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*The Unstoppable Church*

## Reaching Our Enemies and Critics

Acts 21:17-22:29

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I think one of the challenges that we all probably wrestle with from time to time that can seriously affect our ability to accomplish the mission is our tendency to divide the world up into *us* and *them*. Out in the marketplace, in school, in the neighborhood, in social circles, it all starts to divide out into *us* (the believers) and *them*.

The problem is there's kind of a fine line between *us* and *them*. And then it's *us* avoiding *them*... and it's *us* irritated by *them*...and it's *us* offended by *them*. And eventually it becomes *us* against *them*. It ends up we're fighting the very people that God has called us to reach, and of course that's a problem.

How do we avoid that? None of us want that. How do we avoid that? How do we keep the right perspective so it doesn't become that way in our neighborhoods and our schools and out in the marketplace?

Well, if you have a Bible, turn with me this morning to Acts 21. I think Paul helps us answer that question. We have a very long text this morning, so we're going to be going fast and there are probably lots of other things we could talk about. We're going to stay pretty much true to the main point of the text in order to get through this.

If you were with us last week, you remember that the apostle Paul is called to Jerusalem. The Spirit of God has told him not only is he called to Jerusalem but when he gets there bonds and afflictions await him. His Christian brothers and sisters have begged him not to go, "If you're going to go and get beat up and thrown in jail, then don't go." But he has told them, "I have to go. That's where God has called me."

Of course that would raise the question: Why was Paul so determined to go? Of course one answer would be: Because he wanted to obey the calling that God had given him. But I think there's more to it than that. If you know anything about the life of the apostle Paul, you know that he was passionate for his own people. He loved the Hebrew people and he longed to see them come to know Jesus as Savior—so much so that when he wrote the Book of Romans he said, "God, if I could actually give up my salvation so my people would believe, I would be willing to do that."

He loved these people and his heart has been for them, but God has called him to the Gentiles. But now in this final chapter of his ministry life, God is allowing Paul back to Jerusalem and he's aware of the fact it'll probably cost him his life. All he's asking is that he gets a chance to proclaim the Gospel, the truth, to them.

So with that in mind, we pick up the story in verse 17:

**After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.**

**Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.”Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.** (Acts 21:17-26, \*NASB)

Paul enters Jerusalem, meets up with the Jerusalem church there. He’s well-received. James is the leader of the Jerusalem church. This is not James as in Peter, James and John. If you remember, that James was executed by Herod in chapter 12. This is James the brother of Jesus, and he was the leader of the Jerusalem church.

Paul is telling the story of his second and third missionary visits. You remember, after the first journey he came and shared at the Jerusalem Council and there was great celebration. But now he has taken two more journeys and literally he has been a part of changing Asia and Asia Minor. He has been a part of changing the world. So he’s coming back and is telling these stories of what God has done. And they’re thrilled to hear. They’re celebrating; they’re glorifying God.

But James is also aware of the fact that even though there are thousands of Jews there in Jerusalem who have believed, they’re still highly legalistic and they haven’t let go of their legalistic traditions. What they’ve been told from their Jewish brothers and sisters up in the Asia Minor area who have now come down to the feast is that Paul has really been speaking against the Jews, and he’s telling people basically to forsake the teachings of Moses and to not circumcise their children—and basically forsake their Hebraic ways.

Of course, that very much upsets them. So James is saying, “You know, if they find out you’re here—and they will—we’re all in big trouble. So what do we do about this?”

Well, they come up with this plan: We’re got four brothers that are in the midst of their vow—and without spending a lot of time explaining the whole vow thing—the point is they’re going up to the temple, they’re going to finish their vow. And if Paul was willing to go with them and participate in some way, it would give evidence that he has not abandoned his Hebraic roots, that he is not opposed to what they are as Hebrews, and maybe it would serve to kind of bring the Church back together a little bit.

Then James goes back and reminds them that this is the same idea out of the Jerusalem Council: that even though the Gentiles didn’t have to be circumcised to be believers, that there are still areas in life that are very sensitive to their Jewish brothers and sisters. For the sake of unity in the Church, it would be good for them to avoid these areas.

When Paul was on his third missionary journey, from the city of Ephesus, he wrote a letter back to the Corinthian church. It’s what we know in the New Testament as First Corinthians. In that letter he actually says, “You know, I’ve learned in my ministry that to be effective for the Gospel, sometimes to the Jew I have to be a Jew, and to the Gentile I have to be a Gentile, and to the legalist I have to be a legalist.” In other words, Paul says he has tried to avoid putting up unnecessary obstacles in order to create an environment where they are most likely to listen.

