



A Painful Path – Part 2

Misunderstandings & Accommodations

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Well, in all the decades I've done child dedications, I've never had a couple up here show me their kid and say, "This is Judas." I've never had it. No one names their kid Judas, because, you mean, they just wouldn't. This is the villain, right? Judas is the villain. And he's not just the villain in the redemptive plan. It's like he is the reminder of the greatest kind of relational pain that you can experience. A betrayal. I mean, here is one of the inner circle of Christ who should have had his back, but instead ends up stabbing him in the back. And that is not what we ever would want to see replicated in our children and yet in our lives we are going to experience all of that.

And the worst part of it is the inner circle part. That's the worst part of it, as David said, because David felt something of a betrayal in his life a thousand years before Christ. And he had a man named Ahithophel in his life who betrayed him. And he writes a psalm about it, Psalm 55 and he says, you know, if it were my enemy who was treating me like this, if it was my enemy who was saying these things about me, if it was my enemy who was insolent, disrespectful, he said, I could handle that. I have a category for that. He said, "It was you, my companion, my friend." I mean, just you can just hear it that the modern vernacular say, "Like I thought you were my friend." I mean, have you ever had to say that? Of course you have. I thought you were my friend. I thought you were my friend.

Then he goes on to the next verse, he says, It's just so painful because it was at the most profound level, not just a coworker, that we went into the sanctuary together. We walked in the courts of the worship center together. And then you did this. Relational pain. It's the worst really kind of pain that strikes close to our hearts that just feels so unsettling. And in our Christian life between now and the time we meet Jesus face to face, if you're a Christian, you're going to have the Christian life and it's going to be punctuated by this kind of thing. And to put it in moderate terms, softer terms, these things grow out of misunderstandings that we have, sometimes other things. Right? But usually a misunderstanding that takes place between our friends that starts to get in between us.

And in the church when we go to church together, like David would say they're in the temple walking together as companions in the worship center that's going to happen. It's probably already happened. If you are a seasoned Christian you can look back and say I know what that's like to have a misunderstanding between me and someone in my small group, in my sub-congregation, someone I used to sit with in church. And then all of this takes place and I have that thought, that phrase I want to say like, "I thought he was my friend." We've all said it, and sadly the forecast is you'll continue to say it. And that's part of the painful path that God has us walking on.

Paul, as we looked at last week in Acts 21, is walking on a painful path to Jerusalem which is going to end with his enemies turning him over there, the Jewish enemies, turning him over to the Roman officials. But before we get to that, we stopped last week in verse 16, and we're



going to look today at verses 17 through 22. And what you'll see here is a sense of that betrayal. It is a misunderstanding at the heart of the problem of what Paul's about to walk through. And I just hope that we can read this passage and hold him up in our minds as an example as to how to rightly deal with this. Because the world's got two ways to deal with people who are friends who seem to just completely misunderstand something and blow it out of proportion. And we start to have problems to where you start to say that phrase, "I thought this guy was my friend."

The world says I know how to deal with this. If they stab me in the back the first natural reaction is to say, "Well, then I'm going to stab him in the back." And that retaliation, of course, is just ruled out in Scripture. And if you're just even trying to walk in the Christian life and you say, well, I guess I can't retaliate as hard as that is. We learn, I hope, to which, you know, withdraw our emotions of vengeance and choose to restrain ourselves. But the other one that's much more common is just to withdraw. This guy used to be my friend and if that's the way he's going to treat me, we're done. And you get enough of those going on in your church experience that's when you start looking for other churches and say, I'm done, done with this church. I don't like those people. I don't get along with them. And then you find a lot of other reasons you like to say, well, "I'm out."

Well, besides retaliation or withdrawal, I think this third path that Paul walks down here as he comes to Jerusalem, first of all, not to his enemies, but to his friends. I think we can say here's some wisdom played out for us. A third way to go about this that's a godly way to go about it. And we can't always predict accurately or guarantee the outcome, but this is the right way to handle it. So whether you're in the middle of it now or you're going to face it soon, the painful problem of relational friendships going south where misunderstandings are blown out of proportion, I want us to read these ten verses from the English Standard Version, try to understand the historical context and then say what can we learn from this to be able to put into practice in our lives?

So follow along. Put your eyeballs on this text, Acts Chapter 21 starting in verse 17. We'll read through verse 26 as Paul comes to Jerusalem from Caesarea. You remember he was at that coastal town and he's going to travel here with Luke and the team. And there are some Christians from Caesarea who know he's going to go into just a hotbed of hostilities from his enemies and so they went with him. So we've got a pretty big team coming to Jerusalem and we see here in this passage how this goes.

So follow along as I read it for you with some comments in Acts Chapter 21 verse 17. I'll read from the English Standard Version. It says, "And when we had come to Jerusalem," Luke says, "the brothers received us gladly." So a good start. We're going to the church in Jerusalem. We found other Christians just like we did in Tyre, just like we did in Caesarea. Now we're coming to Jerusalem. We got other Christians, they're our brothers in Christ. The next day, after we had this little reception, "On the following day Paul went in with us to James." So this isn't just a private meeting. We got a team here, a team who is traveling with Paul and a team with James. At least the leaders, the pastors are there. All the elders, the overseers, the pastors are present. And you can see this now. You've got the missionary



coming back from his third missionary journey and he's going to report here what's going on in his mission.

Verse 19, "After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry." So you imagine this just like we've got missionaries coming from the field coming to report to us. It's just a good experience. He's got his laptop out, PowerPoint or whatever. He's doing his thing saying this is all the stuff that's happened. Look at how the Gentiles have come to Christ in Asia Minor and all the way out there in modern-day Greece, Achaia, Macedonia. It's just a lot has happened. He recounts it all. And even that phrase "one by one," you can see him going through everything in his missionary work as he reports back to the leader here, the senior leader.

