointing. He had been anticipating this meeting for so long and with such high expectations, that there was a let-down when he met the lady with the rose rather than the gorgeous blonde in the green suit. I think you get my drift.

But as it turns out, even though he had a disappointment, this became God's ticket for some of the most amazing opportunities for ministry to both Jews and Gentiles that he had ever achieved to this date. He got his heart's desire. He never did get the woman in the green suit, but he got something much better. What God is going to do in the remaining verses of this book is to let Paul speak to larger numbers of Jews than he has ever spoken to before, to speak to kings, and governors, and soldiers, and eventually to win converts from the Praetorian guard and establish a church right within Caesar's palace. You can't just make an appointment with those kinds of people. Their secretaries tend to screen them pretty heavily. Right? But God knew just how to help Paul turn the world upside down. And it came because Paul was gracious with a less than gracious Jerusalem eldership. It

¹ SOURCE: Max Lucado, "The People With the Roses," Chapter 19 in *And the Angels Were Silent* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1992).

came because Paul was willing to treat the lady with the red rose with respect and with humility.

Some of you have been disappointed by relationships you have had with the proverbial friends with the red roses. Sometimes we react sinfully, and other times we have the humility of Paul. But the kindness with which we treat our red-rose-people may impact the degree of blessing that God pours out in our lives. Today's sermon is on how to handle relational disappointments.

I. Paul's long anticipated trip to Jerusalem

A. Earlier this year Paul expressed the enormous longing that he had for Jewish salvation (Rom. 9:1-5; 10:1)

Let's look first of all at what Paul had been hoping for. I believe that Paul wanted a reunion of Jewish church and Gentile church where each gloried in the other. That was his dream. That's what he had preached about and written about. But when Paul came to Jerusalem, he didn't meet his blonde dream. Now it's true, Paul's reception wasn't ugly, but neither was it what he hoped for. The leaders in Jerusalem didn't seem to have the same kind of passion for both Jew and Gentile that he had hoped for. And they were definitely preoccupied with things that weren't that important – ceremonial traditions.

Let's look first at Paul's passion. So far in this book we have seen that Paul is passionate for winning Gentiles to the faith. He is the apostle to the Gentiles. But he has never lost his great desire to see Israel won to faith. He always started to the Jews first, and then to the Gentiles. Earlier in Acts we saw with what joy Paul took his two rare trips to Jerusalem. But the burden to see Israel saved got heavier and heavier upon him.

Turn with me to Romans 10. Earlier that same year Paul had written Romans, and three of its chapters describe God's plan for winning Jews (Romans 9-11). All three chapters show Paul's enormous longing for Jewish evangelism. It ends with an incredible doxology. I'm only going to read two sections. Look first at Romans 10:1. "**Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.**" That's his passion. Now look at chapter 9:1-5.

Romans 9:1 I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit,
Three times he emphasizes that what he is about to say is not an exaggeration because people will have a hard time believing it. He's willing

to go to hell so that these Jews could be saved!! *That's the kind of burden that he has!* That just doesn't seem possible. But it was a reality with Paul. This was a supernatural burden for the Jews that God had given to Paul.

Verse 2:

Romans 9:2 that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart.

Romans 9:3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, Romans 9:4 who are Israelites, to whom *pertain* the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises;

Romans 9:5 of whom *are* the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ *came*, who is over all, *the* eternally blessed God. Amen.

Paul was opening up his heart so that people could see how much he loved the Jews. Even when they didn't reciprocate his love, God enabled him to love them. He preached to them; he wrote letters to them; he expressed his affection to them. And now he had traveled with a huge mercy-ministries gift to help them.

B. He was looking forward to seeing the Jerusalem church (Acts 19:21; 20:22)

In Acts 19:21 Luke says that Paul “**purposed in the Spirit... to go to Jerusalem.**” J.H. Kennedy said, “[This phrase] seems intended to describe a purpose formed with intense earnestness.”² That was certainly the case in chapter 20:22 where it explicitly says that Paul was *constrained* by the Spirit for Jerusalem. He had been looking forward to blessing the Jerusalem church for a long time.

C. He was excited about the massive love offering that he had been able to collect from the Gentiles (Rom. 15:24-28; 1 Cor. 16:3; Acts 24:17) and was about to deliver to the church (see Acts 24:17)

And of course, the purpose of this trip was to bring a massive love offering from the Gentile churches to help the poor who were suffering in Jerusalem. In Acts 24:17 Paul (remembering this visit) says, “**Now after many years I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation.**”

² J. H. Kennedy, *the Second and Third Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* (London, 1900), p. 20.

