



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 21:18–40

“Applying Divine Principles: Part II”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Turning to Acts chapter 21, and reading verse 18 through verse 40, for our Scripture reading today. The apostle has now returned to the city of Jerusalem, after the completion of his last missionary journey, and he will make a report to the elders of the city and the brethren. And then will react to a suggestion that is made by the elders. And, finally, the chapter concludes with Paul in the custody of the Romans. Beginning with verse 18, Luke writes:

“And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present. And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified (the original text has “they glorified God”) and said unto him, “Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law: And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. What is it therefore? The multitude must needs come together: For they will hear that thou art come.””

Now, there is a slightly different basic text here in the original, and probably your text, if you have a modern version, reads slightly differently, but the point is that they say, “When you come, individuals

are certainly going to hear about it and they are going to hear about your being here. And that’s going to cause us some problems,” they are thinking.

“Do therefore this that we say to thee, ‘We have four men which have a vow on them; them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law.’”

Now, let me just add a word of explanation here. It was very common for Jewish men to undertake to temporarily or for a short period of time, probably a better way to express it, to take the vow of a Nazarite upon them. It was a form of devotion to do that. And, unfortunately, it had become a very expensive vow. When the Nazarite came to fulfill his vow, he would shave his head, the hair would be burned at the door of the temple. But then he had to offer an offering, and the offering was very expensive because he had to offer two lambs and a ram, then offer loafs and cakes with meal and drink offerings. So for poor people, this was a very expensive offering and, remember, there were many poor in Jerusalem among the Christians. In fact, Paul in this very visit to the city of Jerusalem has brought with him an offering from other evangelical churches for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. He thought it was very important for various reasons. But it is an indication that they were poor.

Now, because this particular type of vow required an expensive offering and many could not pay it, it was customary for wealthier Jewish people to take upon themselves the expenses involved. And they would do that as an act of piety, like giving money, like supporting Christian work. And so wealthier individuals would pay for the expense of the two lambs and the ram and all that was involved in finishing the Nazarite vow. So that’s what’s in mind when they say to the apostle, “Take, purify thyself with them, be at charges with them,” which means essentially pay their expenses, that

they may shave their heads and all may know that you are walking according to the law of Moses and keeping its requirements.

Verse 25, they remind Paul of the Jerusalem Council’s decree, which seems strange because Paul was there, too. But it was not uncommon for people to tell us things we already know, isn’t it? Particularly when they are giving us advice, they remind us of things that we already know. And it’s the part of good sense, sometimes, to listen to things we already know because people are trying to be helpful, sometimes, but other times, they are not trying to be helpful. They’re just trying to pound it into us. Well, in this case, they probably were trying to be helpful and so they say.

“As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication.”

That was the decision of the Jerusalem Council; that is, that the Gentiles are not under the law, but that they should be careful not to offend Jews, who did still live according to the prescriptions of the law, by doing these things which Moses, generally, speaks about.

“Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them.”

Now, one other thing should be said here. Paul did not, so far as we know, take the Nazarite vow upon him. What he was doing, was doing what was required of Jewish people, when they spent time among the Gentiles. When they went out and spent time among the Gentiles, they became defiled. So it was customary for Jewish men, who were pious men, when they returned after a visit to a place like Dallas, they would be defiled. And so it was necessary for them to engage in a rite of

purification. So for, frequently for seven days, they would carry out certain religious rites, by which the defilement contracted by the fellowship with the Gentiles would be taken away. So, evidently, Paul was to do this and arrange it in such a way that his completion of his purificatory rites might accord with the men who had taken the Nazarite vow, so that people would see, yes, Paul is observing the Jewish customs. Now, verse 27 reads.

“And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him.”

Now, evidently, the elders like all human beings had overlooked one significant fact, and that was that while there are many Jewish believers in the city of Jerusalem, in fact, the Greek text says literally “thousands of them,” they forgot that there were Jewish people who had come to the feast of Pentecost, from all over that part of the world. And a number of them came from Ephesus. Now, Paul was pretty well-known in Ephesus. He was known as the fellow who caused all of that uproar over there, and so when the Jews from Asia who had come to the feast, saw things that were happening there, then difficulties arose, unanticipated by the elders. So when they saw Paul in the temple, they stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him.

