

Enemies Into Friends

Acts 21:37 - 22:30

Good morning, as always, it's good to be with you, and to be able to look at God's Word together. Next week we'll be taking a brief, two-week hiatus from Acts for Palm Sunday and Easter, but this morning we pick up the story of Acts at the end of chapter 21. You can find our passage on page 876 in one of the pew Bibles.

As you're opening there, I want to ask, have you ever considered what it means or what it looks like to love your enemies, as Jesus calls us to do? Perhaps we sometimes struggle with this question, because we think of an enemy as someone we feel animosity towards. And so, to love our enemy appears to be a contradiction in terms. Clearly, we must define what an "enemy" is in a way that accords with Jesus' instruction for us. If by "enemy" we mean, someone we hate, then to love an enemy is necessarily impossible, as it would be a contradiction in terms. Therefore, I would propose that an enemy is not someone whom you hate, but is someone who hates you.

But now we need to define what we mean by "hate"? And I would suggest that a basic definition of hate is to desire evil, or harm, or something negative for someone. Which would mean that an enemy is simply someone who desires evil for you. And so, coming back to our first question, to love your enemy means to seek the good of the one who seeks evil for you. Or, in the words of Romans 12:21, loving your enemy looks like "overcoming evil with good."

Of course, Jesus is the ultimate example of someone loving their enemies, but we will see today that Paul is an excellent example of this as well. And my hope is that by considering his example, we might grow in our own love for our enemies.

Before we begin reading, let me remind us of the preceding context. Paul has made his way to Jerusalem in order to deliver support to the Christians there. Along the way, as we saw, his friends begged him not to go, knowing Paul was not popular amongst the Jews in Jerusalem, and so fearing what would happen to him. But Paul is determined to go.

Upon arriving, he takes a vow with a few other men, purifying himself, intending to make an offering at the Temple in order to dispel some of the rumors about him. Rumors that part of Paul's ministry among the Gentiles included encouraging Jewish believers to forsake the Law of Moses and their cultural customs. These rumors had disturbed many of the Jewish Christians, not to mention Jewish non-Christians in Jerusalem who were still committed to their cultural roots, and so Paul resolved to show that he too still honored his ancestral heritage.

However, a group of Jews from Asia Minor, who had followed Paul to Jerusalem, accuse him of these rumored anti-Jewish teachings while Paul is visiting the Temple, and, because they had seen him out and about with some Gentiles, they presumptively add the charge of defiling the Temple to his rap sheet, just for good measure. It works and throws all Jerusalem into an uproar. They end up dragging Paul out of the Temple, and now, we pick up the story right as a group of Roman soldiers is saving Paul from the mob, as they are in the process of beating him to death. Now, let's begin reading with verse 37 of chapter 21.

“As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, ‘May I say something to you?’ And he said, ‘Do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?’ Paul replied, ‘I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.’ And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying...”

And we'll stop there for a moment to talk about what we see in these verses.

Last week pastor Grant shared Paul's evangelistic approach to people: he accommodated himself to all, removing all obstacles possible, in order to gain a good hearing for the Gospel. This is key to understanding our passage this morning, because the story we are tracing with Paul is a masterclass in cross-cultural evangelism. He begins here by removing the basic language barrier by speaking to the tribune in his native tongue. Then when the tribune asks him who he is, since apparently there was some significant confusion on that score, Paul ingratiates himself further by mentioning that he was born in Tarsus, a prominent city within the Roman Empire. These tactful moves by Paul are the marks of a genius in cross-cultural engagement. And his tact pays off, as he is given the go-ahead to speak to the crowd.

But before we move on, don't miss the significance of Paul even making this request. He has just been rescued from this mob, which was beating him with the intent to kill him. You'd think Paul would simply breathe a sigh of relief and allow himself to be taken into the safety of the fortress without a second thought for the crowd. Instead, he asks to address the crowd, and not to give them a piece of his mind, but to try and defend himself and share the work of God in his life. So, we see Paul, in the middle of the chaos and abuse, doing everything he can to get a chance to tell everyone he can about Jesus; we see him being all things to all people to save some. To that end, as he addresses the crowd, he switches to Hebrew.

“‘Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.’ And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said: ‘I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.’”

See the effect Paul's change in language creates? Luke notes how as the crowd hears that Paul is speaking in their native tongue, they become even more attentive than they already were. As I said a minute ago, the key to understanding this passage is Paul's practice of becoming all things to all people for the sake of saving them. Connected to that, and key to understanding Paul's speech specifically, is to remember he is defending himself against rumors and charges that he had become a traitor to his people. This speech is meant to dispel those rumors, not for the sake of Paul's reputation, but in order to create an opening for the Gospel.

