

## “Wise As Serpents, Innocent as Doves”

Acts 25:1-12

Good morning, my name is Michael Tourtellotte, I’m one of the pastors here, and we have been going through the book of Acts since last year, tracing the story of the early church. For the last couple months, that has meant looking at the legal trials that spanned years of the Apostle Paul’s life and ministry. We will continue looking at that part of the story this morning, looking at Acts 25, which you can find on page 878 in one of the pew Bibles.

In this part of the story, we’ve seen Paul get yanked around a bit at the hands of various groups and interested parties. The primary players so far have been a group of Jews who are out for Paul’s blood, the Roman tribune Lysias, and the governor Felix. Then last week we were introduced to a new character: Porcius Festus, who replaced Felix as governor, who will also look to use Paul for his political gain. The story of Acts, and Paul in particular, has been defined by the politics of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea. Whether the politics within the Jewish community, or the interplay between the Jews and their Roman oppressors. Paul has been in a sort of tug-of-war between those two latter groups. The Jews have been trying to get him out in the open so they can kill him, and, as we will see, sometimes the Roman officials are open to that idea, but Paul’s pesky Roman citizenship keeps interfering, not allowing them to treat him *too* unjustly.

The whole ordeal is deeply reminiscent of something Jesus said to His disciples during His earthly ministry when He sent them out on a sort of short-term mission trip. In Matthew 10:16-18 He said, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.” Is that not an exact description of what has happened to Paul? And it seems to me that he has done a good job implementing Jesus’ advice to the disciples. He’s been wise in every situation. And he has maintained his innocence, by word and deed, all along. And this is exactly what he will do in our passage this morning with the newly arrived governor. My prayer is that by considering Paul’s shrewd innocence, we might better know how to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves in our own context.

At the end of chapter 24 Festus succeeded Felix, and Felix left Paul in prison in order to do a favor for the Jews. Then chapter 25 begins, “Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. ‘So,’ said he, ‘let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.’”

Shortly after arriving in Caesarea, the seat of Roman power in the region, Festus takes a trip to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish community in the region. Again, relations between Rome and Israel were one of the major political issues in this place and time. Therefore, Festus makes it one of his top priorities to establish a positive relationship with the leaders of Israel.

For their part, the Jewish leaders likely know that the start of a new governorship is a good time to obtain a favor, and so they try to get one from Festus upon his arrival. They lay out their case against Paul, emphasizing its importance, and requesting that the trial be moved back to Jerusalem. Perhaps unbeknownst to Festus (though perhaps he had some inkling), the Jews have renewed their plan to kill Paul in an ambush, which is the true purpose behind their request. To his credit though, Festus recognizes that there is really no legitimate basis to move Paul back to Jerusalem, and so he tells them to come to Caesarea instead. As we will see, Festus is not opposed to doing the Jews a favor, but he’s not going to violate proper Roman protocol to do it. And for him to grant a favor to the opponents of a Roman citizen could be viewed as him passing judgement, or playing favorites, without a fair trial, which would be a violation of Paul’s rights.

On the one hand here, we see Paul's previous shrewdness paying off, in that by leaning on his Roman rights, he has ensured himself due process. And on the other hand, it should be acknowledged that Festus appears to be a relatively just judge, despite the fact that he still plays political games to some extent. He's also a timely judge, who wastes no time resuming the trial once he returns to Caesarea, as we see in verses 6-7: "After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove."

True to his word, Festus returns to Caesarea after spending a few days in Jerusalem, and Paul's trial becomes his first order of business. However, things don't go the way the Jewish leaders led him to expect, as he himself notes later on to King Agrippa, because Paul's Roman they aren't able to prove any actionable offenses by Paul that would warrant punishment. The picture Luke paints of this portion of the trial is interesting though, isn't it? He says that Paul's accusers are literally standing around him as they level their many serious accusations against him. Could Paul appear more like a sheep among wolves? And like a sheep, he defends himself with innocence in verse 8. "Paul argued in his defense, 'Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.'"

