

Title: A Christian and An Imperfect Government
Text: Acts 25.1-12
Theme: Our relationship to authority
Series: Acts
Prop Stmt: God uses and even overrules an imperfect government for our good

The book of Acts is the story of the early church. This is our story. These are the shoulders we stand on. This book helps us understand what has gone on before us and what we can expect from this world. When we witness racial animosity, and various levels of angst and struggle in how to think rightly about this and help one another, we should not be surprised by the depth and intensity of the conflict. After all, think about this. What event marked the birthday of the church? What was it? It was the day of Pentecost. On that Jewish holiday, people from various regions of the world heard the same gospel in their own language. The birthday of the church marked a new stage in God's plan. Thousands of years before, the world was unified in her rebellion against God and God divided the world as a curse, as a punishment for her rebellion. And he divided her through languages. But now, through the gospel, through the church, God was initiating his plan to unite the world in Christ and on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the curse was being reversed. God's plan is to make one people out of many, one nation out of many, and one voice out of many languages. The plan of God as unfolded in the pages of Scripture to have this new people of God who all hear the word of God with their hearts and love one another from the heart, is glorious! It is beautiful. And Satan hates it and opposes it and will work like hell in his effort to stop it. So, from 30,000 feet as we do a flyover of the Bible, we see that the issue of racial understanding, racial harmony, racial reconciliation, racial conflict, racial struggle (all things racial) are fraught with trouble. And this trouble is put right in front of our noses over and over in this book.

What happens in Acts 2 is that some of the early believers (who were Jewish) began to speak the Word of God in other languages. This was not just a miraculous experience that got attention. This was a preview of what was going to happen. God was serious about the gospel going out from Jerusalem to Samaria (historically a racial issue) to Judea and then all over the world. And the book of Acts is now tracing that story line. We are watching how the gospel is spreading out. Early on it was primarily the Jews who came to faith in Christ. Then Samaritans started believing, then Gentiles started believing and things started getting really tense and messy. The question that was raised then was, is this gospel strong enough to hold all of these people together? There is so much going on in this book and you and I do not appreciate all of it unless we understand how the issue of racial animosity is the big pot in which this soup is boiling.

Take for example our text. The apostle Paul is in prison basically because he is accused of being accepting of the Gentiles. The Jewish leaders are lit up over that and are accusing him of violating the OT law and want him dead. They are so angry and riotous about this, that they are plotting and scheming to kill him, while Paul is explaining that what Christ has done and what he is following is actually the fulfillment of the OT law. He is proving that they are on the wrong side of history. They are on the wrong side of His story. The Jewish leaders want to define what it means to be as a Jew as someone who does not associate with Gentiles. Paul teaches, preaches and practices that because of the gospel, because of what Christ as done that every single person (no matter what their race) who comes to faith in Christ is placed into a new family, becomes

part of a new Temple, is in a new nation, is made a citizen of a new kingdom, where all of the races in all their glory and splendor become the race of the redeemed. That issue in theory is opposed, therefore (and this is a big therefore), we should expect that this issue in practice will be a struggle.

As the people of God, we hate and grieve over the death of George Floyd and all people who suffer injustice. We hate and grieve the fact some have exploited this for their own wickedness. We hate racism. We hate the fact that we feel the cloud of this hanging over our lives. We feel the weight of this, we really do. We all obviously feel it differently, just as we all grieve differently, but whether we are able to humbly and constructively talk about it today with each other, or tomorrow, or have to wait, we know that as the people of God, we need to, so that we can help each other follow Jesus better and be a preview of what is going to happen, when people from every tribe, language and nation are arm in arm around the throne and are all singing a new song together. That day is guaranteed to come. We struggle and press on, this day, at this time, in the midst of this challenge, because that day is coming.

Read text:

Can you imagine a government official playing to a religious crowd in order to get their support so that he can pursue his agenda or stay in power? Many government officials play that game because many religious crowds are naïve enough to be played or are playing it too and both have the wrong view of power, the wrong view of God and the wrong view of one another. The gospel church is called to be different and not to play that game nor allow itself to be played because the gospel is too precious to be surrendered to politics. In this text a religious crowd is trying to play the official who is trying to play them. In the middle of this messy situation is Paul seemingly at the mercy of it all. He is the Christian at the mercy of an imperfect government. Paul's situation is complicated and controversial because there are various factors, like tributaries that feed this contextual river.