He begins by highlighting for the crowd that he is one of them, establishing as much common ground as possible. First, he addresses them as “Brothers and fathers”, these are terms of camaraderie and respect. Second, he lays out his character defense. He’s a Jew; this is important because, as we saw with the tribune, there was confusion as to who Paul was, and many in the crowd may have assumed him to be a Gentile, since the main charge against him was that he defiled the Temple. Second, he says he was “brought up” or raised in Jerusalem, the center of Judaism. Not only that, but he was trained by a prominent rabbi, Gamaliel, in accordance with the traditions the Jews held most dear. And this was no half-hearted religious observance, he was fully bought in, just as zealous as any of those in the crowd. A zeal that was shown in the fact that he persecuted Christianity in the most extreme ways possible, viewing it, at the time, as a threat to Judaism. In other words, Paul starts his argument with a resounding, “I get it! I was just like you once.” But then he launches into the story of how everything changed, beginning with verse 6.

“As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And I answered, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said to me, “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.” Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, “What shall I do, Lord?” And the Lord said to me, “Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.” And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.”

Notice how even though Paul is telling the story of how he was converted from Judaism in its traditional form, he is still emphasizing the Jewish roots of Jesus and Christianity. For instance, his Damascus Road experience is full of Old Testament allusions. First, Paul is surrounded by a light brighter than the sun, which there’s only one thing brighter than the sun: the Shakina Glory, the visible manifestation of God’s glory. He then falls to the ground in a way reminiscent of Isaiah in his heavenly vision. And then the voice of Jesus issues from heaven like the voice of God at Sinai.

Given these things, Paul’s initial question to Jesus is kind of humorous, and may display his disorientation: who is it that’s speaking to you? Well Saul, “God” seems like a good guess. Nonetheless, his question gives Jesus the chance to introduce himself. Interestingly, back in Luke’s earlier account of this experience in Acts 9, he simply records Jesus as saying, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting...”, but here Paul reports him saying, “I am Jesus of *Nazareth*, whom you are persecuting.” Again, Paul shows that this is not an anti-Jewish faith, but rather a thoroughly Jewish faith, centered on a Jewish God-man named Jesus from a the Jewish town of Nazareth.

Having established all this, Paul goes on to base what he had done in his ministry on another deeply important concept within Judaism: the Word of the Lord. He asks Jesus what he is supposed to do, receives his instructions, and follows them. He sets himself up as someone who simply obeyed the Word of the Lord, like the prophets. Paul then continues the story in verses 12-16.

“And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, “Brother Saul, receive your sight.” And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. And he said, “The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a

witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.””

So, having established the divine origins of his conversion and ministry call, Paul now corroborates his story with a human witness: Ananias. And notice how Paul draws out Ananias's Jewish pedigree: “a devout man” who was “well spoken of by all Jews” in Damascus. The experience is lent further legitimacy when Ananias performs the miracle of restoring Paul's sight. And this is the final straw for Paul (then Saul) and he is baptized into the faith, and told that the Lord has work for him to do. Now, Paul will conclude his story with how he figured out what that work was to be, in verses 17-21.

“When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, “Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.” And I said, “Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.” And he said to me, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.””

After Paul's conversion, he stayed in Damascus for about 3 years until he was forced to flee, due to a plot to kill him, at which point he went to Jerusalem. During his time in Jerusalem he has this vision in which Jesus confirms the commission he received during his time with Ananias, but with the caveat that people in Jerusalem would not accept his testimony, and so he ought to instead go to the Gentiles.

Again, notice how Paul counters the accusations against him. First, the fact that he was praying in the Temple 3 years after his conversion shows that Paul had not completely abandoned all his cultural roots and practices upon becoming a Christian. This account also shows that he didn't go to the Gentiles for any lack of love toward his countrymen, but on account of the Word of the Lord, because he was told to by Jesus.

We've seen how throughout his speech Paul labored to establish as much common ground as possible with his audience in order to gain a favorable hearing for his testimony about Jesus. And to this point in his story, the crowd seems to have listened attentively to Paul, but that all changes with this last line, as we see in verse 22.

“Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.’”

That's quite the abrupt switch, isn't it? Luke takes pains to paint this sequence of events, contrasting the madness of the crowd before and after Paul's speech with the quiet attentiveness of the crowd during his speech. Before his speech, the crowd is beating him with intent to kill him. Then, in order to emphasize it, Luke mentions the quiet attentiveness of the crowd twice as Paul begins his speech, which goes well, until he reaches the part about Jesus sending him to the Gentiles. At which point the switch is flipped, and the crowd flies into a murderous rage again. Which I think this shows us what the true issue was at play.