Understanding that we're free in Christ doesn't mean we're free to do as we please. We still steward that freedom for the maximum effectiveness of the Gospel. One of the things we have to understand is it's very important that we not put up obstacles where there don't need to be obstacles to the Gospel. In other words, there are some hills worth dying on, and there are some hills not worth dying on. There are some issues that are issues, and there are some issues that aren't issues. And we need to learn to sort those things out.

When we're out with unbelievers in the marketplace, in our neighborhoods, in our schools—we don't have to fix everybody; we don't have to straighten everybody out; we don't have to comment on every issue. That's really not the point. We have to kind of sort that stuff out and recognize really what is the issue, and not put up unnecessary obstacles but stay focused on what ultimately will change someone's life—and create a relationship where they're most likely to listen to that.

That's what Paul is doing here. It seems like a fine plan. You remember in Acts, Paul is in a hurry to get to Jerusalem in these last couple of chapters. And the reason for that is because he wants to be in Jerusalem during the time of the feasts, primarily the Passover, because the city would swell to a million people (by some estimates, as much as two million people). They would just be packed in the city.

So that's the environment in which all this is taking place. You have Jews from Asia Minor that encountered Paul on those journeys that are now in Jerusalem. And that creates the details in the paragraph that follows. Verse 27:

**When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. At once he took along some soldiers and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he began asking who he was and what he had done. But among the crowd some were shouting one thing and some another, and when he could not find out the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. When he got to the stairs, he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob; for the multitude of the people kept following them, shouting, "Away with him!"** (vs. 27-36)

Well, as soon as Paul shows up in the temple, there are many of these Jews that had encountered Paul out and about in Corinth and in Ephesus. In those places during Paul's journeys things got pretty ugly.

So these Jews now have made their way all the way to Jerusalem. They immediately recognize Paul and they decide: *This is our moment. This is our chance to finally get rid of this guy.* And so they seize him.

It is worth noting that at this point—when Paul is seized—this is the last time Paul will be free in the Book of Acts. He will be in custody the rest of the way. When they take him custody, they

begin to call their fellow countrymen together, and basically what they say about Paul certainly isn't true. He is falsely accused. They say that he has been teaching that he is against our people; in other words, he's Anti-Semitic—and that he's against the Law and he's against the temple. And of course that riles up the crowd pretty fast.

But the reality is Paul hadn't taught that at all. What Paul had taught was just the opposite. Paul was the most Hebrew of all of them, in the sense that he recognized Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise of a Messiah, that one day through the seed of Abraham would come One through whom all the world would be blessed. And Paul recognized: *This should be our greatest moment as a Hebrew people—because our Messiah has come.*

He didn't speak against the Law; he spoke Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law. Jesus Himself said, "I didn't come to abolish the Law; I came to fulfill the Law." This was their crowning moment. The fulfillment of the Law had come and lived among them.

He didn't speak against the temple. He simply understood that Jesus was the fulfillment of the temple. Everything that was done in the temple was pointing toward the coming of a Messiah, and Jesus was the culmination of that.

It's sad to realize that in the first century, this should have been the greatest moment in the history of the Hebrew people. This should have been their finest hour. Everything they ever longed for and believed had come to pass, and the Savior of the world had come.

Instead, it was probably their darkest hour because of their unbelief. Not only that, but they just kind of made up this story about Trophimus. He was from Ephesus; he was a Gentile; he was one of Paul's converts. And he had come with Paul all the way into the city of Jerusalem. And of course, these Jews from Ephesus immediately recognized him. They saw him in town, so they made up this story that Paul had taken him into the temple and defiled it.

In the temple area there was a large courtyard, and Gentiles were allowed in that outer area. Then there was a fairly low wall and that separated the place where the Gentiles could go no farther. As a matter of fact, even in the last couple hundred years they have found signs and inscriptions that were on that wall that indicate that if Gentiles went past the wall it was punishable by death.

So they were very serious about this, and they accused Paul of violating the temple. Now stop and think about this. Paul is so sensitive not to offend his Jewish brothers and sisters that he is basically being legalistic with the legalists—bending over backwards not to offend them. So is he likely going to turn around and drag a Gentile in through this courtyard into the forbidden area? Number one, he would know that would set these Hebrew people off; but number two, it would cost his friend his life. I mean, there is no way Paul would have done that. It was purely fabricated.

