

January 30, 2005

“When the Difficulties Are People”  
Acts 21:17-26

FCF: Confusion as to how to deal with interpersonal difficulty

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) We must reconsider our response to difficult people,  
(magnet) because we are all part of one body.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Should I be gentle or firm in what I say? Should I focus on the issues or pay attention to their perceptions? Should I look first for points of agreement or seek out chinks in their armor? I know everyone says “all truth is relative.” But, dog-gone-it, I know the truth. And what they did, what they said, and the way they went about it was wrong! They were wrong. And they’ve wronged me. But what should I do?

Ah, the joys of interpersonal conflict. The struggle is real – for all of us. It’s real. It’s significant. And not surprisingly, the Lord of all of life has not left it unaddressed in His Word. No, He knows us too well and loves us too much to leave us on our own.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** Acts 21:17-26

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

As many of you know, today something remarkable is taking place in Iraq – the first multiparty election since 1924. But the sun will not go down this day without the shedding of blood. Insurgents, terrorists, and others with a stake in disrupting the process will make sure of that. And so the Iraqis and the Coalition forces have prepared for the worst, taking the approach that it’s not a question of “if” it will happen but “when” and “how we will respond.” Such inevitability demands a certain level of preparedness.

Some problems are inevitable. That’s true in all areas of life. I alluded to one area just a few minutes ago – the inevitabilities of interpersonal problems, of differences, disagreements, and sometimes even strife. That’s to be expected. We get bad information. We make bad assumptions – often about others. Decisions have to be made on limited resources over which we have different opinions – whether money, energy, or time. And compounding things, there’s that dark stripe running through us all, staining us at the core. Interpersonal problems are a given. We should expect them.

Most often, though, the problems stem from people. Even in the church. Sometimes well-meaning folks standing at our side. Remember what transpired just before this passage. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, sure that that was the direction he must go. But the Holy Spirit revealed to him and to his companions that this would be hard. And so, meaning well, they began to try and change his mind. Now, eventually they came around. But even still, it would have been better for them to have supported him another way. All this is to say, sometimes difficult people are well meaning people.

They’re standing at your side. But other times, they’re standing against you. Which is what we see here. Poorly informed, uncharitable judgments – all showing the dangers of rumors and our susceptibility to them. Ah, life in the church. Surely it’s why some wise sage once noticed it’s something like life on Noah’s ark – if it weren’t for the flood on the outside you wouldn’t be able to stand the stench on the inside. Or, as Martin Luther noted, we are saints but sinners still. And so, again, such problems are inevitable.

But that’s not to say we should respond by our impulses, that what we do should be governed by the first thing that comes to mind. Hardly. The frustration that sets in, the anger, the self-pity, self-righteousness, self-defense, self-isolation – all the things we are so prone to when in conflict with one another – need to be questioned and checked.

Why? Because “body life” demands it. Not being a part unto ourselves, rather being a part of something bigger than ourselves, the Church, a larger body, demands it.

## **I. SUBMITTING TO THE INSIGHT OF OTHERS**

Now what do I mean? Well, look with me at what we see here in Acts 21 and the need we have in the midst of interpersonal difficulty to submit to the insight of others. For though it hardly comes naturally, it’s desperately needed. We see this in Paul’s willingness to submit himself to James’ suggestion of a way to preserve the peace of the church – the same James who also wrote about wisdom and the dangers of the tongue.

### *A) Because of Their Insight*

Paul heeds these words because of their source, the insight they bring.

#### 1. Maturity

James was someone he could trust, someone he had counseled with before – especially back in the Jerusalem Council as we see in Acts 15 and the dealings there with similar issues. James is clearly one who is responding with a level of maturity – not regretting but rejoicing in the news Paul brings of his ministry and receiving him with open arms.

#### 2. Knowledge of the situation

But James is also one who has knowledge of the situation in Jerusalem – knowledge Paul may not have had. Things were changing. Tension was in the air. The people’s pride in their nation, in their culture, in their identity was soaring. So much so that in just a few short years, the Romans would destroy the Temple and everyone who got in their way.

### *B) Because of Our Blindness*

James had insight. He could be trusted. And so Paul listened to him. Especially because he knew he couldn’t completely trust himself. For he, as we all, had blind spots.

#### 1. Mortal limitations

Blind spots because of our mortal limitations. We are not God. None of us are – all knowing or all present. It’s not possible for us to have all the facts.

#### 2. Sinful biases

But not only that, we have a tendency to twist the few facts we have. Paul said elsewhere (**READ 1 Corinthians 4:3b-4**). A clean conscience is not an absolute guarantee we have clean hands. And, especially in this case, the anger of being falsely accused can make one prone to responding in kind – with harsh words and severe measures.

That’s what Paul was enduring here. And surely he was tempted. Here he was making a special effort to visit this church with the news of the Lord’s wondrous work among the Gentiles, bearing with him an offering, a gift, from the Gentiles to their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. And what does he find? Suspicion and resentment.

It was the Lord’s grace to him, evidence of the Spirit’s work in his heart, that Paul was able to respond as he did with such humility. Granting glory for all that had happened not to himself but to the Lord alone (**READ Acts 21:19**). That same humility is then reflected in his willingness to pay heed to the Lord’s counsel as it came to him from his fellow brother, James. That’s the Lord’s grace working in his heart.

### *Application:*

And we would do well to pay heed to it. And to the means through which this grace came – pursuing others, opening up to them, listening to what they had to say, giving the Spirit a chance to speak. We need to recognize the gravitational pull upon us all – especially in times of interpersonal difficulty – to seek out no one, to heed no one, and to act on our own. We need to be wary of that and to listen to others around us.