“Crying out, ‘Men of Israel, help. This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people and the law and this place (that is, the temple) and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place. For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.’”

So it’s obvious they were from Ephesus. They knew Trophimus; they knew he was a Christian man, and when they saw him in the city, and they hated Paul, they just assumed that Paul had brought Trophimus into the temple and thus defiled the temple. And we read in verse 30.

“And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple and forthwith the doors were shut.”

That is, the Jewish men who took charge of the temple, they didn't want anything to happen in the temple area, but they weren't particularly anxious to stop anything that happened after, outside. It's the same kind of thing that happened in the crucifixion of our Lord. Religious people brought it about, but they didn't want to bring it about in a way that might obviously conflict with their religion. And so they were happy for Paul to be put to death and at the same time preach, “Thou shalt not kill.” So long as it wasn't done in the temple area. That's characteristic of human nature, isn't it?

Verse 31:

“And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, (that is, the Roman in charge of the temple police) that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Who immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down unto them: And when they saw the chief captain and the soldiers, they left off beating of Paul. Then the chief captain came near, and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and demanded who he was, and what he had done. (And he wouldn't, Paul wasn't allowed to speak for himself. Everybody began to chime in, as you might expect.) And some cried one thing, some another, among the multitude: and when he could not know the certainty for the tumult, he commanded him to be carried into the barracks. (That's the sense of castle here. And, incidentally, the Roman barracks or the castle was right in one corner of the temple area. If you visit Jerusalem today, you can see where it was.) And when he came upon the stairs, so it was, that he was borne of the soldiers for the violence of the people. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying, ‘Away with him.’ And as Paul was to be led into the barracks, he said unto the chief captain, ‘May I speak unto thee?’ (Who was startled that Paul was able to speak Greek.) Who said, ‘Canst thou speak Greek?’ Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers?”

This is a documented historic fact. Josephus, the Jewish historian, in his account of the Jewish wars, speaks of this Egyptian who was seeking to suggest that certain Messianic prophecies might be fulfilled, and Josephus, with characteristic exaggeration of the fact says, “he led out thirty thousand people.” Luke, the inspired historian, is probably a whole lot closer to the truth and he says that this Roman said to the apostle, “Art not thou that Egyptian which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers or assassins?”

“But Paul said, ‘I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city (that meant, of course, that he was a Roman) and I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people.’ And when he had given him license, Paul stood on the stairs, and beckoned with the hand unto the people. And when there was made a great silence, he spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue, saying,”

It’s not usual that a chapter ends with a comma, but that’s the way it does, and we will save the exposition of what Paul said for next week, Sunday morning, the Lord willing.

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word.

[Message] Last weekend, in the exposition of the first part of chapter 21, I made the comment that it’s very unlikely that preachers, who are looking for texts, and preaching simply texts as their customary method of teaching, rarely choose a section like Acts chapter 21, because it really doesn’t have many outstanding texts and the subject matter is something that is difficult and a little bit hard to comprehend. And so, consequently, Acts chapter 21, is one of the neglected passages of the Word of God. That’s one of the advantages of expository preaching and one of the difficulties of expository preaching.

Now, coming to the second half of the chapter, under the general title today of, “Applying Divine Principles,” there are some additional questions that are raised about the incidents that have

taken place, as Luke has described them. Assuming that the Apostle Paul made no mistake in going to Jerusalem, even though he had been warned by Agabus the prophet, that he would be there bound by those in Jerusalem and taken prisoner, assuming that Paul made no mistake in going to Jerusalem, did Luke regard the action that Paul took to preserve peace among the believers, to be wrong? In other words, did Luke himself think that Paul should not have entered into the temple, and to undergo a rite of purification in connection with these four men?

