

The Paradox of Moral Heroism: When Going Above and Beyond the Call of Duty is What Duty Requires

A Sermon on Acts 21:1-16

Pastor Knox @ Faith Tacoma PCA

March 30, 2025 PM

As we've followed Paul's ministry in the book of Acts, we've seen two opposite themes. On the one hand, we've seen his fruitfulness: churches being planted across the Mediterranean world, Jews being convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, Gentiles burning their magic books, the Eutychus raised from the dead.

On the other hand, we've seen the theme of growing opposition to Paul and the gospel: riots in Thessalonica and Ephesus; angry accusations that Paul is undermining the gods, or the city, or Caesar; Paul being arrested and beaten.

Here in the first half of chapter 21, as Paul completes his third missionary journey, it becomes increasingly clear not only that these two trends are on a collision course, but also that the point of collision will be in Jerusalem, towards which Paul has been steadily journeying.

As we read the text, notice how the tension between these two themes triples. In former chapters we have already gotten a sense of the growing danger to Paul, but here two more layers are added as Paul's fellow disciples urge him not to go to Jerusalem, and as the Holy Spirit repeatedly predicts that danger waits for him in Jerusalem.

Acts 21:1-16

This is the Word of the Lord...

Please keep the text in front of you, and may the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

What should we make of Paul's decision to continue on this collision course, despite the predictions of the Holy Spirit and despite the urging of his friends? Was it wisdom or folly, courageous or reckless, valiant or cocky?

This evening I want to argue that Paul's decision was noble and exemplary. And I'd like to make that argument by putting Paul's decision in terms of a wider category that is important for us as Christians to wrestle with: moral heroism.

What is moral heroism? In a nutshell, moral heroism is going above and beyond the ordinary call of duty.¹ In The Doctrine of the Christian Life, John Frame notes several examples of moral heroism in Scripture: David's mighty men sneaking through enemy lines to retrieve a drink of Bethlehem's well water for David (2 Sam 23:13-17), the poor widow of Mark 12 who donates her last two copper coins (Mark 12:41ff), and Barnabas selling his property and donating the proceeds to the church.

Viewed from a pragmatic perspective, these extreme actions almost appear to be morally questionable. Like the disciples here in Acts 21, questioning the wisdom of Paul's decision to knowingly walk into the powder keg of Jerusalem with the match of the gospel in his hand,² we might find ourselves doubting whether David's mighty men were motivated by loyalty or by hubris when they decided to sneak through enemy lines merely to retrieve a glass of tastier water for their king. After all, what good would it have been to David to lose three of his best men over the difference between tap water and Dasani? Again we might ask, "Was it wise or foolish, valiant or reckless, courageous or cocky?"

In a similar way, reflecting on the poor widow's extreme generosity, we might well wonder, "Shouldn't this poor widow have been a recipient of generosity, not a source of it?" To put it in our terms, if this widow had given her last two pennies to the monthly deacon's offering, wouldn't those two pennies quickly be returned to her as mercy ministry? Practically speaking, why not just skip the circle of distribution and put those coins to work keeping this widow afloat?

¹ Although John Frame does not use that exact definition, it is implied in his discussion of moral heroism in the *Doctrine of the Christian Life* pg 196-199.

² Kudos to James BeJon for the descriptive phrase "powder keg" to describe Jerusalem at this time. Leithart, Peter. Bejohn, James. Meyers, Jeff. Roberts Alistair. "Acts 21: Paul in Jerusalem and his Arrest." Theopolis Podcast. The Book of Acts: A Podcast series

In both cases, there seems to be a tension between wise stewardship and self-sacrifice, between practicality and some nobler, higher concern. And in both cases it's clear that self-sacrifice and nobler concerns win out over what would seem to be wise stewardship and practicality.

But, whatever doubts or hesitations we may have about such extreme actions, the Bible does not hesitate or hedge when it commends these actions and these actors as noble, exemplary, and praiseworthy.

Perhaps we might seek to resolve this tension in our minds by falling back on a modified definition of moral heroism. Perhaps we might say that such actions are good, not because they are required in any sense, but because they go utterly above and beyond the call of duty.

