

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermon series titled, ☐ “The Church that Changed the World.” It is a study through the New Testament book of Acts.

Our text for today is ☐ Acts 21:17-36. From this text, we are going to learn about how to pursue peace in a culture war.

A culture war is a conflict between social groups who strongly disagree on certain values and ideas. The groups in conflict typically fight against each other to steer public policies to align with their respective ways of thinking. Culture wars are generally marked by polarization, partisanship, and misunderstandings.

And some of the misunderstandings come from wearing culture-war goggles. When we see through culture-war goggles, we assume the best about ourselves and our tribe, and we assume the worst about those other people.

There is nothing wrong with having well-informed, deeply-held convictions on an issue over which we disagree with others. And there is nothing wrong with advocating for public policies that align with our convictions.

But when we end up wearing culture-war goggles, when we succumb to the bias of assuming the best about ourselves and our tribe, and assuming the worst about those other people, it does not serve us well.

Of course, no one in our group has such a bias; it’s the other people who are messed up. 😊

Culture wars have battlefields. In our day, these include things like abortion, LGBTQ rights, the teaching of Critical Race Theory, gun rights, COVID protocols, conservative versus liberal politics, and transgender treatment for minors.

Culture wars over such issues can bleed into the church and mix with other wars over the role of women in church, Calvinism versus Arminianism, infant baptism, young earth versus old earth beliefs, hymns versus modern worship music, expository preaching versus topical preaching, and the list goes on.

This is significant because how we navigate culture wars can be the difference between undermining and advancing the cause of Christ. How we navigate culture wars can be the difference between division and unity in the church. How we navigate culture wars can be the difference between devouring and loving one another.

With so many people using the word “unprecedented” to describe our current American culture, it is easy to think that cultural wars and polarization are new things about which Scripture has nothing to say.

But the truth is, culture wars are nothing new. In fact, the apostle Paul has to navigate a challenging culture war in our text for today. We are going to go to school on Paul. We are going to learn from his example.

You may recall that Paul is concluding his third missionary journey. He is headed for Jerusalem, which will be his final destination. He brings with him some ministry partners, some of whom are from churches that, at Paul’s urging, are providing financial support to the church in Jerusalem. To this point in history, the church in Jerusalem has been the mother church—the hub of Christianity. It had been the church home of the twelve apostles, including Peter, John, and James, the half-brother of Jesus. Its members are predominately Jewish.

In □ Acts 21:17-19, Luke says,

ESV Acts 21:17 When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly.

□ ESV Acts 21:18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

□ ESV Acts 21:19 After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.
20 And when they heard it, they glorified God. . . .

James and the other leaders of the Jerusalem church are glad to hear how God had been working through Paul to reach the Gentiles for Christ in Asia and Macedonia.

The other apostles such as Peter and John are probably not there; otherwise, Luke would have mentioned them. Perhaps they are away ministering elsewhere.

But the elders who are present face an urgent challenge in the Jerusalem church, and it relates to Paul himself. In □ verse 20, they begin to explain the problem to Paul.

ESV Acts 21:20 . . . And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law,”

Many Jews in Israel had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, their Savior. That’s the encouraging news.

The complicating news is that these new Jewish converts are □ “zealous for the law,” which is to say they are fanatically committed to keeping all the commands in the Hebrew Scriptures that had come through Moses, including the command to be circumcised.

Part of their zeal for the law had been fueled by an intensifying culture war between Jews and Gentiles.

The common stereotype held by Jews about Gentiles was that they were unclean, ungodly, and unfit for any kind of fellowship.

The common stereotype held by Gentiles about Jews was that they were self-righteous, anti-social, and judgmental.

On top of that, Roman Gentiles were oppressively in control of Israel, and the Jews increasingly resented them for it. The time of Paul’s visit to Jerusalem was only a few short years before the martyrdom of James at the hands of Roman authorities.¹ And a full-blown Jewish revolt against the Romans would soon follow in an effort to take back Israel for God. It would result in the Romans destroying the Jewish temple in 70 AD.

The cultural conflict between Jews and Gentiles created tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers in the church. Of course, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, all are one.² And Christian attitudes toward one another should reflect that oneness.

But old prejudices die hard.

¹ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3 p. 3139.

² Galatians 3:28.

