

**Acts 24:1-27, No. 49****“Making the Case”****October 16, 2019****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Paul has been taken from Jerusalem to Caesarea for his own safety and for the adjudication of charges made against him by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem.

**Text Comment**

- v.2 Isn't it amazing how similar that world was to ours today? The Jews came to present their charges, but they needed a lawyer to conduct their case. It was the lawyer who did the talking. In the terms we would use today, Tertullus opened for the prosecution.
- v.3 Lawyers weren't then, as they are aren't now, above telling an outright lie in court if it would help their case. The fact was that Jewish/Roman relations had deteriorated during Felix' governorship, few Jews would have said that he had been a reformer of any kind, and whatever was in the Jewish mind toward Felix it wasn't gratitude. They despised the man. But in Roman court procedure this opening was commonplace, so commonplace, it had a name, the *captatio benevolentiae*, an endeavor to secure the judge's good will. [Peterson, 631n]
- v.5 “Nazarene” was a term invented by the enemies of the Christian faith to describe the Christians. That Jesus had hailed from Nazareth was common knowledge and the insignificance of the town is what they wished to attach to the reputation of both Jesus and his followers. In other words, “Nazarene” was a slur.
- What is interesting in Tertullus' opening gambit is the confirmation it provides for the fact that the Jews in Jerusalem were well aware of how influential Paul had been throughout the diaspora. They knew he had been attracting converts from the synagogues in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean world. Had Paul been unsuccessful or just modestly successful in his evangelistic work, they wouldn't have bothered with him; but they obviously considered him a serious threat and wanted him eliminated.
- v.6 This is what is called making a silk purse out of a sow's ear. He hadn't started the riot, the Jews had. They hadn't stopped it, the Romans had. And, of course, Paul had not profaned the temple, he had been there that day precisely to remove ceremonial defilement to preserve the temple's purity.
- v.9 As in our legal system, testimony was taken to confirm the charges that had been made.
- v.10 Paul had to defend himself. He had no lawyer and, as his defense unfolds, we are left thinking that he wouldn't have wanted one. He was less interested in defending himself at the bar, in the strict sense, than in making a case for and bearing witness to the gospel of Christ. In any case he likewise begins with a *captatio benevolentiae*, though much more modest and truthful. [Stott, 361]

- v.12 In other words, if Felix cared to, he could easily enough verify the truth of what Paul was saying. He had been in the city only twelve days, nor was he prosecuting a public ministry during those days. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship in the temple as a loyal Jew. In other words, he was no troublemaker, as the Jews were alleging. The mention of his attending synagogues in Jerusalem is a further indication that Jewish Christians were not only continuing to worship in the temple, they were worshipping in the synagogues as well, at least in those synagogues whose leadership had not yet made them positively unwelcome. The Christian and non-Christian Jews, in other words, were still mingling in the Jewish church, much as the Reformed and unreformed parts of the church still mingled in the same sanctuaries for some time after the beginning of the Reformation or as conservatives and liberals still mingled in Protestant churches after the rise of theological liberalism in those denominations. It was a situation that couldn't last and didn't. The division between them was too deep, too fundamental, and would finally force a separation, the very separation that had occurred regularly in the synagogues of the diaspora, requiring new churches, specifically Christian, to be formed in those same cities.
- v.14 The term "sect" is used without prejudice in Acts of a particular party within Judaism, such as the Pharisees or the Sadducees. But here it seems to suggest something unworthy of credit. But Paul replies that he too worships and serves the God of the Jews, follows the same Hebrew Scriptures, and has the same hope of resurrection.
- v.15 Paul admits to Felix that there is a theological/religious division among the Jews. That would have come as no surprise to Felix. We will read in v. 22 that he knew very well who the Christians were and what they believed. There were, of course, other issues that then set Jew against Jew, most notably that between the defenders of the status quo and the zealots, who were rabidly and often violently anti-Roman.
- v.16 In the Bible there is always this double obligation: to God and to man. They are possible to distinguish, but they are impossible to separate. Neither can be met without the other.
- v.17 The fact that Paul seems to have had access to money may be what led Felix to believe that he would be able to pay a bribe, a common expectation of Roman governors and of a man like Felix in particular. We will read that this was his expectation in v. 26.
- v.19 Remember the Jews who started this whole affair were from Corinth and, perhaps, had followed Paul to Jerusalem hoping to make trouble for him. Roman law did not favor men who made accusations but failed to carry through on them in a legal proceeding. [Sherwin-White in Stott, 362]
- v.23 He ought to have released Paul, but he did see to it that he was treated in a manner appropriate for a Roman citizen who had not been convicted of a crime. What is more, Luke himself would have had rather easy access to Paul throughout his two-year incarceration, further indication that Paul would have had something to do with the writing of both Luke's Gospel and the volume we know as Acts. No doubt he was also

visited by others, such as Philip and his family who lived in Caesarea, who would bring in burgers and fries at least once a week!

v.24 Interestingly, Drusilla was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I, the king whose execution of James and whose subsequent death Luke reported in chapter 12.