In one sense, there seems to be some truth in that way of conceptualizing these actions. On the one hand, there is an obvious sense in which these actions were not explicitly or strictly required by the law of God. While the law of God certainly would have required David's soldiers to be loyal to him as the Lord's anointed King, their decision to risk their lives merely to bring him a drink of water from Bethlehem's well was not an obvious or necessary expression of that loyalty. After all, David neither commanded the action, nor was it in any sense necessary to David's welfare, since there were other water sources. David himself acknowledges as much by refusing to drink the water, instead pouring it out as an offering to the Lord.

We can make similar points about the generosity of Barnabas. Immediately after Barnabas' donation, Peter speaks to Ananias about his hypocritical donation, "While it [*that is, Ananias' property*] remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." (ESV) Acts 5:4. Notice that part of Peter's rebuke is that Ananias was NOT obligated to donate this property. This implies that Barnabas' donation had also been an act that went above and beyond the call of duty.

Likewise, it would seem that the poor widow of Mark 12 transcended the call of duty when she gave her last two pennies. While it is certainly true that the law of God requires us to give a tithe to the Lord, to express thanksgiving and faith through offerings, and to care for the people of God, it does not mandate that we give every last penny, nor does it require us to renounce all of our possessions.

But, while there was no command in the Hebrew Bible to which these saints could have pointed as they acted and said, "See this verse? It explicitly and obviously requires me to perform this action," it doesn't quite work to say that these actions were absolutely, utterly above and beyond the call of duty. As John Frame points out in the *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, it creates a

number of problems to say that these actions were not required in any sense.³ For one thing, the Bible clearly praises these actions and holds them up as exemplary. But if these actions were not, in any sense, obedience to and applications of the law of God, then it would seem to imply that these saints were adding to the law of God, a project which seems suspect at best. Moreover, if these actions were exemplary (*and they are*), and, if the Bible requires us to imitate godly examples (*which it does* (1 Cor 11:1, Heb 12:1), then what sense does it make to say that these exemplary actions were themselves not obligatory in the first place?

But even more fundamentally, as John Frame points out, the Bible frequently calls us to an entire lifestyle of extreme commitment and action. Remember the first great commandment “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” All of your faculties, all of the time, all the way devoted to His service. The very nature of the command implies an unlimited and unqualified duty.

But even more extreme of a demand is the call to follow and imitate the Lord Jesus, who is, surely, the epitome of moral heroism. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. (John 13:34) “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Ephesians 5:1–2. “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1) “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’” (Matthew 16:24–25)

But, in my opinion, the verse that best embodies this tension between ordinary duty and the call to go above and beyond duty, is Luke 17:10. There Jesus teaches us, as His disciples, “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy (useless/unprofitable) servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

Let that sink in. After following the most extreme demands of Christ, after taking up our cross and denying ourselves, after making the greatest sacrifice or after the most heroic moment of our lives, after going above and beyond the call of duty as far as we can imagine... Jesus teaches us to say, “We are unprofitable servants; we have only done what was our duty.”

This is why I entitled the sermon, “The Paradox of Moral Heroism,” because the call to Christian discipleship involves the duty to go above and beyond the ordinary call of duty.

³ What follows is a mixture of his thoughts and mine. See the Frame, John. The Doctrine of the Christian. From A Theology of Lordship Series. P&R. pgs 196-199

Look again at Acts 21 and notice how this theme is illustrated in Paul's decision to continue traveling to Jerusalem. On the one hand, there is an obvious sense in which Paul's desire to go to Jerusalem seems to go above and beyond the call of duty. Twice in these verses the Holy Spirit predicts that some kind of harm will befall Paul if he goes to Jerusalem. Most of us, most of the time, would probably interpret these predictions in exactly the same way that Paul's friends do here: as a solid reason NOT to go to Jerusalem, as the Lord "closing the door."

Imagine how they must have reasoned with him here in Acts 21, "Don't go Paul; you'll be killed like Jesus or Stephen! And then what good will you be to us?! We need you! The churches need you! The Gentiles need you! Just think how many more churches you could plant, how many more pastors you could train, how many more synagogues you could visit, if you would just stay healthy and free! Wouldn't it be better stewardship of your gifts and calling to stay away from Jerusalem? Let someone else bring the offering of the Gentiles to Jerusalem! Be practical Paul! You need to do what is sustainable, so you can keep ministering for a lifetime!"