I have a hunch that Paul would have gone into the temple anyway, but should he have identified himself with these four men, who were undergoing the Nazarite vow rites. Should he have done that? Did Luke regard him as wrong? But for the sake of the facts of the matter, related the incident? Even though it was used for the fulfilling of God’s will that he go on to Rome, because after all, remember, that’s Paul’s ultimate destination. And this is the occasion for the arrest of the apostle and the necessary steps for him to finally appear in Rome, as a witness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So that’s one of the questions that one would think about as he read this chapter.

But more important than that is this question, how can we harmonize Paul’s view, that we are not under the law, with his purification of himself with the four men under the Nazarite vows? After all, Paul states very plainly, in Romans chapter 6 in verse 14, writing to the Roman believers, “We are not under law, but under grace.” And then in the 7th chapter, he confirms it, by stressing the fact that “we have died to the law.” And then, to make it very plain that he is speaking of the whole of the law, and not simply the ceremonial part of the law, he cites the commandment, “Thou shall not covet.” And, in order to prevent anyone from saying, well, that’s an exception, and to rationalize by some devious method of exegesis, of which all New Testament scholars are well qualified to do, the apostle states the same thing in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, he says, “We are not under law,” and then he refers to the Ten Commandments.

So there’s no question about Paul’s meaning; he means that believers are not under the Law of Moses; and they are not under the Ten Commandments, as a code. But now, of course, the apostle was not an “Antinomian” in the sense in which that term is ordinarily used. He wasn’t a

person who believed that a man could break the Mosaic Law eliminating the question of the Sabbath Law, because over and over in the New Testament, in his own teaching, he makes it very plain that the moral requirements of the Ten Commandments are to be seen in the lives of believers. “If a man walks by the Spirit of God, he will fulfill the law.” So he states in Romans chapter 8, and then again in Galatians chapter 5, he states, “When a man walks by the Spirit, then there is no charge that can be laid against him by the Law of Moses.”

So here is the question, if the apostle says we are not under the Law, but yet he, himself, observes these requirements of the Jewish Law, is not Paul in this instance, at least, confusing the principles of Law and grace? Now, to show you that it's a real question that some outstanding Bible teachers have had, G. Campbell Morgan who has written a very well-known commentary on the book of Acts, has said with regard to Paul's purification of himself, with these men, that, “Paul made here the greatest mistake of his ministry.” The man who led me to the Lord, Donald Grey Barnhouse, Presbyterian minister of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, said that, “Paul demonstrated here that he was an opinionated, stubborn, old man.” Now, there is some support for that. He was an opinionated, stubborn, old man, providing we look at those terms in a favorable light. But then, Dr. Barnhouse went on to say that, “What he did was as bad as if he were to enter a Roman Catholic Cathedral and receive from the priest's hands the Mass.” Now, that was Dr. Barnhouse's way of teaching by means of the way of the shock treatment. I have some friends who teach by the shock treatment, and they frequently overstress things and over emphasize things in order to make what they think is a valid point. Well, I get the opinion from Dr. Barnhouse that he thought that Paul made a mistake here. So why did Luke record this incident? And was it a mistake on the part of Paul? Did he record it simply to indicate the occasion of Paul's arrest and the occasion of his ultimate trip to Rome?

If you read the book of Acts, if you will just simply see that a large part of that book is devoted to that trip to Rome. So we're coming into a part of Acts that Luke regards as very important. Acts has 28 chapters. We are in chapter 21. The last one-fourth of the book is devoted to

Paul’s journey to Rome, the occasion of it and then the details of it, and, finally, the last chapter deals with his reaching the city of Rome.

