

Ritual Purification

Numbers 19:17–22, Acts 21:15–26

It's interesting the way certain words fall out of use over time. As I began work on this sermon, I read the text in the Geneva Bible. It begins: "And after those days we *trussed up our fardels*, and went up to Jerusalem."¹ My first reaction was "Say what?" Perhaps a misprint? But I checked a couple old copies and found out that the wording was correct. Both "truss" and "fardel" are still in the dictionary. "Truss" means *to tie up*; "fardel" means *bundle*. So here we have Luke saying, "After those days we *tied up our bundles*, and went up to Jerusalem."² Gill explains: "They took up their bundles, which hitherto were brought by sea, and now put them upon beasts, going by land from Caesarea," then on to Jerusalem, about 75 miles away.

1. Arriving in town

If you've ever flown to the Holy Land, you no doubt landed at the Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. Then perhaps you boarded a taxi or tour bus and headed up to Jerusalem. It takes a little more than an hour now, but in Paul's day, you would have had to make the trip on foot, with your "fardels" (bundles) loaded on donkeys. There would likely have been businessmen who would have rented you pack animals for the journey, which might take four or five days. You would have probably traveled in a caravan—safety in numbers.

Paul and his traveling companions left Caesarea, where they had been hosted at the home of Philip the evangelist. Others from the church there traveled with them. Also in the company was Mnason, whom we mentioned last week. He was an "old" or "early" disciple, that is, one who had been part of the church since the Day of Pentecost. He was a resident of Jerusalem, and would invite the group to stay at his home there. Clearly, the early disciples practiced hospitality—and we should, too! Elders, especially, are to be "given to hospitality."³

Luke observes, "When we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly" (v. 17). The word for "gladly" used here occurs only twice in the New Testament: here, and in Acts 2:41, "those who gladly received his word were baptized."⁴ How noteworthy that the earlier occurrence referred to receiving "the word," and this one refers to receiving "the brethren." This is the ongoing responsibility of every believer: (1) to receive "the Word" in both its biblical senses: the written word, the Holy Scriptures, and the incarnate Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Author of the Scriptures; and (2) to receive "the brethren," those who are the adopted sons of God. The one is a first-table duty: love for God; and

¹ 1599 Geneva Bible (Acworth, Georgia: Tolle Lege Press, 2006–2022)

² John Gill, commentary, Acts 21:15 (e-Sword)

³ Rom. 12:13, 1 Tim. 3:2

⁴ ἀσμένως (Acts 2:41, Byzantine text)

the other is a second-table duty: love for his church. The apostle John speaks of receiving Christ by faith in the prologue to his gospel: “But as many as *received* him, to them gave he power to become *the sons of God*, even to them that believe on his name.” All those who truly believe in Christ are God’s adopted sons, enjoying the same spiritual relation to the Father: “Beloved, now are we the sons of God.” In the words of Christ, “All ye are brethren.” We are brothers and sisters in Christ. As brethren, we are to “love one another.” So, dear saints of God, remember your duty: to love the *Word*, and to love your *brethren*—your church family. When God in his wise providence brings visitors to worship with us, make it a point to reach out to them, to show them the love of Christ. Jesus says, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” Christian, do you love the Word, the Holy Scriptures? Do you have a desire to read it, to hear it preached, to know it better? Do you love the Christ of the Word? And do you love the brethren, your fellow saints? Do you love them such that you want to be involved in their lives, to really get to know them, to share their joys and sorrows? These are basic first-table and second-table duties. Listen to how the apostles Peter and John describe them: “Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently.... Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous.... We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.... Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”⁵ God is very serious about this: he wants us to gladly receive his Word, and to gladly receive the brethren. Clearly, the early Christians understood these twin duties and put them into practice. We should too.

2. Giving a report

Continuing with our story, we learn that “on the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present” (v. 18). Gill explains that this James was “not the son of Zebedee and brother of John, for he was killed by Herod some years [before]; but James the son of Alphaeus, and brother of our Lord, who presided over this church.”⁶ This is the James who apparently served as moderator of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). James was the ranking apostle of the Jerusalem church. No other apostles are mentioned in this verse, suggesting that perhaps they, too, had traveled to distant parts to spread the gospel. James was there, and “all the

⁵ Scriptures cited in this paragraph: John 1:12; 1 John 3:2; Matt. 23:8; John 13:34; Matt. 25:40; 1 Pet. 1:22, 3:8; 1 John 3:14, 16

⁶ Gill, commentary, Acts 21:18 (e-Sword). “James” (Ἰάκωβος) is the New Testament equivalent of “Jacob” (יַעֲקֹב), the patriarch whose name was changed to “Israel” (Gen. 32:28).

elders were present.” That must have been an august gathering—wouldn’t it have been amazing to have been a fly on the wall at that meeting!