James, by the way, is not James the apostle. We know earlier in the book he was martyred and killed. But we have James here, the half-brother of Christ, along with Jude. We see him, the second to the last book of the New Testament written by him, but he is now the leader and we knew him from the Jerusalem Council. He was already ensconced as a leader in this church. Some of the apostles had scattered. Some of them we don't know where they are at this point. Some we might assume are there or traveling. But the point is, James, the recognized senior leader of the pastors is present and he's going to have some things to say to Paul here in verse 20. "And when they heard it, they glorified God." So great, we're just so happy and thankful to God that he's done great things through your ministry.

And here's the problem. There's more. "They said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews? Of those who have believed.'" Okay, even that it's like, okay, you've done so much, you've done some great things there. But we want to tell you, you know, there's been a lot of great things going on here. And, you know, there's a lot of Jews here in Judea, in Israel and in Jerusalem who have been saved. I mean, just thousands of them have been coming to faith in Christ. Here comes the next sentence, bottom of verse 20, "They are all zealous for the law." Now, remember who's saying this? James is. James and his team are talking to Paul and his team about the church in Jerusalem, and we have Jewish-background believers now in the church, and he says they're zealous for the law.

We know James as he presided in large part over the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where right out of the gate in verses 1 and 2, the question was, do you have to circumcise people to have them get right with God, to be saved? That's how the text reads. And the answer of the Jerusalem Council, as James presides over it, is "No, of course not." You don't do any works of the law, including these ceremonial rites like circumcision or keeping high holy days or the Sabbath day or the dietary restrictions. None of that is required to be saved. So James knows that. So when he's saying we got background believers in Judaism here who are zealous for the law, you got to take the subset of the law and say what is he talking about?

Is he talking about the moral commands of God that we all fall short of? Well, they can be zealous for that, and that would just be a statement about their sanctification. They're really zealous for the moral laws of God. Or it might even be you think, well, maybe it's the civil law of the Old Testament as it talks about how Judaism created this nation as God had planned,



and they had all these rules for administrating and collecting taxes. And a lot of the Old Testament is describing the law of Moses, how that's supposed to function. But that's not what he's talking about. What he's talking about, we know, verse 21 is going to make clear.

"They had been told about you," Paul, "that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs." Well where did you get those customs? Well, the customs that you grew up with before you came to faith in Christ were all the Mosaic and Levitical and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. And I am an advocate, as unpopular as that may be in the academy these days, of the threefold division of the law, whether "civil law" told them how to function as a nation, of the "ceremonial law" that was all fulfilled in Christ. And none of that really relates to the salvation of anyone. They're pictures of what's coming in Christ. Well, the book of Hebrews calls them obsolete. That's the English word translating in that text, telling us they are no longer required. Just as Jesus on the cross when he died, the temple veil was miraculously torn, which is huge. It was thick, like five inches thick. Josephus tells us this thing was torn in two.

So we know that God's plan was that none of this was required, though it was required as a ceremonial act of worship. Well, then you had the "moral laws," you had the "civil laws," you had the "ceremonial laws." So the moral laws of God, well, yeah, those are true. Those are always going to reflect the holiness of God. And if I were to be holy in all of our behavior as he is, then of course we need to understand that. But here we understand what the subset is, the customs of Judaism. So we know circumcision would fall into the category of the customs and what we would like to call in the threefold division of the law of the Old Testament, we would say those are the ceremonial laws. Those are the things that set us apart culturally. Our dietary laws, our holidays, our Yom Tov they're called, the special days of the calendar. All the things that go on in Judaism that make us distinct as a tradition, as an ethnic group here, we're zealous for that. We think there's meaning in that. There's importance in that.

And you're out there on the mission field telling people when you win these Gentiles because you're telling Jewish-background people, hey, you can't circumcise your kids. Now, did Paul teach that? One of the first things we see after the Jerusalem Council in Acts Chapter 16 is he picks up a guy named Timothy after traveling through Lystra and Derbe there in modern-day Turkey and he brings him along with him on a missionary endeavor in the synagogue. And since Timothy had only one parent who was a Jew, they had known in the community he was not circumcised. And of course, Paul then saying, well, listen, just go get circumcised, because we don't want to be, you know, a stumbling block to these people. So fine. He was fine with circumcision.

As a matter of fact, as he says in First Corinthians Chapter 7 verse 19, "Circumcision doesn't mean anything. It doesn't count for anything." It's not important for you being right with God. Right? We're not going to go to the Corinthians in Greece and say you need to get circumcised to somehow get right with God or even fit in with the community. It doesn't matter because the church in Corinth was mostly Gentiles and some Jews and it didn't matter. Right? Just like we don't care. No one asked you when you came to our Compass 101 class



are you circumcised? That wasn't the question on the survey. No one cares. We don't have any quarrel. We don't have these babies up here asking, "Well, was he circumcised? Where did he get circumcised?" It doesn't matter. And Paul says that in First Corinthians, it doesn't matter.

But, you know, to the Jewish people who are ingrained in the customs of that ethnic expression of their commitment and relationship with God, it mattered. It was their custom. Is there anything wrong with it? No, there's nothing wrong with it. If you want to get circumcised then get circumcised. If you don't want to, then don't. It doesn't matter. What matters according to First Corinthians Chapter 7 verse 19 is keeping the commandments of God. Some say, "Well, wait a minute, Paul. Hey, newsflash, that was a commandment of God." Yeah, but it was a commandment of God that fell under the banner in this text that you would say are the customs of Judaism, or we would call them the ceremonies of Judaism. Right? And that doesn't matter. That's not what we have to keep. What we have to keep as growing Christians is what does it mean to do what is right and righteous. Well, those are the rules of God, though, what we call the moral rules of God.

So there are background believers in Jerusalem, as you might imagine, just like Paul was born in Judaism, born of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day, a Pharisee of pharisees, learned all about the Jewish law. I mean, if anyone had a background in Judaism it was him. And so he is now being accused of saying you can't do that. Well, we know from the narrative from Acts Chapter 9 forward, he is not teaching that. But that's what they're saying about him. Verse 22, "What then is to be done?" These people are zealous for the law and you're telling them not to keep the customs, the ceremonial law. "They will certainly hear that you've come." Dot, dot, dot. Well, what's going to happen? It's not going to go well.

