

97-07-13b

Okay, we're back now from our break, we've observed this and this pointing out of an error perhaps or a flaw in judgment or Paul not finding the guidance of the Holy Spirit compelling in this circumstance makes us a little bit uncomfortable because Paul mentions this gathering of the gift in many places and we're a little uncomfortable admitting the fallibility of the Apostle who's writing this inspired Scripture and so forth. One thing to keep in mind is that of course Paul is not the only Apostle whose errors in judgment are recorded in Scripture. Peter wrote books and Peter makes a mistake, Paul documents that in Galatians and it is important to recognize that it is not the communication of truth that is compromised in this case.

Paul doesn't teach something and then find out that it's wrong or the giving that was involved here in the ministry to fellow believers, all of that is fine. The Gentile churches are to care about the poor and we are to give grudgingly and without necessity because God does love a cheerful giver. Nothing that Paul teaches is compromised by recognizing that he made a mistake.

We don't question the truth that's contained in the Psalms and yet we have abundant evidence that the author of many of those Psalms, King David, made egregious errors in the course of his life. Those are recorded for our instruction and for our benefit and I'm just glad that my life is not one of those that is used as an example and that my errors are not those that are teaching points for hundreds of millions of believers down through the centuries. We have to appreciate the ministry of God's Spirit in instructing us even in the errors.

We know that God does this in our own lives. God works all things together for good and it's not only our successes but also our failures from which we learn and by which we grow. This is true in school.

You recall it when you're in the academic environment. Sometimes I remember taking Oklahoma history and having tests over different events in Oklahoma history, who was Bell's star and so forth. The things that I remember, some of the things that I remember most clearly from that course were questions that I missed on the test and missing it on the test emphasized it.

I thought, why didn't I know that answer? I went back and picked that up and so I wound up covering that material maybe two or three times where if I had happened to get it right the first time, it faded out of my memory. God uses all of these things for our benefit and He records the successes and the failures of people in the Bible for the same reason. So it is not something that should shake our faith or trouble us that God has seen fit to also record this misstep on Paul's part.

You remember the argument over John Mark that Paul engages in a little bit earlier in Acts where there are sharp words exchanged between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark. That's not a good thing. Somebody was in the wrong there.

You don't have two ministers of the Word of God getting so mad at each other that they part company over this. Paul apparently had some difficulty putting up with John Mark. When he reappears on the scene later on, Paul is not very anxious to have him along because he says, well, he was a problem to us before.

So what we want to do at this point, having documented, I think, the fact that Paul was acting in violation of God's guidance in this case, the Holy Spirit told him numerous times, where else in Acts do you have the Holy Spirit coming back and telling Paul several times the same thing? Why would God come back and keep telling you something? Well, because you're not listening. Why did the angel of the Lord appear in the road in front of Balaam three times? Because Balaam kept trying to go. Balaam didn't stop and think, you know, this donkey has never stopped on me before, as the donkey herself points out.

Balaam doesn't ask himself, why am I experiencing this very unusual problem here that I haven't had before? He's single-minded. He's got it in his mind that he's going to go. And when things start hinting at him that all is not well, he disregards it.

Well, Paul ought to be asking himself the question, why is it that I keep getting this message? I've got the picture. I know the bonds and chains await me. Why do I keep getting this? Something must be, there must be a message here for me.

And his answer is, I am willing to do whatever it takes to fulfill my calling. This is a good thing, and this is Paul's faith, and it's his understanding of his calling that whatever the resistance, no matter how many chains, how many beatings, how much opposition comes his way, he's not going to be deterred from declaring Jesus Christ and declaring the full counsel of God. And that's a good thing.

But is it the best thing? Is it the thing for this time? That's what he has to ask himself. That's what Balaam needed to ask himself. God said, go to Moab, and he's going, and then he gets stopped.

Well, why? Something is amiss. Paul is being cautioned. Paul is being warned.

In one case here, as we saw this morning, Paul is being told outright, don't go. And this is something we need to ask ourselves. This is one of the classic questions in divine guidance.

Well, if I choose to go down a certain path, if I make a certain decision, and then I start encountering resistance, how do I know if this is an obstacle to be overcome by faith, or if this is God closing the door and saying, you're not supposed to be doing this? It's a classic question. We all run across this, and we say, boy, this just seems to be really difficult. It's not going well in this area.

Is God trying to tell me something? Well, how do we answer that question? How should Paul have answered it? How should Balaam have answered it? Well, we often try to resolve this in the

realm of circumstances. How will things turn out if I continue? How will things turn out if I stop? Paul looks at these warnings, and he says, well, I may be beaten, and I may be imprisoned, but nothing is going to stop me from going and fulfilling this. This is what he tells the Ephesian elders.