But there is caution to be taken. Be careful who you listen to. Paul heard and heeded a fellow brother in Christ – one in whom the Spirit dwelled, whose heart had been shaped by the Scriptures, who would say what needed to be said. That’s what we need. Not necessarily someone we want to hear but someone we need to hear. Seek with care.

*Illustration:*

There’s a football game being played next Sunday. You may have heard about it. And whoever wins – the Patriots or the Eagles – it’s going to take the proverbial “team effort.” Different players in different positions with different skills playing different roles – all towards the same goal. It would be the height of foolishness, of arrogance, for any one of them to think they could do it all. Each needs the effort of the others.

So do we. We were made to rely on one another. Again, especially in conflict for so much of what we’re called to be and do does not come naturally. We need the body.

## **II. SUBMITTING TO THE NEEDS OF OTHERS**

Yet the realities of this body life come out in other ways as well – not just in terms of how our needs are met but others’. Here again we see things that do not come naturally – submitting ourselves to the insight of others and submitting ourselves to the needs of others as well. Think with me as to what was behind James’ suggestion.

### *A) Standing Firm for the Gospel*

First, the need to stand firm for the gospel – not just for the message itself but for its effects, longing to see it not only heard but lived out in the lives of others.

#### 1. What was not at stake

Let me explain some of the details as to what James and Paul had determined to do here. They are referring to Nazarite vows – a time of abstaining from wine and of growing out one’s hair at the end of which the hair was cut and then burned with other sacrifices at the Temple. They were concrete expressions of gratitude or longing for future blessing.

Now for a Jewish Christian (someone raised in Judaism but converted to Christianity), performing these vows was simply part of their culture. In itself, it was not diluting the message of the gospel – “salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.” In doing this, Paul and the others were not “adding to the gospel.” But nor were they “abandoning their culture.” He had already done something like this in chapter 18. And it simply fits into an overall pattern of how he regarded the Jewish traditions. Whether it was things to do with vows or circumcision or food, where it furthered the gospel, Paul encouraged it. Where it did not, he forbid it. People were free to do it so long as they were not binding others to it, adding rules, laws, hoops where there were none.

#### 2. What was at stake

All this is to say that the purity of the gospel is not at stake with what Paul was doing here. But the peace of the church was. There was the real possibility of a split within the church in Jerusalem over this. Paul understood these things. James and the elders understood these things. But not everyone else did. You see it in the foolishness of their believing rumors about Paul’s teaching. You see it in their immaturity and insecurity. There really are people like this still. And you can tell. They don’t have “legalist” stamped on their forehead. But you can tell in discerning how guilty they make others feel, in the things they add to the gospel, in the lack of joy in their lives. You can tell.

### *B) Walking in Step with the Gospel*

Paul is standing firm in the gospel – in longing to see it being worked out in people’s lives. He is walking in step with the gospel. He has the mind of a theologian

and the heart of a shepherd (**READ 1 Corinthians 9:19-23**). “All things to all people” – in reaching out to people with the gospel and seeing them nurtured and maturing as well.

1. The reality of Paul’s freedom

Think of the reality of Paul’s freedom here. In one sense, he didn’t have to do this. His standing before Christ was not at stake. He was free. He didn’t have to do any of this.

2. The direction of Paul’s freedom

But in another sense he did. His standing before Christ may not have been in jeopardy. But his standing with others was. And, in a way, so too was their standing with Christ. These were brothers and sisters. These were people for whom his Lord had died.

And so he submitted himself to the needs of others. And note this. For Paul, this was not a question of “who was right and who was wrong?” They were wrong. And Paul knew that. It was a question rather of “will I – even when right – respond in the right way?”

*Application:*

This is a call for balance. Sometimes, yes, the situation calls for being firm in the details, in the nuances of the faith. Read Galatians. But sometimes it calls for gentleness and forbearance. There’s a need for balance. And caution. For we are not prone to standing firm on the things we should. And so when we are, a gut check is needed. But nor are we prone to being gentle and open on the things we should. And so again, when we are, a gut check is needed. Balance and caution. Continual prayer and discernment.

Asking questions of ourselves and one another all the time. What do I love more? My freedom or my fellow freedmen? Who do I love more? Myself? Them? Or Christ? Our response to difficult people needs to be taken through such a filtering process.

For again, as I said before, we are all one body. We need each other. Even the difficult people. For their sake and even our own. The care I give to them will eventually affect me. So is it a firm stand or a gentle hand? Pray for the Lord’s help – for wisdom, insight, with others. And pray expectantly. Listen. He died for them. And He looks to us to live for them. This is body life – submitting to the needs of others.

**CONCLUSION:**

What we’re talking about here is the strong bearing with the weak – those who are more grounded, those whose faith is more mature and deeply rooted, looking out for the frailties of others, looking to Christ to strengthen us all. It’s body life fleshed out.

Think with me. Think of a significant injury. Back last spring, I sprained my ankle while out playing in the yard with my kids. I had to spend the next few hours keeping it up and on ice. And the next several days had to be spent with each step significantly favoring the other foot, keeping as much weight off that ankle as I could. The movement of my whole body was altered for the sake of a few little tendons. Not that the rest of the body – the stronger, more healthy parts – had to. They could function without taking on such a load. But they needed to for the sake of the one, the few, and when you think about it, really for themselves. The strong bearing with the weak.

And isn’t that what Christ has done? Taking us on as His load? Not just once for all on the cross, but in bearing with our foolishness, our stubbornness, our pride? Is that not cause for us to do the same for others? For the strong to bear with the weak? And is it not our Lord who alone enables us to do this – bearing with others’ weakness? May He in His grace, who so lovingly bears with us and bears us up, work within our hearts to show mercy to those who are weak. And may we see ourselves in them.

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