So here's James, the pastor here in Jerusalem. Most of his congregants are Jewish-background people and they are zealous for the customs of Judaism. They're still functioning as a Jewish nation at this point. Right? They haven't even been rooted out yet. This is not 70 A.D. yet. They are still functioning as the nation of Israel. And he's going you're out there saying something different? That wasn't true. We've read the narrative from Luke. That's not true. And yet we've got a problem. These people have misunderstood Paul. And you can imagine what it must feel like to be the Apostle Paul standing there in sandals with your robe on. You stand up to give a report. It's all great news about God reaching the nations through your ministry. And they're saying, "We got a lot of people in the church that just really have a problem with you." Right?

Verse 23. "Do therefore what we tell you." Again, I'm like, dude, do you know who you're talking to? This is the Apostle Paul. I'm going to do what you do? Paul says, "Here's all you need to do. You need to go back to all your people in your church and you need to tell them that is not what I'm doing. Luke can vouch for me. He's been on most of our travels, this is not what I'm saying. So I don't have to do anything but tell you that they're wrong." Do you know what we got brewing there? We've got real relational conflict brewing there. But I imagine some shallow breathing on Paul's part as he's listening to the senior preaching leader here in the church of Jerusalem who is about to say, "Here's what you got to do to fix this."



And James says, "We have four men who are under a vow." Well, if you look at the customs of Judaism, the ceremonial laws of Judaism, there is something called a vow, a special vow that you make that involves your hair, which we know in the rest of this verse, that's what it involves. And that's in Numbers Chapter 6 that describes what is called the Nazirite Vow, which even though you've read Bible stories about people who have this their whole life, usually you just entered into it as an adult at a particular season of time, much like you and your spouse or you and a friend might enter into a season of fasting and prayer. It's just for a season. Sometimes it was a week-long, as some of the historians say. Sometimes it was longer than that.

But it started with you shaving your head and then as your hair grew that was the special sign of the time that you lived in devotion to God. You did certain things that were extra like you couldn't eat any of the fruit of the vine. You couldn't drink any alcohol. You couldn't go near a dead body, even if it was a loved one. You had a lot of little things you had to do in Numbers Chapter 6.

At the end of the time you cut your hair. You came then with another sacrifice, another gift for the temple, and you came with your hair as part of it as the rabbis talked about and you ended your vow and all that hair was grown while you were in this special season of devotion to God, consecration to God at a special level. You sought God, you sought to do something great for God, whatever the reason, you entered into it. It was a special season, just like you would enter into a season of prayer and fasting for who knows why you did it? Who knows? But you did it. You did it for God. You did it in consecration to God. You did it because you were seeking God in prayer. They entered into these vows.

Paul, by the way, just two chapters earlier, three chapters earlier in Chapter 18, he was under one of the vows, right? He had to go get his hair cut at Cenchreae because he was under a vow. Well, it's the same vow. So we know Paul even does this and they're saying that he's not into the customs of Judaism. He's a background Jewish believer himself, even though he's preaching to the Gentiles all the time. He does preach in the synagogue sometimes. He wins some Jews to Christ. He's involved in even doing the very thing that's going on in your church. We have four men under a vow.

Here's what I want you to do, James says, "Take these men, purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads." So why don't you enter into this vow with them? "Thus, all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law." What kind of law? Well, of course, he's trying to live in observance to the moral law in his sanctification. But that's not a way to earn your way into God. He says it very clearly in Galatians Chapter 6, when he's dealing with circumcision.

When people think that circumcision in ceremonial law will get me right with God or gives me entrance into the community, that's not the way it works. And he says, moral law. There's no moral law that's going to make me right with God. Right? The law shows us our own sin,



moral law does. The ceremonial law is part of the custom of Judaism and none of that's going to make us right with God. We know that civil law, it's no longer a nation among nations. Now it's an international organization. Churches in every ethnic group all over the world and in all the nations God is building his Church.

So we know when it comes to Paul's view of the law, he doesn't live under the law in the sense that he says, I don't live under the law. I'm not bound to it to keep a ceremonial law to show some allegiance to a Jewish nation. That is not what God... God's building an international thing now. And you know what? If I want to take my background customs and engage in them, I'll do it. And maybe sometimes or maybe all the time he ate kosher. Maybe he engaged in a vow once a year. Maybe, as we know, we see this in his travels, he wants to celebrate the Passover. Absolutely. Fine. Have at it. He's not telling other people in Athens they've got to do that. He's not saying in Ephesus you've got to do that. He's not saying in Lystra you've got to do that. He's not saying in Antioch you've got to do that. But he's engaging in some of that himself.

So he does live in observance of the law. But here is James saying, prove it. You go take these guys, you pay their expenses and you go cut your hair with them and you do a Nazirite Vow with them and they'll see. And by the way, when people are led to Christ "as for the Gentiles," verse 25, "if they've believed" and put their trust in the Messiah, well, we have a letter. "We've sent it with our judgment that they should abstain from things sacrificed to idols," don't eat that meat that's been sacrificed to idols, "and from blood." Right? You can't eat meat with the blood still in it. "And from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality."

Now, we dealt with this list. You got to go back to Acts Chapter 15 when we dealt with this particular list, which we think even, I think, at least in my conclusions, that even the sexual morality was not just a general statement about sexual immorality. It had to do with all the Levitical laws, including what kind of people you could marry. Like how close of a relation can you marry? And I can try and prove that in another sermon, they're all recorded and there on the back of the worksheet, some of the pertinent ones.

But the idea of these things relates to Gentiles not as a way to get saved, but as things they ought to do if they're going to be in a church and try to have meals with the Christian brothers who are of a Jewish background. Well, you better avoid these things to make peace in the church. So he says, we've sent that letter. That's what we think. So verse 26, Paul says, by no means there's no possible way I'm going to do this because I don't need to prove anything. They should stop misquoting me. They've completely misunderstood me. I'm not doing it. It's unnecessary.