He says in verse 24, none of these things move me. Well, maybe some of these things should be moving him. Why is it that they don't move him? Because I do not count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

So he says, well, this is a part of my calling, and this is what I am supposed to do, and I'm going to do what I'm supposed to do regardless of the consequences. And that's a good thing, but as we know from Paul's own communication under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it's not just what we do, but it's why we do it. And if we find ourselves encountering obstacles like Paul does here, we need to decide, is this going to move me? Is this something that's going to change my approach or change my decision? Am I going to cease and desist and move in a different direction, or am I going to get on my horse and start doing something that I've not been doing? If we encounter something in circumstances, or if we encounter something that makes us think that we need to reevaluate, where should we look to decide what's right? Where does the Word of God apply itself? Does the Word of God give us the right choice and the right thing to do in every circumstance? Does the Word of God tell us, move to this city, go to this school, marry this person? We don't have much at all in the way of that kind of guidance other than moral commands, you know, fornication, adultery, deceit, and that kind of thing.

But in the day-to-day decisions, should I take road A, road B, or road C, we don't have explicit directions in the Word of God, nor do we get explicit revelation from God. Why is that? Because we make our choices based on the thoughts and intents of the heart. Is this the best way to fulfill my calling? Is my first and foremost desire in picking whatever path I pick to please God? Am I judging myself to see if I've got a mixed motivation? Am I picking road A because not only can I justify it as being a part of the will of God, but it really is going to satisfy a personal desire.

Isn't this great that God's will coincides with my will in this case, and I can go and do this thing, and it's also going to gratify a desire or a need or a wish or a lust, perhaps? I can sort of kill two birds with one stone here. See, this is obviously the will of God. Paul can go to Jerusalem and preach the gospel of Christ and bear witness.

That's his commission. That's his calling. And this, as I said last week, this is an advanced test.

When we're immature and when we're growing new believers, our tests are pretty easy. Do you sin or do you not? Do you fall prey to anger and jealousy and victory? Do you continue to gossip or do you stop gossiping? Our tests are much more fundamental, black and white. Here's the white, there's the black, stick with the white, and we move forward.

But as we grow, as it says at the end of Hebrews 5, we become mature and have our senses

exercised to discern good and evil, and it's not as clear. Now we're picking things out in what might initially look like are shades of gray. I personally don't believe in shades of gray.

I just think you've got a finer resolution of the black and white. You've got to look more closely. You've got to spend more time thinking.

And there is nothing so deceitful and nothing so difficult to sort out as the human heart. Jeremiah 17, 9, in the King James, says, The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it? Well, there's an answer to that question.

Who does know the heart? It's God. The Spirit of God and the Word of God divides to the dividing center of all that. It's a critic of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

And it's our job, whatever our specific calling, whatever our gift, whatever our task, whatever our decisions in life, to judge ourselves, to operate in the light of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, to discern the thoughts and intents of our own heart. It's a whole lot easier for us to look around and try to judge the thoughts and intents of other people's hearts and decide whether they're doing what they ought to do, rather than turning that laser beam of perception and judgment inward on our own thoughts and intents. When we start encountering resistance, when we start having reason to question whether we're doing what we're supposed to do or not, this is the place to resolve the issue.

It's not in how circumstances are going to turn out. It is true that Paul is going to be imprisoned, as he has been before. He's going to be beaten, as he has been before.

Deciding, well, how much beating is enough to deter me from going? Well, that's not a way to resolve the problem. And that's the difficulty that Paul has here, because Paul doesn't stop, and this is my understanding of what's going on here. But Paul says, knowing that I'm going to be beaten and imprisoned does not move me.

And it should not move him. It's not, well, if I'm going to get imprisoned, I'm not going to go. If they're going to beat me, then I must not be supposed to go there.

Many times the right path is going to cost us something. It is going to involve a sacrifice. But Paul says, knowing that I'm going to be imprisoned doesn't move me.

I'm ready to testify, whatever it takes. But that's not what the Holy Spirit is getting at. The Holy Spirit is not trying to keep him from being imprisoned.

The Holy Spirit is trying to get him to stop and analyze his motivation. Is he trying to go down there and vindicate himself in front of the Jewish church? If he is, then he shouldn't go. That's not the way to go.

That's not the reason to go. In the same way that Balaam should not go down to Moab, thinking,

well, I'm sure glad God sent me down here because, boy, is this going to be a profitable trip. The reason God stops Balaam is to straighten out his motivation and make sure that he's got a clear mind and a clear understanding of why he's there and what he's supposed to do.

