

Scripture Reading:

Acts 25:23 “So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command Paul was brought in.

Acts 26:1 “Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: 2 "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, 3 especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently. 4 My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. 5 They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. 6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. 7 To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. 8 Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead? 9 Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. 12 "While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 13 at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. 17 I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 18 to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.'”

"Paul the Pharisee"

I have been setting the table for a few weeks now, and at last we come to Paul's final lengthy message that is recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts. Lord willing we will spend three weeks on this message:

- Today we will look at Paul's history as a Pharisee where I trust we will see a clear warning about two very destructive sins and learn how important it is to know not only what to say, but how it must be said!

In preparation, we looked at the big picture of how history was moving with the destruction of Jerusalem coming in just a few short years & the mighty Roman Empire about to be crushed by the stone cut without hands:

- The so-called golden age of Greece & Rome was about to give way to the New Creation.

We considered the characters that God had gathered in this auditorium, who came with much pomp to hear a humble prisoner named Paul.

- Little did they know that they were likely the audience for the final warning that the Nation of Israel would receive from God.

And we considered the prisoner who has languished now for well over two years in Caesarea, falsely charged and unjustly treated by not only the Jewish leaders, but two Roman governors.

- Paul was brought before Kings & rulers just as Jesus promised & so now we will consider what he had to say under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is appearing before the civil magistrates who represent Israel, Rome & the local city and thus I have suggested that we read & meditate on two important passages during this time to help us understand the mind of Paul on such matters: Passages to help us understand how he approached this meeting and passages that have much to teach us today!

The first was Romans 13 where we find words written by Paul just a few years earlier to the Saints living in Rome itself under Emperor Nero. Paul is coming before a King that is living with his own sister & who has come to Caesarea to kiss up to Rome. This King comes to meet a corrupt Roman governor who is trying to find a way out of the mess he has made of Paul's case, refusing to release an innocent man who is now going to Caesar on appeal with no explanation.

- IF we had such an opportunity, I think we all would be tempted to give them both a piece of our minds when they gave us the floor!

I am pretty sure that Paul's own words came back to him as he sought God's direction for the best approach in speaking to these magistrates: Those who have studied this passage in Romans 13 or listened to the suggested series by Pastor Baucham know that it begins and ends with the command to be subject to the civil authorities...

“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.” [this of course includes King Agrippa, Governor Festus and the others present!] ² **“Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.”** ³ **For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.** ⁴ **For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.** ⁵ **Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.”**

[as Pastor Baucham rightly points out, we give civil magistrates, and any other authorities we are under, honor and submission NOT because they are perfect or even deserve such honor & submission, but because we are commanded to give such honor as we honor & submit to Christ]

⁶ **“For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing.** ⁷ **Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.”**

So as we move into chapter 26, Paul is put to the test as King Agrippa gives him permission to speak for himself:

- How will Paul address this wicked & largely powerless King who is the fourth generation reprobate in the family of King Herod the Great?
- We can all imagine how Paul would have liked to have addressed this King on a personal level... But that is NOT what we see here!

“So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently.”

- As we often say today, Paul has practiced what he preached to the Saints in Rome...

- He has given honor where he could and earned an audience before these leaders requesting that they hear him out.

The other passage from I Timothy that I asked us to read and ponder gives us great insight into why Paul chose to share the message that he did before these magistrates on this important day...

I Timothy 2: “ Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. 3 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

- Here we see Paul demonstrate that he has the proper respect and right priorities when he addresses these gathered magistrates.

Paul knows that the end is near for the Nation of Israel, but as we have studied in the past, he has a real heart for the Jewish people! His desire and goal is that this King be saved and turned in the right direction! Thus the people he rules might live more peaceable lives & as a result many people could come to the Savior while there is yet time!

As we shall see next week, even though Paul’s message is certainly pointed at this Jewish King, it also brings the Roman authorities under conviction! With the opportunity to speak, the Apostle Paul first shows how the great error of Israel was played out in his own life, he then gives a powerful account of his own conversion or testimony and finally Paul challenges King Agrippa and the others present to believe the truth!

- So this week we consider Paul the Pharisee...
- Why did Paul begin with his history as a Pharisee before such a mixed audience?

One cannot read the Gospels and miss the great conflict between the Pharisees and our Lord Jesus during His earthly ministry. This conflict continues on here in Luke’s orderly account and in many of Paul Epistles to the Church. The reason for this I believe is because the Pharisees represent two of the most destructive sins we all can face:

- The sin of pride or presumption
- The sin of legalism

We see the first most clearly in a parable of Jesus that we studied in Luke 18:

“[Jesus] spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector [or an IRS agent]. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' 13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

- Paul will now share about such pride from his very own experience!
- The other great sin of the Pharisees, which often gets all the attention, is legalism!

To rightly understand this great sin, I want us to remember the question that I asked last week:

- How do we know when someone is trying to cheat us or deceive us?

You can ask one simple question:

- Where is Jesus in their thinking, in their priorities, in their lives?

This is a question that must not only be asked of secular people, but even of God’s covenant people as well... We see this principle most clearly with the confrontation that Jesus has with the Pharisees in John chapter five: “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.”

As we listen to Paul’s confessions, we must remember that these two great sins are found both within and without the Church:

We often think of pride as being the world’s problem, but that proud Pharisee who prayed to himself in God’s Temple was a member of God’s covenant people who likely had MUCH of the Old Testament memorized.