I find it fascinating and wonderfully confirming of the history of Luke's narrative, that we are given so much detail about Paul's fortunes once arrested, so much detail that can be confirmed with what is known from other sources about the people involved, about Roman legal procedures, and about the world of second-temple Judaism. No one reading this chapter can doubt that we are being given an account of things as they actually happened. But, if so here, why not everywhere else? But then the question is forced upon us: what particular purpose did Luke have in giving us these details. What are we to learn from this piece of history, besides, of course, how it was that Paul remained in Caesarea for some two years awaiting trial? That is important information in its own right, to be sure.

Among the other answers that might be given to that question – Holy Scripture is always *thick*, that is, every passage has layers of significance, of instruction, and of meaning – I say, another reason we have this information is surely that we might know how it was that Paul argued his case. How did he turn his legal defense into an opportunity to bear witness to the truth of Jesus Christ? We have seen Paul once before presenting the gospel to an entirely pagan audience and noticed that his approach differed on that occasion from his typical practice with the Jews. In Athens, before the philosophers, he did not cite the Scriptures as he characteristically did in speaking to Jews. The Greeks had no acquaintance with the Hebrew Scriptures and would have been unimpressed with an appeal its authority. So to the Gentiles Paul argued after the fashion that has come to be known as “Christian apologetics,” the making of general arguments that first make a way for the presentation of the gospel and then defend the gospel as a reasonable, if not the *most* reasonable, if not the *only* reasonable account of facts everyone knows to be true.

It appears that what Paul did here, before Felix and Drusilla, was something akin to what G.K. Chesterton did in his great book, *The Everlasting Man*, what C.S. Lewis did in his *Mere Christianity*, what Francis Schaeffer did in his *The God Who is There*, or what Ravi Zacharias did in his famous lectures at Harvard, later published in book form as *Can Man Live without God?*

In each case these apologists, these defenders of the faith, suited their argument to the audience they were trying to reach. There were two things about Felix and Drusilla that were no doubt known to Paul and considered to be important as he considered how to make his case before them. The first was that Felix was a pagan. He was married to a Jew, but he was himself a man of the Roman world and happily so. He cared little or nothing for what was taught in the Scriptures of the Jews. *He didn't like the Jews, didn't respect the Jews.* He was married to a Jew, but he didn't choose her because she was a Jew, far from it. Drusilla part Jew, but she was other things first. Felix was a cruel man, a vicious man, and as we learn in v. 26, an avaricious one.

The western text of Acts, which as I have several times reminded you, may or may not preserve some significant historical details, says that the initiative here was Drusilla's. She wanted to hear

Paul and Felix arranged the hearing to satisfy her. She was curious about Paul. She must have known something of his personal story and certainly was aware of his reputation. But don't make her into some kind of seeker. She had a reputation of her own, and it wasn't for spiritual interest. She had a reputation for being a ravishing beauty. It was for this reason that Felix had lured her away from her husband to have her for himself. She was his third wife. He was her second husband even though she wasn't quite 20 years of age when these events took place. She was no amateur theologian; she was a social climber. (By the way, she would eventually bear a son, also named Felix, who would be killed, together with her, in the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79.) In any case, Paul knew he was not speaking to Puritans. Their lax morals may well have had something to do with the argument he made. [Stott, 363]

In any case, he didn't simply preach the word to these two. Paul faced the same problem we face in the West today: he had to gain a hearing for our message among people who have little acquaintance with it and little reason to take it seriously, a message that struck at the roots of virtually every conventional opinion entertained in the Greco-Roman world. Years ago, when they introduced *Evangelism Explosion* to France, James Kennedy's method of Christian evangelism, they discovered that it didn't work with the typical French man or woman as it had in South Florida. The reason was that its fundamental assumption – viz. that everyone understands that what the Bible says ought to be taken seriously (an assumption one could make in the Bible belt in the 1960s and 70s when the program was developed) – was lost on the French. The *EE* approach assumed a confidence in the Bible that the French did not have. Apologists were needed to gain a hearing first. And nowadays that problem is commonplace in the United States as well. The residual confidence in the Bible has virtually disappeared in American culture. In the 1960s some 65% of Americans said they believed the Bible to be true. No longer. Now the number is in the 20s. In fact, nowadays many more Americans will say that there isn't such a thing as absolute truth than will say that you can find the truth in the Bible.