It's the same thing with Paul. Because Paul does not respond to these warnings of the Holy Spirit, we find him writing in Romans 15, pray that my service will be acceptable to the saints. Paul is the foremost proponent of what you do.

Do it heartily as unto the Lord and not unto men. I want you to look at what happens when Paul arrives in this situation, when he does get there to Jerusalem, because he does not heed these warnings. Look at verse 15 of Acts 21, because this also is instructive for us.

After those days we packed up and went to Jerusalem. Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Nasson of Cyprus, an early disciple with whom we were to lodge. When we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.

Here's a great thing. See, this is not so bad. You get to Jerusalem, we've got some brethren here, we're all singing out of the same hymnal.

On the following day, Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. You may remember from Galatians what happened to Peter when the men of James came up to Antioch. Peter had seen the sheet let down, was eating with the Gentiles, and was relaxed about the requirements of the law, and recognized that these were no longer binding for believers in the church age, but when the men from James came up, Peter tightened up.

Peter said, I'm sorry I can't come out there to dinner with you tonight. Something came up, can't make it, and Paul calls him on it, and he says, you're misleading. You're doing a disservice to believers, and you're confusing and obscuring the gospel of grace, which is the teaching about how to live in grace after you're a believer.

Here we're back with James again, and good old James. All the elders were present, and verse 19, when he had greeted them, he told in detail the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard it, they glorified the Lord.

Here's Paul saying, all right, they're with me on this. I'm going to get this vindication that I came down here to get. They said to him, you see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law.

Here's red warning flag number one. What have we studied in 15 chapters of Romans? What does Paul say in Romans? They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. They are zealous for the law, but they're trying to establish their righteousness by the law, and righteousness doesn't come by the law.

You don't live your Christian life by what you do. It's who you trust. It's what you're thinking.

It's the thoughts and intents of the heart, and whatever is not of faith is sin. They are all zealous for the law, but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, nor to walk according to the customs. What is uppermost in these people's minds? There are people over here, and you're telling them not to keep the law, and they're not worried about the Gentiles at this point.

Oh, it's wonderful, Paul, you've got a great ministry among the Gentiles, but we hear that you're teaching Jews that they don't have to keep the law anymore, which Paul has not taught. It's an implication in what he has taught. What did he say in Romans? What does he say in Galatians? The law has been fulfilled.

We're not under law, but under grace. He doesn't come right out and say, therefore you Jews stop keeping the law. He himself observes the feasts.

He takes vows and so forth, which is harmless if his motivation is right. This is an expression of worship. It's not trying to establish his own righteousness before God.

He doesn't go before God thinking, I'm righteous because I observed this feast or I kept this vow. It's why we do what we do that counts. These people obviously do not understand that.

They don't say, Paul, we've heard you teaching about that it's obedience from the heart that God is looking for. We understand that the law is a way to express that and not a means of attaining it. What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come, in verse 22.

23, therefore do what we tell you. Do what we tell you. This isn't therefore obey God or let's do what we're about to do heartily as under the Lord and not unto men.

These people are coming, so you've got to do something to please them. You've got to do something to pacify them, to reassure them, to please them, to meet their standard. This is everything Paul has been preaching against in 15 chapters of Romans, isn't it? But once the compromise begins in the heart, in our lives it's the heart first and then the hands.

Our heart has to be right and then the things we do with our hands count. But Paul, because he has come to Jerusalem for the purpose of trying to appease these people and trying to bring them together, one compromise leads to another and one chink in the armor is going to get widened and that little chink is going to become a crack and that crack is going to become a split and the split is going to become a gaping place of vulnerability for Paul. Isn't this why he came to Jerusalem? To make these people understand, to vindicate himself in their eyes? Of course it is.

That's what he's asked the Roman church to pray for. Therefore, because these people are

coming, because they misunderstand you, do what we tell you. There's no appeal to Scripture.

There's no revelation of the Holy Spirit here. We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing.

Do this to straighten these people out, to make them accept you, to heal this breach that's in their minds. There's no argument from Scripture. There's no passionate plea like Paul presents in Romans.

He's going to do something now. By his actions he's going to try to appease these people. He doesn't even get the chance to teach them.

He's going to go in and take the vow and let that be his testimony. He's going to use the Mosaic law to assure these people that his gospel of grace is legitimate. Paul can't see this.

Why is that? It's something that was brought up during the break, something that Patti mentioned is a very good observation. Once we start thinking along these lines and once we let this type of thinking intrude in our minds, we're going to be less and less sensitive to the ministry of the Spirit. Why is it that Paul doesn't get a vision or a dream or a straight voice of God as he makes his way to Jerusalem? How does he get all of these messages? How does the Holy Spirit communicate to him? It's in every city through other believers.