Next week when we baptize James Maximus, we will join with his parents in committing to raise him in the fear and admonition of the Lord...

This is more than making sure he has lots of Scripture and catechism questions memorized or being proud of his church membership...

- **Our desire is that James be a disciple of Jesus, NOT a Pharisee!**
- **Such is the case for ALL of the covenant children that God has blessed us with!**

On the other hand, we often think of legalism as only being a problem within the Church or other religious institutions... Keeping rules so that we can be saved!

- **But the bondage to ‘man’s law’ can often be even worse: Consider the life guard in Florida who was fired this week for saving a troubled swimmer outside of his zone!**

What Paul was about to share should have struck at the hearts of both King Agrippa and Governor Festus...

- **And I am quite sure that Paul and the other Saints were praying that BOTH would be convicted.**
- **My pray is that we also hear and heed these important warnings from the Apostle Paul...**

4 “My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. 5 They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.”

- **Being a Pharisee was not bad in and of itself any more than being a pastor today is bad just because we have some who have greatly abused their office or teach heresies.**

The question is always:

- **Do they know and love Jesus?**
- **As Jesus pointed out, HE is where the Scriptures they studied and memorized should have taken them.**

6 “And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. 7 To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. 8 Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?”

- **Next week we will see Paul share the story of his conversion: How God got his attention and showed him the truth that should have been so plain!**
- **The great hope of the suffering Messiah that the twelve tribes hoped to attain!**
- **As Luke stressed in his Gospel, Jesus has come to save His people from their sins, and those with believing faith embraced Him!**

As a side note, we should remember that according to the New Testament, here and elsewhere, God did not lose any of the tribes!

- But Paul along with most in the nation of Israel did not see Jesus!

What Paul is about to share should have struck at the heart of the great-grandson of King Herod the Great who first tried to kill God's Messiah...

9 "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. *[Paul was a proud Pharisee, saying "I myself thought!"]* 10 This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities." *[the legalist who ignores God always compels people to conform to their rules]*

Paul makes it clear that he was no better than this wicked King he was testifying before, nor any of the other cruel leaders who were present.

- But as we shall see next week, Paul goes on to show why he is now a new man...

12 "While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 13 at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me."

I want us to ponder two things as we prepare to consider another account of Paul's conversion next week:

- The first is how these sins of the Pharisees can so easily beset us
- AND 2nd, to remember that each of us has also seen the light from heaven.

First we must beware of the sin of pride... The greatest sin according to C.S. Lewis. As Mr. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, "There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves... There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others."

That proud Pharisee who prayed to himself in God's Temple did not see himself as a proud man... He was simply proud of who and what he was! Whenever we are tempted to thank God that we are not like 'those' people, be they Christian or pagans... BEWARE!

Remember, it was AFTER his Damascus road experience when Paul reminded young Timothy that he himself was the greatest of sinners and this is the attitude that each of us should come with as we gather each week to confess our sins...

- I know my sin better than anyone else's sin and thus when I stand before our righteous God I truly should see myself as the chief of sinners!

The close cousin to the sin of pride is the sin of legalism, but we need to realize they are not exactly the same.

- The destruction that pride can bring in our own lives as we stand proudly before God thinking we do not need His grace is wrought upon others through legalism.

I will not have time this morning to cover this in detail, but take the time to consider the judgments that Jesus called down upon the Pharisees who practiced legalism in His day... Making sure that people knew ALL the details about the Scriptures, but never teaching them to see or love Jesus.

- These many woes are found in Matthew chapter 23, given just before the announcement of the destruction of Jerusalem in chapter 24 which Jesus gave His disciples.

I hope you will study them all, but as an example of the danger of legalism, consider verse 15: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.”

- These are serious sins and we must always be on our guard against them!

But please remember that we can ask the same simple question that we used to evaluate the world’s thinking when it comes to knowing if we are functioning as or listening to Pharisees:

- Where is Jesus in their thinking, in their priorities, in their lives?

We should reach the end of Acts, later this year where we will find the Apostle Paul “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.”

- Next week we will see Jesus at the center of his presentation to these civil magistrates as He is with all of Paul’s teaching and living.

Paul saw the light from heaven and knew the reality of Emmanuel, God with us. As John proclaimed, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

King Agrippa’s great-grandfather did all he could to kill the baby Jesus. His grandfather killed God’s last Old Testament Prophet and mocked Jesus as He presented Himself as the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world. His own father killed the Apostle James and died a horrible death as the result of the sin of pride.

- It is no wonder that he later cries out to Paul ““You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”

We have no record of whether King Agrippa or any of the others present this day turned to Jesus in real repentance, but we do know that Paul was faithful in presenting the Gospel and trusting God for the result.

- Because God is faithful, we too have seen the light from heaven, Jesus, the Son of God who came to give us life and life abundant!
- It is Good News that we can share with those in need, calling them to the same life.

As we prepare to feast at this Table this morning and be commissioned for that work, we will rejoice with Paul as those who have come to Jesus, the faithful God who came to ransom captive Israel!

Communion Meditation: John 8:28

“Then Jesus said to them, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things. 29 And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him.” 30 As He spoke these words, many believed in Him. 31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. 32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” 33 They [the Pharisees] answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, ‘You will be made free?’” 34 Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. 35 And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. 36 Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”