



"Waiting Until It's Convenient"

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 24:1-27

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August 21, 2011

Introduction.

Do you remember the old TV series "Perry Mason"? It was one of the first popular television shows which featured lawyers and courtroom drama. I always loved it when Perry Mason cross-examined a witness and with relentless questions badgered them into a confession.

Raymond Burr, the star of the show, was once asked what he attributed to the great success of the series and other television shows about the law and lawyers. His response was that Americans have a keen interest in justice and the judicial system. We Americans do have a fascination with these things. It's one of the reasons "Law and Order" and all its spinoffs has been one of the longest running dramas on television ever.

This morning our passage tells us about a man named Tertullus who was a lawyer. He argued the case against the Paul when the apostle appeared before the Roman governor Antonius Felix, a man who ruled Judea from 52-60 AD. What can you and learn about our faith in Christ from this courtroom drama?

I. The Prosecution by Tertullus.

At the end of the previous chapter in Acts, Governor Felix, having read the letter from Claudius Lysias, sent to Jerusalem for Paul's accusers, and he kept the apostle in custody in Caesarea on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The text tells us that 5 days later, Ananias, the high priest, came to Caesarea along with some members of the Sanhedrin from Jerusalem along with a lawyer named Tertullus. After the governor received them, Paul was summoned and Tertullus presented his case before Felix.

The attorney began with what was called a *capatio benevolentiae*. It was a formal statement typical in most presentations in a Roman court that was intended to curry the favor of the judge. Usually, it was complimentary to the point of hypocrisy, and it often included a promise to be brief, which the lawyer made here. (I have to confess I haven't known many lawyers who were able to be brief! And I've often wondered why those lengthy documents they prepare for the court are called "briefs." They look pretty long to me!) Tertullus expressed gratitude for the "peace" Felix had secured in Judea and the "reforms" he introduced. In reality, the governor had put down several insurrections with harsh brutality, which later on ended his political career.

The attorney went on to list the three charges against Paul. First, he said that the apostle was a troublemaker and had stirred up riots among the Jews all over the world. Second, he said Paul was a ringleader of the Nazarene sect. And third, he said that Paul tried to desecrate the temple. Tertullus concluded his case, and the Jews present joined in the accusation, asserting these things were true.

II. The Defense by Paul.

When the governor motioned for Paul to speak, the apostle launched into his defense. He also began with a *capatio benevolentiae*, but his was more modest than had been Tertullus'. Then Paul proceeded to refute one-by-one the allegations made against him.

He stated emphatically that he was not a troublemaker, and he insisted that at no time did he ever try to stir up a riot. He said that he went to Jerusalem as a pilgrim to worship, not an agitator to cause a disturbance. Second, he addressed the charge that he was a ringleader of the Nazarene sect, and he responded by saying that although he was indeed a follower of the Way, as it was called, this was not a sect, because he worshipped the same God as did the Jews and he believed the teaching of the Scriptures. Paul said he worshipped the same God, believed the same truths, shared in the same hope of the resurrection, and cherished the same ambition of having a clear conscience as did those who accused him.

Finally, Paul vigorously denied that he defiled the temple, and he said that the condition in which they found him in the temple had been one of ceremonial purity. There was no crowd and no disturbance until Jews from Asia stirred up a riot. The apostle concluded by asking why these men from Asia were not present in the court to press their charges? Their absence was a breach of Roman law, which held accountable accusers who abandoned their charges.

III. The Adjournment by Felix.

The governor, who apparently was well acquainted with Christianity, adjourned the proceedings. He found himself on the horns of a dilemma. He could not convict Paul, since Lysias the tribune had found no fault in him, and Tertullus had not been able to substantiate his charges. But on the other hand, Felix was unwilling to release Paul, partly because he hoped for a bribe and partly because he wanted to curry favor with the Jews. The only other option for him was to postpone his verdict on the pretext that he needed the Commander's advice. Meanwhile, Felix ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard, but because Paul was a Roman citizen who had not been convicted of any crime, he gave instructions that Paul should be given what was called *custodia libera*, in which, although he was never left unguarded, his friends could have free access to him.

There was no other public hearing for another two years, but Felix decided to conduct a kind of private investigation of his own. The governor and his wife, a Jewess named Drusilla, sent for Paul and listened to him speak about his faith. Drusilla was the youngest daughter of King Herod Agrippa I, and she had a reputation for being very beautiful. Previously she was married to another king by the name of Azizus, the king of Emesa, but Felix lured her away from her first husband, and he persuaded her to divorce her husband and marry him when she was only 16. She was in fact Felix's third wife. One can understand why they were, as the text says, "afraid" when Paul spoke to them about sexual ethics and the moral demands of God.

During the succeeding months, Felix often sent for Paul and he talked with him. Luke says that the governor was looking for a bribe, but down deep perhaps he knew that Paul had something that was more precious than money, something money could not buy. At any rate Felix never did grant a hearing with Claudius Lysias, and he left Paul in prison in order to win favor with the Jews.

Eventually, Felix was recalled to Rome after an outbreak of mob violence in which the governor allowed the Roman troops to kill thousands of Jews and loot the homes of the wealthiest people in Caesarea. The Jews reported Felix to Rome, and he was dismissed from his governorship. It was only the influence of his brother Pallas that saved him from execution, and he was replaced by a man named Festus in 60 AD. We'll learn about him next week.

