

Scripture Reading:

Acts 22:24 “23 Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered [Paul] to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him. 25 And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?" 26 When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman." 27 Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." 28 The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." 29 Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him. 30 The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them.”

Acts 23:1 “Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." 2 And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?" 4 And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" 5 Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.' " 6 But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" 7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. 8 For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection--and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. 9 Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God." 10 Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.”

"Paul Confounds His Enemies"

Last Lord's Day we took some time to remind ourselves how God uses even great Empires to protect His people and to see the advance of God's Kingdom in history, which many do not understand in our times. This week we will consider another subject that might also seem a bit strange to Christian ears today!

➤ We have before us in the text, two examples of the Apostle Paul confounding his enemies!

-- We are familiar with the command to love our enemies, which of course even our enemies remind us of on a regular basis!

-- We know the need to evangelize the lost, sharing the Good News that our sins can be forgiven. Our enemies would rather we forget that command!

-- We also know, and should remember, the command to be subject to those in authority over us whether it is our parents in the home, elders or deacons in the church, or civil rulers.

➤ I will attempt to argue from our text this morning that there are also times where we are to confound our enemies!

Now it might seem difficult to reconcile that with the above commands and this might be why some of the commentators seemed to have a great deal of trouble with this portion of Luke's orderly account!

➤ Many of them simply think that Paul was wrong to react the way that he did, especially before the council.

Many of them are quick to point out that Jesus said we are to turn the other cheek and point to how Jesus stood silently before His accusers when facing a very similar trial. First, we know from the VERY long list of trials and tribulations given in his 2nd letter to the Church at Corinth that Paul had no problem obeying the command to turn the other cheek!

- It is hard to argue that Paul was afraid of conflicts or tribulations in his ministry!

However, the important lesson that I hope we learn today is that even though Paul was ready & willing to suffer for the faith, he also knew that he was not a doormat, consenting to suffer even when it was not necessary! So this brings us to a critical question:

How do we know when it is time to submit to an enemy and when we should strive to confound them?

This goes to the heart of an issue that does not get the attention that it needs in our day: Christian maturity!

I have been speaking with some of our young people in recent weeks about the Book of Proverbs, [*something I do often!*] I have encouraged them to do a type of study that I did as a young Christian where you take a notebook with two columns at the ready as you ponder the wisdom of Proverbs.

- In one column you write down commands you find and in the other you write down promises that God has given.

That might seem simplistic but it is amazing how many you can find for both columns if you actually meditate on what Solomon and others have to share in this important book.

Let me give a quick example with verse five of chapter one: “A wise man will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, To understand a proverb and an enigma, The words of the wise and their riddles.”

Certainly there is a command there to learn and a promise that we will be wise [*notice that they are linked as are many of the commands & promises in Proverbs!*] However there is also a command to be wise, a command to hear, one to seek wise counsel and one to be mature! On the promise side we should also include the provision of wise teachers and the ability to understand the difficult issues of life. I hope you can see how meditating on the Word greatly increases both lists!

- By meditating on God’s Word we see not only the most obvious commands and promises, but the implied and indirect ones as well.

When you get to the actual Proverbs, which begin in chapter ten, the book moves from the more simple principles and situations to the more complex, with the assumption that one is maturing in their understanding along the way. By chapter twenty-six we have reached one of my favorite examples of how challenging Christian maturity can be: The kind of maturity that the Apostle Paul needed here in Jerusalem with the Romans and these Jewish leaders:

Proverbs 26:4 “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, Lest you also be like him.”
5 “Answer a fool according to his folly, Lest he be wise in his own eyes.”

There you have two verses right next to each other, with one saying to answer a fool and the other saying to NOT answer a fool. So, we run into a fool in this life [*besides the one in the mirror*] and the obvious question is... Do we answer them or not?

This is where Christian maturity is required:

- We need to be able to discern the situation and apply the proper verse.
- This is the type of mature disciple that Paul was and we should learn from his example in the situations we are considering.

When he was about to be beaten by the Roman commander, Paul faced the same type of conflicting counsel that some would see in those verses in Proverbs about responding to fools:

First, he could have thought about what he had just recently written to the Church at Rome, reminding them in Romans 13:1 that we as Saints are to be subject to those that God has put in authority over us. On the other hand, he might have remembered the words of Peter and John in this same city when the Jewish council demanded that they NOT mention the name of Jesus: ‘Whom should we obey: God or man?’