Keep in mind that Paul himself had, apparently, been recently persuaded by similar reasoning in similar circumstances. Remember that in Acts 20:3, when Paul learned about a plot made against him by the Jews to harm him during his voyage to Syria, he changed his plans and traveled by land through Macedonia. In other words, he chose to avoid danger...to do what was practical and sustainable. Similarly, in Acts 19:30-31, when Paul was eager to jump into the fray of the Ephesian riot, he was persuaded by his friends not to run headlong into danger, to do the practical and sustainable thing.

But this time, Paul does the opposite. He sails knowingly and directly into the heart of the storm.

Why?

From one perspective, we could analyze Paul's decision in terms of his situation and the good he hoped to accomplish. In a previous sermon I reflected on the collection that Paul had been gathering from the Gentile churches and the symbolic significance of arriving with that gift in the Jerusalem church on the day of Pentecost. Along those lines, remember how much Paul makes of this giving opportunity at various points in the epistles, especially emphasizing how it represents the unity between Jew and Gentile and the spiritual harvest of the Gentiles.

Most likely that background is part of what Paul had in mind in Acts 20:24 when he said, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus."

But, as many commentators point out,⁴ Paul also probably had in mind the hope of defending the church from the misrepresentation and slander which has been at the core of the opposition. As I mentioned earlier, both Jews and Gentiles have accused Paul and his gospel of being impious, subversive, and revolutionary. It's likely that Paul knew that going to Jerusalem would give him a hearing with key Jewish and Gentile authorities. Perhaps he could make a cogent defense of the faith and of his ministry, clearing the church and the gospel of an unnecessarily negative reputation with civil and religious authorities. *(We'll see much more on this theme in coming chapters.)*

From another perspective, we could analyze Paul's decision in terms of his apostolic calling. While his calling, generally, was to take the gospel to the Gentiles, it's important to remember that Paul's calling specifically included a call to suffer. Remember what the Lord said to Ananias about Paul in Acts 9:15-16, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Remembering this commission helps us to understand how and why Paul interpreted these revelations of the Holy Spirit (21:4 and 21:11) so differently than his friends. From the beginning of his ministry, Paul had known that significant suffering for the name of Christ would be an essential part of his calling. And so he interpreted these revelations as predictions of what was coming shortly, and took them as an opportunity to strengthen his resolve. But his friends, not knowing this wider context, interpreted them as warnings, or even as prohibitions, and so urged Paul not to go.

But while both of these perspectives are helpful for understanding Paul's decision, the one which our sermon text hints at most strongly comes from a different direction. Look again at this passage and notice the parallels between Paul's last journey to Jerusalem, and Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem.

For starters, recall that back in Acts 19:21 Paul had "resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem." In a similar way, Luke 9:51 tells us that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem...when the days drew near for him to be taken up." Look again at verse 15 and recall that Paul had initially brought 7 disciples with him on this trip (20:4); notice, here, that he adds a few more, bringing the group to a number that must have been close to 12. In other words, just as Jesus took his last trip to Jerusalem with a dozen disciples, so Paul probably did too. Likewise, just as Jewish plots against Paul's life brewed as he journeyed to Jerusalem, so they brewed against Jesus' life as he journeyed there. Just as Agabus warns here in verse 11 that the Jews will "bind" Paul and will deliver him "into the hands of Gentiles," so the Jews bound Jesus and delivered him

⁴ See for example

into the hands of Gentiles. Just as chapters 20 and 21 of Acts contain three predictions of Paul's suffering in Jerusalem (20:23, 21:4, 21:11), so Jesus made a three-fold prediction of his suffering in Jerusalem. Just as Paul here in our text remains determined to go to Jerusalem, despite the pleading of his friends (21:13), so Jesus resisted Peter's urging not to suffer in Jerusalem (Mark 8:32, Matt 16:21-23). And just as the matter is settled here in Acts 21 with a statement of submission to God's will (verse 14), so Jesus settled his anxious soul in Gethsemane by praying, "not my will, but yours, be done."

In all these ways, Luke is showing us the ultimate rationale behind Paul's decision: to take up his cross and follow Jesus.