How big was this offering? Well, the size must have been enormous because it took ten additional men to help carry it. That's a lot of money that they are watching over. Earlier in Acts Luke identifies who accompanied Paul. The Macedonian churches were represented by Sopater, Aristarchus and Secundus. The Galatian churches were represented by Gaius and Timothy. The Asian churches were represented by Tychicus and Trophemus. And according to 2 Corinthians, the Corinthian churches were represented by Titus and two other unnamed brethren. Now keep in mind that most of these are Gentiles. As we go through this passage, try to imagine what *they* would feel like when James speaks to Paul. All of them were accompanying the gifts that had been raised by their own churches. They were excited to finally be there and to give the gifts and express their love. This was a large delegation. This was a big deal.

Now Paul hasn't been in Jerusalem for a long time. All of the apostles have left, and it's now just James the brother of Jesus, and the elders. Paul doesn't know what kind of reception he will receive. He's hoping for the blonde, but he doesn't know what to expect. For example, in Romans 15:30-31, Paul had earlier told the Roman church to pray diligently that the saints in Jerusalem would receive him well. He said, "**Now I beg you, brethren... that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, that** [and here come two prayer requests] **I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and** [here's the second prayer request] **that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, that I may come to you with joy...**" He's hoping that this blind date will be a good one, right? But he is a bit nervous about it. Two days before, they had started to travel in verse 15: "**And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem.**" It's a 65-mile trip, but if they travel by horse they can do it in two days. I assume that they travelled by horse because of all the offerings that they needed to transport. So they likely arrive late afternoon or early evening.

II. The mixed reaction to Paul's coming

A. Joyous reception by the "brethren" (vv. 16-17)

Paul's reception starts off fairly cordial. Verses 16-17:

Acts 21:16 Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge.

Acts 21:17 And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.

Some scholars (based on what we are going to look at) cynically view the warm reception as only being overjoyed at the massive amount of money that Paul is bringing with him. But if that is true, Luke doesn't display the same cynicism. He simply says that the brothers received the delegation gladly when they arrived that evening. This is not the congregation as a whole (as we will see in a bit).

B. Guarded meeting with the leaders (vv. 18ff)

1. Private meeting to do damage control (v. 18) before the whole church meets with Paul (v. 22)

The next day however, there *is* a mixed reaction. First of all, there is an attempt at damage control by the leaders. Having Paul come is causing them some anxiety. Rather than making this meeting a public meeting, verse 18 has them meeting privately with James and the elders. Verse 18 says, **“On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.”** F.F. Bruce points out that James must have had a huge house to be able to accommodate the 70 some elders plus all of Paul's delegation. But this private meeting was needed because a lot of false rumors had been spreading about Paul, and the congregation as a whole wasn't too pleased. Look for the hint at verse 22: **“What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come.”** So the plan was to get Paul to do things that would appease the Jewish congregation.

This must have been very disappointing to Paul. Here is a delegation of eleven men who have sacrificed time, money and labor in order to bless the church of Jerusalem, and all the elders can think about is how uncomfortable it is to have Paul around; and we need to figure out a way to do damage control!?

Now just to be fair to James, we do need to understand that he had a tough situation on his hands. Let me tell you a little bit about the historical context in which they were operating. This was a time of intense Jewish nationalism because of abuses from the Romans. There was more and more anger on the part of the Jews. According to Josephus, the mid 50's showed increasing Jewish hatred for Gentiles, and one Jewish insurrection after another, and one brutal suppression of the Jews after another by the procurator, Felix, and the rise of such ant-foreign feelings that if you had a Gentile friend, you were viewed with great suspicion. Paul was the ultimate friend of the Gentiles. He's the apostle to the Gentiles. And what made James fearful was that the members of his own church had been influenced

by these cultural feelings. Isn't it interesting how the church can sometimes reflect the attitudes of culture? We need to be on guard about that. To what degree do we take on the political, racial, ethical and financial views of our culture?

Anyway, the church had become racially prejudiced because of the horrible mistreatment that they had received at the hands of the Roman procurator, Felix. And to me it is a warning that we must not take offense at whole groups of people simply because there are a few bad eggs among them. We shouldn't stereotype and think that blacks do such and such, or Hispanics do such and such, or Democrats believe such and such. They are all individuals.