I. **The gospel has historically resulted in animosity.** (1-3)

We all know that behind all of this animosity is the enemy of our souls who hates God, hates Christ, hates the gospel, hates the church, hates unity and fellowship in the gospel, and hates you and will exploit every opportunity he can to keep to defame the gospel, including misinformation, misunderstanding, hypocrisy and fear.

Festus is the new governor of the region, having been appointed by Rome to take over for and replace Felix. It sounds like Festus has been briefed fairly well and has been informed on where the hot spots are in Israel, what the issues are, and who he needs to work with to keep things calm. So, three days after arriving in the province, Festus makes his first official visit to Jerusalem where he meets with the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews (which I take to be members of the Sanhedrin) who lay out their case against Paul and “they urged him” and asked for a favor that he summon Paul to Jerusalem for a hearing because they wanted to ambush Paul and kill him before he ever gets to Jerusalem. This is obviously a slight and necessary modification to their original plan to ambush Paul and kill him back when they asked for a second trial in Jerusalem two years before. They still want to kill him.

Wow! It's been two years and Paul is still in prison in Caesarea. It's been two years and you would think that there are plenty of other issues that would occupy these men. Can't they let this go? They have not forgotten and apparently are not willing to let this go until Paul is dead. Why the anger? Why do they hate Paul so much?

A. There are many examples of misinformation.

Paul was accused of bringing a Gentile into the Jews only section of the Temple area, which he did not do. This whole debacle began back in chapter 21, when (v.29) the Jews from Asia (modern day Turkey) who knew of Paul's ministry in Ephesus and related cities started yelling and accusing Paul of bringing Greeks into the temple because "they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple." But, after asking Paul about it, they got clarification and apologized. Did that happen? No! They made an accusation, they kept making the accusation. In the trial before Felix Paul was accused of stirring up riots among all the Jews. Did he do that? No, but they keep repeating this accusation and now Paul has been in prison for two years. Do not surprised by the fact that people lie about Christians and about Christianity. People lied about Jesus. They lied about Paul. They will lie about you. And others will believe those lies and it creates a lot of confusion. Lies are terrible, but they are effective because bad news travels fast.

B. There are many examples of misunderstanding.

Paul is arrested in the Temple area because the Roman Tribune thought he was the Egyptian who was the ringleader of a revolt. Paul has to clarify that to the Tribune. Paul has to inform the Tribune later on that he is a Roman citizen. And last week in chapter 24, Paul has to clarify the details about what actually happened.

So, here we are two years later. Felix has been replaced by Festus and one of the first things that Festus does is go to Jerusalem and hears about these charges against Paul. And they are still saying the same thing. They keep playing the same song. It is simply false. But, the misinformation that these men charge Paul with has resulted in a lot of misunderstanding by others in the city and surrounding area regarding what Christians really believe and what their agenda really is.

C. There are many examples of hypocrisy.

Now, this is not in the text explicitly, but what adds to some of the animosity that people have toward the gospel is when we do the same thing to others that we complain about when they are done to us. When we do not give people the benefit of the doubt in a conversation, or are quick to condemn a politician that we are not in alignment with, we are acting no different than our world. There is a lot of confusion about what genuine Christianity really is and we can add to that confusion by not living in a manner consistent with our message. Then, there is the fact that

D. The gospel exposes the sin in my own life.

Of course, that is really hard to face. The gospel is unique and controversial in this regard. The religions of the world look at the world's problems as being out there (society and world) and the solution as being in here (self). Christianity says that the problem is in here (self) and therefore the solution has to come from outside of us. That is hard for many people to embrace.

We are swimming in water of this world that is influenced by all of these factors that make it murky and difficult to see clearly. The other day I was talking with some neighbors and they asked me what line of work I was in. When I told them, one of them said, "Can I ask you something?" I said, "sure." And she said, "Do you bring politics into the pulpit?" And the way she asked it led me to believe that there was a lot behind that question. Was it misinformation, misunderstanding, some bad experiences with Christians, was it wrong beliefs that she had that she did not want to confront? I don't know. But, we all swim in this water. Do not be surprised when you get labeled and when your faith does not get a fair hearing.