Previously, Luke did not say what the Jews specific accusations were, but between the preceding story of Acts and Paul's response here, we can have a pretty good idea that they centered on him being a rabble rouser, who profaned the Temple, and undermined Caesar's rule in the region. Paul very simply declares that he is guilty of none of these charges. This may seem like a flimsy defensive, but holding to a claim of innocence, when you are, in fact, innocent can actually be a very powerful defense.

Shakespeare wrote in *The Merchant of Venice*, "truth will out", meaning that eventually what is true will come to light. This in turn means that if you simply maintain your ground on what's true, eventually it will prove itself to be sound. This is essentially what Paul has done, and does again here, and once again it makes him a very difficult opponent to get rid of. But innocence becomes an even greater defense when coupled with wisdom, which is what Paul does in verse 9-12. "But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, 'Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?' But Paul said, 'I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.' Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, 'To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.'"

As I said earlier, Festus is unwilling to do the Jews a favor at the expense of Roman law, but that doesn't mean he's unwilling to try and figure out how to do them a favor in a way that doesn't violate Roman law, which is what he seems to attempt here. Paul's opponents have already requested that Festus transfer him back to Jerusalem, so he knows at least one of the outcomes they're after. However, as previously mentioned, he can't just transfer Paul against his will. So, he asks Paul if he wants to be transferred back to Jerusalem, because if Paul is willing then the transfer wouldn't be a violation of his rights, and it would allow Festus to do the Jews a favor.

But Paul is no dummy. He hasn't forgotten why he was transferred to Caesarea in the first place: there was a plot against his life, a plot that involved him being ambushed during a transfer from one location to another. Paul also knows that as a Roman citizen he has the right to appeal to a higher Roman court, namely the emperor's imperial court, and so he exercises that option here to avoid the ambush. However, Paul's wise handling of the situation is more subtle than him simply escaping another threat to his life. He understands Festus is in a difficult position. For if he sends Paul to another court himself, he risks angering the Jewish leaders, and starting off his governorship of the region on a bad foot. But if he cedes Paul to the Jewish authorities without cause, then he risks getting in trouble with Rome for violating Paul's rights. It's a tough spot.

So, Paul makes the appeal to Caesar, thereby removing the decision (and the probable blame) from Festus. Now Festus can get rid of Paul, remove himself from a difficult political situation, and claim to the Jewish leaders that he had no power to stop Paul. In other words, Paul's not just protecting his interests, he's doing Festus a favor. Recognizing this opportunity to extricate himself gracefully, Festus grants Paul's appeal. And thus, concludes another of Paul's lessons on how to be a sheep in the midst of wolves. So, what can we learn from Paul about being wise and innocent in a corrupt, antagonistic environment? Well, first, I think we need to ask, "To what end should we be wise and innocent?" In other words, there are a number of goals a person may seek to achieve by shrewd innocence, but what is the end that Christ followers hope to achieve through those means?

If we consider Paul and the disciples whom Jesus told to be wise and innocent, the answer is pretty clear: the goal was the proclamation of the Gospel and the expansion of the Kingdom. We can see how Paul's shrewd moves have not just been about self-preservation, they have been about the preservation of the mission to which he had been called. He was not making decisions for the purpose of self-advancement, but for the purpose of Kingdom-advancement, even if that meant difficulty for himself. In fact, in just a couple chapters we'll learn that Paul, in appealing to Caesar, actually forfeited the chance to be set free. Why would he do that? For the sake of following Jesus' call for him to testify to the Gospel in Rome.