But these people are so zealous for their cause; they're so zealous for their legalism that at this point the truth is really irrelevant. What they need is that which will feed their cause, and of course this works the crowd into quite a frenzy. They drag Paul out of the temple. They don't even want to wait until they get outside the city. They're just going to beat him to death in the street in front of the temple.

It is worth noting that these were highly religious people zealous for God—so highly religious and so zealous that they came from hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of miles away, at their own personal expense, many of them through great danger, just to be in Jerusalem during the time of the Passover in order to keep the rules. Highly committed! And yet at the same time, they were willing to drag someone into the street and beat him to death on trumped-up charges.

There is a tendency in our culture to think: *You know, if somebody is really zealous for God and highly religious, they've got to be okay. What they are doing has got to be right.* But it has always been true that there have been people who have been highly zealous for God and highly religious, who have done very evil things. We see it in our world today, and it has always been true. And it's a good thing to remember.

Well, the commander hears word of this uproar, and he grabs some troops, and he goes down there. He pulls Paul out of the pile and he slaps some chains on him, and he tries to get to the bottom of this thing. He asks, "What are the charges?" He's imagining if you're beating this guy to death, there have got to be some pretty serious charges here.

But as the crowd begins to call out their charges, it becomes obvious they don't even know why they're beating this guy up. There's no clarity to it. So he's going to haul him back to the barracks and we'll straighten it out. As a matter of fact, the crowd is in such a lather that at one point they even have to carry Paul just to get him through the crowd and into the barracks.

The last line of that paragraph, "Away with him!" would be the Greek equivalent of "Kill him!" "Kill him!" is what the crowd is shouting as they're trying to get Paul out of there.

Verse 37:

**As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek? Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" But Paul said, "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people." When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying, "Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you. And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet.** (vs. 21:37-22:2)

It's interesting—the translation in English when Paul speaks to the commander—it's extremely polite. These words are not really read very often in the Scriptures when he says to him, "**May I say something to you?**" The reason for the unusual English is because the Greek is unusually polite. Luke is trying to make a point, and that point is that at this point Paul was not angry; he was not bitter; he was not filled with fear; he was not vengeful; he was not out of control.

As a matter of fact, he was just the opposite. He was very much in control and speaking to the commander in very polite, honorable, respectful terms—because he understood this may be the moment he has longed for all his converted life. This may be the moment where he gets an opportunity to do what his heart has longed to do ever since he has encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. What he knows strategically is: *I can't blow it now.* If Paul responds with anger, if Paul responds with fear and bitterness and vengeance in his heart, he is going to blow his opportunity of a lifetime. So he's very much under control; he's very respectful.

I think it's important for us to understand some of the greatest opportunities we have to bear witness are in the most difficult moments of life. When everything is going well and you're treated well and things are running smoothly, everybody seems to respond rightly.

It's in the moments where there's chaos; it's in the moments where it's unfair; it's in the moments when we're falsely accused; it's in the moments when most people would get angry, would lose their temper, would lash out—that we often have our greatest platform to demonstrate that there's

something different about us. And it's very important in those moments that we don't do what the flesh wants to do, but rather we respond in a very controlled, strategic way so that we don't blow the chance of a lifetime.

Well, that's exactly what's happening here, and it catches the commander off guard. At first he's impressed that Paul speaks fluent Greek. He thinks maybe he's the Egyptian that was in town about three years previously and led this group of assassins through the city and then they chased them out. Paul says, "No, that's not me. I'm from Tarsus and just wondering if I could have the opportunity to speak to these folks." In what would have been considered a very unusual circumstance, he was granted permission.

When Paul stands up to speak to his people, Luke goes out of his way to tell us twice he spoke in the Hebrew dialect. It's a way of saying when Paul was addressing his people. He spoke in their tongue. It was his way of saying, "Hey, I'm one of you, and I care about you, and I need you to listen to me." It seems to be fairly effective. The crowd quiets down and he begins his story. Verse 3:

**"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished. But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' And I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.' But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus. A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.'" (vs. 3-16)**

Once Paul has gotten their attention, he does what he has longed to do for years—and that is, he tells his own personal story. He starts by identifying with them and says, "You know, I was born in Tarsus (which was a significant city), but I grew up here in Jerusalem. I studied under Gamaliel (one of their most revered rabbis) and understood the Law. I walked according to the Law in the strictest sense. I was so zealous for God—just as you are—that I actually took it upon myself to begin eliminating Christians. They were called the Way. I went out there and I killed them. And I also captured them and I threw men and women in prison. And if that wasn't enough, I got permission to take it out of Jerusalem and into other cities and to capture them there and bring them back and work them over."