- So, should Paul submit or resist?

The Apostle Paul chose the path of wisdom, a path foretold by Jesus for just such a day: Matthew 10:16 "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. 17 But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. 18 You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. 19 But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you."

- So wisely, Paul turns to the soldier and asked whether what he was doing to a citizen was right?

Paul asserted his Roman citizenship, not because that was the most important thing to him, but simply because it would avoid a beating and at the same time hold the erring magistrates accountable. We saw him do the same thing with the authorities in Philippi who had him illegally arrested and beaten.

This is an important reminder, especially in an election year, that we need to be engaged as salt and light even in the political realm of life!

- What is much more troubling for some of the commentators and others, is how Paul now engages these religious leaders AND his claim to be a Pharisee!

This passage is far less troubling if we remember the historical context we have focused on in recent weeks and actually assume that Luke is giving us an orderly account of what happened! If we do so, there is no need to argue that Luke got any of the details wrong or that Paul fell into some major sin during this confrontation.

- So what is the context?

The Apostle Paul has returned to Jerusalem in large part because he has a heart for the salvation of his people! He begins what would have been another clear witness to even these leaders who had hardened their hearts. *[we know this because Paul will in fact witness to them when he is given another chance in Caesarea, which we will consider after Easter.]* Paul has the best of intentions and only resorts to confounding these men when it becomes very obvious that they have no interest in hearing the truth.

- Actually, it becomes obviously very quickly because Paul has barely given his salutation when they have him struck!

Paul gives a VERY strong response and the question we want to consider, is whether it was a mature response:

- Or more pointedly, were these the very words that the Holy Spirit gave Paul to say as Jesus promised?

"God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?"

- Did Paul lose his temper or did Paul speak as God's prophet?
- There is quite a difference!

Many commentators sadly think that Paul lost it here & then had to apologize!

- There are those who feel that Paul should have followed the command of Jesus to turn the other cheek quite literally in this situation.

However, I think it is important to note that even Jesus, whose calling was to be silent before His accusers, still took some opportunity to hold them accountable, asking those who struck Him why He had been struck and reminding Pilate that he had no power over Him that had not been given to him by His Father. It was proper for Paul as a mature Saint to respond...

- So now the question is whether his strong response was the right response and here is where the greater context is so important to remember.

Paul is declaring TWO things in his strong response:

- First, Paul rightly points out that it was wrong for them to strike someone who was not convicted and condemned under God's Law, which they should have been following!
- At the same time, Paul is also calling into question the authority of those who ordered this action, and here speaks as God's prophet:
- God struck down Ananias in 66AD!

We also note that Paul refers to Ananias as a whitewashed wall which brings to mind the many 'woes' in Matthew chapter 23, where Jesus refers to the Jewish leaders as "whited sepulchers," which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones!"

Paul is saying to Ananias, you may sit in the chair and have all the outward appearances of the high priest but your heart and actions speak otherwise. Remember that Jesus also said that sins against the Son would be forgiven, but that sins against the Holy Spirit would not, which is why He could pray from the cross, 'Father forgive them' and then send His disciples FIRST to be witnesses in Jerusalem and now have even the Apostle to the Gentiles always going first to the Jews.

They had crucified the Lord of glory but even this greatest sin of history could be forgiven IF they did not resist the call to repentance from the Spirit!

- Paul came to this council to preach the Good News, to offer the way of forgiveness & they immediately strike him on the mouth!

As we have repeatedly pointed out, the final destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem is only a few years away. Jesus had pronounced the judgment on these religious leaders and at His death the Temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. The Spirit was poured out at Pentecost and the glory of the Lord now rests on the Bride of Jesus rather than the old Temple building.

- Paul is appealing to these leaders, even at this late date, to repent and believe & they have clearly said NO.

Thus Paul says they are a white-washed wall: They may look good on the outside, but they are in fact rotten to the core. We need to understand all of this to make sense of Paul's next response...

- And this is where many of the commentators REALLY get confused!

Those standing by Paul respond in a way that is not surprising for those raised in the Jewish culture:

They ask, "Do you revile God's high priest?"