So this was very important for Luke, and, no doubt, he wanted to, as we said in the beginning, to record the progress of the Gospel from Jerusalem all the way to the capital city of the Empire, the city of Rome. I think from the spiritual standpoint, what he wanted to show was that Paul is now a witness on trial for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And if one ever needed an incident to impress upon us the fact that the world is opposed to the gospel of Christ, these chapters will indicate it. The world of religion and the world of politics, the world of government; these worlds are opposed to the truth of God. Oh, there may be some exceptions in history, a few cases of this, but, generally speaking, these great human sources of power are opposed to the truth of God. The world of politics, the world of religion and the world of government; it’s always that way for the simple reason that politics and religion and government are in the hands of, generally speaking, the non-Christian. And non-Christians are rebellious naturally toward the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s part of our essential makeup. And it will help you a lot, even if you are not a Christian, if you just understand the nature of man. All history testifies to this, when read plainly and clearly.

Now, then, we’re going to look at it, rather briefly. I’ve already explained, I think, some of the more difficult things in the Scripture reading. We’ll just rapidly go through it, and then spend our last ten or fifteen minutes on the question of the relationship of the apostle Paul to the Law, and how we are to be related to the Law in the light of the apostle’s practices.

When Paul reached the city of Jerusalem, on this his final missionary journey, per se, he reached a city at the time of the feast of Pentecost. Some have estimated that there were as many as two million, Jewish people in Jerusalem at this time; that may be an exaggeration, but there were many Jews who had come there from all over that part of the world. The feast of Pentecost was one of the great feasts, which they celebrated. And we already have an indication in this account itself that there were Jewish men from Asia and from the city of Ephesus who had come there.

Furthermore, in the city of Jerusalem, there was a great deal of tension because Jerusalem was regarded as the City of God. God had made great promises concerning Jerusalem, in the Old Testament. Those promises shall be fulfilled in the future. But, in the meantime, Rome stands over the Holy City. And, naturally, there were individuals who were upset over this and wanted to be free of the Roman yoke. To study the history of Israel is to study attempts like this, and the Age of the Maccabees illustrates it before New Testament times.

Now, here is a city filled with tension. They were celebrating one of their feasts, which caused the people to have even further desire to be their own master. God had given them great promises in the Word of God that Israel would be the head of the nations, and not the tail of the nations. And so you can see that everything is ripe for an explosion of the feelings of the people.

Well, Paul comes; he meets with the saints, as is his custom. The brethren in Jerusalem received him gladly. He went in to see the elders of the church in Jerusalem the next day, with James, who evidently had a place of great influence among the elders, all the elders were present, Luke says. And Paul related to them, after he had greeted them, the things that God had done among the Gentiles, by his ministry. He told about how he had been in Asia. he told about how he had been in Greece. He told about the responsiveness to the Word of God there. And those godly men, in the city of Jerusalem, when he declared what God had done among the Gentiles by his ministry, they glorified God because of the things that the Lord God had done.

You'll see that Paul and they attributed the success of his mission to the Gentiles to the Lord God. In that sense, Luke is surely telling us exactly what transpired.

But now, the elders make a request of Paul. It has been said that this indicated a bit of doctrinal weakness on the part of the elders; perhaps a desire to engage in a bit of expediency, in order to preserve peace. And it's customary for those who feel that this is so at this point to point out that peace is important. But truth is even more important than peace. And, consequently, one's understanding of this chapter relates, ultimately, to one's understanding of what is meant by the believer's relationship to the Law. At any rate, the elders make a request of Paul. They say, “Look,

Paul, people all over the world are saying that you are teaching people to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, nor should they walk after the customs,” that would include the feasts and things like this. So what about it? Obviously, you’re here; you’re going to cause difficulty. People are going to get together because you’re here, and they are going to react in a way that may not be favorable for all of us. Because there are thousands of Jews which believe; and they are all zealous of the law. So they wisely sense that here is a situation that could be, that could cause a great deal of problem.