No. Verse 22, "Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and he went into the temple," with his shaved head, "giving notice when the days of purification be fulfilled," here's the term of our Nazirite Vow, "and the offering presented for each one of them." Here's the money. He does exactly what James asked him to do. I am saying this is a good template of not retaliating. It's not forget you, then I'm going to go to another church and



give my PowerPoint presentation. It's the third one. I'm going to fix it. I'll do whatever it takes to fix it.

Let's start with verses 17 through 22. He's having a misunderstanding in a scene where it just feels uncomfortable reading it if your mind is really in the historical situation. It's really sad that this leader of the church in Jerusalem is looking at Paul and going, "Well, that's a great story. It's great to hear about the Gentiles, but you have a really bad reputation in our church." That's just painful to hear, particularly because the things they're complaining about are not true. It's a distortion of something where you can say, well, I see where they might have gotten there. I get that. Right? But it's not true.

You're going to have misunderstandings and they're going to be painful. And here's the verb I've chosen for you on your worksheet. Number one, you need to "Weather the Pains of Misunderstandings" because you're going to have them and you need to survive them. I don't want you to be a church hopper. I don't want you moving from small group to small group or sub-congregation to sub-congregation or service to service, because you don't want to see those people. You don't want anything to do with them anymore. You've got to weather these things. We have to work through it, right? We have to continue on.

And it was a joy for me in the child dedication this morning to dedicate children of children I've dedicated. I had two of them this morning. And just to have that long term relationship with so many people who I know this: we're not robots, we don't have the same software inside in terms of we agree on everything. We don't. But here's the thing. We've weathered any kind of conflicts or misunderstandings we've had through the years. I mean, some of these are real good friends of mine. And we have worshiped in the same church for decades. And I say to myself that's a good picture of saying I know I'm going to have to weather the storms of misunderstanding. "What kind of misunderstandings did you have with those guys?" I didn't have... It's been perfect with those people. But, I've had misunderstandings with some people who I'm preaching to right now. And guess what? We've weathered that. Were they painful? Yes, they were painful. It's always painful. It is painful. Okay?

Now, let me give you in thinking of those conflicts let me give you some tools here, some things in the Bible I think we need to start with. Let's just jot this one down. Galatians Chapter 1 verse 10. I'm going to give you some things that I think are very important if we're going to weather the pain of misunderstanding. Number one, I don't want God ever to misunderstand me. Number one, I don't want God to not be pleased with what I choose to do. Number one, Galatians Chapter 1 verse 10, I want to please God. I want to be "a servant of God." And therefore I want to make sure that even if everyone in this church hates my guts, I'm going to say, "God, am I doing what you want me to do?" So I want to please God. You hear a lot of sermons about that, I'm all about it. I need to be willing to sacrifice any relationship on the altar of saying I'm going to do what's right.

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, you might say here are good examples of people standing tall saying, I'm going to do what's right no matter what it costs me. Great. Fantastic. A lot of sermons, I can think of Luke 14. There are just plenty of passages that run in my



mind. Yes, we talk about it all the time. Great. Number two. If I desire to please God, that's great. Here's number two. I desire and should desire to please people. "Oh, wow, that doesn't sound right." It is, jot it down. I desire to please people. I want to be able to have people pleased with what I choose to do. Turn with me if you would please just to prove this because that sounds like heresy to some of you, Romans Chapter 12.

Let's look at Romans Chapter 12. I am looking at a church and I know this from Romans Chapter 14, it's filled with Jewish-background believers and Gentile believers and they are trying to get along in this church. Well, one of the things he's going to get to is the details of dealing with people who are eating kosher and not kosher, people who are celebrating high holy days and people who aren't. And he's going to deal with that properly in Chapter 14. But in Chapter 12, we're starting to set up with some principles. And here's what he says in Chapter 12. Drop down to verse 17. I don't want to retaliate. Of course, he's trying to keep them all together. He doesn't want them to flee either. Right? "But give thought," verse 17, "to do what is honorable in the sight of all." There's the first thing. I want to now say, what can I do that would be perceived in your mind as honorable? "If possible," verse 18, "so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

Now Paul's trying to make peace with these Jewish believers in Jerusalem. He's trying to look at James and say, I want to be on the same page here. So he is going to bend over backwards here in this passage to do something he doesn't have to do. But he's going to try to do it because he wants them to think, "Yeah, I'm honorable. You need to understand where I'm coming from, not just by my words, but by my actions." You need to give thought to that, Paul is telling the Romans. How is this going to be? I want people to be pleased. As a matter of fact, so much so that even a leader in the church, First Timothy Chapter 3, what is it? Verse 7, 8, right in there. He says, "You need to make sure that you are thought of well by outsiders," because interesting, even I cannot be a pastor unless generally speaking, now there are things that I believe and teach that they will not like, but I should be when I have a person who comes to work on my home or I run to into someone at the gas station, get to know them because I go there all the time, I should be able to have that. They should think he's an honorable guy. He's a good guy. I should have a good... I should try to please people. OK.

So I want to please God and I want to please people. When those are in conflict which one wins? The one I started with. I always want to please God. And if it comes down to I can't please you, well, "So far as it depends on me, I'm going to try to live at peace with you." But God comes first. Got it. We know that. But I think the second one is not thought of enough, particularly in our day. Because you can retreat in your air-conditioned car, go home to your air-conditioned house, and you can live all... You can just find another church. There are ten of them within driving distance. You can go and probably hear the word taught and you just go find something else. But we're trying to do what we can to make sure we all get along, that we're honorable in one another's sight, that we try to make peace here. So I want God's approval, but I want people's approval whenever I can possibly get it.



Go to Romans 14. We're close to it now. Here's the problem. I have a view on something. You have a view on something and those conflict. I have a practice. It's not your practice. Your practice is the opposite and those conflict. So I know this, there's the fodder for our conflict. More on that in a minute. But right now what I want to see is you and I can have different views of how we eat if we were back in the first century and it was an issue of my conscience in terms of kosher or non-kosher. And here's what I know. God can look at us doing different things on a particular issue and can say, I'm pleased with that and I'm pleased with that. Right? Now the conflict is I'm not pleased that you don't do it my way and you're not pleased that I don't do it your way. But I know that in a passage like this, look at verse 6 for instance, I know both of us can please God. That's an important principle.