II. People tend to leverage their influence for their own agendas. (3)

This past week, the former president of the UAW pleaded guilty "to helping steal more than \$1 million from rank-and-file workers as part of racketeering scheme." The UAW was born to protect the workers. It is maddening when the organization that is supposed to protect the workers is led by people who steal from them. But, this has been going on for centuries.

A. The Jews

Look at v.3. The Jews were "asking as a favor against Paul." They wanted the venue of the trial changed so that they would have the opportunity to kill him. These men were using their position, their clout, their influence, their reputation as Jews to play a power card so they could kill a Jew. There was a hidden agenda and these religious Jews were willing play this card of leverage in order to have the opportunity to commit murder. What kind of a religion is that? What kind of a faith is that? What kind of leadership is this? This is quintessential back room deal, isn't it? Festus meets with them and he knows that his success as their leader is dependent to a large degree upon getting along with them and they know that they have this power and they are willing to use it. Are these Jews acting in such a way that if they actually got what they wanted that Festus would be so impressed with their religion and his heart so moved by them that he would be interested in knowing more about what the Jewish faith was all about? Of course not! They are not acting any different than anyone else. And no different than Festus.

B. Festus

According to v.9, Festus was wishing to do the Jews a favor. Festus was willing to send Paul back to Jerusalem to face charges there in order to get the support of the Jews. So, what is going on is two forces using their power to benefit themselves with a Christian as a disposable pawn.

C. Christians

Brothers and sisters, we are different. We do not use the weapons of this world to advance our cause. We do not fight our battles with threats, with abusive speech, with hateful comments. We do not sling mud. We help diffuse situations, not escalate them.

Listen again to what Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth. “For though we walk in the flesh (we live in this present world in human bodies), we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.” We do not resort to calling names, to be hateful, divisive, dismissive or to treat people as the enemy. Anyone can do that. There is nothing supernatural about doing that. The reality is this...

III. **True justice is often elusive.** (9)

A. **God gives us government for our good.**

A few months earlier, Paul wrote to the believers in Rome.

Romans 13.1-7 (read and comment)

The government we are given is for our good. Festus initially appears to be an honorable man. We know that Felix wasn't, yet Paul was very respectful. Felix appears to start off on the right foot. He meets with the Jewish leaders and they want him to do them a favor. He doesn't give them their request. He invites them to come to Caesarea so he can hear the case for himself. And we think, well, ok then, this may work out for Paul after all. Once again, the unproven charges are brought against Paul and Paul speaks on his own behalf. The text sounds like an abbreviated version of what actually happened. But look at how v.9 begins. “But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor...” Once again, here it is...

B. **We are governed by imperfect people.**

Do you have to agree with the government official in order to show him or her honor? Only Jesus is a perfect Ruler. You will find flaws in all leaders. We are governed by imperfect people. Do not expect perfect consistency. And by the way, if our governor attended our service and we announced that she was here, I would expect you to stand with me in honor of her office. If the president attended our service and we announced that he was here, I would expect that you would stand with me in honor of his office. Can I explain the logic of all of their decisions? No, but that has no bearing on whether or not I am to honor to them. When you dishonor officials, you are letting the world squeeze you into its mold. Don't let them do this to you.

Our government is going to be flawed. No government is going to get things right until Christ rules in his kingdom. That is not an excuse to tolerate or excuse injustice, but it is a good reminder that we are not home yet. Therefore,

C. **Guard your heart from hoping too much and despairing too much.**

Beloved, we are going to get home. We are. The griefs of this world, the sufferings of this world (as Paul says in Romans 8) are real, but they are going to get blown away by the glories of our

life to come. I am going to be disappointed in this world, but no matter how much I dream or how big I dream, the world to come will blow me away so much that I will most likely forget my disappointments. So I am free to grieve knowing that grief will not last. I am also free to dream, knowing that ultimately I will not get let down.

IV. **God uses imperfect leaders to carry out his perfect plan.** (10-11)

What is God doing? He is taking the gospel to the ends of the earth and as part of that, he is using this event as the means to get Paul to Rome, where Paul will write several more books of the Bible, that will be used to spread the gospel, make hotspots for the gospel, and build the church all over the world. Jerusalem was seven years from chaos and eleven years from destruction and devastation. In ten years, the Jewish nation would be wiped out, but the gospel continued.

When someone we love is treated unjustly, we know that even that is leveraged by God to bring about a perfectly just and glorious kingdom. Press on brothers and sisters. God will keep us until that day and for that day.