But the point I am bringing up is that there is a reason why James is trying to do damage control. Uppermost in his mind is *not* how his reaction might hurt the feelings of the Gentiles in this delegation, or how it might hurt the feelings of Paul. Frankly, having Paul and the delegation there was putting James in a tight spot. Yes, he's thankful for Paul's ministry. Yes, he's thankful for the money. They could sure use it. But James as a typical leader is feeling pressure from all sides.

2. Private reception of the report (v. 19)

Of course, these guys are godly men, and they want the kingdom to advance. In the last few years they have probably not seen *any outreach whatsoever to the Gentiles*. Given the attitudes of the church, you can see why. But it doesn't mean they don't have a heart for God. In fact, I think we can safely assume that they are thrilled to hear of the way God is advancing His kingdom around the world. In verse 19 Paul reports on the last years of sacrificial ministry and the way that God has caused the Gentile church to explode. **“When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.**

3. We can assume that this was when the money was delivered and counted out (see Acts 24:17).

Many assume that this may have been the time that the money was counted out and transferred hands. So there is a lot of exciting stuff that is happening. But it's all kept secret and hush-hush. They don't want the congregation to find out that Paul is here until they can do some damage control.

***C. Reaction to the report (v. 20) was – Yeah, that’s cool
Paul...but...***

Third, commentaries point out that their reaction to the report was less than enthusiastic. Verse 20 says, “**And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him,..** and then come complaints, further damage control, and preoccupation with petty stuff that puts a damper on the enthusiasm. I’ve summarized this whole response as, “Yeah, that’s cool, Paul...but” and they change the subject and try to get Paul to do something that will protect their hide. It’s a disappointment. And frequently godly people can be disappointments to you and to me. It’s not that they are trying to be. They just don’t see what’s on your heart. They have stuff weighing on their *own* minds. Godly people can sometimes talk past each other *on the same subject* simply because what is weighing on their minds is quite different. In a management book published last year, Michael Patton used a great parable for this. He said,

A man in a hot air balloon realized he was lost. He reduced altitude and spotted a woman below. He descended a bit more and shouted, "Excuse me, can you help me? I promised a friend I would meet him an hour ago, but I don't know where I am." The woman below replied, "You're in a hot air balloon hovering approximately 30 feet above the ground. You're between 40 and 41 degrees north latitude and between 59 and 60 degrees west longitude."

"You must be an engineer," said the balloonist. "I am," replied the woman, "How did you know?"

"Well," answered the balloonist, "everything you told me is, technically correct, but I've no idea what to make of your information, and the fact is I'm still lost. Frankly, you've not been much help at all. If anything, you've delayed my trip."

The woman below responded, "You must be in Management." "I am," replied the balloonist, "but how did you know?"

"Well," said the woman, "you don't know where you are or where you're going. You have risen to where you are due to a large quantity of hot air. You made a promise, which you've no idea how to keep, and you expect people beneath you to solve your problems. The fact is you are in exactly the same position you were in before we met, but now, somehow, it's my fault."³

Paul must have felt like that. He’s come to help the Jewish church and express his love for them, but somehow, things have been turned around and it’s all Paul’s fault that the Jerusalem church is experiencing the tensions that it has. Let’s look at the myopia (the shortsightedness) of the Jerusalem

³ Michael Quinn Patton, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), p. 567.

elders' plan. Though what they did was not wrong, it still shows nearsightedness.

III. The myopia of the Jerusalem elders plan – though what they did was not wrong, it shows a nearsightedness.

A. Implied disinterest in Paul's report (v. 20a)

Verse 20: “**And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law.’**” We see two insulting things here already. First is an implied lack of interest in what Paul is doing. True, they do glorify God, but the way Luke writes this, he gives the clear impression that they can hardly wait to tell Paul what is *really* weighing on their minds. They politely listen, but they are not really listening. You can tell that the whole time they are thinking about something else.

Have you ever talked to people like this? I have to admit that I have been guilty of it myself many times. It's very easy for it to happen. The person is nodding and listening, but you can tell that they are concentrating on what *they were going to say next* and as soon as they can, they highjack to the conversation to that something else. And many times they are not even aware of it. I've been oblivious to the fact that I have done this from time to time. My wife has had to point it out to me a number of times, and I'm working on it. So I can understand what is happening to these elders. But it's not great.

