



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"When Is It Right To Assert One's Rights?"

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 22:22-23:11

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Introduction.

The cover article of *Time* magazine back on July 4th was on the Constitution. It talked about the way in which people in this country are very concerned about their rights. We talk about mineral rights, water rights, abortion rights, gay rights, the right to bear arms, and the list goes on. This is only natural, because our concern for rights is rooted in the Bill of Rights – the first 10 amendments to the Constitution. These are the rights that assure us of the freedoms of speech, assembly, worship, and so forth. However, there are some today who suggest we have taken this whole idea of rights a bit too far, and there is in fact a limit to one's rights, especially for the follower of Jesus Christ.

Ben Franklin once said, "The U.S. Constitution doesn't guarantee happiness, only the pursuit of it. You have to catch up with it yourself!"

As we continue to study the last phase of the public ministry of the apostle Paul, we look at a passage this morning that refers to the apostle's actions within the legal system of his day and a time when he asserted his rights. Paul was clever in the way he dealt with the situation of his arrest and interrogation, and his actions forced the hand of his captors. Let's take a look at the passage.

I. Paul Asserted His Rights.

You will recall from our previous study in recent weeks that Paul was attacked in the temple in Jerusalem, because some Jews from Asia recognized him from his missionary travels there and they stirred up the crowd against the apostle. The Roman commander arrested Paul and took him to the barracks for questioning. On the way to the barracks, however, Paul requested permission to speak to the crowd, and he told of his experience of God's grace when he met the risen Christ while on the road to Damascus. However, as Paul related his call from God to take the gospel to the Gentiles, the crowd erupted in anger once again.

The passage before us today says the commander decided to find out the truth of the matter by examining Paul under scourging. This was not a punishment; rather, it was the means the Romans used to secure the truth or a confession in a criminal matter. Perhaps this seems rather cruel and out-of-date, but the recent scandals of torture and interrogation by some of our U.S. forces, sadly reveals it still happens today.

As they were stretching out Paul to be scourged, the apostle asked a centurion standing nearby if it was legal to flog a Roman citizen who had not been found guilty of any crime. Paul knew it was unlawful. Everyone knew it. The centurion went directly to the commander and told him that Paul was a Roman citizen. When the commander heard this, he went immediately to Paul, and when he learned of his Roman citizenship, he released the apostle. All Roman citizens were exempt from examination under torture. They had their rights.

How do we square Paul's actions with the teachings of Jesus about yielding our rights? Our Lord urged His followers to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile, to lay down our lives for His sake, but here we read of a situation in which Paul asserted his rights. How do we reconcile these things?

My friend Doug Webster, who is a pastor and author, has written,¹ there are three ways to look at rights in the Bible. First, there are some rights we should give up for the sake of the gospel. Next, there are other rights we should claim for the advancement of the gospel. And, finally, there are the rights of others we should defend so they can hear the truth of the gospel.

It is true that the follower of Christ does not need to be concerned with his/her rights in an ultimate sense. Jesus said, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me." However, as this passage makes clear, there may be occasions when a Christian may claim or assert his/her rights if it proves to advance the cause of Christ, and just because we are a Christian doesn't mean we should roll over and become a doormat when opposition comes our way. In fact, Christians should oppose injustice wherever it raises its ugly head. However, as believers we should not simply look at our rights as a means to protect our little corner of the world, or to save our own hide for that matter.

Historically, the gospel has flourished in countries where individual rights have been guaranteed, such as here in America. However, we have to also admit that it has flourished in countries where individual rights have been greatly violated. For example, in our day the growth of the church is exploding in countries like China despite government opposition and severe persecution. So the bottom line is to the extent that personal rights can be utilized to assist in the advancement of the Gospel, they may be claimed, but never counted upon. We should always speak the truth and stand for justice and righteousness, denouncing the violation of human rights, but we should never look to the State to be the ultimate protector and defender of our rights. If we do, we will be sadly disappointed. Only Christ is great enough and trustworthy enough to do that for us.

II. Paul Divided the Sanhedrin.

Since the Roman commander could not determine by torture why the people were so angry with Paul, he ordered the Jewish Sanhedrin to come gather and interrogate his prisoner. Paul began his defense by addressing the members of the Sanhedrin as "men and brothers." It was the common formal address used among assembled Jews. Then he said, "I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." This statement angered the high priest, Ananias, and, in violation of the law, he ordered those near Paul to strike him on the mouth.

The apostle lashed out at Ananias and accused him of breaking the Jewish law, which safeguarded the rights of defendants and presumed them innocent until proven guilty. However, when it was brought to Paul's attention he was rebuking the high priest, the apostle apologized.

At first blush, we might think that Paul's challenge seems out of character for a follower of Christ who, when they hurled insults at Him, did not retaliate, and when He suffered made no threats.ⁱⁱ But Paul was a person of similar passions as you and me, and perhaps he lost his composure under fire. I don't really know. What I do know is that when he was told that he was speaking to the high priest, Paul was quick to acknowledge his mistake. He apologized for his comments and quoted Exodus 22:28 which said that no one should speak evil of a ruler of his people. I think it takes a gracious person to own up to one's mistake and be willing to admit when they are wrong. How easy is it for you to admit when you are wrong?

Ananias' interruption changed the entire course of the meeting, but not as the high priest expected. Paul realized that the deck was stacked against him, and there was little chance that he would receive a fair hearing. So he began again, and this time he took the offensive. He said, "*I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead*" (23:6). Now why in the world would Paul say this?

The Sanhedrin was made up of two groups of people who held different theological positions, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees had a high regard for the oral tradition; the Sadducees had regard only for the written law. The Pharisees believed in predestination; the Sadducees believed in free will. The Pharisees believed in the existence of angels and evil spirits, whereas the Sadducees did not. And the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, while the Sadducees believed that there was no resurrection after death.

