

March 25, 2007  
Keeping Religion Simple  
Acts 21:17-36

Last week we traveled with Paul as he journeyed from one port of call to the next on his way to Jerusalem. It was an eye-opening journey for me. I had never before seen the importance of the church as I did in those first sixteen verses in chapter twenty one. The word church is not once mentioned but the reality of church is everywhere present. Every place Paul went, he was encouraged by the church, men and women who were strangers to him and yet brothers and sisters because of their relationship with Jesus Christ.

The early church was anything but a club. There was nothing exclusive about the people of God. These early Christians believed that they were to extend God's grace and love to the world. Carl Sandberg was once asked what he believed to be the ugliest word in the English language. He thought a moment and then said, "The ugliest word in the English language is "exclusive." Maybe for God, too, exclusive is the ugliest word in his vocabulary, for God so loved the entire world.

When Paul arrives in Jerusalem, he wants to tell them the Gospel is for all people. James, the brother of Jesus, greets Paul and his companions along with the elders of the church in Jerusalem. Paul shared all that God had done through his preaching and teaching and the church in Jerusalem "praised God" (v. 20). It must have been a wonderful homecoming for Paul.

*Then...*there always seems to be a "*then*," doesn't there? "I was really doing well on that test, *then*..." Boy, our relationship was going great, *then*..." "I was feeling great, *then*..." They can't just rejoice with Paul and have dinner and all go home praising God. They have to bring up a "*then*." "*Then* they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law'" (v. 20). One has to admire the way James broke the news to Paul. It almost sounds like he is rejoicing in the number of these church members. The Greek word "myriad" used for thousands indicates that there were thousands upon thousands of Jews who made decisions to follow Jesus. That's a good thing, don't you think? But that little phrase "they are all zealous for the law" clues Paul in that trouble lies ahead.

What does it mean to be "zealous for the law?" To be zealous for the law doesn't sound all that ominous. I mean, we admire people who keep the law. The Ten Commandments are God's laws and we believe that as followers of Jesus we are bound by them. And in these verses Paul himself observes Jewish law by taking the oath of a Nazarite, testifying to his commitment to the Jewish rite of purification. We teach our kids to keep the law. We put people in jail who break the law. If there are thousands upon thousands of people who believe in Jesus and who are keeping the law, what's the problem? Sounds like maybe James and the elders have a pretty good church, right?

Not so fast. Sometimes being zealous for the law can serve as an excuse for not doing what is right. Say, your mother-in-law is over for dinner and suddenly develops an acute appendicitis. You assist your mother-in-law into the car and began driving to the hospital. The wife becomes hysterical and pleads with you to drive as fast as you can. But the traffic signs clearly indicate that the speed limit is thirty-five miles per hour. You are a law abiding citizen and keep the car well below the speed limit. You don't want to break the law, right? You are just zealous for the law.

Late one night a man enters one of those expensive hotels in New York and checks into his hotel. As he approaches the elevator a sign reads: "Dogs must be carried on elevator." The man stops. He thinks to himself, "Where in the world am I going to get a dog this time of night?" Taken to the extreme, laws can be a bit ridiculous.

Once a woman was brought to Jesus who had been taken in the very act of adultery. The Law of Moses in Leviticus 20 clearly states that this woman should be put to death. Had you been there what verdict would you have given to the woman? Would you have followed the law, the teachings of scripture?

The Jewish religion during the time of Jesus had hundreds of laws. It had become a religion of do's and don'ts. Righteous people were judged as those people who maintained the outward appearance of religion. Think of it this way: A person may go to church every Sunday, may tithe, may not steal or kill anyone. From every appearance he may indeed be a model Christian. But isn't there more to being a Christian than merely keeping the external appearance of the law?

I'm sure you have been keeping up with the decommissioning of the U.S.S. John F. Kennedy. After thirty-nine years of protecting our country, the navy is retiring this magnificent carrier. I'm told she will be towed to Boston where she will become a museum. What I didn't know until a few weeks ago is that the engines will be removed from this floating battle wagon. Those huge power plants that move this huge monster on the sea with unbelievable speed will be placed in storage, perhaps for some future use. Meanwhile, the Kennedy will be just a shell of her former self. From the outside, the casual observer will think the ship is still capable of getting under way, but in reality the ship will be dead in the water. Appearances can be very deceiving.