In Philippians 2:4 we see that Paul has learned how to avoid this. Here's his secret. He says, “**Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.**” If you have had the tendency to politely listen but not really be listening, you may want to take Paul's advice. In this chapter Paul puts his own interests on the back burner in favor of the needs of the community. It may have made him feel badly, but he doesn't show it.

B. Narrow focus on Jewish concerns (v. 20b)

A second area of myopia in verse 20 is the focus of James upon the myriads of Jewish believers who are all zealous for the ceremonial law. And it makes sense that he is focused on this – that's his primary calling: to the Jews. But this is not a meeting about *James*. This is supposed to be a meeting about *Paul*.

So rather than considering the health of the church worldwide, James is only thinking about the health of his own congregation. And all of us can fall into this rut. It's easy to get so ingrown and so inwardly focused that we don't notice how what we say might negatively impact others. I'm not saying that you can't talk about your pet topics. But I would encourage some of you to think about what visitors might want to talk about themselves. Some of the topics I hear being discussed with enthusiasm after church or at our house could scare off visitors – you know, guns, gold, President BO, taxation, political views, immigration. Again, it's not that this church can't talk about every topic under heaven. I love the fact that this church has broad interests. I think that's beautiful – when we do it with each other. But it's good to occasionally think about how our Jerusalem talk will impact others who have never heard any of this stuff. I'm sure if these ten delegates had not been more mature, they would have been scared off from doing anything more for the Jewish church. Talk about culture shock! Their Jewish concerns were so narrow that they had become myopic. Thankfully I see the maturity of Paul in a number of you who befriend new visitors and ask questions and show an interest in more than just your pet topics. And I praise you for that. That shows the graciousness and humility of Paul. I love that.

C. Taking false rumors too seriously and not shutting down gossip:

1. That Paul tells Jews to forsake Moses (v. 21a)

Let's move on. Point C shows that the elders took the false rumors in the congregation too seriously. Rather than confronting the gossips, James tries to get *Paul* to solve the problem. And wonderfully, Paul is gracious about it all, even though I am sure that it must have hurt. Let's read verse 21: **“but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.”** These are slanderous statements that ought to have been stopped at the source rather than making Paul need to go through this drama.

Did Paul tell the Jews to forsake Moses? Absolutely not. What's particularly troubling about this rumor is that the Greek word used for “forsake Moses” is literally “apostasy against Moses.” That's a pretty strong accusation that should have been confronted by James. The only other time that the word for apostasy is used is in 2Thessalonians 2:3, and it is referring to a heretical falling away from the faith. It's a very negative word. Paul was not an apostate against Moses. He was submitting to Mosaic revelation that pointed to the coming Messiah and the temporary nature of the ceremonial

law. IN Acts 26:22 Paul said that he had been “**saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come.**” He is in effect saying that everything he had been teaching could be found in the Old Testament. So the first discouraging rumor is that Paul has told Jews that they have to apostatize from Moses. And it’s especially discouraging that the elders have not dealt with this slander.

2. That Paul tells Jews they can’t circumcise their children (v. 21b)

The second false rumor must have made his heart sink just as much. Did Paul tell the Jews that they were not allowed to circumcise their babies? Absolutely not. He himself circumcised Timothy in Acts 16:3 because in that situation it didn’t violate any principles that he had been fighting for. Obviously some Jews have been ticked off by what they read in Galatians, and they are misrepresenting Paul. 1 Corinthians 7:19 said, “**Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters.**” Paul didn’t care if Jews wanted to circumcise their children. He just didn’t want Jews imposing it on Gentiles and telling baptized Gentiles that they weren’t saved till they got circumcised. He didn’t even want Jews saying that Gentile Christians were second class citizens without circumcision. That had already been settled in Acts 15, and to bring it up again is a bit disheartening.

3. That Paul tells Jews that they have to quit their Jewish customs (v. 21c)

And then verse 21 mentions the rumor that Paul was making Jews quit all the Jewish customs. Again, this is so slanderous, it must have hurt Paul that James and the elders have even taken the charge seriously or that they had let the believers get away with such gossip. All through Acts we see Paul enjoying Jewish customs. He just doesn’t see them as law anymore.

So the Jewish leaders have insulted Paul in yet another way: they have failed to shut down congregational gossip about him and secondly, they have made Paul jump through the hoops in order to disprove the gossip rather than defending Paul. Where’s the principle that you are innocent till you are proven guilty?