About eight years earlier³, as recorded in Acts 15, some Jewish believers from Jerusalem were mixing the Judaism of the Old Covenant with the Christianity of the New. They were teaching that, in order for a Gentile to become a true Christian—in order for a Gentile to be saved—that Gentile must also become Jewish by surrendering to circumcision and following the Mosaic Law from the Old Testament, which includes the ten commandments.

You may recall, as recorded in Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas had traveled to Jerusalem to ask the apostles in the mother church to settle the question of what is required of Gentile believers—how Jewish do they have to be? They had a meeting known as the Jerusalem council. Let me take a few minutes to review the findings because they relate directly to our text.

The Jerusalem council affirmed what the apostles had consistently taught. There is only one condition for receiving the free gift of eternal salvation: faith alone in Christ alone. No one—neither Jew nor Gentile—has to be circumcised or to follow the Mosaic Law in order to be saved.

Jewish believers were free to observe Jewish traditions, including circumcision, as long as these traditions were not required for eternal salvation or legalistically imposed on others.

The directive of the Jerusalem council to Jewish believers was clear: Don't require Gentile believers to become Jewish in order to be saved.

At the same time, the council directed Gentile believers to respect certain Jewish traditions, mostly having to do with food. This was not to

³ Kem Oberholtzer, class notes reflecting Harold Hoehener, "Chronology of the Apostolic Age" ThD dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1972.

earn God's favor, but to foster table fellowship among Jewish and Gentile believers in the church.

In that day and culture, sharing a meal was an important part of social connection and fostering relationships and encouraging one another. And the council knew that some Jewish believers were not about to mix and share a meal with Gentile believers who were eating food sacrificed to idols or meat not properly bled, according to Jewish tradition. It would be a shock to their Jewish sensibilities.

So, having struck down decisively the notion that one must be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law in order to be saved, the Jerusalem council called their Gentile brothers to make some concessions, to be sensitive to long-held Jewish dietary traditions so as not to hinder the healthy fellowship necessary to the church.

So, on the one hand, in addressing the issue of salvation, the authorities in the early church said to their fellow Jewish Christians, "Don't make it needlessly difficult for Gentiles to turn to Christ."

On the other hand, in addressing the issue of fellowship, they said to Gentile Christians, "Don't make it needlessly difficult for your Jewish brothers to have a meal with you."

Well, that was Jerusalem council, eight years before Paul's current visit to Jerusalem in our text.

In the intervening eight years, tensions between Jews and Gentiles in Israel had intensified, and Jewish nationalism had been on the rise. The people and leaders of Jerusalem shifted further to the right in response to their culture war with Roman Gentiles. And observance of the Mosaic law was viewed as an expression of fidelity to Israel. Jews who believed in Jesus and those who did not had a common enemy: the evil

Roman Gentiles. Observance of the Mosaic law both in and outside the church was viewed as a patriotic act of solidarity in the political culture war.⁴ And this culture war bled into the church.

Right about now, you may be thinking, “So what? What does that have to do with Paul?” The elders of the Jerusalem church explain it to Paul in verse 21.

ESV Acts 21:21 “and they [the believers in the Jerusalem church] have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.”

Some of the Jewish believers in the church at Jerusalem are hearing rumors that Paul, himself a Jew, has become anti-Jewish. This is a serious issue because the Jewish believers in the Jerusalem church are “zealous for the law.”

Rumor has it that Paul has been teaching Jews to forsake the law of Moses, commanding them not to be circumcised, and telling them to forsake their Jewish customs. The suspicion is that Paul has gone liberal, that he has forsaken religious traditions deemed sacred, that he has betrayed his country, that he is a traitorous JINO—you know, a Jew in name only.

The rumor is patently false. The truth is, Paul has not discouraged any Jews from being Jewish. He has not told any Jews that they should not be circumcised. Jewish Christians are free to be as Jewish as they want as long as their traditions do not become a kind of legalism that replaces faith in Christ with works as the means by which we are saved.

⁴ Keener, vol. 3, pp. 3115-3116.

At this point, you may be wondering, “Well, then how in the world did such false accusations about Paul start circulating in the church?”

I believe the church in Jerusalem got caught up in the culture war between Jews and Gentiles. And they put on culture-war goggles. Those donning culture-war goggles abandon critical thinking, rationality, and nuance in favor of partisanship, polarization, and oversimplification.

And Paul is a casualty of culture war.

Paul is distinguished as an apostle to the Gentiles. But through the lens of culture-war goggles, this makes him a Gentile sympathizer. As a Gentile sympathizer, Paul is no longer in the Jewish “in group,” which means he no longer gets the benefit of any doubts. Anything he has ever said that could be remotely construed as negative toward the Jewish law or circumcision is assumed to be bad and anti-Jewish.