And while it may look different for each of us, I'm pretty sure when it comes to how we interact with the world around us, God is still interested in us proclaiming the Gospel and advancing His Kingdom. While Paul was called to go to prison for Jesus, maybe you're called to go to your job for Jesus. While Paul was called to tell kings and governors about what Jesus had done in his life, maybe you're called to tell your classmates about what Jesus has done in your life. While Paul was called to proclaim the Gospel in Rome, maybe you're called to proclaim the Gospel at home. While Paul was called to evangelize through preaching and argument, maybe you're called to evangelize through befriending the unloved. Whatever it looks like in your life, for Christ followers it's important that our aim is to carry out the Gospel call He has given us, to contribute to the advance of Kingdom in the way He has made us, gifted us, and placed us to contribute.

It's important we check our hearts on this, because it's easy for other goals to slip in and displace our God-given, Kingdom callings. It's easy for us to slip into simply trying to protect ourselves and our loved ones from harm. It's easy to slip into just trying to win the culture war. Or to slip into any number of other things, that may not be bad or unimportant, but which are not eternal or ultimate. Jesus calls us to shrewd innocence that aims at what is ultimate. To that end, Paul is incredibly wise in how he has navigated this ordeal, particularly in how he has leveraged his Roman citizenship. He wasn't afraid to take advantage of his privileges for the sake of furthering the spread of the Gospel, and we shouldn't be afraid to do that either. And, as Americans, we have many privileges. Here are just a few. We are privileged to be able to gather for worship and preach the Gospel without fear. We are privileged with the freedom to defend our beliefs and values in the public square. We are privileged to have a voice in the governing of our country. So, by all means, let us leverage those advantages, but let's be sure to leverage them for the sake of the Gospel, not our own personal agendas, or the agendas of others.

And when we seek to advance the Gospel, the means are just as important as the ends. This is where innocence as a partner to wisdom becomes important. Many professing Christians today, on both sides of the aisle, seem to think that if we are to advance the Kingdom in our society, we must be prepared to get our hands dirty. And so, they engage in the same kinds of political manipulation, slander, and power grabbing as their opponents. Many of these people are incredibly shrewd, but they are hardly innocent by Christ's standards.

Here's a few examples of what I mean. Jesus told us to bless those who curse us, but many Christians return curses for curses. Jesus told us that we were not to be like the pagan rulers of his day who sought power by any means necessary, but many Christians still seem to operate as though earthly power was necessary for us to advance the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus told us to pray for God to raise up laborers to go out and bring lost souls into the Kingdom, but many Christians seem content to isolate themselves, if not *intent* on isolating themselves from many of the souls that need saving the most. Such attitudes and actions are simply un-Christlike, and so sinful.

05.05.24

Pastor Michael Tourtellotte

And so, important to understand in this discussion is that in the Kingdom of God the means are just as important as the ends. Working to increase the virtue of our society, and keeping ourselves unsullied from the ways of the world are noble ends, but the means by which we pursue those ends are important.

Have you ever noticed that during Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, Satan only offers him things He will eventually get anyway? Satan basically tempts Jesus to 1) prove to Himself that He is the Son of God, 2) prove to others that He is the Son of God, and 3) assume the authority and glory of the kingdoms of the earth. Those are all good ends! It's the means the devil suggested that were wrong. Jesus would prove to Himself to be the Son of God and assume the authority and glory of the kingdoms of the earth through His death, resurrection, ascension, and eventual return. Jesus refused the temptation to seek God's ends in ways that were not God's means.

In a world overrun with hatred and the us vs. them mentality (Russia vs. Ukraine, Israel vs. Palestine, Republicans vs. Democrats), the need for a different way of doing things seems patently obvious to me; we need different means, we need God's means. And so, we ought to follow our Savior's example, and be as innocent as we are wise in what we do. Which leads us to our main idea, which is that as sheep among wolves, we ought to advance the Kingdom in the way God has called, equipped, and placed us with all wisdom and innocence. In other words, we ought to leverage all available advantages toward Gospel ends, while committing ourselves to only utilizing Gospel means. And Gospel means are the way of the cross.