At that point he's identifying that *at one point in my life I was just like you*. How could Paul condemn these people? He had done the very same thing that they're doing. He had hated just like they're hating. He had attacked just like they're attacking—only he had taken it further—he had actually put Christians to death; he had thrown them in prisons. So he's saying, "I understand why you're doing this. At one point in my life, I was there."

But then he begins to tell his story. "I was on the way to Damascus and the intent was to find Christians and bring them back and punish them. But there was this light on the road, and it knocked me to the ground. And there was this voice from heaven that said, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'"

I do find it interesting to remember that when you persecute the Church, you persecute Christ. It's important for us to remember the Church is the Bride of Christ. The Church is not perfect; but for good or for bad, it is His spouse. It's His Bride. If you don't happen to like your spouse criticized, you may think about that the next time you criticize the Bride of Christ.

Well, Jesus is saying, "**Saul, why are you persecuting Me?**" And Saul is saying, "Who are You?" "I'm Jesus." I mean, that had to be absolutely breathtaking for Paul to recognize this Jesus whom he had been fighting, this Jesus whom he rejected—was actually God Himself—and now speaking from the heavens and identifying Himself for who He is and identifying that Paul is actually persecuting Him, that Paul is fighting God rather than zealous for God. Paul says, "What am I supposed to do?" And He says, "I want you to go to Damascus."

Paul goes out of his way to say, "By the way, there were eyewitnesses. It wasn't just me on the road. If you want to talk to these folks, they can tell you what happened."

They get to Damascus and to a man by the name of Ananias. Paul goes out of his way to say, "By the way, Ananias is a very devout Jew and he keeps the Law. He's somebody that all of our Jews revere. He's a godly man. He's the one that found me there and he's the one that God used to remove my blindness. And then he said, 'Saul, God has appointed you. This is a God thing and God wants you to know His will. And God wants you to know the Righteous One, Jesus Himself. God wants you to hear His voice, and God wants you to be a proclaimer of the message.'" Then Ananias says, "That's the deal. Now what are you waiting for? Get up and get with it!"

In verse 16 it is possible to get a little bit confused, depending on what translation of the Scripture you use. Some of the translations make it sound like baptism is that which washes away your sins. Now without getting into a lengthy discussion about that, I will tell you that the Greek language doesn't allow for that. The phrase "washing away your sins" grammatically has to be connected to calling on His name. The New American Standard actually interprets it accordingly: "**Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins [by] calling on His name.**" That's the grammar there. And that's the way the message has been all the way through the Book of Acts. You call on His name; Jesus washes away your sins. Baptism is the public testimony of that.

Verse 17:

**"It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, and I saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.' And I said, 'Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of**

**those who were slaying him.’ And He said to me, ‘Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’” (vs. 17-21)**

What Paul is saying is that when God radically converted him, he went back to Jerusalem, back to the temple, and the longing in his heart was to talk to his own people. He wanted to tell them, “Hey, I was wrong. I was wrong! Jesus is the Messiah. And I’ve been out there killing Christians, and I was fighting against God—and I had it all wrong.” He wanted his people to know that. But God is saying to him, “Paul, if you step out there and start speaking that, they’ll kill you. So this isn’t the time for that. I’m going to send you to the Gentiles, and I want you to take this message out to the Gentiles”—with an understanding that one day God will grant him the opportunity to declare his story to his people.

So that’s why he has been out declaring his message to the Gentiles. That was his calling. But this has been the passion of his heart: to tell his story to his own people—in essence to say, “I was wrong; I had it all wrong.”

You’d like to think that these legalistic Jews would listen to his story and say, “You know, this is really quite a story. We probably should think about this. I mean, if there are eyewitnesses to what happened on the road to Damascus, and if someone we all trust, Ananias, was involved in this, and we all know that Saul was so passionate to persecute and put to death Christians—we’ve got to admit something radically changed, and maybe we ought to investigate this.”