To be fair to James, gossip is hard to shut down because people rarely gossip in front of the elders. This church has engaged in gossip from time to time that is often hard to put a finger on. And this is why I have called every one of you to be an ambassador of peace and do what you can to stop gossip

at its source. I admit, it's easier said than done. I have listened to gossip on occasion *myself* without rebuking it. And that's not right. And I've repented of that. So I am not saying that this is going to be easy.

But this passage can help us with this issue of gossip in four ways. First, if we are the subjects of gossip, we can develop tough skin and gracious responses like Paul did. That will help to promote fellowship.

Second, if we are the perpetrators of gossip, we can remind ourselves that the gossip of the Jerusalem church ended up getting Paul sent to prison. If it hadn't been for this gossip, James would not have suggested a solution that endangered Paul's safety. Gossip can have disastrous unintended consequences. And we need to remind ourselves of that. This is true even when the gossip is 100% truth. It's not enough to say that it is true. It can still be damaging. That's why Matthew 18 says to speak to the brother alone. As the saying goes: "A truth that's told with bad intent is worse than lies that men invent." But with this congregation, it wasn't truth, but half-truth that was being flung around. Nelson Mink said, "Half-truths are like half a brick; they can be thrown farther." Why? Because they are somewhat believable. And there were plenty of passages in Paul's epistles that these gossips could have gotten half a brick from.

Third, if we are the ones who listen to gossip, we should try to use these as teaching moments to try to prevent gossip from happening again. If the gossip is not true, we can point that out. If the gossip is true, but you are not part of the problem or part of the solution, you can point out that definition of gossip – telling problems to people who are not part of the problem or part of the solution. Some of you have a gracious method of dealing with this – you say something to the effect of, "Well, if we are going to talk about this, we need to have a game plan about how to solve it. We can't just talk; we need action." That shuts off gossip real quick. But don't wait for George to deal with the gossip. Try to deal with it yourself.

And fourthly, if we are leaders, we ought not to let the bad attitudes of others dictate the way we run the church. If we do, we will constantly be reacting like these leaders did, rather than being proactive leaders with vision. So I think this really is quite an instructive passage for our own behavior. Can you see how there is really nothing new under the sun? And the same principles that promoted fellowship back then can work today as well.

D. Concerned about reactions of congregation and taking steps for damage control (v. 22-24)

1. They know that the congregation will demand a meeting (v. 22)

Point D shows a fourth thing that must have been disappointing to Paul and the delegates. They can see from the speech in verses 22-24 that the elders are reacting to the congregation and taking steps for damage control rather than steps for relationship. Verse 22 shows that they know the congregation will demand a meeting. **“What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come.”** In effect what they are saying, “We don’t like this any more than you do Paul, but we don’t have control over our congregation. They are a strong-willed bunch. We can’t help their attitudes. We need to do something quick before they hear you have come and they start asking tough questions.”

2. They’ve already made plans (v. 23)

Verse 23 shows that these leaders have already hatched a plan, which to me shows that they have been talking about the problem of Paul. **“Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow...”** The phrase, **“Do what we tell you”** implies that James has already talked this over with the elders, and he is simply representing their conclusions. The phrase, **“We have four men,”** implies that they had already searched for a solution to this controversial Paul. You can see that all of this has been heavily weighing on their minds, and they can hardly wait for Paul to get over his speech so that they can deal with it.

3. Paul was to pay from his own pocket costly offerings to sponsor the purification of these men (v. 24)

Verse 24: **“Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses...”** “Thanks a lot guys! So you not only treat me as being the problem, but you want me to personally pay for all of this?!” Now Paul doesn’t say that. He goes along with the plan. But I’m sure his heart was somewhat sinking.

4. Paul was to also engage in Jewish rites so that others could see that he honors Jewish customs (v. 24)

Continuing on in verse 24: **“Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the**

law.” If four of the elders had taken a Nazarite vow, it is obvious that keeping the ceremonial law continued to be practiced within Messianic Christianity. It’s not just modern Messianic congregations that have valued the ceremonial law.