For example, Paul had written previously in □ Romans 10:4,

ESV Romans 10:4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Paul had also written previously in □ Galatians 5:6,

ESV Galatians 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

We look back and understand that Paul is simply emphasizing the priority of faith in Jesus over observance of the law or circumcision as the way to be right with God. Paul is not telling Jews that the law is inherently bad and should be rejected. Nor is Paul telling Jews that circumcision is bad and must be avoided.

But when you are wearing culture-war goggles, you see things differently. Understanding Paul properly would require some nuanced thinking and discernment, which the goggles obscure. The lenses are polarized in a different way, to block the glare of reason. You can't see anything gray, only black and white. Things get twisted and misunderstood. □ Acts 21:21 reflects the distortion in their accusation.

ESV Acts 21:21 “. . . you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.”

Paul doesn't teach any such thing. But he gets goggled. Paul is a casualty of culture war.

After explaining the problem, the elders of the Jerusalem church lay it at Paul's feet. In □ verse 22, they say,

ESV Acts 21:22 “What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.”

At this point, if I were Paul, I would be irritated at the elders. “What do you mean, ‘what is to be done?’ I'll tell you what you do. You tell your people the truth. You come to my defense. You set them straight. I am not anti-Jewish.”

Apparently, James and the elders had not been able to convince their people of Paul's innocence. Which points to a shocking truth: church people don't always listen to their leaders.

It is also possible that some of the Jerusalem elders share their people's concerns.

It turns out that the elders' question is not really seeking an answer. They already have an answer. It comes in □ verses 23 and 24.

ESV Acts 21:23 “Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24 take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. . . .”

The four men in question are likely Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem church who have taken a Nazirite vow. A Nazirite vow is an ancient Jewish custom in which these Jewish men have dedicated themselves to God to accomplish a specific purpose. While under the vow, the men must abstain from wine; they must avoid contact with the dead; and they must allow their hair to grow uncut.

When the purpose of the vow is fulfilled, the men are to deliver a special, costly sacrifice to the temple. Then, they are to undergo a process of purification. And then, they are to shave their heads and present their hair to the Jewish priest, who burns it on the altar.

So, in the case of these four men, the elders are directing Paul to join them in undergoing the process of purification and to pay all the expenses associated with their required sacrifice.

The elders explain the rationale for all this in the last part of □ verse 24.

ESV Acts 21:24 “. . . Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.”

The thinking is that this show of support for Jewish traditions will demonstrate to the people of the Jerusalem church that Paul is not

anti-Jewish, thus avoiding needless conflict. The concern is for unity in the church.

Supporting a Nazirite vow would not have violated Paul's convictions because, as you may recall from Acts 18, Paul himself had made such a VOW.

Furthermore, in the spirit of making concessions for the sake of peace, the elders remind Paul of the stipulations of the Jerusalem council recorded in a letter eight years earlier. In verse 25, they say,

ESV Acts 21:25 “But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, . . .

ESV Acts 21:25 “. . . and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

This reference to the earlier findings of the Jerusalem council serves as a reminder for Gentile believers not to needlessly offend their Jewish brethren by eating non-kosher foods in front of them and thereby affirming the people's misconception that Paul is anti-Jewish. This is a relevant reminder because Paul has brought with him a number of Gentile believers, including Luke and Trophimus.

Again, the concern is to preserve unity in the church.

And once again, if I were Paul, I think I might be irritated. “After all I have sacrificed and endured for the sake of fulfilling my call to reach the Gentiles for Christ, and after bringing you financial support—much of it from Gentiles—you are now asking me to jump through some nonessential Jewish religious hoops and pay money just to mollify the

malicious misconceptions of some bone-headed Jewish Christians with culture-war goggles on so tight they can't think straight!"

But that's me.

We don't know what Paul is thinking. It would be understandable if Paul were irritated. But even if he is, Paul respectfully does what the elders ask. □ Verse 26 documents his compliance.

ESV Acts 21:26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, . . .

□ ESV Acts 21:26 . . . giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

Paul is deferential to fellow believers who have stereotyped him and misunderstood him. He could have lashed out. Instead, he holds it together to accommodate weaker brothers and sisters in Christ in the Jerusalem church. He could have become disillusioned at being goggled by his own people. Instead, he serves them by surrendering his preferences for the sake of harmony in the church.