But as is typically the case with religious, legalistic people, the truth isn’t really the point. As soon as they hear the bit about going to the Gentiles, they erupt again because they can’t stand the thought that the grace of God would go to the Gentiles. Verse 22:

**They listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and they said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!” And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air, the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way. But when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?” When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and told him, saying, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.” The commander came and said to him, “Tell, me, are you a Roman?” And he said, “Yes.” The commander answered, “I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.” And Paul said, “But I was actually born a citizen.” Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains. (vs. 22-29)**

They listened up until the point of the Gentiles, and they just absolutely could not process the thought that God would call someone to take a message of grace to the Gentiles. And so their response is, “You know, a man like this shouldn’t even be allowed to live! He has got to die.” And they’re worked up to a lather. They’re out of control. They’re throwing dust into the air. The whole environment is getting ugly again.

So the commander decides he has got to get to the bottom of this. You kind of get the impression he has kind of had it up to here with all of this. He pulls Paul aside and he’s, in essence, going to torture him to get to the truth. You get the impression that he thinks: *I still haven’t got to the*

*bottom of this. There's got to be something this guy's guilty of that we don't know yet. So we're going to scourge him, and then ultimately we'll get to the truth.*

Now we know from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that up until this point he had received 39 lashes five times; he had been beaten with rods three times. So Paul was not new to punishment. But you do have to understand, a scourging was in a completely different category. Paul had never experienced anything like what he was about to experience. This is the same beating that Jesus took before He was hung on the cross. It was absolutely horrible. As a matter of fact, many people died in the process of scourging. And if they didn't, most of them were physically handicapped in some way from that day forward, just because of the trauma of the event.

So what was about to happen to Paul was unbelievably horrible. But just before the torture was to begin, Paul mentions he is a Roman. Roman citizens experienced favor under the Law that no one else experienced. As a matter of fact, almost everything that had been done to Paul so far was illegal to do to a Roman citizen. So immediately the centurion pulls back and he goes to the commander and says, "Are you aware of the fact this guy's a Roman?" And the commander rushes to him and says, "Is this true?"

The commander goes on to say, "You know, the only way I got Roman citizenship is I had to bribe somebody." Paul says, "I was born a Roman." And they're backing off pretty fast and they're letting him go; and they're recognizing if anybody finds out what they've done, they're in big trouble. At least for the moment, Paul's life is spared.

Our tendency would be to say, "Boy that was lucky!" But of course we know that isn't what it was. It was the sovereignty of God—that in God's perfect plan Paul was born a Roman citizen because at this moment in time it would allow Paul to continue to accomplish God's purpose. As a matter of fact, his Roman citizenship is going to allow him to speak to the rulers of the world in a way he never could have had he not been a Roman citizen. So even in the midst of such chaos, we see the order and sovereignty of God as He executes His plan.

Well, in the first week of February we actually pick up the Book of Acts and we'll finish it in February and March. But for this morning, as we try to wrap this up and think about what is the relevance to our lives, I really want to focus in on one simple point—and that's what I think is the point of the text.

It's amazing that after these people falsely accuse Paul—they misrepresent his message; they make up things about him that simply aren't true in order to just work a crowd into a lather; they hate him; they want him dead; they pull him into the street and they're going to beat him to death if the Roman soldiers hadn't stopped them—in the midst of all that, Paul doesn't hate these people. Paul isn't angry with these people. He doesn't lash out at these people. Paul loves these people.

Paul loves these people, and in a very controlled, loving, respectful way he has the chance to tell his story to thousands and thousands and thousands of his own people. And you have to ask the question: What is it that allowed Paul to keep his perspective and not lose it here and blow a chance of a lifetime to tell his story?

He tells you the answer. The answer is: Because he never forgot where he came from. He never forgot the fact that: *Apart from the grace of God, I would be in that crowd*—because that's who he was. He hated like they hated. He was zealous for the Law like they were zealous for the Law. He put Christians to death like they want to put Christians to death. That was him.

He also recognizes things didn't change because he got so smart. Things didn't change because he became so spiritual. Things didn't change because he figured it out. Things changed because on the road to Damascus, God flattened him—and in His grace revealed Himself and changed Paul's heart so that he would know the Righteous One, so he would know the truth.

I think one of the reasons we have a tendency to divide the world up into categories of *us* and *them* is because we have a tendency to forget where we've come from. Somehow, somewhere along the way we start to think maybe we are a little better; maybe we are a cut above; maybe we are more spiritual. And therefore there should be *us* and there should be *them*, and they irritate us. They offend us. And so we learn to avoid them. We cluster together.

