



"The Battle Between Religion and Gospel"

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 21:17-35

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Good morning church family, it is good to be here with you. This does feel like a family. A couple of months ago I reached a little anniversary of being here at the church for six years and it has been an awesome experience for me to be a part of this church family for six years. I can just look back and when I first came here I looked like I was 21 years old and look at me now (audience laughter).

It has been fun to share different chapters of my life with my church family. Jen and I would like to share that we are entering a new chapter with having a child and we're very excited to share that news (audience applause). Our child is due January 1 (2012), so if you know a way to induce a child before that for tax purpose, let me know. We don't know the gender yet. We are both just hoping for a human, that would be awesome. We are really excited about this and I just wanted to share that with the church family.

Now on to why we are here.

This passage for me stands out because as we've gone through the Book of Acts it has seemed to be an ongoing conflict that Paul begins to run into with the religious culture of his time. In the Jewish framework, he seems to be coming into combat with.

In this passage, we find that Paul is now coming to Jerusalem, which is known to be the place of peace, yet by his very presence a conflict arises – an argument. For me it is amazing that just by Paul's presence of being there it leads people, who are supposedly so zealous for the law, even in the temple, to be driven to murder. Can you imagine? In the temple, God's holy place, a place of worship, by the presence of one person a crowd would riot – it would throw someone out, it would want to kill them. There is something behind here, something underneath the surface that is going on to have such a powerful conflict, a battle. For me, I think it is the fact that Paul in his sharing of the Gospel is waging war with the religious framework of that time. I think that it is still a battle today.

There is a war between religion and the Gospel, that those two are in deep conflict with one another and it is no different today than it was back then. I think in part it is because they are at odds with one another. How can people who have the same background and many of these people believe that the people who were writing were Christian converts from Judaism. They were converting from Christianity,

they had a belief in Jesus, but they still were clinging onto the law. How could the people with the same belief and same background end up in two wildly different places? How come with the same framework they saw life in God and others so differently. We are people who are limited by our perspective, our vision.

I'd like to show a video now illustrating the confines of our point of view. Now notice in this video that someone is going to be swapped out for another person and the bystander does not even notice. Let's watch it together. Video...

It is funny as we watch that we see how bizarre it is that they couldn't be that observant of the people in front of them? How does that happen? I think it is the reality that we as people can only focus on so much, right? What we choose to focus on determines what we miss. For those people they were either focused on where they were going that day, they were focused on the map and whatever it might be. They didn't realize that someone swapped out right in front of them.

What about Paul's time? It seems as if they were focusing on two widely different things. For some of these converts, they were focusing on their religious box, the law that they had to live and abide by. Paul seemed to be fixated on how God was doing something new through the Gospel and through the work of cross. This was opening up the religious box and how they were focusing on different things determined what they were missing. It seems as if Paul was missing out on a religious lifestyle of constraint and these converts and other Jewish individuals were missing out on the work of Christ and the Gospel. Religion and the Gospel will always be at odds with one another and I think it is the case for our life today.

Why is the Gospel so threatening? What is so threatening about the Gospel? For me I think of the Gospel, I think of joy, hope, newness, restoration. So what is the threat, if there is a threat? The reality is that the Gospel is not just an add on to life, it is a completely different framework to look at ourselves, look at God, look at others and look at this world. It goes completely contrary to what is natural within us.

What is natural within us is religion and morality. This idea if you do well, you deserve well back into you. When you fail or mess up that means you deserve or deserve being punished made right. Yet the Gospel is a re-wiring of that – it destroys that. It is completely contrary to the moral way of living.

When we receive the Gospel it is not that we live life as is, we smile a little bit more or we just don't do a couple of these things – it is a complete re-wiring. We are now captivated by something else completely and when you live in a moral framework where it is about reward and punishment, what is God's role in that? Well God is this distant being who pops in everyone in a while and rewards and punishes like this distant unknown being. For me the greatest analogy I can think of is like El Nino. Remember El Nino? This thing that we just kind of talked about – oh, it's a heat wave it must be El Nino – we don't really know what to call it. We're getting a lot of rain – it must be El Nino – you know it is this distant, unknown

being. Kind of lot God in religion – this distant being that pops in and rewards and punishes and every once in a while you get a taste of – oh, I guess that was God? I guess I did something wrong or I guess I was rewarded for the good thing I did. Yet the Gospel is completely different. God is not some distant being. He is so central and crucial. He is not a doer as much as He is a part of us.

Martin Luther believed that this form of religious living, moral living, was the default mode to the human heart. He said this, “There is not one in a thousand who does not set his confidence upon his works, expecting by them to win God’s favor and anticipate His grace. They make a fare of them, a thing which God cannot endure, since He has promised His grace freely and wills that it will begin by trusting that grace and in it perform all works whatever they may be.” That within us the default mode of our human heart is religion? Do you believe that? Do you believe that we can slide into a religious way of living, even now, as we are familiar with the Gospel.