Paul is not being asked to violate any cardinal doctrines of the faith or to be unbiblical. He is being asked to circumstantially surrender his own prerogatives and freedoms for the sake of unity.

And he does it.

In doing so, Paul is taking his own medicine. Previously, he had written in □ Romans 14:19,

ESV Romans 14:19 . . . let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

In following the elders' directives in deference to weaker brothers, Paul pursues corporate peace over personal preference.

Also, back in □ Acts 20:48, Paul had exhorted the elders of the church in Ephesus to . . .

ESV Acts 20:28 “. . . care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

Jesus Christ died for the sake of his bride, the body of Christ, his church. It is through Christ that we have peace with God. It is in Christ that we should pursue peace with one another, even when it is difficult.

So, here is the two-part big idea I draw from all this: □ Beware culture-war goggles; pursue blood-bought peace.

In the church, we are all quite capable of wearing culture-war goggles that distort our perspective. And we are all, at one time or another, likely to be viewed and misunderstood through culture-war goggles. We will goggle. And we will be goggled.

Let me remind you about culture-war goggles. When we see through culture-war goggles, we assume the best about ourselves and our tribe, and we assume the worst about those other people. When we don culture-war goggles, we abandon critical thinking, rationality, and nuance in favor of partisanship, polarization, and oversimplification.

The challenge is to recognize and rise above the culture-war goggles, and to pursue the peace and harmony Christ died to make possible.

Beware culture-war goggles; pursue blood-bought peace.

Paul's effort is laudable. But the outcome is not. Those who pursue peace will not always get to enjoy it. Unfortunately, Paul becomes a casualty of the culture war outside the church. Some unbelieving Jews from Ephesus in Asia—perhaps some who had traveled to Jerusalem in observance of the day of Pentecost—they see Paul in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. And they attack, vilifying Paul as an anti-Jewish, Gentile-sympathizing enemy. □ Verses 27 through 29 describe the attack.

ESV Acts 21:27 When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, . . .

□ ESV Acts 21:28 . . . “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. . . .

□ ESV Acts 21:28 “. . . Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.”

□ ESV Acts 21:29 For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

Once again, the allegations are untrue. Paul is not teaching against the Jewish people or against the Jewish law or against the Jewish temple. And while Trophimus, the Gentile believer from Ephesus had indeed accompanied Paul to Jerusalem, Paul had not taken him into the temple.

But when one wears culture-war goggles, one can bend the truth to suit one's partisan purposes. Bringing Trophimus to Jerusalem might as well be bringing him to the temple. It is a small-but-expedient stretch that

allows them to cancel their enemy. Because to bring a Gentile into the temple was to defile the temple. It was an offense punishable by death.

□ Verses 30 and 31 describe the ensuing melee.

ESV Acts 21:30 Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.

□ ESV Acts 21:31 And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

The tribune is a Roman military commander stationed in a garrison directly adjacent to the temple. The priority of the tribune is to maintain order, so □ verses 32 through 36 record his response.

ESV Acts 21:32 He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

□ ESV Acts 21:33 Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done.

□ ESV Acts 21:34 Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.

□ ESV Acts 21:35 And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, 36 for the mob of the people followed, crying out, “Away with him!”

Ironically, this is exactly what another mob had said about 25 years earlier when Pilate presented Jesus to them. They cried out, “Away with him!”⁵

This brings us back to the big idea: □ Beware culture-war goggles; pursue blood-bought peace.

This is an important idea, but hard to apply. Spotting the goggles can be tricky, particularly when we’re wearing them. And pursuing peace can be messy and highly situational. Paul’s situation is but one example, and it has taken me thirty hours to study it and a half hour to try to explain it. And I’m not even sure I’ve succeeded.

This is complicated by the fact that the big idea is not a charge to pursue peace at any cost. Some things are worth fighting for. But we need to make sure we are not fighting against figments of our goggle-ation.

Perhaps the best advice I can give right now for applying the big idea is to pray about it.

To prayerfully consider before God the extent to which you may be wearing culture-war goggles right now.

And to prayerfully consider before God how he may want you pursue peace in relationships within the church—relationships that may be currently marked by tension, suspicion, disagreement, or misunderstanding. Or goggling.

⁵ John 19:15.

Let's pray. Lord, grant us the insight to recognize the wearing of culture-war goggles in ourselves and others and to rise above it to pursue peace, especially within the church Christ died to save. Amen.