Look at verse 6. "The one who observes the day", like a certain high holy day or a weekly Sabbath day, "observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God." Now, what are we talking about? Go up to verse 2. "One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables." And by weak he's not trying to insult anybody. He's just saying if you're a Jewish-background believer and you're concerned about the meat in the marketplace, it may even be kosher on the kosher list but was it dedicated to idols? And certainly bacon and ham and shellfish, I'm not supposed to eat any of that. And I was taught that from my youth. Now I became a Christian at 35. You know, I just have a hard time eating that stuff. I have a hard time smelling bacon. (I can't imagine.) But I can see that in the text of Scripture.

Now, he's called weak in that text, but not as an insult. But the fact that his conscience is going to be violated by that. So there's another one who is fine eating everything verse 6 says. Back down to verse 6. "Now, the one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while one who abstains, abstains in honor the Lord and gives thanks to God." Now, the whole context to make clear both of these people can please the Lord, they're both servants of Christ. Right?

Just to get personal here. Right? Like I and the rest of the pastors have decided we are not going to drink any alcohol. We abstain from that. Right? It's not just the weakness of our conscience, right? It's the sense that we know there are weak consciences among us. So we're not the ones that you're going to find sipping on a margarita at the Mexican restaurant after church. We just think it's not worth it. We're not going to do it. We're not going to do it. It's not that we can't hold our alcohol. Right? But we're going to say we're not going to drink. So we abstain and we do it to the Lord and honor the Lord. Just like Timothy in Ephesus as the senior preaching pastor, he didn't drink either.

Now some of you drink and you drink wine because you got to have it by that great steak that you're eating. And so you've got to drink some. Great. And if you do it in honor of the Lord can you please God in giving thanks for some smooth wine that you have at dinner? Yes, you can. And can I give thanks to God by saying God I say no to that when it's offered to me at a wedding? And I can do that to the honor of God. And God can say I'm pleased and I'm pleased, right? Now, you can't get drunk by the way. Right? So get a breathalyzer, make sure



you're not getting drunk at those weddings. But that's the prohibition. But you can drink, right? You can drink to the honor of God.

Or you can come up in the lobby, guys, and you can unbutton your shirt and show me your giant like tattooed eagle you just got put all over your chest this week, saying, "So I was out riding a motorcycle and stopped, got this huge tattoo and the wings go all the way back of my head. Isn't it awesome?" Right? And you can say, "I just love the way the glory of God is seen in the eagle's wings. And look at the plumage, praise God, Look at my bad tattoos." Right? And I can high-five you and say, listen, praise God. You do it to the glory of God. Fine. Right? And don't start quoting Leviticus 19. We can talk about that in another sermon. That is not referencing artwork on your body. It's about a pagan ritual about contact with the dead and honoring the dead and cutting yourself. Different context. The only time the word tattoo shows up here in the Bible.

I can say, "You know what? My chest, I don't want anybody taking second looks at it anyway when I'm at the beach. So no, I don't want anything on my chest." So I'm not doing it and I'm going to abstain to the glory of God. And God can be pleased with me and God can be pleased with you. Why? Because none of these things are commanded or prohibited.

Now, if there was a verse that said you can't drink or you can't get a tattoo. Great, fine. But those are the kinds of things that do split up churches, right? When people start having these issues with each other. People have certain customs, they have certain proclivities, they have certain things their conscience can allow them to do, and other people the things that their conscience can't allow them to do. And in that regard, we should be able to live peaceably together because there's not an issue there. There's a lot of latitude within the liberties of the Christian life that this whole passage is trying to address. And that should be fine in the body of Christ. What's not fine, go back to verse 3 of Romans 14. "Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats." Why? "For God has welcomed him." Both of them. Right?

Here's the deal. Don't start saying, "Well, that dude wouldn't even get a tattoo because he just, I don't know, he doesn't love eagles or God or something." No. "Or drink, he just doesn't want to..." Stop. I see it all the time, whatever the issue might be. I mean, there have been subsets of Christianity saying that there are certain decibels in music it can't surpass, or the beat of the music can't pass the beat of your heart. Stop with the nonsense of saying this is something you got to do because this is the way it's got to be done. And if you do it differently than me, then I condemn you or I despise you or I judge you on this.

Now, that resonates well, certainly in Southern California, in Southern California churches. People love all that. But here's what you can't love. And that is if someone says, I am doing something expressly prohibited by the Bible. You shouldn't love that. And you shouldn't say, "Well, I don't judge, man. I don't judge. I don't judge. I found a ministry leader. You know, he's passed out drunk at the bar. It's fine, though, you know, because I'm not going on judge." You should start judging at that point, right? Because that is a violation of a clearly expressed principle and command of Scripture.



So we're not saying it's infinite. We're saying they're parameters to all of this. But the reality is we cannot have the kinds of things that are going on within the church, and I got to say, and I will diagnose it and you'll see if I'm right when we get there. But if we're to really interview the hearts of the people at the church in Jerusalem, I'll bet there are some Jewish people there who look in their own hearts at Paul and they despise him because they think that even if they rightly understand why he's doing what he's doing and not pressing people to be circumcised, they're putting too much stock in the circumcision.

In other words, let's put it this way, in Matthew 15, Jesus is dealing with the Sadducees and Pharisees, and they're looking at the disciples of Christ and they're going to eat and they didn't go through their washing of their hands. Now, that's not mom. Like, wash your hands. Let me see. Did you use soap? This is about the ablutions of the customs of Judaism. Now, this isn't even ceremonial law. These were the laws and the customs and traditions of people.