Tim Keller shared a chart and I found it so very helpful. **The difference between religion on the left and Gospel on the right.**

In Religion: I obey therefore I’m accepted.

In Gospel: I’m accepted therefore I obey.

In Religion: Motivation is based on fear and insecurity.

(such as, the ice is thin, so I’m striving to do my best.)

In the Gospel: Motivation is based on grateful joy.

There is a firm foundation of the work of the cross and so we respond out of gratitude.

In Religion: I obey God to get things from God.

In the Gospel: I obey God to get delight and resemble Him.

He is the great reward. When circumstances go wrong within religion, within that framework, I’m anger at God because I believe good people deserve comfort, yet in the Gospel, when circumstances go wrong, I remember Christ sacrifice and God’s ultimate victory.

My identity and self worth are based mainly on how hard I would within religion or how moral I am; therefore, I look down on those who are lazy and immoral. Yet in the Gospel my identity and self worth are based on the one who died for me. I’m saved by sheer grace so I cannot look down on others. I slip into that mind set often. Where in our default mode do we have a tendency to go back to and reprogram our heart and our soul. The Gospel wants us to move from that. It wants to destroy that religious point of view and that we be rewired in a new way. We see the religious point of view and the Gospel point of view in Acts 21.

These people, who were so zealous, for the law could not handle the fact that Paul was coming in, ushering in others who were so unclean into God's temple. They couldn't handle the fact that Paul is breaking through the religious box, allowing God to do something new. It was threatening to them.

What is so threatening about the Gospel? I'd like to share three points and be done with it.

1. It moves us from Independence to Need.

We all know that Jesus loved us and died for us while we were enemies. Yet too often, once we receive that powerful truth, we fail when we think that we need to maintain His acceptance by our good works. One of the most clearest passages I can find in the Gospel comes in Matthew 9:13 and Jesus said this, "But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." How powerful is that? Jesus I looking at us and saying essentially: Before you give me all your good works, before you do all your religious sacrifices, the one thing that I would prefer that you experience mercy. I am more passionate about you being a cup of my mercy than a doer of good things. That is what I desire. If you are righteous in yourself you might miss out on it because I've come for those in need.

Being people of need is not something that is part of our default. It is not something we desire. The Gospel is also spoken clearly in the Beatitudes when Jesus on the Mount said, "Blessed are those who are hungry, thirst, those who are poor in spirit." He is saying blessed are those who are broken. Yet religion says blessed are those who are full, who are independent, who are not of need. People who can pick themselves by their own bootstraps. Blessed are those. The Gospel and religion come to battle there.

Paul's message in this time was not to discredit many of the religious practices, but it was to say that they, especially circumcision had no power to save. In Galatians 5:4, Paul said this, "You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ." Their religion alienated them from Christ and these are Christians. You have fallen away from grace. I've always thought that the term fallen from grace as Christians or people who believe who have fallen into sin. Right? No, not in this context. People who have fallen from grace are people who have fallen into righteous, the damnable good deeds that we do, those are the ones that fall from grace.

We acknowledge in the Gospel that we believe we can change ourself, that is about the same thing that you can push a boat along the sea by getting against the mast and pushing against it. It just doesn't work that way. It is God's work – He is the solution.

2. It moves us from our own clan to God's larger community.

The second thing that the Gospel threatens is that it moves us from our own clan to God's larger community. In Acts 21, why are these converts known for having so much zeal? Why were they so fixated on the law?

The ancient Jewish historian Josephus described this time period as being filled with political unrest and strong Jewish nationalism. There were ready for the Romans to get out, for the Gentiles to get out of their holy land. There were several uprisings by Jews against the Roman leaders which had been brutally put down. This caused even more anger from the Jewish community and intensified their hatred for Gentiles and here comes Paul ushering Gentiles into God's family. No wonder there was the hatred. No wonder they didn't open up to what God was doing. So much of their identity was based on who they were against and not as much as who they were. Yet the Gospels eliminates those religious groupings, those lines and it points us to our commonality that we all need Christ.

A great story that we have within our own fold is the story of Paul Tiah. He is a member of our church. Paul and his family came to Austin as refugees. They were from Liberia where there was this great ethnic and bloody battle between these two ethnic groups. Paul and his family fled Liberia and they came to America. They got here to Austin and obviously imagine yourself coming from Liberia to Austin – it is really to get around and understand our culture, right? Just imagine how weird Austin is, even for Americans in Texas, right?

Paul after a while discerned how difficult it is for refugees to navigate here in America. He went to the refugee services of Texas and said, "The next time an African refugee family comes to Austin, we'd love to welcome them." Some time goes by and Paul gets called and advised an African family has moved to Austin. Paul got this new family's address and he headed to their apartment to say hello, welcome and let me know if you need any help. As he got there he realized that the other family was also from Liberia.

However, the problem he learned was that this new family was from the other ethnic Liberian group. This new family was also fleeing the same battle. As Paul stepped into this family's new home, each of them was face-to-face with the enemy. Yet because of Paul's love of the Gospel and his love of Christ he desired to lean into relationship. Awkwardly Paul invited this new family to come over to the Tiah's home for lunch or dinner. The new family actually showed up.