The psalmist was well aware of deceptive appearances when he confessed to God, "For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps. 51:16-17).

What were these people who were zealous for the law zealous about? Were they zealous about doing right, feeding the poor, caring for the sick? Primarily, they were zealous to circumcise their children and observe the customs of their traditions (v.21). Sounds a little to me like these folks are rather zealous about keeping up the appearance of religion. They want some external indication that they are more religious than other people. Outward, external rituals can be a substitute for inner transformation of the heart. Interestingly, Jesus failed to impress the Pharisees with his observance of religion. He mixed with the wrong crowd and frequently befriended tax-collectors and prostitutes. Jesus knew that true religion was a matter of what was within a person, the nature of one's heart.

Still, to be zealous for the law is not a bad thing, as long as you are zealous for the right law. Is there one law, one rule that can serve as a guide in our Christian life? Actually, there is one law that stands above all others. It can be found all the way back in the Book of Deuteronomy: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut.6:5). This command is often referred to as the Shema. It is the one command that stood first of all that God required of Israel. It is implied in the first of the ten commandments of Exodus twenty that there shall be "no other gods before me" (Ex.20:3). Jesus interpreted this command and fleshed it out for Israel by adding "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). Jesus taught that to love God meant to love one's neighbor. Loving God and loving others went hand in hand. In fact so central was this command that Jesus

said, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:40). Wow! All the rules and laws and regulations of religion can be summed up in loving God and loving others. Religion is as simple as that.

If you want some measurable way to determine if you are really growing in your faith toward God, Jesus gives you a sure-fire test: Are you growing in your love for your neighbor? The love that Jesus speaks of is not just a warm, fuzzy kind of feeling. Love gives itself sacrificially to the other person. Love loves unconditionally with no strings. And what is so amazing about this love is who it is directed towards. Neighbor is not someone like us but quite different from us--different in culture, religion--in all the important ways neighbor is a person unlike us. To help us understand precisely who neighbor is, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk.10).

Jews and Samaritans were hostile toward one another. Each thought the other to be vile and dirty. If a Jew saw a Samaritan he would stay as far away as possible and the Samaritan felt the same way. Yet, in the story Jesus tells us, the Samaritan does the unthinkable: He helps a Jew. In other words, to love one's neighbor means to love without cultural or religious or racial borders, without any borders whatsoever. In the last phrase of that wonderful story Jesus tells his hearers "Go and do likewise..."

Those who know how to keep up the appearance of religion know how to play the game but do not know how to live the life. While Paul is in the temple, in a place of worship, the crowd turns on him and drags him outside to kill him. Only the intervention of the Roman soldiers keeps Paul from being murdered by those who are zealous for the law. Go figure! Paul goes to the temple to pray and almost gets killed. He has to go to a Roman army barracks to find peace and quiet. Church people who only keep up the appearances of religion always drive those who are sincerely seeking God away.

Of course those who are zealous for the law would never admit that they were driving people away from church. They would confess that they love God and are just protecting the church. But their motives are soon exposed: They simply don't love their neighbor. And when you do not love others, you fail the test of being zealous for the law.

Once I served a church where the staff decided to reach out into the community and invite the neighborhood children. Most of the church embraced this idea and helped us with the details. But some in the church became furious. In a business meeting they voiced their angry objection to our outreach plan with: "If we invite all those neighborhood kids, they will put their dirty hands on our walls, and leave gum wrappers everywhere and goodness knows what else." It seems funny now but at the time that little delegation of people almost divided the church.

Religion is really pretty simple. It all boils down to the Royal Law: Love God, love your neighbor. The rest, well, the rest you can figure out as you go along. Are you zealous for the law? I mean, are you zealous for the real law, the Royal Law? It is the only law that matters. Amen.