So they suggest, why don’t you go into the temple. There are four men there, who are engaging in the Nazarite vow. And the time is coming for the fulfillment of the vow, when they will shave their heads, burn the hair and offer the animals. Why don’t you go into the temple? They knew Paul had no objection to this, because he had had a vow previously, himself, and it was the custom of people who had lived among the Gentiles for awhile to purify themselves. Because, after all, folks, we are unclean. That is, according to Judaism, we are unclean. We are sinners of the Gentiles, as Paul says, in Galatians chapter 5. So go in and identify yourself with them. And, furthermore, pay for their offerings. And in this, you will perform an act of piety, recognized by all of the Jewish men here in the city of Jerusalem, and they will see that you really do observe the customs.

Now, the apostle went on, we read in verse 26, and took the men, “and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them.” So Paul took their suggestion. He went in. He engaged in the act of purification, as far as he was concerned. He, evidently, paid for the offerings of these Nazarites, these who had taken the Nazarite vow for a time. And in this way, sought to allay the suspicions that people had about him.

Now, some scholars doubt that this ever happened, because they cannot see how Paul, in the light of his teaching in the Epistles, could ever have done anything like this. They think that his teaching concerning the Law is so plain and clear that we are not under the Law, that he would never even have observed a Jewish custom. In fact, one well-known scholar has said, “It would be more

credible that a dying John Calvin would have bequeathed a golden dress to the Mother of God.” And you can imagine that that would never, never, never happen. So it is thought that this is really a tradition that is not true and that Luke has relied upon a source that is untrue; not true to the nature of Paul as we know it.

Well, for those who take the Word of God in a little different way, we’d have to deal with this as something that is true of Paul. Well, we know that he went in, and when the seven days were ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, they stirred up all the people and laid hands on him. What the elders had forgotten, and they are human men, elders, occasionally, make mistakes. What they had forgotten was that there were not simply Jews from Jerusalem there; but there were also unbelieving Jews who were from Ephesus and other places. And those fellows knew about Paul. He had gone into their cities, and they didn’t like it, and they had caused riots because he had been there. We’ve just read of them, in the preceding chapters. So when they came there and they saw, “There is that pest again, that Paul!”

And, furthermore, one of them says, “I saw Trophimus the other day. He’s here too. And don’t you know they are so close.” You’ll find Trophimus referred to in the New Testament. “Don’t you know that they are so close. Here’s Paul in the temple area. he’s taken Trophimus in the temple area.” And that’s one thing you are not supposed to do.

Now, remember, the temple area was a very important part of the city of Jerusalem. It was divided into several concentric rectangular courts. There was the court of the Gentiles. Then, there was the court of the women. And then there was the court of Israel, where only the Jewish men could enter. And so strict separation was maintained. Gentiles, Jewish women, Jewish men, in fact, Claremont-Ganneau, doing some excavation in the temple area a few decades ago, discovered the barrier that stood between one of these areas, between the women and the court of Israel. And on this barrier written in both Greek and Latin is the inscription, “No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame that his death ensues.” So it was a crime punishable by death. Now, the Romans,

evidently, stood behind that. So you can see, that for Trophimus to have entered into the temple area would be a very serious kind of crime, as far as they are concerned.

They had seen him there, and they supposed that Paul had brought him in the temple. And when they began to circulate what they thought was the situation, the whole city was moved. They all ran together. They took Paul; they drew him out of the temple. And, forthwith, the doors were shut. You cannot commit a crime in the temple area; but you can commit it outside. Isn't that characteristic of human nature? We see that in the sacrifice of our Lord. It's possible to put someone to death, to murder them, providing you do it in the name of religion. But, anyway, they seized Paul. You can imagine the different explanations that have been given of Trophimus being there. How did he get to be there? Well, I don't know. Maybe he wandered in of his own free will.

One of the commentators said, “Trophimus wandering into the temple area, after these barrier, this barrier was made known, Trophimus wandering into the temple area would be as credible as the account that someone happened to wander into the private rooms of the Kremlin, when he was visiting in Moscow.” So no, Trophimus never went into the temple area. That was something that they had thought up.

Well, finally, they lay hold of Paul. The whole city is in an uproar. And they cry, “Away with Paul.” The very words that were used of our Lord Jesus Christ. And so, as far as Paul is concerned, he's having the experience of the sufferings of our Lord, going through the same experiences, from ungodly men.