Well Jesus ends up quoting Isaiah 29, and he says, you know what? Here's the problem. You guys take the "commandments of men" and you turn them into the doctrines of God. That's a problem. You're starting to say now this is what the Bible says. This is what God says because God agrees with me on this topic when the Bible has nothing to say about that. You don't have to wash your hands before you eat. That might be smart, but you don't have to. And the reality of this some ritual ablution and say five times, "hallelujah," and you've got to pray this... You don't have to do that. And yet the Pharisees took their preference and they ensconced it into biblical doctrine. And now all of a sudden we got a big problem.

By the way, let me say a few more reasons that you might have conflicts in your small groups and relationships and misunderstandings arise. Some of it arises because we've taken our preferences and made them God's commands, and they're not. That's sin, Matthew 15. But a lot of us, as Paul said to the Philippians, a lot of people are preaching Christ out of envy and rivalry, and that's why they're despising me in prison and they're trying to antagonize me as a missionary who got in prison. Others are preaching Christ sincerely and when they talk about me in prison they know that it's working out for the advancement of the gospel.

But some people want to demean me because they're feeling a rivalry toward me. They're envious of my fruitfulness in this, and therefore their envy is causing them to disparage me. And who knows if there are some in the church of Jerusalem, maybe even among the pastors who are looking at Paul, they're seeing all these people coming to Christ all across the ancient Greek world, the Roman world. And they're thinking, "Well, I don't know. But are they, you know, they're not under the customs though. They're not doing it our way." Maybe there's some envy there and jealousy. I don't know. I don't want to even have to face them for the first thousand years. But I want to think those guys, I just know my church and my ministry and I know the people I interact with in the Christian organizations I interact with, I know a lot of stuff is done to break up the peace and unity of organizations because of jealousy and envy and rivalry. And Paul says that's a problem.



Here's one more. How about this one. Proverbs talks about the whisperer. That's the gossip. He says that it goes down, it's like a delicious morsel. Think of whatever it is, right? Your weakness is like a snicker bar. It's a Snickers bar for the ear. That's what gossip is like. It's like, ah, so good. Why? Because you're saying something disparaging about someone, who knows why? Because maybe they do something that's not according to my preference. Maybe I'm envious of them. Maybe I'm a rival to them in some way. And so when you say something that's whispered, "Hey, did you hear about Paul? I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, wow that feels good to hear that," because I'm always looking to try and somehow make sure that I'm better than that person, whatever my motive might be. Maybe I think they're off the rails because they don't do it the way I do it. Whatever. The gossip just has a built-in... We have a built-in appetite for it.

There's not a church that splits at least over tertiary or secondary issues that is not fueled by gossip. And gossip is always the thing where they're assuming the worst in people. They were assuming the worst in Paul because Paul never said those things. Can I see why they came to that? I can see it. But you got to think the worst of Paul. They're going to be people in this church, in your small group, in your sub-congregation, they're going to think the worst of you and you'll need to say, "I thought we were friends," and it's going to all be fueled by this. So you got to weather this because it's going to continue up throughout your Christian life. We're going to get through it. Okay?

Now, how do we get through it? James has got a solution. Verse 23, first half of verse 23, the first sentence of verse 23, Here comes James and he's going to speak for the pastors and he's going to say this. He's going to say, "Do therefore what we tell you." Now, I know this. Paul's never going to give James carte blanche, like, tell me whatever it is, I'll do it, because I know that whatever it is has always got limits. Okay? So let's write this down and then we'll come to the classic text that I would have to defrock me from my pastoral ministry if I did not turn you to First Corinthians Chapter 9. But let's start with writing down the point. First Corinthians Chapter 9 is going to illustrate for us in several ways the way that we always need to know there are limits to what I'm going to do to make my relationship with you right. There are limits to it. I want to flex, but I need to know like how far I'm allowed to flex.

Number two, "Know How Far You're Allowed to Flex." And it's not infinite. It's not infinite. There are first-tier issues that you should not flex on. If I start getting up here preaching about the fact that there is no Trinity or that Jesus is not divine or that Christ didn't die on the cross as a petitionary atonement for our sins, right? That's the time you should get your stuff, get your Bible, get out, try and get me out and be done with this thing. Right? Because that's a first-tier issue. Right? But whatever the other issue might be, if it's a misunderstanding between you and your friend, between me and you, whatever it might be, we need to flex and James is going to recommend how we flex in this passage, how Paul should flex and do the unnecessary thing. But here's the deal, right? He knows it's not carte blanche, it's not I'll do whatever you tell me to do.

So that's why I think there's some shallow breathing and a pause here in this text. So First Corinthians 9, that's what I threatened to take you to, and I'm going to do it. Here it comes,



First Corinthians 9, drop all the way down to verse 19. Everybody preaches on Acts 21 unless they don't know their Bibles, they're all going to take you here because you've got to go here because this is kind of what's going on here. Paul's about to be told to do something and he's going to do it but it's only so far he can go. And thankfully, James didn't tell him to go too far, even though some people think he told him to go too far. And that's your commentary reading and you can see people's conflicting opinions about all this. But I'm preaching it the way I understand it, and I think I'm understanding it right.

But here we go. Verse 19, First Corinthians 9:19, "For though I'm free from all," like, that's just simply saying this, "I know, God knows I didn't say that. I know God knows I'm not doing that. I know God knows that I've done the right thing, I'm free, really? God is my God. Christ is my Lord. You're not him. So in the end, I could not lift a finger here. I could just say, humph, and walk away so I'm free from all." Right? But "I have made myself a servant to all," because not only would I please God, I want to please you too. I want to do what's honorable in your sight. That's the principles I laid down as foundational principles in point one. So Paul's looking at this in the context of, bottom of verse 19, missions work and evangelism, "that I might win more of them."

So this is about his missionary work. But let me just say this and I can prove it if I had more time. This is an identical approach and strategy to solving our lack of unity problems when it comes to your friend being at odds with you, right? Being able to maintain unity, "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." I guarantee you this is the same principle that you should want to be a servant of those people who have a problem with you.

