

**Acts 18: 12-21; “Paul’s Faithful Ministry & Vow”, Sermon # 67 in the series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on
October 3rd, 2021, in the Morning Worship Service.**

I want to speak to you from these verses about the apostle Paul’s faithfulness in ministry, and the vow which he took which is recorded for us in these verses. Paul was a man who was very serious about living His life unto God, and winning people to Christ. It was what God had called and commissioned him to do. He would spend and be spent and be spent in this good work. Today, I would like to make mention of 3 things that he was faithful to do, so that Christ’s kingdom would go forward.

1st of all – Paul was faithful to preach that salvation was only by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the law. 2nd – Paul took a vow, that in preaching Christ, he would also hold fast to a right view of God’s law. In preaching these things to you, I hope that you will be faithful to do the same kind of things as Paul did, to promote the kingdom of Christ and our God.

1st of all – Paul was faithful to preach that salvation was only by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the law.

So the Lord Jesus came to the apostle Paul in a vision in the night, when he was first opposed by the Jews for preaching the gospel in their synagogue. The opposition was very great there. Verse 6 tells us that they opposed Paul’s teaching and they blasphemed the Christ whom he preached. The reason that they were blaspheming was because they did not want to believe that the Lord Jesus was God’s only-begotten Son and their promised Messiah. Paul was showing this to them from the Scriptures. And when they blasphemed, Paul felt compelled to shake out his garments at them, and tell them that their blood was now on their own heads; that he would go to the Gentiles, from then on.

But even so, the Lord had saved Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and Gaius, and many others it says in verse 8 of this chapter. Paul really wondered whether he could continue the mission there until the Lord said to him in this vision that he should not be afraid; but that he should speak, and not keep silent. For He was going to be with him, And no one would attack him to hurt him, for He had many people in this city who He was intending to save. Now, this was a promise that the Lord gave to Paul specifically, in relation to his ministering in this particular city. It didn’t mean that he would not be persecuted in all the places that he went to minister. It meant that the Lord was specifically not going to allow Paul to be persecuted in this particular way; his being attacked by people in that city, at that time, for the next year and a half.

How could God promise him this? He could only promise it to him, if He had the ability to prevent it. And He would prevent it. He would so providentially order things in the minds of the people in authority, that they would not be able to take action against Paul’s staying and preaching and teaching. And it will be so for us, as well, if we can understand that God does have the ability to prevent persecution from taking place, in any given place, and at any given time, by His own sovereign will. If it will fulfill His good purposes in relation to the gospel, He will do this. In this case, He wanted Paul to be able to stay there in Corinth for the next year and a half and teach the people there. Paul could not have realistically done this if he had been persecuted and hounded, in the way that he sometimes was, when he preached the gospel.

In applying this to ourselves, I want you to see, that in regard to the ministry that the Lord has given us here, God is able to establish our work in peace if that is His purpose. He controls what happens in every place, according to His sovereign will, and peace can prevail if He determines to bring it about. And so, we will be able to minister to people around us. Listen to Proverbs 1: 33 – “But whoever listens to Me will dwell safely, and will be secure, without fear of evil.” You see, there is the principle, and God is well able to establish it. If you listen to God’s

voice, speaking to your heart in relation to the truth of His word, you shall be secure, without fear of evil.

Listen to Psalm 112, verse 6b-8 – The righteous will be in everlasting remembrance.” “He will not be afraid of evil tidings; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord.” “His heart is established; he will not be afraid, until he sees his desire upon his enemies.” Ah, the comfort of such verses is very great. And yet, we also find verses which say – And all who will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. And we also find Jesus saying – Blessed are you when you are persecuted. Well, we find, that, often, many Christians suffer persecution simply because they are trying to be faithful to their Lord. They are trying to minister to people around them who need the gospel and they are opposed like Paul was.

And here in our text we find that wicked men were still trying to undo the good work that Paul was trying to do. And so it says in verse 12, that when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat, saying – This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law. This, they thought, was a good strategy to fight against Paul’s preaching of the gospel. If they could show that Paul was a kind of lawless Jewish/Christian man, trying to persuade their people to worship God contrary to the law, then they thought, a separation could be made between the Jews and the Christians by a political ruling.

They wanted Gallio to rule on Paul’s Christianity; that is, his teaching people to worship God contrary to their law. They wanted to make a separation between the Jews and the Christians which would benefit them, the Jews, and stop this preaching of Paul’s which was ruining things for their synagogue they thought. But Gallio wisely declined to do this. He said to them – If this were a matter of Paul’s having done something wrong, or if he were guilty of some wicked crime, then he would have ruled on it. But since it was a matter related to questions of words and names and their own law, he told them, look to it yourselves. He did not want to be a judge in such matters.