Paul could ask himself the question, why isn't God talking to me personally? Why is it that these other believers are coming and bringing me the Word? How sensitive is Paul at this point to direct communication from God? Apparently not as much as he used to be because it has to be Agabus and it has to be the four virgin daughters and it has to be these other prophets that stand up in every city and say, Paul, here's what's going to happen. Let me give you an object lesson. Agabus takes his coat, takes his over wrap there, this big long piece of cloth.

Agabus sits down on the floor and wraps Paul's clothing around his ankles and wraps it around his wrists and says, you see this Paul? The owner of this, I mean how clear does Paul have to have it communicated? But Paul doesn't get it in a vision, he doesn't get it in a dream, he doesn't get it directly from the Holy Spirit, why? Something is wrong and Paul doesn't catch it and you see it go from bad to worse. Now he's being told by the men of James that Paul has already seen the effect of their legalism on Peter, but as soon as we start harboring and nurturing this desire that isn't a part of our calling and that hasn't been filtered out by the sharp sword of the Word of God, we become blind, we become callous, we become insensitive to the things that the Holy Spirit is going to try to show us out of God's Word. Take them, be purified with them, shave heads, pay the expenses, and what does he say at the end of verse 24, so that they may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.

Now Paul does walk orderly and Paul does in fact still keep the law and that's somewhat of a surprising revelation, but if you look in the book of Acts, Paul doesn't travel on feast days, Paul comes to Jerusalem to observe the feast, Paul stays in other towns and observes the feasts, Paul is still operating under the law, which is fine. It's okay for a Jew in that generation who has come to Jesus Christ and who understands what he is doing and why he is doing it, that this is not a means of attaining righteousness, but it's a traditional way of expressing respect and worship for God. There's nothing wrong with it.

Paul's argument throughout his epistles is the law is not a means of righteousness, and for people that didn't grow up under it, that's not what they were trained up under, that's not their personal way of expressing their faith and their trust in God and their worship for God, don't impose that on them. If you're a Jew and you grew up under that and you're in this first generation and you want to keep observing the feasts, fine, what a rich way to appreciate Jesus Christ and understand the fulfillment of those things, but Paul doesn't look at it as a means of being righteous. These people do, and James and his men are saying if you do this, these people can now be comfortable that their thinking is okay, and they're going to assume that you think the way they do.

Well, he doesn't, and this confuses the issue and muddies the water. Concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written, and they once again mollify Paul and say, see, we're not putting this on the Gentiles. Paul took the men the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, which time an offering should be made, and so forth.

If you go on and read the rest of chapter 21, you find that the Jews are totally unreceptive to this. This doesn't accomplish the purpose at all, and just as the Holy Spirit predicted, Paul ends up in bonds. However, when you go through all of these defenses and so forth, look down at chapter 23, after all of these things, Paul does get a chance to testify before kings and before the house of Israel, and he does the things that are part of his calling.

Somewhere in here, Paul apparently gets himself straightened out and recognizes that this was a foolish thing that he tried, but this doesn't thwart the plan of God. It doesn't stop the plan of God. God wasn't taken by surprise.

God knew when he sent these messages from the Holy Spirit that Paul was going to resist, but that was incorporated into God's plan. So look at 23.10. There arose a great dissension, the commander fearing that Paul might be pulled to pieces by these people commands the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them and bring him into the barracks. And this is another fulfillment of those prophecies.

But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, now notice, this is not a prophet coming, this is not Agabus coming down and saying, Paul be of good cheer. What has happened? Now

God is personally present and personally communicating with Paul once again, and that tells us that something has changed in Paul's heart. The Lord stands by him and says, be of good cheer, Paul, as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.

So this misstep on Paul's part, this failure and this area of bad motivation on Paul's part was something that God warned against. Paul went through it anyway. Bad things happened as a result, but it doesn't thwart the plan of God.

No failure that we commit is going to stop the plan of God. There's no one that won't be evangelized. There's no thing circumstantial in this life that will fail to come to pass because we fail.

It is whether or not we achieve the goal, which is not in circumstances, it's in the heart. That's what God is looking for. Do we genuinely want to please him? Are we genuinely trying to operate in faith? That's the measure.

That's the measure we apply to ourselves. We don't have to worry about circumstances. We cannot stumble so as to fall.

God will never suffer the righteous to be moved in circumstances. Even in failure, God can work that together for good. Paul winds up being exactly where he's supposed to be, saying exactly what he's supposed to say all the way through his career, even though some of the reason that he's there is because Paul failed.