And surely this angle is what most helps us to understand Paul's mindset at this point in the narrative of Acts. While I think it's true that Paul probably thought he could accomplish some good in Jerusalem, this doesn't seem to be a decision motivated primarily by practicalities or strategy. And while it's certainly true that Paul's decision involved faithfulness to his unique apostolic calling, I don't think it plumbs the depths of his motivation.

If we want to know more fully what inspired and sustained Paul's final journey to Jerusalem, then we ought to remember what Paul said in Philippians 3: that he counted all of his Jewish pedigree and law-keeping as "loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." "For his sake" Paul "suffered the loss of all things and counted them as rubbish, in order that" he might "gain Christ and be found in him," in order that he might "know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible" he might "attain the resurrection from the dead." (Phil 3:8-11)

In other words, for the apostle Paul, moral heroism was not an end in and of itself. Paul's ultimate goal was to know Christ, to gain Christ, to be found in Christ, to share in Christ's life and glory.

So what can we take away from this window into Paul's decision to go to Jerusalem, predictions and pleas notwithstanding?

Acts 21 is an important reminder that in different ways and at various times every disciple of Christ will be called to some kind of moral heroism: to go above and beyond the ordinary call of duty, to do what seems impractical, extreme, unreasonable, or unsustainable, to sacrifice what is rightfully ours, to take up our cross and suffer for the name of Christ.

For some of you, that may mean giving sacrificially of your time or money. For some of you that may mean serving without pay, praise, thanks, or earthly reward. For some of you that may

mean caring for an exceptionally difficult or sick spouse. For others of you it might mean staying single so that you are free to minister in ways that married folks cannot. For some of you it might mean adopting a child or taking foster children into your home. For others of you, it might look like being content with your beloved child leaving you to take the gospel to a far-flung corner of the globe. For some of you it might look like leaving a lucrative, successful career for an obscure ministry. For others of you, it might look like sticking with an exceptionally difficult 9-5 because of the good that only you can do in that station. For some of you it might look like sacrificially caring for the sick, the dying, or the disabled, and for others of you it might look like being the exceptionally sick, disabled, or dying while shining the light of Christ to others.

We are not all called to the same expression of moral heroism. We all have different circumstances, different callings, and different personalities. In many ways and at many times, simply doing our ordinary duty will be enough, and it will be legitimate for us to simply do what is practical and sustainable.

But Acts 21 reminds us that, when those moments come in which the Lord calls us to go above and beyond (*and they will*), what will inspire and sustain our obedience, is not only hope of the good we may do to others in our sacrifice, not only the resolve that comes from knowing what gifts and calling the Lord has bestowed upon us, but the confidence that in those moments we are being conformed to the image of Christ, who not only laid down His life upon the same cross which we commands us to take up, but was resurrected to a still more glorious life.

And so, my fellow disciples of Christ, let us trust that out of every hardship we endure for the name of Christ will ultimately come an even richer blessing, that out of every loss for His sake will come a better gain, and out of every death in His service will come a more glorious resurrection. Amen!

Works Consulted

- Frame, John. The Doctrine of the Christian. From A Theology of Lordship Series. P&R
- Hughes, Kent R. Acts: The Church Afire. Preaching the Word Series. Crossway.
- Leithart, Peter. Bejohn, James. Meyers, Jeff. Roberts Alistair. "Acts 21: Paul in Jerusalem and his Arrest." Theopolis Podcast. The Book of Acts: A Podcast series.
- Marshall, I Howard. Acts. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP Academic.
- Milne, Bruce. Acts: Witnesses to Him. Focus on the Bible.
- Peterson, David G. The Acts of the Apostles. Pillar NT commentaries series. Eerdmans
- Rayburn, Rob. "The Christian's Calling." A Sermon on Acts 21:1-16. Sept 4, 2016
<https://www.faithtacoma.org/acts2/the-christians-calling-acts-211-16>
- Sproul, RC. Acts: An Expository Commentary. Ligonier.
- Stott, John. The Message of Acts. The Bible Speaks Today.
- Waters, Guy. Acts: EP Study Commentary.
- Witherington, Ben. The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary. Eerdmans. 1998.