This, by the way, is the right use of separation of church and state by a political ruler. The state does not have legal jurisdiction over the church to rule on ecclesiastical matters. These are matters related to a man’s conscience before God. They ought not to be encroached upon by the state deciding on whether God is being worshiped in this way, or that way, or whether it is contrary to the law which is found in the Bible. By Gallio’s answer we can see that the law being referred to, here, is the law of Moses. But the way that these men were bringing these charges against Paul shows us more specifically, that it was God’s law with all of the additional commandments which the unbelieving Jews added to it.

It was the continuation of what the scribes and Pharisees of that day who raised up that whole false system of a man’s trying to establish his own righteousness in the sight of God and men. That was the system which Jesus condemned during the latter time of His earthly ministry in Matthew 23. The Holy Spirit through Paul’s ministry, was leading him, through his preaching and teaching as an apostle of Christ, to bring down and to destroy this whole false system that somehow we can be saved by our own works. This leads me to ask whether, in regard to whatever gift that God has given to you, do you teach by your words and example that salvation is not by the works that a person does, to try to keep God’s law? Listen to 1st Timothy chapter 1, verse 8 – “But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, knowing this: the the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed gospel which was committed to my trust.”

So, what Paul is saying is, that whatever gift it is that God has given to you, you are to remember to use it in such a way that it would lead all people to know that salvation is not of their works, but it is of Christ and His work, alone. Let them see this in your good works. You can say to them, if they ask why you are helping them – I am doing this out of love to Christ, and love to you. I love you because Christ first loved me, and gave Himself for me. Let them hear this from your lips; that is, the gospel, the good news that Christ is the only perfect man and that He suffered for sinners so that they might be saved. That He worked out a perfect righteousness on our behalf, if we will believe in Him.

The glorious gospel is not that a person can keep God's holy law, but it is rather that Christ was given by God to show forth all of His perfections and that all of His expectations for obedience and righteousness were fulfilled in Him. It was given to show all of us, who are sinners, that we fall far short of God's perfection, and that we are thus guilty and vile in ourselves. And that all perfection is only to be found in Christ. That is using the law lawfully. We worship God, not by saying that we can keep the law ourselves. We worship God by saying that the law is fulfilled perfectly, only in Christ.

The way that God will lead you, in terms of your service to Christ, is in relation to how you will serve Him in righteousness, and how you will serve him with the gift that He has given to you. The way that you will know if you are going about these things in the right way is when your highest concern is for furthering the glory of God and Christ in your words and deeds, or whether you are furthering your own glory in your words and deeds. You will notice that God always led Paul in such a way that he could further His glory by the grace which God supplied him.

And this is why Paul says in Romans chapter 12, verse 3 – “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. You will notice what happened when Gallio said that he would not prosecute Paul. It says that he drove the antagonistic Jews away from the judgment seat. And what did the Gentiles who were looking on, do? They pitched in to help meet out the justice that they thought Gallio should have enacted. They proceeded to lay hold of the leader of the synagogue, Sosthenes, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. They were doing this to show their great disapproval of any further persecution of Paul taking place.

Sosthenes evidently took this beating to heart. He now no doubt thought that he was actually suffering for something which he himself had not done wrong; something similar to what the Lord Jesus had suffered for, in suffering in the place of sinners. Evidently, the Holy Spirit worked in his heart. And he himself now knew, that he should leave behind his legalistic thinking and become a Christian. It was the way that the Lord led Paul, that led to this man's conversion. And later on, we find that the apostle Paul, together with Sosthenes, wrote the book of 1st Corinthians in the Bible.

He says in 1st Corinthians 1: 1 – “Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.” And so we see how Paul was led of the Lord, and how he was faithful to preach the truth of the gospel, even in the midst of great opposition. May each of us have this same purpose in mind, to share with people around us, that salvation is not by works, but by faith in Christ.

2nd – Paul took a vow, that in preaching Christ, he would also hold fast to a right view of God's law.

Verses 18-23 – “So Paul still remained a good while.” “Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him.” “He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea,

for he had taken a vow.” “And he came to Ephesus, and left them there; but he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.” “When they asked him to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent, but took leave of them, saying, ‘I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing.’” And he sailed from Ephesus.” “And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch.” “After he had spent some there, he departed and went over the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples.”