You know, the reality is the only difference between that person that irritates you at work and you is the grace of God. That's the only difference. The only difference between those people that so offend you and you is the grace of God. You know, Paul was very clear in Second Corinthians that the people of this world are blinded by the god of this age, and it's only when God lifts the blinders that we see.

You may think one day you saw the truth and believed yourself. But the reality is it was only when God lifted the blinders that you saw the truth. Just like Paul, you weren't smarter. You weren't more spiritual. You weren't more sincere. You weren't raised better. There's one reason why you believe today, and that's because God lifted the blinders.

Why He lifted your blinders and not the person you work next to is something only He knows. But the fact is, you've come this morning and you know Jesus as Savior. You come and you worship Him and your life has been radically changed. And it's all because of the grace of God.

That should change the way we look at these people around us. Rather than looking at them through judgmental, condemning, irritated, angry eyes, we see them through the eyes of Jesus and we recognize: *Apart from the grace of God, that's me. That's me. And what they need is what I needed. They need an encounter with the life-changing power of Jesus. And God has called me to be the one to share my story with them. I don't hate them. I'm not angry with them. I don't want to avoid them. I want them to know what has changed my life that God might so radically change their lives.*

Tomorrow morning when you go to work, go back to school, go to your neighborhood, your social circles, I pray that you'll see people through different eyes and remember: *Apart from the grace of God, that is me.* And that our calling is to love them, to build a relationship with them, and at the right time to share your story of salvation with them, that their lives might be changed forever as yours has been.

*Our Father, we're thankful that You love us and that You saved us. Lord, sometimes we think that maybe we just figured this all out and that makes us a cut above the rest. But Lord, we know that's not true. There is nothing we could do until You lifted the blinders and we were able to see the truth. And because of Your grace, our lives have been changed. Lord, the difference between those people that don't believe and us is Your grace. So Lord, help us not to avoid them, not to attack them, but to love them—to never forget where we've come from but to see our own story in somebody else's story. And through eyes of compassion might we love them and share the story of that which has changed our lives forever. Lord, we ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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**Study Questions**  
*The Unstoppable Church*  
**Reaching Our Enemies and Critics**  
**Acts 21:17-22:29**  
Pastor Bryan Clark

**Opening Discussion**

1. Have you ever tried to do the right thing and ended up being falsely accused or unjustly criticized?

How did that make you feel?

How did you respond?

2. What should we expect from other believers when God is doing an exciting work through us?
3. How would most people react then they are falsely accused and unjustly criticized?

What sets the believer apart in similar circumstances?

**Bible Study**

1. Read Acts 21:17-26. What are the two reactions of the believers to Paul's effective ministry to the Gentiles?

What should we expect when God is doing a work through us?

2. Why did Paul go along with the plan to take the four men to the temple and participate in their vow in some way?

Compare I Corinthians 9:19-23. What do we learn from this?

3. Read Acts 21:27-36. What did the legalistic Jews from Ephesus accuse Paul of and were these accusations true?

Do think these Jews knew they were lying or were they so zealous for their cause they convinced themselves these accusations were actually true?

4. These legalistic Jews were so dedicated to their religious rituals and rules that they traveled hundreds of miles to be in Jerusalem for the feasts yet their behavior is clearly fleshly and destructive. In what way might we see similar behavior in our culture today?

5. Read Acts 21:37-22:21. What do you think allowed Paul to respond to those who wanted to kill him with respect and love rather than lashing out at them in anger?

It is worth noting that this may have been the largest Jewish crowd with whom Paul had the opportunity to share the Gospel. Thankfully he didn't miss his opportunity by lashing out in anger.

6. Why did Paul choose to tell his own conversion story rather than answering the direct accusations of the mob?

What do we learn from this?

7. Read Acts 22:22-29. In the end, Paul was spared torture this time because of something totally out of his control. Was this just a lucky break for Paul, or is it possible, in the midst of what seem like circumstances totally out of control, that God was still in control and was working out His plan through Paul?

Why is this important for us to remember especially in circumstances that seem unfair and out of control?

## **Application**

1. What should be our expectations of others if we are effectively serving Christ?

Why is it important to have realistic expectations?

2. List the two main things you learned from this text about how to respond when falsely accused or unjustly treated?
3. What must you remember about yourself to keep a right perspective toward others who mistreat you?