It doesn't take God by surprise. If he was not supposed to be in jail in Jerusalem, we could have had another Philippi experience. The doors could open, or like Peter, where the jail is open and an angel walks him right out and puts him back where he's supposed to be.

God will ensure that we're at the right place at the right time doing what we're supposed to do. It's an amazing thing because we think, well, if I fail, I'll get off this linear track of God's plan and I'll never get back on. Not at all.

Every day that we wake up, we have a new opportunity to seek to please God in everything that we think, in everything that we decide, in everything that we engage in. The task and the responsibility we have each day is to ask ourselves the question, why am I doing what I'm doing? Who am I trying to please? And to judge ourselves in that area and to not make this mistake, to not be somehow gratifying our own desires or justifying the fulfillment of what we want because it's also God's will. Well, isn't this nice that this is God's will and it's also something I'm really anxious for? Well, we're not very sophisticated.

The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. Who can understand it? How do we accomplish that? It's by meditating on the Word of God. It's the Word of God that has the power to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart.

It's God the Holy Spirit who picks up that sharp sword. And for whom does he do that? For those who ask, for those who seek, for those who knock, for those who have an ear to hear. If we want that ministry bad enough, if it matters to us enough to be pleasing to God each day, we go and ask.

We go and seek. We walk up to the door and knock. And we say, Lord, don't let me go down a wrong path.

I don't want to fail. I don't want to operate out of mixed motives. Show me if I'm in error.

I don't want to mess up. I want to please you, whatever it takes. And we can have the dedication that Paul has and be willing to go even unto death or sacrifice of whatever shape.

God is looking for those who love him. That's fulfillment of all the law and the prophets, to love the Lord our God with our heart, our soul, and our strength, and to love one another. And it is that desire that we want to cultivate and that we want to measure our course through life by.

And if we find that we're trying to please people, we're trying to conciliate people, we're trying to vindicate ourselves in front of people, that's a time to stop. That's a time to get back into communion with God. It's a time to get up in the middle of the night and pray and seek the face of God and the presence of God and meditate on his word and cultivate the ministry of his Spirit.

Because there's no point in failing. There's no purpose in wasting time in that area. We have a great opportunity and God has given us everything we need to accomplish that.

And so that I think is the reason that God has left us this record of this episode and why we have the revelation of Paul's motivations. How else could we find out why Paul resisted this message from the Spirit? We have it in Romans 15. We know why he was not moved by the word of God coming to him.

He wanted to be vindicated in the eyes of people. Unfortunately, it's so ironic because it's the very thing he's argued against in this book. And we also have to be cautious because it's a whole lot easier to look at these things in the abstract than it is to see it in our own selves, isn't it? And Paul himself, as he writes inspired scripture on this subject, is unable, and of course it scares the daylights out of me because here I am standing up teaching these things and I can be doing the very same thing.

There can be an area in my life where I'm failing to be afflicted in conscience by this. Well, how do I get past that? I've got to do the very same thing I'm encouraging you to do. We have to spend time with God.

We have to spend time thinking about his word other than the few times a week we get together for Bible class. If it matters enough to us, we'll do that. We'll take a time and go for a walk or get

up in the morning or do whatever it takes and go to God.

We have a Father who is anxious for us to succeed. There's nothing that will please him more than for us to be a success at this. He is bending over as far forward as he can to provide and to do everything possible to nurture us and guide us into this way of life.

All he's waiting for is for us to want it bad enough to start taking advantage of all of those things that he has put in our periphery. Everything has been done except our decision day by day. Time goes forward and we wake up each morning and we stop each day and we say, why am I doing what I'm doing? That's our calling and that's our great opportunity.

Every day that we have that God allocates to us is one that can be redeemed from the evil days and the evil generation that Christ died to deliver us out of, it tells us in Colossians 1. So that's what we can take away from this. I think that's why it's in Romans 15. It's our greatest area of weakness to somehow be motivated by what people think.

We have to be motivated by what God thinks. That will keep us sensitive to his guidance and able to bear the fruit that he wants us to bear in the inner man. Let's close in prayer.

Father, we thank you for the preservation of these things in your word. We thank you for the example that we have in the lives of biblical figures. We thank you that we have the personal possession of your spirit and your word to enable us to do the things that we could never do in our own steam.

We can't sort out the complicated, intermeshed motivations and thoughts of our heart, but your spirit and your word are able to do that for us. It can bring light where no light has ever shone before. We pray that these things will serve that purpose.

We pray that as a result of learning these things, God the Holy Spirit will have even more to work with and will be able to move us when we need moving and will be able to show us the path in our thoughts and in our actions that pleases God and pleases you and that glorifies our Savior. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.