Knowing these differences, Paul decided to divide the Sanhedrin. When he said that he was on trial for the resurrection of the dead, it sent the whole Council into an uproar. The Pharisees rallied to Paul's defense,

while the Sadducees were angered all the more. The apostle was about to be torn between the two groups when the commander intervened once again and had the troops take Paul back to the barracks.

The apostle was clever to size up the situation and change his tact. He took the focus off himself and placed it on the theological differences of his opponents. Jesus urged His followers to be wise and serpents and innocent as doves, and we see an example of that here in this passage. You and I should be wise and prudent, but our motives always need to be held in check by our obedience to Christ through His Spirit.

III. Paul Received Encouragement From The Lord.

The next night Paul had a vision, a supernatural revelation, in which Jesus, the risen Lord, spoke a word of encouragement to him. This didn't happen very often in the apostle's life, and it was an unusual experience which strengthened his weakened spirit. In verse 11 the Lord said, *"Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome" (23:11).*

At this critical point in Paul's life, he must have been discouraged. He had been rejected by his own people. The city that had been his love and his passion, Jerusalem, was now the most dangerous place on earth for him to be. The temple which had been a place of worship and a home for nurturing his faith was now the place where he was arrested and almost killed. And the very Council he had once served as a young man, the Sanhedrin, was now the place where he was unable to receive a fair hearing.

Paul must have questioned if he had missed God's call in traveling to Jerusalem. Perhaps he wondered, "Was I mistaken? Was I just pursuing my own selfish interests? Was I correct in asserting my rights as a Roman citizen? I wonder if I will get out of Jerusalem alive." Given the events of the day, it would have been easy to have been discouraged.

Have you ever been in a situation like that? Your world crashes in around you, and you wonder if there will ever be a way out of the wilderness? How does God meet you in those times? In what ways has He revealed Himself to you when you've been in trouble, and can you trust Him today because of His faithfulness in the past?

Into his confusion the Lord spoke to Paul and gave him assurances that the apostle was indeed in the center of God's will, and that he didn't need to worry or be fearful about the future. God had a plan, and nothing would keep Paul from getting to Rome. The apostle was assured that he would be a witness for Christ in the capital city of the Roman Empire, just as he had been in the capital city of Judaism. This must have been a great encouragement to Paul during the many delays and anxieties that he would experience the next two years while he was in prison awaiting trial and the chance to go to Rome.

Paul learned never to forget in the dark what God shows you to be true in the light. He learned to hold tenaciously to his dream, and he learned to trust God even when things look bleak. The Lord is in the business of beating the odds, and regardless of how things may look on the outside, Christ and His Word assure us and give us confidence in the face of adversity. No matter how desperate the situation may look at the time, God is still working out His purposes.

This has been a challenging season in our church life where we've been dealing with changes in our denomination. There are deep differences of opinion in our congregation, and people feel strongly about these things. The Session has been in a season of prayer and fasting and discernment as we wrestle with these matters, and we invite you to join us in this, too. We all need the wisdom of God.

Last Tuesday at a called meeting of Session at which we talked about these tough matters, I asked each elder and pastor to share one thing the Lord had said or revealed to them during this season of prayer and fasting. It was encouraging to hear each person relate what the Lord had revealed to them. I shared that the thing God has most impressed upon me in this time of discernment has been the phrase, "Fear not!" Don't be afraid. Did you know the phrase "Fear not!" appears 365 times in the Bible? One for each day of the year.

God can encourage us in our times of trial. He did for the apostle Paul, and He can do the same for you and me.

Conclusion/Application.

There one last thing I want to share with you from this passage by way of application. Notice what Paul says of Ananias, the high priest, "*God will strike you, you white-washed wall*" (23:3). The metaphor of a white-washed wall suggests a tottering structure whose precarious condition has been disguised by a generous coat of whitewash, or paint. It gives the appearance of one thing when in actuality it is quite another. It looks good on the outside, but inside it is rotting and on the verge of collapse.

A lot of people have lives like that. They are busy polishing their image on the outside, keeping up their appearances, but inside they are bordering on collapse. Is that where you are today? Are you struggling with deep problems but trying to fool the world into thinking everything is okay? Stop living a lie. Be authentic and real. Own up to it all, and allow Jesus to help you become the person He wants you to be.

I close with this. When the Queen Mary was launched in 1936, she was the largest ship to cross the oceans. Through four decades and a World War, she served until at last she was retired and anchored as a floating hotel and museum in Long Beach, California. I saw the Queen Mary several years ago when I was in Long Beach.

I have since learned that during the conversion of the ship to a hotel and museum, her three massive smoke-stacks were taken off to be scraped down, repaired, and repainted. However, when the smoke stacks were put on the dock they crumbled. Nothing was left of the $\frac{3}{4}$ inch steel plate from which the stacks had been formed. All that remained were the more than 30 coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The steel had completely rusted away.ⁱⁱⁱ

When Paul called Ananias a white-washed wall, he meant that the high priest had no substance, only an exterior appearance, propped up by coats of paint. Don't you be like that. Develop the core of your life around Christ and go deep in Him.

And let me also encourage you to enter into your own season of prayer and fasting for the struggles of your own life and those of our nation. With the problems of the drought here in Texas, the economy of our nation, and the crisis in our denomination – there's plenty to pray about. Let's go to the Lord in prayer and seek His face in this challenging time in our history. The right to prayer is a right worth asserting! Amen.

ⁱ Doug Webster, Unpublished commentary on the Book of Acts, p. 221.

ⁱⁱ 1 Pt. 2:23.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Leadership Journal*, Vol. 4, #4.