

ETHICAL TANGLES

Acts 23:1-16

In order to ascertain definitely the charges against Paul, the chief captain summoned the council and brought the prisoner before it. He thus hoped to get a clear statement of their accusation against Paul. As he faced the body to which he formerly belonged, Paul must have known a number of its members. He beheld them with a look of confidence, rather than one of hesitation or fear. Without any formality Paul began just where he had left off the evening before.

I. Paul's Attitude.

1. He gazed intently at the council as a man on trial studies the faces of those in whose hands his life hangs. Was he looking for sympathy? Was he searching for honesty of heart? Was he wondering if they had open minds? Was he wondering if they were friends or foes?
2. He addressed them as "men and brethren."
How could he so address the men who had maltreated him?
How could he regard the ones who would tear him to pieces as "men and brethren?"
Normal, human reactions would be retaliation, hate and vengeance. The spirit of Christ in the heart of Paul is the answer to the problem.
3. The spirit of the prisoner disarmed the court.
They all recognized that their prisoner was an unusual man. They could not quarrel with him. They could not answer his words. They could not meet his spirit. He was a man who rendered kindness for cruelty. He gave love for hate. He took into his heart as brothers the men who would murder him.

II. Paul's Defense.

1. He appealed by his past record.
There is great reassurance in a man's heart when he can look back on his past record and be unashamed and unafraid. Many do not want to be judged in the light of their past, but wish that it could be forgotten.
2. He appealed by his conscience.
He had lived in good conscience before God. One is doubly fortified when he has conscience on his side. Conscience is greater than mind, more powerful than memory, more fertile than imagination, and more persistent than will.

His claim that he had lived conscientiously was rudely interrupted by an order from the president of the council, the high priest Ananias, that a bystander slap him on the mouth, implying that what he had said was presumptuous and false. This high priest was a notoriously haughty and overbearing Sadducee.

3. He appealed by his sense of justice and honor.
Indignantly Paul resented this command by saying, "God shall smite thee, thou whitened wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?" Paul's language may seem harsh, but the pure and righteous soul of the prisoner was so grieved that the man exalted to administer justice should, through personal hate, order him to be smitten "contrary to the law." He was pretending to act as an officer of justice, but he had a spirit of lawless injustice; fair outside but filthy within, like the whitened walls of a sepulcher. It was a rash utterance, as Paul immediately acknowledged, but it was deserved and was prophetic of the violent death of the high priest a few years later. His action was contrary to the law.

He took the case into his own hands, ignoring the other members, and deciding the case before Paul had been heard. The law required careful investigation before punishment and permitted the accused the right to be heard in his own defense.

4. He appealed by his sense of propriety.
When he was told that his cutting remark was made to the high priest, he immediately apologized. He was willing to respect the office even though an unworthy man occupied it. The office was still a thing of honor and deserved the respect of all men however unfit the men who filled the office might be.
5. He appealed by his sense of consistency.
The man who administers laws should himself be law-abiding. One who teaches the truth should himself tell the truth.
6. He appealed by his self-possession.
Paul was the most quiet man in the tumult. Men lost their self-control, and the whole scene was one of confusion. Paul alone was willing to confess any slight oversight he might have made. He was a just man and desired to live justly before his enemies as well as before God.

III. Paul's Tactics.

The Jews were divided into three religious groups. The Pharisees believed in spirits, in angels and in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees did not believe in any of these things. They were the modernists of that day. The Essenes were visionary and aesthetic; they over-spiritualized everything. They were the extremists and fanatics of that day. The scribes were so called because of their profession. They earned their living by copying the Scriptures by hand. They could have been from any of these groups. In this case, they were Pharisees. Paul was quick to see that these different religious sects were represented in his audience and lost no time in capitalizing the situation.

1. He announced his position on the question of the resurrection.
Paul was quick to take in a situation. He took clever advantage of it by declaring himself a Pharisee on the fundamental question at issue, namely, the hope of the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. While the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, the Sadducees hotly denied it. This was the dividing issue between them. By announcing his stand on this question, Paul turned these two groups against each other, and caused them to forget him in their fight between themselves. Most radicals are ready to defend their views, and the less religion they have, the harder they fight for it.
2. He made the doctrine of the resurrection the issue, although it was not the real cause of his arrest. The main cause for his arrest was the Resurrection of Jesus. It was the doctrine of the resurrection in a concrete case to which they objected and Paul discussed it in the abstract. He laid the emphasis upon the doctrine as a whole. The two groups flew at each others' throats with fury. The main question was lost sight of in the haze of minor matters.
3. Paul was a Pharisee in doctrine, in teaching and in theory, but he was not a Pharisee in spirit and in principle. He courted the Sadducees by taking their part in some measure on an issue which he could accept. He did so without compromise. It was not necessary to call their attention to their differences.

4. In doing this, he caused the Pharisees to defend the very thing they had been opposing. He turned his worst enemies into defenders of his doctrine. It was good strategy.
5. In thus turning these groups on each other, he showed that none of them knew what the disturbance was about. They soon forgot the main issue. Their prejudices mastered their reasoning.

To divide the opposition weakens its force. To fight something in common with an enemy will soften his attitude. To get an enemy to fight for you is better than to make him fight against you. It takes wisdom to deal properly with opposition.

Paul never waited to find the popular side of the question and then align himself with it. He made a popular side and others aligned themselves with his side. Men may be creatures of circumstance or they may be creators of circumstance. Men may by lack of wisdom turn friends into foes or men may by wisdom turn foes into friends. There is no substitute for common sense.

IV. Paul's Encouragement.

On the night following that stormy day, which was filled with tragic experiences, when Paul was helpless in the hands of merciless fanatics, the Lord appeared and stood by him. He always stands by His followers in such experiences. He had stood by him when the angry mob was about to tear him to pieces. Never for a second was the Lord away from him in his hours of danger.

The Lord encouraged Paul saying, "Be of good cheer." His resources were far more than those of Satan. When Satan assembled forty men to kill Paul, the Lord sent almost five hundred armed soldiers to protect him.

It was not necessary for the Lord to perform a miracle in order to protect Paul. He could have done so, of course, had it been necessary. Instead, He worked through natural channels. He allowed a boy to overhear a conversation. The boy did the natural thing, which was to tell his uncle what he heard. Then the boy was taken to the chief officer, where he repeated the secret which he had heard. The officer, in turn, ordered five hundred armed soldiers to take Paul away from the prison by night and thus avoid a tragedy. God often works through natural channels.

His Lord told the Apostle that his work was not finished, and that these men could not end it. He had a big task ahead of him. He was yet to carry the gospel to Rome, the center of civilization. Paul carried this divine assurance into every jail, into every court, into every trial where his life was threatened. He knew there would come a day when he would walk the streets of Rome. This was a divine promise, and it could not fail.

From the mere human angle, it would have seemed that Paul had come to the end of his career, but far from it. His enemies thought that by killing him they could destroy his message. In this they failed to reckon with God. Killing God's messengers only serves to scatter His message farther.