Well, it's very striking isn't it that Jerusalem persecutes the gospel of Christ, persecutes Paul. Rome protects Paul; and the Lord God uses both upon this occasion to get his servant to Rome. And that's the goal of the story of the book of the Acts.

Now, that brings us to our problem. We'll spend our last few minutes on that. Can Paul's actions be harmonized with his principles? What are Paul's principles? Well, first of it, it's evident from Paul's letters and his teaching elsewhere, that the Gentiles are free from Judaism. That is, they do not have to observe the Mosaic proscriptions. For example, in the Epistle to the Galatians, in

chapter 5, in verse 1, the apostle writes, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage.” So it’s clear from Paul’s teaching that he regarded the Gentiles as free from the need to keep the Law as a code. We’re not under Law; we’re under grace. Romans 6 and 7, 2 Corinthians chapter 3, make it very plain, Galatians chapter 3 in verse 4, also emphasize it. In other places, Paul says, “The law is not for a righteous man; the law is for an unrighteous man.” It’s to bring men to the conviction of their sin, primarily. So the Gentiles are free from Judaism. When the veil of the temple was rent in twain, from top to bottom, as we’ve so often stressed, it’s from top to bottom not bottom to top, as if the Lord God is doing it, himself. The Mosaic Law, as a code was done away with. Now, so far as the moral principles of the law, they are repeated in the New Testament. They are repeated as the teaching of Christ.

Now, excluding the law of the Sabbath, over which there has been considerable disagreement, all believing Christians have to acknowledge that we are responsible to keep the moral content of the Law of Moses. But so far as the Law as a code is concerned, it’s done away with. The man who walks by the Spirit, will keep the moral law, and keep it in a way that will please the Lord God. But Gentiles are free from keeping the Law as a code.

Now, what about Jewish believers? Well, Jews are free from the Law, too. But due to the historical situation in which they lived, having lived under law, under its prescriptions, under the feasts, under the necessity for the offerings, under the various types of things found in the Mosaic Law, it’s natural that their daily life should be governed by the customs under which they had been brought up. So Jews are free from the Law, but they are also free to observe the Law. True freedom is the freedom to be free from the Law and the freedom to observe the Law.

Now, if you will study Paul’s normal life, in the book of Acts, and very few people do this. They tend to want to argue a question like this on the basis of one passage. That’s always a mistake. And failing to look at Paul’s life properly, they come to opposed conclusions and fight each other over this.

Whereas, if they spent some time and looked at all of the New Testament teaching, and also then looked at Paul’s life, which he says, “Is that which we are to imitate,” they will see that Paul, even after he became a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ lived, generally, as a Jewish man. He lived as a Jewish believer. That’s what he was. That’s what he had grown up in. He had advanced in Judaism, beyond many of his contemporaries, and it’s perfectly natural to expect that of Paul.

So for example, in chapter 16, in verse 3, we read about Timothy, “Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek.” And so he had Timothy circumcised in order that Timothy might be able to minister, unhindered, among Jewish people. Notice chapter 18 in verse 18, “And Paul after this tarried there yet a good while, and then took his leave of the brethren, and sailed thence into Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila; having shorn his head in Cenchrea: for he had a vow.” So it was Paul’s practice to engage in these Jewish customs, from time to time. So he felt free to do it, as a Christian man. He was free from the law, but he was free, also to put himself under the Law if he felt that he wished to do it. In chapter 20, for various reasons, we don’t have time to go into the reasons. In verse 6 of chapter 20, we read, “And we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and came unto them to Troas in five days; where we abode seven days.” So it’s evident that the apostle observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Verse 16: “For Paul had determined to sail by Ephesus, because he would not spend the time in Asia: For he hasted, if it were possible for him, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost.” So he observed, ordinarily, these Jewish feasts. He felt free to do it as a Christian man.