The crowd, it turns out, was not just angry about Paul being anti-Jewish, a charge he soundly rebuts with his testimony. Rather, the crowd was angry that he was pro-Gentile in a way that

seemingly prioritized the Gentiles over Israel. As soon as Paul, at Jesus' command, seems to prioritize the Gentiles over his own people, the crowd suddenly declares him no longer fit to live, and the Roman soldiers are forced to save him from being killed once again. Let's finish the passage beginning with verse 23.

“And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, ‘Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?’ When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, ‘What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.’ So the tribune came and said to him, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?’ And he said, ‘Yes.’ The tribune answered, ‘I bought this citizenship for a large sum.’ Paul said, ‘But I am a citizen by birth.’ So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.”

“But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.”

So, the Roman soldiers are forced to make a hasty retreat with Paul, once again. They prepare to beat Paul themselves, in order to ascertain what is going on, when Paul begins what will be a brilliant, sustained manipulation of Roman law as it pertains to his citizenship. Roman citizens were, in our terms, innocent until proven guilty, and so to flog a citizen prior to them being found guilty would have potentially carried serious consequences for the tribune and his soldiers. In fact, as we see from the passage, even to have bound Paul could be viewed as violating his rights, which was what scared the tribune. So, upon learning of Paul's citizenship, a more prominent form of citizenship than even the tribune could claim, he cancels Paul's examination, and comes up with another plan, which we'll look at a few weeks from now.

I am convinced, however, that Paul knows that as a citizen, he is entitled to a trial, which in his mind means an opportunity to share the Gospel with more people, and eventually take the Gospel all the way to Rome. This is exactly what the rest of the story of Acts details: a years-long legal process that affords Paul the opportunity to share the Gospel with various officials, governors, and even kings. I said earlier that the key to understanding this passage was Paul's strategy of becoming all things to all people for the sake of saving some, but it's really the key to understanding the rest of Acts. Because if you view Paul's actions through the lens of him trying to share the Gospel with as many people as possible, suddenly much of what he does clicks into place.

For instance, in our passage it answers questions like, “Why does Paul want to speak to the crowd that tried to kill him?” Answer: he wanted to save them. “Why does he work so hard to prove he's not anti-Jewish?” To garner favor, in order to gain a better hearing for the Gospel. “Why does he make an effort to speak the native language of both Romans and Jews?” To remove any barrier to the Gospel that he can. “Why does he navigate his way into a lengthy legal process?” Admittedly and understandably, probably in part because he didn't want to be flogged needlessly, but also because he knew it would give him an opportunity to witness about Jesus.

Paul was motivated by an insatiable desire to share Jesus with as many people as he possibly could. This has been his pattern throughout Acts: he goes to a city, starts by sharing about Jesus in the synagogue, if and when the Gospel got rejected there he went to the Gentiles, and once he'd shared as much as he could he went to the next city and did it all over again. Sharing Jesus with as many people as possible is what drove Paul, and he was willing to do whatever he could to make that happen as effectively as possible. Including loving his enemies, because the Gospel is all about turning enemies into friends.

I was struck, as I studied for this message, by the contrast between Paul's interactions with his fellow believers en route to Jerusalem, and his interactions with his "own people" in Jerusalem. As Paul makes his way to Jerusalem, his trip is marked with loving exchanges at the various churches he visits, in which they tearfully try to get him to reconsider, due to their love for him. And remember, those were exchanges between people who used to be enemies. Once upon a time, Paul was trying to imprison and kill such people, but now they are like family. The Gospel had turned enemies into friends; it had turned a persecutor who believers were initially fearful to admit into their fellowship, into someone they grieved to let go.

And then Paul gets to Jerusalem, and his own people, his own tribe wants to kill him. Like Jesus, he came to his own, but his own did not accept him. And yet, despite this Paul does his best in love for his enemies, to save them, only to have them revert to wanting to kill him again upon hearing that Jesus told Paul to go to the Gentiles.

This is the difference the Gospel makes in people. Those who have been changed from one of God's enemies into one of His friends are compelled to do the same with their enemies. Those who haven't experienced the change the Gospel brings, remain stuck in their enmity, their animosity toward their enemies. Which means, if you are not compelled to love your enemies for the sake of their salvation, it may well indicate that you have not fully grasped the Gospel. And brothers and sisters, there are a lot of people who call themselves Christians today, who show they have not fully comprehended the Gospel by their lack of desire to love their enemies and see them saved.

For Christians, the world is divided into two groups: 1) those you love *as* brothers and sisters in Christ, and 2) those you love *in order that they may become* your brothers and sisters in Christ. This doesn't mean we won't have enemies, it just means we won't be anyone's enemy. From the time of his conversion, Paul has had many enemies throughout Acts, but he has been no one's enemy. Many have sought his harm, but he has only sought their salvation.