So Paul reasoned with them not first about whether he or the Jewish delegation most accurately represented the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, or whether Jesus had really come back from the dead, or whether he was the Messiah, questions that were not likely to be immediately interesting to them. Instead, we learn in v. 25, he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, and pressed his argument so effectively that Felix, not liking the way the conversation was heading and Paul having touched a nerve, called a halt to the proceedings.

We would love to know precisely what it was that Paul said, but Luke did not have space to put in a summary of his defense. But, apparently, what Paul gave to Felix and Drusilla was some form of what, in Christian apologetics, is typically referred to as the "moral argument." He seems to have argued that human beings are moral agents, that they know the good, but don't do it, and that they are, for that reason, subject to divine judgment. We have the basis for that argument in Romans 1 and 2, which, by the way, Paul had written at the most a few months before this, and so know that this thinking was fresh in his mind. Surely Paul must have argued many times along those lines. That makes it only more likely that he turned those insights into an argument for Felix and Drusilla.

The moral argument is an argument from reality as every human being encounters that reality in his own heart and in the observation of life. Dr. Schaeffer and Ravi Zacharias have used this argument to great effect in their lectures and books. But C.S. Lewis was the master at deploying an argument about righteousness, self-control and the coming judgment. Here is Lewis in *Mere Christianity*:

“First...human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly...they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the law of nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in. [21]

“[When I was an atheist] my argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of *just* and *unjust*? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. [45-46]

In *The Problem of Pain* Lewis argues similarly.

“[In] morality...man goes beyond anything that can be ‘given’ in the facts of experience. And it has characteristics too remarkable to be ignored. The moralities accepted among men may differ – though not so widely as is often claimed – but they all agree in prescribing a behavior which their adherents fail to practice. All men alike stand condemned, not by alien codes of ethics, but by their own, and all men therefore are conscious of guilt.” [21-22]

Dr. Schaeffer made the same argument in a somewhat different way. He pointed out that all that would be required to condemn any human being would be to hang a little tape recorder around his or her neck and then play back all the occasions when he or she condemned others for violating standards he or she violated as well. We are inescapably moral in our judgments – behavior is not simply useful or unhelpful to us; *it is always and everywhere right or wrong!* – but we all fail to live up to the morality we ourselves confess. He would go on to point out in his very winning way that it is morality after all, it is this universal moral code and this moral nature of human life that makes life bearable and, finally, beautiful. That there is such a thing as “good” is essential to human happiness and to any sense of meaning in life. But for *good* to exist, *ought* must exist and how can there be an *ought* in human life – how can it be said that human beings *should* live in a certain way – if God does not exist?

Until his death in 2007, Richard Rorty was something of a celebrity, a cultural phenomenon: a professional philosopher, an academic (he was a professor at Princeton, Virginia, and Stanford in turn), who was also a public figure, a popular gadfly, offering his advice to everyone about everything. He was the Bertrand Russell of his day. He was an atheist, a post-modernist, and so a serious relativist. He argued as a professional academic that there is no such thing as truth, no ultimate reality accessible to everyone, and so no morality binding on everyone because everything in life is shaped by the perspective of the one thinking about it or looking at it. He loved to say this is the boldest and most provocative way because then reporters would quote him: anyone who thinks he or she can locate reality is, he said, “a real live metaphysical prig” and, he would go on to say that, unfortunately “there are to be sure such dudes left.” So the

notion that there is such a thing as absolute truth or absolute morality was, for Richard Rorty, philosophically preposterous. No thinking person should think such a thought.