Did Paul observe the tithe? Well, now, we know if we read the New Testament, there is nothing in the New Testament about the tithe. The tithe was an income tax. Gifts and offerings were beyond the tithe. So the Christian church, unfortunately, has brought over the tithe into the Christian church; and put believers under a requirement that is not part of the New Testament. And so the New Testament principle is that we should give, as God has prospered us, among other things. So believers may give. If they are in financial difficulty, they don’t have to give at all. That is, difficulty

that is something over which they don't have a whole lot of control. And some of us have had difficulties like that. Maybe are having difficulties like that. If you feel that God has blessed you, so that you give 5 percent, there's nothing in the New Testament that says that that's wrong. If you want to give 15 percent, there isn't anything in the New Testament that says that's wrong. Or if you want to give 20 percent, if God has blessed you in that way, there is nothing in the New Testament contrary to that. And, if you want to give a tithe, you are free to give a tithe. But, if you give a tithe, I do hope that you give it simply because you feel that God has blessed you to that extent and that you are giving not because it's the Law of Moses, but because God has prospered you to that extent. The New Testament says nothing about the tithe, and Christians being under the tithe.

So Paul observed those Jewish customs. Now, there are certain kinds of customs that we might be engaging in, which we are free to do. Now, a lot of the things that we engage in are not set out in the New Testament at all. They are the taboos that are characteristic of many Christian circles. That type of thing an individual does not have to observe. It may be desirable to observe a taboo, if there are certain values that may be gained from it. For example, to take one that twenty-five years ago very few evangelical Christians would ever been seen in a theatre. Now, that proves that I belong to that age category that Tom was speaking about in the time of the announcements. But that was true of evangelicals. They rarely ever entered a theatre. There are still some around who rarely ever enter the theatre. They think it's wrong.

I can remember a discussion in the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary, and there was a certain statement in the seminary statements to the effect that people who were engaged in Christian ministry shouldn't engage in certain things. And listed were one or two items, I've forgotten exactly what they are now, but we had a faculty discussion and one of the faculty members, a little bit, who tended a little bit to legalism, suggested that we add some things to the list. They were things that he thought should be taboos. Well, I thought we had taboos enough; and so I knew that he loved music and the opera. And so when he started talking about these other taboos, I said, “Yes, and opera.”

[Laughter] And I said it with a straight face. And so that discussion dropped immediately. He was so happy over going to opera that he was willing to dismiss these other little picayunish thing.

Now, those types of things are something different. But, it's possible for an individual to observe something for some particular reason. For example, if you know in Utah that the Mormons don't like to drink coffee and think it's wrong, why it's perfectly all right for you to go to Utah and there to abstain from drinking a cup of coffee that might enable you to have an opening to speak to a Mormon with a great deal more conviction.

There's a marvelous story, which is a true story, in one of Dr. Ironside's books, about the visit that he made to the city of Detroit. He was preaching in a gospel hall there in a church very similar to Believers Chapel. And there was a former Mohammedan from India, who was there, who was the head of a tea business. And he had come to know the Lord Jesus as his Savior, in this country. And on one occasion, when holding a meeting there, the Sunday school had its annual picnic, and everyone went out to a beautiful spot outside the city of Detroit. In those days, I think there was such a spot. And you who are from Michigan, you can catch me afterwards and inform me of the truth, but, anyway, as they were there talking, a young lady came up to this man. His name, by the way, was Mr. Mohammed Ali, and so she came up to Mr. Ali, and she said to him, “Would you like some sandwiches?”