Like when you're there, as Jesus said, Matthew 5, you're coming to the altar, you're in line, you're about to come up to the priest and you realize my brother has something against me, right? James is now saying, hey, your brothers here have something against you. What's the solution? Leave it. Don't even get up to the front of the line. Don't even finish your sacrifice. Go and make it right. It's not that you have a problem with your brother, although you got to fix that too. But your brother has a problem with you. I want to fix it. Right? That's the whole point of this sermon. Fix it. And you fix it in this text, he says, by flexing. I'm going to serve.

Well, how do you flex? Verse 20, "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews." Or let's put it this way. To the Jew I became a Jew in order to stay at peace with the Jews. Certainly I'm happy to do that. I don't want to unnecessarily offend you. What do I have to do? "To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law.)" Did you catch that?

So Timothy can be told by Paul to get circumcised as he goes into the middle of Asia Minor and he can go and do that. It's in keeping with the custom, but he's doing it not because he has to. He's doing that because I feel conscripted to do it, not because the Bible requires me. I'm doing it at a free, it's an unnecessary thing, but I'm doing it because I have a purpose here. He's flexing, but the limit is I'm not feeling like now I'm compelled to do it. And that's helpful. Why? Because he himself is not going to be bound by those rules, whether they're dietary or whether they involve circumcision or whatever it might be. "That I might win those



under the law." Right? In our case, we might "maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace."

Verse 21, "To those outside the law." Like in Athens, where they didn't care about the dangly hair on the side of his head or the fringes of his robe, they didn't care about whether he ate kosher. They didn't care if you were circumcised or not. No one cared about that in Athens. What do they care about? Do you have any connection with them at all? Any common ground? Well, he's talking about their idols. He's quoting philosophers. He's quoting people they read in their classrooms. He made the bridge. He said, I'm like one outside of the law. "I became like one outside the law." But, you know, I'm really not like them. "I'm not outside the law of God. I'm under the law of Christ."

Which, by the way, just speaking of the three-fold division of law, that, by the way, is a great picture of that. The law of God, which included all civil, moral and ceremonial. The Law of Christ only reiterated as my sanctification guide the moral law of God. So that's why he says the law of God. "Yeah, I'm going to do what God says. I'm under the law of Christ." Very specifically what that requires, which is no longer to have to be compelled to do any of the other two. Right? I know there's a lot that's connected to that, and I understand the implications of it. There's more to say, but that's not the sermon I'm preaching right now. If anyone follows that, and I'm sure some of you did and you wrote a note, "I got to send him an email." Okay. (Audience laughs)

"Not being outside the law, but being under the law of Christ that I might win those outside of the law." I want to make sure that the Athenians hear me or some Athens-background believer, I want to make sure I can stay in fellowship with them. "To the weak, I became like the weak." I'll eat your vegetables. I don't have to pull out a steak in front of you. Right? "That I might win the weak. I become all things to all people that I might by all means save some." This is his missionary concern. He's also got a unity concern which is being played out in Acts 21. I want to make sure those guys understand where I'm coming from. My Christian brothers, I don't want them to think wrongly about this. I want to make peace here. "I do it all for the sake of the gospel," in this case, "that I might share with them in its blessings." All right.

There are limits to how far we can flex. And they're, you know, not under the law, not being outside the law of Christ. And I think Romans 14 verse 33 would also tell me when my conscience is violated. Right? If someone does lay down a slab of meat that was given to, you know, the temple of Diana and my conscience is bothered so much that I can't do it with a clear conscience, then the Bible says at that point you do need to push away from the table. I don't have time for that. I preached all about that in that series that's listed on the back called the "Black and White on Gray Areas." That was all about this from Romans Chapter 14, which may be worth, if I'm surfacing questions, it may be worth listening to all that.

All right. Back to our passage. They say here's what you're going to do. And I'm saying, well, I can't just give you the keys to my life, but I'll hear you out. And he does hear him out. And you know what happens here? Go with these guys who have the vow. You go and participate in the vow with them. You "pay their expenses" out of your own pocket. And all of this will make



it clear that you're not saying what they say you're saying, right? Bend over backwards. Totally unnecessary. You could just say, well you just got to believe what I'm telling you. No, go prove it. And this whole thing about what we teach Gentiles, I mean, just make sure they know that's what you're teaching Gentiles. And Paul, verse 26, says, okay, I'll do it. And he goes and he does exactly what is requested. Okay? That's great. It's unnecessary but he does it.

And here's what I guarantee you he does it as. If he's having the right righteous day he does it out of love, not because he begrudges James or anyone else. Number three, "Do the 'Unnecessary' Out of Love." If you are going to flex, if you're going to put your issues behind you and say, I want peace here, make sure those issues, make sure they're not first-tier issues, these are second-tier issues, I'm going to put these behind me so I can fellowship with you. And I'm going to do it because I love you.

Back to Romans 14. If I have a minute here left, let me take you back to Romans 14 and just quote this great text for you, verse 15. Romans Chapter 14 verse 15. "If your brother is grieved by what you eat," if they're grieved by the fact that it seems like you don't want to do any of the customs like we're offended by that, well, then "you are no longer walking in love." What Paul is doing in Acts 21 is walking in love. Do you follow that? He is doing what is loving here, which is the unnecessary thing that he doesn't have to take another Nazirite Vow. He doesn't have to do that. But he does it and he does it because he loves these brothers in Christ.

"By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died." Now, that may be a dramatic sentence there, "destroy," but they're being hurt by this. Right? They were offended in the church at Jerusalem, but Paul says, "Dude, I'll go do the Nazirite Vow. I kind of was liking my hairdo, but I'll cut it off. I'll do it. I could use the money on other stuff, but I'll spend it on this. I'm going to do it. I'll do it lovingly." Look at verse 18. This is great. "Whoever thus serves Christ," are you going to serve Christ like this, right? "Is acceptable to God, AND," here's the second one, "approved by men." I'd like to please God and I'd like to please people. "So then let us pursue," that's a great verb, pursue, chase it, go after it, "what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding." And in a church our size, I'd like to say that's got to be on our minds all the time. I want to pursue peace and I want to mutually upbuild. I want to encourage you. I want you to encourage me. I want us to do that.