Slowly God began to work within the relationship with Paul and this other named Johnson. In talking to Paul on the phone this past week, I asked him about his relationship with Johnson, now years down the road. He said, "Johnson is my best friend in the world. I consider him to be a brother."

Think about the power of the Gospel to change enemy to brother. Not only that but God began to use the relationship of Paul and Johnson to overflow into desire to have this experience with other refugees.

Paul & Johnson looked at all these different refugees coming into Austin and they said to themselves that they needed to start some sort of group organization to help serve these people. These two men, with what God had done in them, started these group called Multicultural Refugee Coalition that has served hundreds of refugees here in Austin. They teach them how to do so sewing classes. They have job training classes. They have computer literacy classes. They teach all the kids with one other. All the different ethnic groups all find themselves coming to Austin with a desire for newness, hope and reconciliation. They even have a soccer team. I love this picture and look at all the different colors and they are all together, all because of an invitation to dinner.

How the Gospel might use us when we allow the Gospel to push us outside of our own plan to God's larger community. That is what Paul was experiencing – the boundaries that he had, the Gospel blew him open. He couldn't be held back from going into the rest of the world proclaiming this Gospel. The Gospel moves us beyond our own. Finally, the Gospel moves us from control to a release of God's love.

Ultimately, religion is about control, that is what it is about. Religion is about knowing the list of things to do and the things not to do. I know when I'm out of bounds and I know what I need to do to get back in bounds. I know when I fail someone and I know what I need to do to make it up if they allow me to. That is how the religious game happens. It is about control. It is about knowing who is in the box and who is not in the box. Yet the Gospel blows us out of that sense of control and into God's grace.

Jesus in His ministry demolished this idea of religion by making it about Him, about a relationship. He talked to people and said, I am the life, I am the door, I am the hope. His interaction with Martha, at one point she says, "I know one day that God will resurrect individuals (this is right after her brother had died)." Jesus corrects her and says, "You don't get it, I am the resurrection. It is within Him." We can control a religion; we can't control a relationship, especially a relationship with God. In His grace He demolishes our sense of control.

In my life, I grew up in a very strict religious background. I'm so thankful for God giving me the family and the church I grew up in. Somewhere along the way, my view became skewed. I became so focused on being a good boy. Now what happens is eventually you are not a good boy. For me it was the cycle of repentance and trying harder until finally I was so fed up with it, I just gave up and I just walked away from my faith. Then I went off to college and I know for many people college is not a time to get right with God, but for me it was – probably because I went to Texas A&M which is such a holy place (audience laughter).

The great thing about A&M is there is this strong community there of Christians and so I very quickly became so involved with small groups, accountability groups, with

Bible studies, with worship gatherings. I was so busy with my religious machine, yet I still felt estranged from God. Finally, I went to this one conference and I knew this would be the time when God would make it right with me, because I'd given up this time and was at the conference and that is when He typically works, right?

On the last night of this conference, I was sitting way back in the audience. It was one of those moments that you could tell that something unique was happening with God, that in this worship service people were really encountering Him. I stood there completely as a spectator. Never felt so distant from God in such a religious moment. I said the most honest prayer of my life, "You know God, I know I've failed you. I know I was wrong, but You've known for the last years I've been trying to make this up. I don't know what else I can do. I'm out of here. I'm done." I took a step toward the door and in my mind I was resolute that I was walking away from my faith for the rest of my life. It was in that moment that I stopped and for the first time in years, like something within me began to release. A freedom, a weight began to release and very clearly God said to me, "You're done? Good. Now it is my turn." Just freedom. I am so thankful that He did not let me earn my forgiveness. I'm so thankful that it just wasn't another study. It wasn't another sacrifice that God me right with God. Something transformational happened to me that day when I realized that it is about God's love, not about my performance, not about how much I can muster, but the fact that he knew and he is jealous for me to understand His love and forgiveness. That is what combats religion ultimately – it is God's love and grace. Something undeserved, something unmerited.

I know for many of us who are a part of church services. I mean you are here in the summer time. You probably are around religious gatherings often and it can be so dangerous that the very simple truth of the Gospel might become small talk. When was the last time that you were overwhelmed with gratitude of what God has done for you. Very simple, childlike truth that God knows you by name, that He cares for you, that He loves you. More than trying to do your best, He wants you to understand His grace. That is the only way that we will stay transformed. Just like Paul who returned to Jerusalem, the place where he went to murder people and he was going to give his life up for the Gospel.

My encouragement for us is a very simple prayer: God make this new again.

Let's pray.

God, I think you for this time. I think you for this passage that reminds us that You will go at war with our religion. You want to free us not only from our sin but also our righteous. God have your way. Sent us free so that we might experience You and we might experience your community in a new and fresh way. We will worship You, not out of duty or routine but out of gratitude because you have loved us so well. We pray this in Your Name. Amen.