But she came to Dr. Ironside first. And Dr. Ironside was a man who had come to the front [laughter], as a Bible teacher, and so he looked at the tray, he said, “Yes, I'll have several kinds.” And so when she turned to Mr. Ali, she said, “Will you have one?” He said, “What kind are they?” And she said, “They're fresh pork, and there's also ham.” He said, “Do you have any beef?” And she said, “No, I don't.” “Do you have any lamb?” “No, I don't.” “Do you have any fish?” And she said, “No, I don't.” Then Mr. Ali said, “Thank you, my dear young lady, but I won't take any.” And, laughing over this, the young girl said to Mr. Ali, in surprise, “Are you so under the Law that you cannot eat pork. Don't you know that a Christian is at liberty to eat any kind of meat?” And he said, “Yes, I am at liberty to eat it, I know. But I'm also at liberty to let it alone. And I'll tell you why.” he said, “My

father is still living. He’s nearly eighty years of age. He’s at the head of our tea business. I have to return every three years and give him a report. And when I return, I will go up to the house and I will knock on the door, and the servant will announce that I am there. And then my father will come to the door and he will say, ‘Mohammed? Have those infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?’ [laughter] And he said, “I will say, the pork has not touched my lips. “And he’ll welcome me in and I’ll have an opportunity from time to time to speak to him about the Lord Jesus Christ.” He said, “If I were to be unable to answer that question, I would not even be allowed to come in the house.” So he said, “Yes, I have freedom to eat the pork. But I have freedom, also not to eat the pork.”

Now, I think, that that is precisely what Paul is doing here in Acts chapter 20, and I’m going to ask you to turn, if you will, to turn to a passage which I’ll just read. It’s so plain and clear that it doesn’t require any exposition, in the light of what I’ve already said. It’s 1 Corinthians chapter 9, verse 20 through verse 22. Now, Paul is explaining his manner of ministry, in connection with meat sacrificed to idols. But the principle, obviously, is a principle that applies to other situations. Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 9, verse 20, “And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law: To them that are without law, as without law.” Now, listen, if Paul was really under Law, he could never say that. Notice what he says, “To them that are without law, as without law, but then, lest you misunderstand,” he said “Being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ, that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak.” Those are those who have scruples about eating certain things, just as we were talking about. “To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” To put it in the words of one of the finest New Testament commentators, “A truly emancipated spirit, such as Paul’s is not in bondage to its own emancipation.” “A truly emancipated spirit, such as Paul’s is not in bondage to its own emancipation.” In other words, we are free to put ourselves under law, for a particular reason, Paul says. But that doesn’t mean that we are

not free. We are free. We are free to be under the law. We are free from the law, or we are free for the exercise of the law upon occasion.

But, now, when it comes to the gospel that's a different matter. If, for example, our action of being under Law compromises the principle of grace, then the apostle will not submit to a legal requirement. And the finest illustration of this is the passage in Galatians chapter 2, and Titus' circumcision. Timothy is desired to be circumcised, in order that they might have ministry and freedom of it. But in Titus' case, where the issue was circumcision as a means of salvation, listen to what Paul says about that.

Galatians 2, verse 1:

“Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them, which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage.”

That is, to make it plain that Paul really did admit it was necessary to be circumcised in order to be saved.

“To whom, Paul says, we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.”

Men are saved by grace not by any thing that they do. By grace. But, having been saved by grace, we are free from the Law as a code. But we are free to observe sections of the Law, if we like. That's part of our emancipation. And we are not so in bondage to our emancipation that we cannot

voluntarily observe a Jewish custom; or, for that matter, a Gentile custom, providing the truth of the gospel is not in any way hindered.

If you are here today and you have never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, your responsibility is to believe the gospel; that Christ has died for sinners. That you are a sinner. That you need the forgiveness of sins that Christ has provided by the work that Christ has done. He died for sinners. And if you have, by the grace of God, come to the conviction that you are a sinner, and under guilt and condemnation from God, you need Christ. You must come to him. There is no salvation in any other. May God give you grace to come to him and believe upon him, resting upon the merits of what he has done upon the cross at Calvary, you shall receive the forgiveness of sins and justification of life. How marvelous to know that we stand righteous, before God, in grace, by what he has done. Come to Christ. Acknowledge your need. Receive him as your own personal Savior.

Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these sections from the Word of God, which are so relevant for the application of the truth. We thank Thee for Paul; for his faithfulness, for the light that comes to us as we observe the life that he lived. Go with us now, we pray,

In Jesus' name. Amen.