The cross reminds us not only of what Jesus has done for us, but also what He has called us to. As His followers we are called to bear the cross as well, on a daily basis, in fact. Which means sacrifice. Perhaps the sacrifice of some of those agendas that threaten to distract us. Perhaps the sacrifice of our own comfort and safety for the sake of reaching the lost. Perhaps the sacrifice of winning the culture war for the sake of laboring in the ripe fields of the Lord of the harvest. Perhaps the sacrifice of worldly power for the sake of the Kingdom greatness that is found in selfless, humble service. Don't be surprised if God's ways are less appealing than our ways. The ways of God are not the ways of man...they're better. In Isaiah 55:8-9 God says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." So, it is no wonder then that we often fail to understand God's ways, but we only do damage to ourselves when we forsake His ways on account of that lack of understanding.

I had a conversation recently with my daughter Fay about the motivation for doing what's right. In a show of great humility and insight, Fay admitted that sometimes she does what is right for the sake of getting a treat. And I told her, "You know, the problem with that is that treats aren't always enough to make us do what's right. Sometimes we want to do what's wrong more than we want a treat, and when we do that, we lose the treat, and we've done what's wrong." One of the things I love most about parenting is that sometimes in an effort to explain things to a child, you gain greater insight for yourself, and this was one of those moments. I suddenly had an "Aha!" moment that I explained to Fay this way: "On the other hand, if we do what is right because we love Jesus and want to make Him happy, not only do we simply do what is right and bring pleasure to Jesus, but we also get more treats!" The point is this: as with Fay, sometimes doing things God's way seems much less appealing than doing things our way, but in the end doing things His way brings Him pleasure, and is, in fact, the only way to truly get the desires of our heart.

To walk the way of the cross takes faith in the One who walked the way before us because it looks like sacrificing the things we care about, but it is ultimately the path to eternal life. The way of the cross is the path to the good ends we aim to accomplish. It is the way of the cross that will truly protect our loved ones in the eternal sense. It is the only sure protection. It is the way of the cross that will transform our culture. It is the way of the cross that leads to the eternal life and the eternal Kingdom Jesus came to make a reality for us.

Now, perhaps you're thinking that to walk this path sounds really difficult and unpleasant. Perhaps you're expecting that you're going to have to summon all your willpower to force yourself to take every single step down

05.05.24

Pastor Michael Tourtellotte

this path of the cross. If so, I have good news for you: God's ways are not our ways, they're far better. Here's what I mean. Do you know what I think it looks like to walk the path of the cross? I think it looks like coming to treasure Jesus more and more. Paul, as our example in this, did not walk this way through sheer force of will. He walked it because he was utterly enamored with Jesus, and so would do anything to know Him more.

In Philippians 3:8-11 he says this, "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

Paul walked the way of the cross because he knew it was the way to Jesus. He walked it because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. And so, he did not suffer begrudgingly, he suffered expectantly. He expected that he would come to know Jesus better through his suffering. Which to him meant that his suffering was well worth it. It was Paul's desire to know Jesus ever more intimately that fueled his sacrificial service for Jesus, that enabled him to walk the way of the cross. So, we end in the same place this week as pastor Grant did last week, where we come and behold Jesus in His glory that we may become more like Him, shrewdly and innocently advancing His Kingdom by the way of the cross in a hostile world as He leads and empowers us to do so by His Spirit.

## **“Wise As Serpents, Innocent as Doves”**

Acts 25:1-12

Main Idea: As sheep among wolves, we ought to advance the Kingdom in the way God has called, equipped, and placed us with all wisdom and innocence.

Introduction – Sheep Among Wolves

Acts 25:1-5 – A New Governor in Town

Acts 25:6-7 – All Bark, No Bite

Acts 25:8 – Paul's Powerful Innocence

Acts 25:9-11 – Paul's Shrewd Innocence

Application – Gospel Ends by Gospel Means