But, like everyone else who has ever argued and who argues this position today, Rorty was a moral absolutist of the purest sort. He referred contemptuously to people who believed in biblical morality as “the people who think that hounding gays out of the military promotes family values.” He likened people like us, evangelical Christians, as “the same honest, decent, blinkered, disastrous people who voted for Hitler in 1933.” [Citations in P. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance*, 123] But where does this moral outrage on the part of a moral relativist come from? How can someone who admits, even argues with all academic seriousness, that no one can defend a moral code to which all people are subject, then condemn with such viciousness people whose morals are different from his own? Whether Rorty ever really acknowledged the self-defeating nature of his philosophy I don’t know, but many others pointed out that his moral posturing was nothing short of hypocrisy, denying to others the right to make up their own reality while asserting his own right to pass judgment on them. Only in the university would such vacuous argument be taken seriously and only in the modern university would so few people be troubled by the obviously self-contradictory character of such a philosophy. For such views are not only hypocritical and self-defeating, they are *nonsense* in the technical, literal sense of the word. Rorty’s viewpoint was the assertion of an absolute truth that there is no absolute truth; it was his claim that every claim to real knowledge is falsified by the distortion of personal perspective, except, that is, his own claim to know that to be true.

My point is that even philosophers, even the brightest people among us, fall prey to these simple arguments that Paul would have made and that Christians have made ever since. Even the most sophisticated intellectual among us cannot escape his moral character; even those who deny with the greatest learning the existence of a moral code binding on all human beings betray their captivity to that moral code. It is just the age-old hypocrisy once again; Leon Trotsky felt it was entirely right for him to have killed the Czar’s children, but it was not right for Stalin to kill Trotsky’s children!

Alvin Plantinga, also a professional philosopher, argued that arguments like Rorty’s are invariably “cheap.” Such thinkers resolutely refuse to face the real implications of their principles. If there is no law-giver, no real and absolute “ought” in human life, if everything, including our moral reasoning, is finally nothing but matter and energy colliding accidentally, then there is no meaningful difference between the morality of Richard Rorty and the people he hates, between Mother Theresa and a serial killer, between Martin Luther King and the Ku Klux Klan. You cannot defend modern relativism and condemn the jihadist or the evangelical, at least you can’t if you’re honest and if you expect others to take you seriously.

But, more to the point, no one really believes that everyone has a perfect right to his or her own morality. Every human being utters with all seriousness and passion universal moral judgments all the time. Skinheads do it, self-proclaimed atheist scientists do it, professional philosophers do it, and politicians do it. Why? Because we all know – how we know is a matter of disagreement – but we all know that right and wrong *are real things*, objective things, hard, unbending things, that remain no matter what we or any other human being may think. Moral passion, which everyone has, is a bizarrely irrational and inexplicable characteristic of human life if right and

wrong do not actually exist. All the more is this true, and all the more must it be true, if guilt is a universal human experience: a recognition that we have failed to measure up to such standards *and are at fault for having done so!* Why would anyone condemn himself for no reason? Why would we live with the self-loathing for our moral failures if it were something that simple reflection on reality could remove?

But universal moral judgment and guilt can only be accounted for if there is a God who validates this morality. And that validation can exist only if right and wrong actually *make a difference*. But that can only be true if there is a judgment and if there are consequences that follow our behavior, whether right or wrong.

I don't know, of course, precisely how Paul argued his case. I suspect that *righteousness* was his argument that we are all moral creatures and know to do the good; and *self-control* was his argument that, though we admit there is a moral standard, we fail to heed it; and that *judgment* was his argument that there therefore must be a consequence to our behavior. I wonder why "self-control" is mentioned as being part of his argument. Perhaps he knew that was a weak spot for both Felix – who stole a beautiful woman from another man – and for Drusilla who was happy to commit adultery if only it would help her climb the social ladder.

But this is an argument as valid and as important to make, as powerful a recommendation for the truth of our Christian faith today, as ever it was in the first century. Every human being – everyone you rub shoulders with at work, in your neighborhood – no matter what he or she says when standing on his or her feet in debate, believes in right and wrong, believes deeply and passionately in it; cannot escape and does not want to escape the reality of moral conviction. It is what invests human life with meaning, significance, dignity, and purpose. This is a fact of every human life, has always been a fact of life, will always be a fact of life because we have been made in the image of a moral God. Paul knew that and framed his argument accordingly.

When we talk with others about righteousness, about self-control, and about the judgment we are talking about things they understand, they care about, and they cannot deny, not at least without exposing the self-contradiction of their own thought and life. Every human being knows that certain things are right and others are wrong. And every human being knows only too well how often he or she betrays that moral code. What better place for a Christian to begin than to explain where that universal moral code and sensitivity to that code came from and, after that, what is to be done about our failure, our universal failure, to meet its demands? I suspect that is precisely where Paul would have gone if Felix had given him the opportunity. But Felix could see all too clearly where Paul was going and he didn't want to go there. Like innumerable other human beings through the ages, he'd rather go home with his beautiful wife and eat a good meal and not have to think about the hard facts of life.