What’s confusing to some people is that this seems like a contradiction. It seems as if Paul’s epistles are miles apart from Paul’s behavior here. That’s actually not true. Paul was not doing anything that he had not already done many times. Paul had taken a Nazarite vow in chapter 18. And there were other ways in which he had shown his love for Jewish culture. He was not a cultural rebel that deliberately tried to look weird. In fact, we will look at a verse in a bit that says that Paul’s policy was to live under the ceremonial law when trying to reach Jews who were under the ceremonial law (2 Cor. 9:20-22). Paul’s hostility was not to the ceremonial law as a cultural expression, but to the ceremonial law as a way of salvation and/or to the ceremonial law as being imposed on the Gentiles.

E. Concerned about Paul’s reaction they remind him that they are not imposing this on the Gentiles – making the pill easier to swallow (v. 25)

Of course, they make it easier for Paul to swallow this pill by telling him that they agree with him in verse 25, **“But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.”** And let me remind you from our discussions of chapter 15 that this is not three ceremonial laws and one moral law. They are not saying that Gentiles can ignore all the other moral laws. He’s not saying that Gentiles can steal, lie and murder, but that they can’t commit sexual immorality. No. He’s talking about which ceremonial laws in Leviticus 17-18 continued to apply. Those laws (in the order given in Leviticus and the same order given here) are about 1) eating stuff sacrificed to idols (Lev. 17:7-9), blood laws (Lev. 17:10-12), eating things strangled (Lev. 17:13-16) and ceremonial laws related to marriage and sex (Lev. 18:1-19). All four are ceremonial laws that continue into the New Testament. That had already been settled in Acts 15, and they were letting Paul know that they in no way want to violate the spirit of the Acts 15 council. They just want Paul to do something to mollify the prejudice and misunderstandings of Jews who feel like Paul is attacking their Jewishness and culture.

F. But in the process, the joy of Paul's trip is spoiled with nit-picking.

But you can see that these guys have gotten so ingrown that they don't see the big picture like Paul does. They are nearsighted and focused only on things that are temporary and really not that important. Commentaries have pointed out that it wasn't *wrong* for these Jews to keep the ceremonial law. Paul did that *himself* on occasion. But they had lost sight of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. In the preoccupation with a few cultural details they have lost the joy of the liberty God had given the church, and had lost the joy of seeing Gentiles entering God's kingdom; and most of all, they had lost the joy of seeing an integrated church of Jew and Gentile as one body. That was Paul's ideal. He had hoped that the Acts 15 council would have solved that. But it didn't.

So Paul is going to Jerusalem looking for the gorgeous blonde in a green suit, and his heart sinks as he sees that Jerusalem is a pudgy gray with swollen angles. But Paul doesn't offend this gray with the red rose. He values her. He knows that God has knit his heart with the Jerusalem church. He decides that there is a lot to love about her anyway, and he accommodates her scruples. He does this in verses 26-27

Acts 21:26 ¶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.

Acts 21:27 ¶ Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, [And, Lord willing, we will look at their arrest of him next time. But the point is that Paul goes along with their imperfect plan.]

IV. Why did Paul go along with this?

A. There was no sin in doing so.

I should point out that a few people have criticized Paul for doing this, and have said that he was in sin. But most of my commentaries say that you can't exegetically do that. There was no sin on Paul's part by getting purified, cutting his hair, paying for these Jewish nitpickers to have their sacrifices, and letting the Jews be Jews. And in your outlines I give five reasons why it was not sin.

1. Acts 15 was about imposing Jewish customs on Gentiles.

First of all, Acts 15 was not about abolishing all the ceremonial law. God would make that gradually pass away. 1 Corinthians 3:11 speaks in the present tense of the glory of the Old Covenant forms (and they were glorious) as beginning to pass away. That implies that they had not passed away yet. Hebrews 8:13 says, **“In that He says, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”** He’s saying that the laws hadn’t vanished yet, but that they would vanish on their own. It was ready to vanish away with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. There was a forty-year transition period for Jews.

So if Acts 15 did not do away with all ceremonial law for the Jews, what did it do? Acts 15 was first of all a prohibition of Jews imposing Jewish customs on the Gentiles. Acts 15:5 said, **“But when some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them [that is, to circumcise the Gentiles] and to command them to keep the Law of Moses,”** the Jerusalem council said, “No. You can’t impose Mosaic ceremonial laws on the Gentiles.” If you Jews want to keep it, that’s fine. But don’t be imposing it on the Gentiles.

2. Acts 15 was about salvation through ceremonial law.

The second thing that Acts 15 was opposed to was earning salvation through ceremonial law-keeping. Acts 15:2 quotes the Judaizers: **“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”** Paul got mad when he heard that. There was no way he would succumb one inch to that. He denied circumcisonal-regeneration just as much as he opposed baptismal-regeneration. He said that it was salvation by grace alone.