And I know from all of our different backgrounds it may not be as extreme as the Jewish-background believer and the Athenian-background believer, but the bottom line is we're going to have disagreements on stuff that we don't see eye to eye on. Some things that I do you think, "I don't know why he doesn't do what I do," and some things I'm going to say, "well, I don't know why he didn't do what I do." And if it's not a core issue of Christian doctrine, if it's not the issue of who God is or what Christ did for us or what the sin problem is, then I think we can all say, hey, we're going to flex on this because we love each other.

He quotes the list from the Jerusalem Council which was all about that. The reason you don't eat the meat polluted by idols when you're sitting down at a dinner table with a Jewish



background believer is that we don't want to offend them unnecessarily. It's unnecessary for you to do that. So I'm doing something that now feels necessary. But, you know, it really isn't because I'm not violating God or my conscience, but I'm going to do what's unnecessary and I'm going to do it because I love. We need more love in this particular context and we've got to engage in this more often. Completely unnecessary out of love.

Magnets are a good example of this. Magnets, of course, they've got two poles, south pole, north pole, they call it. And when they come and it's the right way two different magnets they snap together. Remember when you were a kid in science class or whatever and you took it and turned it around and tried to put it together? It strongly repelled it. Picture you in an outfit that has these magnets everywhere. Okay? Now, if you're coming up to someone and the poles on your magnet are just fine with the person that you're coming up to and his magnets and your magnets, they are all copacetic, they're all simpatico. They're all going to work. Then BAM, your relationship is going to be enhanced by that. And we like to gather with people who agree with us on everything. I get that. Even our preferences, we've got the same hobbies, we got the same interest. We like, you know, the same music at the same speed in the same volume and whatever it might be. BAM. Right?

Now there are some magnets I can never get rid of, but some magnets in my life are pulled around the opposite way of yours. And so when we come together sometimes it feels like I got more that I disagree with in terms of things that I prefer and all of a sudden now we get near each other and we're repelled by each other. And here's what I'm telling you. You got to know which magnets are required and which ones are not. And I'm not saying you can't have your preferences, but when you're going to fellowship with someone who has different preferences than you, then you take those magnets and say, I don't love these magnets, these preferences, these customs, as much as I love that person, I'm going to leave this over here and I'm going to draw near to you. You have to leave that behind you.

You know the old phrase, when in Rome? What's the rest of it? Do as the Romans do. It actually has its origins, or so they say, back to the fourth century, when Augustine was leading some advice from his mentor, Ambrose, and he's saying, "I don't get it because the church here in Milan functions different than it does in Rome. I don't know how... What am I supposed to do?" And they were both conditioned with their patterns. But Ambrose had some great advice. And here's what he says where that old phrase comes from. He says, "When in Rome, when I visit Rome," he says, "I fast on Saturday," because that's what they did. Right? "And when I'm here in Milan where you are right now, I don't fast."

Now, on the same principle you should observe the custom prevailing in whatever church you come to. Right? If you desire neither to give offense by your conduct, nor find cause for offense in another's, take the magnet off and put it behind you and do whatever it is that corresponds. It doesn't mean when you go back to Milan you're not going to have a different practice. It doesn't mean that you retreat to your own house, you're not going to do something different. But here we've got to do what provides peace and mutual upbuilding. Just like me going to preach somewhere. They always ask, you know, my assistant always asks, "What do you want him to wear? What do you want him to wear?" Why? Because some churches have



this weird, like, expectation. Like "we want him in a suit," and then it's like, "well, do you need a tie on him?" "Yeah, of course we need a tie on him." So it's like, oh, man.

Now it's not sinful to wear a tie. It feels that way when I'm tying it, (audience laughs) but I'm just like, okay. And then I go to other places and they say, "Hey, you know, you're preaching to a bunch of high schoolers here." And it's like, "Just don't wear your dorky stuff you normally wear at your church on the platform." Like, okay, you know, can you send me some clothes or whatever? I need to know how to dress at this place. And it's like, that's fine. It doesn't matter.

That may seem like a small thing and of course it is. But you understand how even people dress at church can become an issue for like, "I can't even work here. I can't even live here. I can't even worship. I don't like the music. I don't like the sound. I don't like how long the sermons are." I get that. I understand. But we need to flex. We need to flex. Because there are a lot of things that when you're at Compass, you've got to do as the Compass people do. When you're in small groups you have to do what the small group people do. Right? Are there non-negotiables? Of course, we preach on those a lot. This passage is about Paul being a good example for us when it comes to the church. We think he solved the problem when it comes to the opponents. We're about to see what happens in verse 27 and it gets real rough. More on that next week.

Let's pray, God... Actually stand up because we're so late we'll dismiss you in prayer. Sorry. Tell me it doesn't feel late. "It doesn't feel late. It felt like a ten-minute message, Pastor Mike." All right. (audience clapping) All right. I don't know what to do about that, but I'm tempted to believe you. But those of you who know me well know that I won't believe it, but I'll try. It's affirming. Let's pray. God, we thank you for our church and that we know we're not out in some small town in the outskirts of town and a very small group of people where we all do the same kind of job, do the same kind of thing, make the same amount of money. This church is like many, certainly in our area, bigger and has a lot of different backgrounds, a lot of different preferences, a lot of different patterns. God, even while we might claim that the wisdom of our preferences and decisions are wiser than theirs, I just pray we would just be super careful to, in our church, be willing to do what the Apostle Paul did here. Which is, listen, I don't want to cause offense. What can I do? How can I flex? What can I do differently? I want to fix it.

God, let us not be like the world and retaliate. Let's not be like the world and run. And a lot of us do that. It's our pattern. God, I pray that we would repent of that and say we're going to flex. We're going to work together. We certainly need to and now more than ever, for us to be in a church, settle in in a small group, to settle in in a sub-congregation to settle in and do what you call this to do and just how joyful it is. I know this personally to have decades-long relationships with those who have weathered whatever misunderstandings may come. So prayers for the future. Thanks for this time. This reminder from the Apostle Paul.

In Jesus name, Amen.