Now, if you have ever read the commentators on this passage, you will find that they are greatly divided over it; first, as to whether Aquila or Paul is the one who had his hair cut off in taking this vow. Second, the timing of when the vow began; whether his cutting his hair at this point signified his taking the vow, or being released from it. And third, whether the vow taken was a regular Nazarite vow, or simply a private vow which was analogous to that. I will not go into all of these things, but I will simply to express my own opinion, from what we have here in the text. It appears to me that it was Paul who took this vow, and he cut his hair at this time to end the vow. It does appear to me that it was a Nazarite vow.

In his case, I believe that he had solemnly dedicated himself to the Lord’s work when he came to Corinth, and this was the outward evidence of it before God and men. This is what a Nazarite vow was, as it is described for us in Numbers 6. He had abstained from wine, and he let his hair grow all of that time that he was at Corinth. The reason that he did this was that he was showing God and men, by his taking this vow, his solemn dedication of himself to the work of preaching Christ. It was His promise to God that he would be faithful to preach Christ, and His teach and preach of how the Lord Jesus had fulfilled the law, and was indeed their promised Messiah.

By this vow, he would continue laboring there in Corinth, believing in God’s promise, that no one would attack him to hurt him. By this vow, he would declare his intention and full purpose of heart to be faithful to Christ’s gospel, and Christ’s leading him in the way that he was leading him. He would not swerve from it no matter what circumstances he faced. He was vowing not to seek his own comfort or pleasure on this 2nd missionary journey, but would complete it, to the glory of God, Christ helping him. This is why later on, when he came to Ephesus, when they asked him to stay a longer time with them, that he refused to do so. His vow included his fulfilling all the Lord wanted him to do in preaching Christ in all the places that he would go on this 2nd Missionary journey.

I believe that he took this vow shortly after the Lord spoke to him in the vision when he first came to Corinth, when he preached and received so much opposition. It was the Lord’s speaking to him that caused him to take this vow. This is confirmed for us in verse 5 of chapter 18 where it says in the New American Standard Translation – “But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.” Our 1689 Confession has a paragraph on the taking of a vow. Chapter 23, paragraph 5 says – “A vow, which is not to be made to any creature, but God alone, is to be made and performed with all religious care and faithfulness.

We might ask ourselves – Well, why would the apostle Paul, the man who more than any other apostle, was responsible for showing us Christians that we are no longer to believe that Jewish ceremonies of the Mosaic law should be kept any longer, because of Christ’s fulfilling the law; why should he, of all people, be doing this? Well, I believe that if you will turn over to 1st Corinthians 9: 19-21, you will find the answer. “For though I am free from all men, I made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law, (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became

as weak, that I might win the weak.” “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.”

As you think about what Paul is saying here, I want you to remember that Paul was often preaching to Jews. And as he was going into their synagogues and preaching the gospel to them, that they should believe in Jesus having fulfilled the law, so that their sins could be forgiven, and that they should receive this great salvation as a free gift, the natural question which would come to their minds would be – But what about the law? And Paul would tell them that the law was holy, righteous, and good. But, he would also no doubt tell them the truth of Romans 7: 4 that God through Christ’s death and resurrection would cause them to die to the law, so that they could bear fruit to God in good works.

This was so very controversial to them, because they had always trusted that it was their own works righteousness which brought them near to God. Paul’s taking this vow and cutting his hair was not his going back to the Jewish ordinances to observe them for his own sake, as though he was under the law. But it was for their sakes, so that they would understand that he did love God’s law. But he now saw it, completely in relation to Christ’s having fulfilled it. And all of His righteous deeds and good works were wrought in Christ, and thus acceptable to God. He would not make the Jews stumble in any way, concerning the things that he had spoken to them. He was pointing them towards our Lord Jesus Christ as the ultimate Nazarite in His devoting Himself entirely to God, and fulfilling the law in every respect, both ceremonially and morally, so that they might be saved.

Let us not stumble over what Paul did here, but let us see him as he would want to be seen, as a man who would become all things to all men, that he might by all means save some. This is also why he wanted so much to be at the coming feast in Jerusalem, the feast of Pentecost. We are not told about that time in the Scriptures, but we must assume that he went there to be able to meet with the gathered church there and tell them of the great things that God had done through His ministry; that God really was working powerfully by His Spirit in planting churches through his preaching. Let us, therefore, always seek to be faithful to do what God has called us to do, according to the gift that he has given to each one of us individually. And let us become all things to all men, that we might save some.