They were shocked by the way that Paul had addressed Ananias:

5 "Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.' "

Now I think we have three choices to pick from when trying to explain what Paul meant by “I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest.” There are some who argue for each of them!

- 1) Paul was lying to cover his mistake! *[I think we can rightly set that one aside]*
- 2) Paul really did not know that it was the high priest who gave the order. *[difficult to see this as being true based on what Paul would have known about this council & the proceedings as well as his own statement and their question]*
- 3) The last and best option is that Paul is simply stating the truth!

Paul did not know that Ananias was the high priest...

- Because Ananias was NOT the high priest:
- Our Great High Priest is now Jesus who is seated at the Father’s right hand of power!

And YES I don’t think we should miss that point that Paul is making: They should NOT speak ill of God’s High Priest...

- And they did so by striking His ambassador who was sent to give them Good News!

Paul is repeating the charge that Stephen made to this same council about twenty years before: “51 "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 who have received the law by the direction of angels & have not kept it."

- Paul knew that the reaction would now be the same as those who murdered Stephen!

So just as he avoided the Roman scourging by confounding them, he now uses his knowledge of this council to once again escape certain injury or even death by confounding this council: 6 “But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"

- Paul is being truthful, but clever, again as wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove!

Paul was well known as a Pharisee of the Pharisees, only now he was a completed Pharisee if you will, having accepted the Messiah promised in the Scriptures AND preaching the glory of the resurrection which was a major point of conflict with the Sadducees.

- Paul’s statement puts these two truths together for those gathered in this courtroom and the result is exactly what Paul expected:

7 “And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. 8 For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection--& no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both.” *[we are familiar with, these distinctions but the fact that Luke recounts them reminds us that his audience was the Gentiles!]*

9 “Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God." 10 Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.”

- I am pretty sure that many of the religious leaders talked among themselves that night saying something along the lines of , ‘why did we let him get away with that!’
- They were confounded!

In the coming weeks we will see they will do the same with Paul that they did with Jesus, plotting for his death. I hope that we come away from this morning's account of two very chaotic days from the life of the Apostle Paul with two important truths in our head:

- The first is the reality that God is in control of ALL things!

God had given Paul clear guidance to come to Jerusalem and after these hectic days Jesus comes to him with words of comfort reminding him that he is right where he is supposed to be!

We will consider this briefly at the Table this morning and study it in greater detail next week.

- The second lesson is to be sure that we see Paul as a mature man fully engaged in these situations!

Paul did not simply 'go with the flow' by sitting back and waiting to see what God was going to do.

Paul functioned as a mature Saint, rightly discerning the situations that he found himself in and then...

- Using the wisdom and skill that God had given him,
Paul confounded his enemies!

Paul often declared that he was a servant, or more rightly a slave of Jesus Christ...

This does not mean that he was a doormat for the enemies of Christ.

May such be true of our lives as well...

Or to put it another way, may we learn the wisdom of Proverbs AND apply the wisdom of Proverbs in our everyday lives, now and forever.

Our hymn of response will be the singing of St. Patrick's Breastplate:

A song written by a great Saint many years ago, who even our secular world remembers with St. Patrick's Day.

- Patrick was a Saint who often used the skill and wisdom that God had given him to confound the many enemies that he faced in taking the Gospel to pagan Ireland.
- It was an island filled with many druids and other forces of evil.

God gave Patrick some miraculous victories as he did with the Apostle Paul, and yet Ireland, dotted with scores of tiny, warring kingdoms, had to be won step by step.

According to Dr. Ralph Wilson, "Approaching a royal castle, Patrick would offer presents of money and fine gifts to secure an audience with the local king. [*being wise as a serpent!*] Then he would tell the king and his family the wonderful news of Jesus' salvation from sin, His death on the cross, His resurrection from the dead. [*being gentle as a dove!*] If the king gave his blessing, Patrick was free to preach throughout the realm. Despite fierce opposition from the druids, castle after castle became an outpost of the kingdom of God."

This Breastplate was written and sung to confront and confound the enemies that Patrick found in the land that once enslaved him.

Not only do they ring as true today as they did fifteen hundred years ago, but they are most clearly needed as much today as they were in that pagan land!

Communion Meditation: Acts 23:11 "But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.""