It’s not that you can’t observe Pentecost or other Jewish customs. We do from time to time as an educational thing. Paul did. You just can’t be saved by it or impose it upon others as a condition of church membership. We think Hanukkah is cool – but it’s not law.

3. Paul had no problem being “all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:20-22).

Third, Paul had already said earlier in his ministry, **“To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law.”** He’s talking about the ceremonial law there. He is in effect saying, “I keep

ceremonial law in order to win Jews.” And he said that not too many months ago. Paul was being perfectly consistent with his earlier practice of practicing ceremonial law in order to win Jews.

4. Paul enjoyed Jewish festivals and other customs.

5. He had already done a similar Jewish vow on a previous trip to Jerusalem (Acts 18:18,21,22).

I think we need to learn from this first reason – that Paul did not consider it a sin to follow James’ advice. Sometimes we guard our sacred rights too zealously. There are times when we can go along with others for the sake of fellowship without ever compromising a principle or in any way sinning. Paul models to us that such bending-over-backwards with those who are inflexible is not always a bad thing. It would be good for our pride sometimes.

B. Humility & trust in God

The second reason why Paul did it was because of the deep humility God had worked in this man and the ability of Paul to trust God in tough spots. Many a man or woman would have been outraged by this time because they would have felt slighted, offended, hurt, and because their pride was stepped on. “Hey James - How come you guys are thinking only about yourselves!” Some people would have chewed these elders out for legalism, judgmentalism, negativity, and lack of leadership. And in some ways they would be right to do so. Would Paul have been right to tell these guys to take a hike? I’m sure he could have justified it. He could have said, “Hey, if you haven’t taught your people well about the liberty that they have in Christ, that’s your problem. If you haven’t controlled gossip within your church, don’t expect me to bail you out.” He could have done that. But he didn’t. And I find that interesting. I’m sure that Paul felt slighted and hurt to some degree. But Paul was not quick to defend his pride and his preferences. He was quick to see it from another person’s perspective and to lay down his own interests for the interests of another, and then just trust God to change the other person’s heart. I like what D.L Moody said. He said,

Trust in yourself, and you are doomed to disappointment; trust in your friends, and they will die and leave you; trust in reputation, and some slanderous tongue may blast it; but trust in God, and you are never to be confounded in time or eternity.

C. Paul was more driven by blessing others than he was by saving face, defending his pride or insisting on a better way.

So Paul did it first, because it was not sin to do so, second because of his humility and trust in God's plan. Thirdly, Paul was more driven by the desire to bless others than he was by a desire to insist on a better way. Perfectionists often struggle with this. They know the best way to edit a book, run a picnic, teach a child or administrate a program. And when others are excitedly doing it "wrong," their tendency is to jump in with all four feet and to correct, coach, and make people conform. I find it interesting that Paul does not do that. Was Paul's way better? From the epistles we know that it was. They were asking him to do something that wouldn't have been his preference. But Paul knew 1) it wasn't wrong, 2) he knew he didn't need to defend his pride, 3) he knew he could trust God to bring good out of this, 4) and he was genuinely interested in developing relationships with these people, and he knew he needed to start with where they were at. So he says, "Why not?" I think he is a tremendous model for our own behavior.

D. Paul trusted God to direct his steps even in the midst of disappointments.

And of course, we know the rest of the story. God used James' advice to get Paul arrested, and through that arrest to catapult Paul's ministry into it's most effective work ever. Paul's gracious response made him grow, made the Jerusalem church grow, and ultimately made the empire of Rome begin to crumble to the Gospel. What a marvelous privilege it was for Paul to be used by God to fulfill the prophecy of Daniel in Daniel chapter 2. Do you remember that story? Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a massive statue with a gold head, silver chest and arms, brass thighs and legs of iron and clay. The golden head represented Babylon; the silver chest represented Medo-Persia; the bronze thighs represented Greece; and the legs of iron and feet of mixed iron and clay represented a fourth world-empire, Rome. But Daniel 2:34 describes what would happen in the days of the Roman Empire: It says, **"a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth."** When Daniel explained the vision, it became clear that the stone cut without hands was the kingdom of heaven that came in the time of Rome. That the kingdom of heaven would impact the bottom of the image first – the Roman

Empire, and would gradually replace all traces of the previous humanistic kingdoms. The kingdom of heaven would gradually become a great mountain, and finally fill the whole earth so that no trace of humanistic empires would remain. What an incredible vision. But as several commentaries have pointed out, Luke structures this book in a way that shows the beginning of the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. Paul was going to be on the cutting edge of that stone that strikes the Roman Empire. It was worth it. It was worth it. Over and over he said that he longed to go to Rome.