And so, I think we need to ask: can we claim the same? As we think of how we've made our way through the world, can we say we've related to our enemies in the same way. Can we truly say that our primary desire for every person is their ultimate good, whether friend or foe, whether they love us or hate us, seek to bless us or kill us? Because I'll tell you, it doesn't always sound like it to me.

The way I've heard some who call themselves Christians talk about atheists, or those in the opposite political party, or the LGBTQ community, or any number of other groups and people, makes me doubt very much that they truly love those people and desire their ultimate good. Perhaps we desire their salvation, but we're kind of waiting for that to happen before we befriend

them. Does this mean we must agree with all those groups or people, or affirm all their beliefs and choices? Of course not! But if we claim to believe the Gospel and to have been saved by it, then we must love them and do everything we can to meet them where they are at for the purpose of sharing the life-changing grace of Jesus with them. Some of them may hate us, some may be our enemies, but we must refuse to be theirs, because Jesus refused to be our enemy, and instead met us wherever we were at as a friend offering grace. The Gospel is all about turning enemies into friends, and therefore, we must be all about loving our enemies in every way we can so that some may be saved.

You see, in a way, the Gospel imagines a world without enemies, and then asks, “What would it take for that world to be a reality?” Imagine with me, what a world without enemies would be like. Imagine, a world without enmity and conflict, full of harmony and peace. Imagine what your own life would be like without enemies. Imagine a world in which friendships were never broken, children never stopped talking to their parents, and spouses were never at odds. Imagine a world in which political discourse was respectful, business was not exploitative, social media was edifying, and nations were allied for the mutual good of all humanity. Is there anyone who does not want that world? Perhaps you’re thinking: “Those are nice thoughts, but come on, that world is never going to be a reality.” To which I would respond: actually, it is.

For those who have been saved by the grace of God, a kingdom without enemies is coming, and has, in fact, already come. This is why we are called to love our enemies, because we are called to be citizens of that kingdom. Yes, there are those who reject that kingdom, just like the crowd Paul tried to persuade, but the kingdom is here, even if it is not fully realized yet. And while I don’t know how long the path to the full realization of that kingdom will be, I think I do know what one of the first steps along the path is: it’s for me (and you) to stop being an enemy, and start loving our enemies, just like Jesus and Paul.

So often what stands in the way of peace, of a conflict being resolved is our desire to have the other person make the first move. Whether consciously or not, we think, “I would (blank), if they would just (blank).” “I would apologize to him, if he just apologized to me.” “I would love my wife, if she just showed me some respect.” “I would respect my husband, if he just showed me some love.” Even when we know we’ve failed on our end, we resist acknowledging that and insist the other person fix their mistakes first, before we address our own. And, of course, the other person is thinking pretty much the exact same thing. And so, we choose to be enemies, each standing in the way of the other getting what they need.

Don’t get me wrong, we all have legitimate grievances against one another, but so did Jesus. And yet, he showed us the only way out of the logjam: someone must choose to give up the fight. One of the enemies must choose to stop being an enemy, and start loving their enemy instead. And yes, perhaps it won’t fix everything. And yes, even if it helps, it may take years for things to improve. And yes, whatever other objection you’re thinking of is probably true to some extent. Your enemy may never choose to become your friend. But this is how it starts. The Gospel is all about enemies becoming friends, which means we start by trying to befriend our enemies that by any means some may be saved. This is what Jesus did. This is what Paul did. This is what we are called to do as well.

"ENEMIES INTO FRIENDS"

Acts 21:37-22:30

Main Idea: The Gospel is all about turning enemies into friends.

Introduction – To Love Our Enemies

Acts 21:37-40 – A Cross-Cultural Genius

Acts 22:1-5 – I'm One of You!

Acts 22:6-11 – A Word from the Lord

Acts 22:12-16 – The Word of a Devout Man

Acts 22:17-21 – Sent to the Gentiles

Acts 22:22 – The Offense of Going to "Them"

Acts 22:23-30 – Paul's Case Goes to Trial

Application – Called to Love Our Enemies

Discussion Questions
for personal, Life Group, or Study Group use

“Enemies Into Friends”

Acts 21:37-22:30

Main Idea: The Gospel is all about turning enemies into friends.

1) To the best of your knowledge, would anyone consider you to be their enemy? If so, how might you become “all things” to them for the sake of drawing them toward salvation?

2) Activity: Make a list of your enemies (people with ill will toward you), and then spend some time praying for their salvation (Matt. 5:44), asking the Lord how you might be used to draw them toward Him.

3) Are there any areas in your life where the Lord is calling you to stop being an enemy and start loving your enemy instead?

Questions? Pastor Michael Tourtellotte at michael@ebcsalem.com