Application.

This morning we've covered a lot of historical data with respect to this passage, but what does it mean for you and me? When my wife, Lorie, reads my sermon to critique it before I speak, it is at this point that she looks up from the manuscript and says, "This is a lot of nice information, honey, but so what?!" In other words, "What does this mean for me today, and how can I apply it to my life?" There are three ways this passage speaks to me, and perhaps God has a word in it for you, too.

First, have you ever been falsely accused by someone? Do you remember how violated you felt and how indignant you were that people misrepresented who you are and the facts of the situation? There are times in our lives when people will twist facts, misrepresent us, and spread rumors about us that simply are not true. How should we respond whenever this happens?

Paul gives us an example here in this text. He denied the charges, he spoke the truth, and he explained his actions with clarity. Christians don't need to roll over when they are victims of misrepresentation or defamation of character, and there are times when you and I should stand up for ourselves in the face of false accusations. However, we, like Paul, should never be surprised if justice doesn't come and when people fail to do the right thing. Felix let Paul languish in prison another two years despite the fact that there was no truth to the charges. When something like this happens to us, we should commit ourselves to the Lord and look to Him to see us through, even when justice eludes us and life is unfair.

What unfair situation are you facing today? How does God want you to stand up for yourself and speak the truth in love, and how does the Lord want you ultimately to put the matter in His hand and trust Him with the outcome? Paul didn't receive justice in his day, and you may not either. But God is with you, just like He was with the apostle. Can you trust that truth?

The second thing I want you to notice in this passage is the way Felix was looking for a bribe. Paul was asked to compromise his morals and try and buy his way out of prison. But the apostle refused, and he wouldn't accede to the governor's wishes.

You and I will face many temptations in this life to compromise our morals, cut corners and make deals in order to get ahead. It might be your boss wants you to shade the truth in a presentation to a client. It might be a classmate who asks you to give them the answers to a test. Or it might be someone who literally is looking for a bribe. "If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours."

When our mission team traveled to Nicaragua from this church back in June, we had a number of refurbished computers which had been donated to and repaired by Austin Samaritans. We took them with us to give to our mission partners to use. When we landed in Managua and went through customs, the agent at the airport gave us the hardest time and wouldn't let the computers through unless we paid an exorbitant fee. He was looking for a bribe to expedite the process.

How do you respond in these situations, and what are the ways you maintain your integrity in the face of temptation. Paul refused to compromise his morals, and his example should be an encouragement to all of us whenever we are tempted to lower our moral standards in an effort to get along or to get ahead. (By the way, we didn't pay the bribe, and we told them someone would return the next day with more paperwork to get the computers. I was proud of our leadership team.)

The final thing I want you to mention by way of application is that I think there are many people in the world like Felix and Drusilla. They are intrigued by the message of Jesus, they are curious to find out more, but they are unwilling to make a commitment to Christ. Paul talked to them about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment of God that will come to all people. Felix and Drusilla knew their lives weren't what they should be. The passage even says Felix was afraid when he gave

his response to the apostle. But in the end the governor said, *"That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you"* (24:25).

There are many who think they can put off a decision about Christ. They think, "When I'm older, then I'll follow Jesus. After I've had my fun, then I'll follow Jesus. When I'm married and have a family, after I made my mark on the world, when I've got all my questions asked and all my doubts addressed then I'll follow Jesus." They think they all the time in the world, and they fail to realize that we should never wait until it's convenient, because it will never be convenient to follow Christ, and none of us knows what tomorrow will bring. The future is very uncertain.

The psalmist wrote, *"Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried Me"* (Ps. 95:7-9). Joshua told the Israelites of his time, *"Choose this day whom you will serve,...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord"* (Josh. 24:15). And the apostle Paul also wrote, *"Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation"* (2 Cor. 6:2). Today is the day of salvation. Say "yes" to Christ today.

There was once a famous scientist who conducted geological experiments many years ago on the side of a mountain by being lowered in a basket tied to a rope by strong men on the top. Each day the men would lower him farther and farther down, and each time they would check his weight and the weight of the basket to make sure they could pull him up. But one day when they lowered him down farther than ever before, till the rope was extended to its full length, and at the end of the day the men were unable to pull the scientist up. They had not taken into account the weight and the length of the rope in addition to the weight of the scientist and the basket.

I know a man who has said 'no' to God his whole life, and now he is like that man in the basket. His is unable to pull against his past refusals. Whenever you say 'no' to God, your heart gets a little more hardened. Whenever you say 'no' to God, your heart becomes a little more stubborn.ⁱ The great tragedy in this story is not that Felix postponed making a decision about Paul in regard the Sanhedrin's accusations, but that he postponed the far more serious matter of making a decision about Christ.

Don't wait until it's convenient, because it will never be convenient to follow Jesus. But it is the most thrilling adventure in the world to be on a journey of faith with the Lord. It is a journey that has more drama than any courtroom TV show. Amen.

ⁱJ. Wilbur Chapman, *Revival Sermons*, p. 211.