Conclusion

It reminds me of Auguste Bartholdi. In 1856 he engaged in his most famous work of art ever. It was to design a lighthouse at the entrance to the Suez Canal, which connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. He spent ten years working on the design and a model of this lighthouse, but could not get the project financed. When the Suez Canal opened without it, Bartholdi felt like he had wasted ten years of his life. What a disappointment! But later, when the French wanted to provide a gift for America, they contacted Bartholdi again, and his lighthouse design was perfect. The colossal robed lady, who stood taller than the legendary Sphinx, became the Statue of Liberty. So what started as a major disappointment ended as a magnificent success for Bartholdi.

Obviously that's not guaranteed for unbelievers, but it is for us. Romans 8:28 promises that even the disappointing relationships and the silly decisions of other people can work together for your good. So love those difficult people in your Jerusalem like Paul did. Be gracious with them, value them, trust God to sanctify them in His own good time, and watch God turn your red roses from disappointment into fulfillment, from non-existent lighthouses into statues of liberty. May God receive the glory as you show forth His grace in how you handle disappointing relationships. Amen.

How to Handle Relational Disappointments

Acts 21:15-27

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 2-15-2009

Introduction

I. Paul's long anticipated trip to Jerusalem

- A. Earlier this year Paul expressed the enormous longing that he had for Jewish salvation (Rom. 9:1-5; 10:1)
- B. He was looking forward to seeing the Jerusalem church (Acts 19:21; 20:22)
- C. He was excited about the massive love offering that he had been able to collect from the Gentiles (Rom. 15:24-28; 1 Cor. 16:3; Acts 24:17) and was about to deliver to the church (see Acts 24:17)

II. The mixed reaction to Paul's coming

- A. Joyous reception by the "brethren" (vv. 16-17)
- B. Guarded meeting with the leaders (vv. 18ff)
 - 1. Private meeting to do damage control (v. 18) before the whole church meets with Paul (v. 22)
 - 2. Private reception of the report (v. 19)
 - 3. We can assume that this was when the money was delivered and counted out (see Acts 24:17).
- C. Reaction to the report (v. 20) was – Yeah, that's cool Paul...but...

III. The myopia of the Jerusalem elders plan – though what they did was not wrong, it shows a nearsightedness.

- A. Implied disinterest in Paul's report (v. 20a)
- B. Narrow focus on Jewish concerns (v. 20b)
- C. Taking false rumors too seriously and not shutting down gossip:
 - 1. That Paul tells Jews to forsake Moses (v. 21a)
 - 2. That Paul tells Jews they can't circumcise their children (v. 21b)
 - 3. That Paul tells Jews that they have to quit their Jewish customs (v. 21c)
- D. Concerned about reactions of congregation and taking steps for damage control (v. 22-24)
 - 1. They know that the congregation will demand a meeting (v. 22)
 - 2. They've already made plans (v. 23)
 - 3. Paul was to pay from his own pocket costly offerings to sponsor the purification of these men (v. 24)
 - 4. Paul was to also engage in Jewish rites so that others could see that he honors Jewish customs (v. 24)
- E. Concerned about Paul's reaction they remind him that they are not imposing this on the Gentiles – making the pill easier to swallow (v. 25)
- F. But in the process, the joy of Paul's trip is spoiled with nit-picking.

IV. Why did Paul go along with this?

- A. There was no sin in doing so.
 - 1. Acts 15 was about imposing Jewish customs on Gentiles.
 - 2. Acts 15 was about salvation through ceremonial law.
 - 3. Paul had no problem being "all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:20-22).
 - 4. Paul enjoyed Jewish festivals and other customs.
 - 5. He had already done a similar Jewish vow on a previous trip to Jerusalem (Acts 18:18,21,22).
- B. Humility & trust in God
- C. Paul was more driven by blessing others than he was by saving face, defending his pride or insisting on a better way.
- D. Paul trusted God to direct his steps even in the midst of disappointments.

Conclusion