Our text informs us that Paul “told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.” Paul gave a report but gave all glory to God—the things that “*God* had done” through his ministry. There were many conversions to Christ. Many Gentiles had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). Paul preached his heart out, but he could not produce conversions on his own. Only the Holy Spirit of God can change a heart. Without the Spirit’s working, unregenerate man wants nothing to do with God. But the good news is that the Spirit of God is omnipotent. He has the ability to change the hardest heart. God’s people become *willing* in the day of his power (Ps. 110:3). Unless a person is born again, he cannot *see* the kingdom of God,⁷ but when the Holy Spirit regenerates a person, he immediately turns to Christ in faith. As the Shorter Catechism summarizes it, he convinces us of our sin and misery, enlightens our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renews our wills, thereby persuading and enabling us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.⁸ The former hater of God can now confess that “though I was blind, now I see.”⁹ “Amazing grace!—how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”¹⁰ Former rebels become disciples of Christ and are gathered into his church. As these early believers heard Paul’s report, they “glorified the Lord.” Though they were grateful for the labors of the apostle Paul, and though they knew that he was an energetic and committed witness who would gladly “spend and be spent” for the sake of the gospel,¹¹ they knew very well that the best human evangelist does not have the ability to change a human heart. The story goes that Charles Spurgeon, the great nineteenth-century London pastor, was walking down the street one day when a drunk leaning on a lamppost yelled out to him, “Hey, Mr. Spurgeon, do you remember me?” “No, why should I?” Spurgeon replied. The drunk answered, “Because I’m one of your converts!” Spurgeon’s response: “Well, you must be one of mine; you’re certainly not one of the Lord’s.”¹² When the Lord converts a sinner, he becomes a new creature in Christ; “old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”¹³ The person who is truly born of God “sinneth not”; the evil one does not touch him.¹⁴ Though those who are born-again *do* experience temptation, and even

⁷ John 3:3

⁸ Westminster Shorter Catechism #31, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

⁹ John 9:25

¹⁰ John Newton, “Amazing Grace” (*Trinity Psalter Hymnal* #433, <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/amazing-grace/>)

¹¹ 2 Cor. 12:15

¹² <https://michaelkelley.co/2011/02/spurgeon-and-the-drunk-convert/> accessed 12-24-22

¹³ 2 Cor. 5:17

¹⁴ 1 John 5:18

give in from time to time. The Holy Spirit moves them to repentance and contrition, moving them to seek forgiveness from God and man. Has the Holy Spirit changed your heart? Has he taken away your love of sinning and given you a desire to be an obedient servant of Christ?

Not only had there been large numbers of conversions—hell-bound sinners brought from the darkness of depravity to the light of the gospel—but as we saw in chapter 19, God had also “worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them” (Acts 19:11–12). Conversions, healings, exorcisms, churches established: these are some of the things that God had done through Paul’s ministry.

The other day I was reading the account of a man who had started a church from scratch with a home Bible study, and it had grown to some 15,000 members within a decade. But as time went on, the man became addicted to money and power and became a heavy-handed tyrant¹⁵—poles apart from the character of the apostle Paul, who pled with his hearers “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ,” and who in presence was “lowly” among God’s people (2 Cor. 10:1). Each of us, no matter our personality type, is called to show the meekness and gentleness of Christ and to maintain an attitude of humility as we deal with others. For some personality types this will be more difficult than for others, but it is required of all of us. In the words of Peter, “Yea, *all of you* be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5).

3. Avoiding unnecessary offense

I’m sure Paul was gratified by the response of James and the elders. Luke reports that “when they heard it, they glorified the Lord.” What better response could there be? This was in direct obedience to the instructions of our Lord Jesus, who said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). The Lord did not say, “Do such a good job that people will pat you on the back and tell you how wonderful you are”; rather, he urged his people to do their good works in such a manner that glory would redound to God alone. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”¹⁶ When the apostle James and the elders of the church at Jerusalem heard Paul’s report, they “glorified the Lord.” The word for “glorified” is related to the noun δόξα, glory. In English, a *doxology* is an expression of praise to God. One of the most familiar doxologies is: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise him, all creatures here below: praise him above, ye heavenly host; praise Father,

¹⁵ https://opc.org/nh.html?article_id=1121 accessed 12-23-22

¹⁶ Matt. 5:16

Son, and Holy Ghost.” Is this the prayer of your heart? Do you long for the glory of God above all else? In our Acts text the pastor and session of the church in Jerusalem glorified the God of heaven for blessing the work of the apostle Paul. Our text could be paraphrased, “When they heard it, they sang a doxology of praise to the Lord.” Likewise, we too, when we witness conversions or hear reports of how God is working across his church, ought to give praise to the Lord. We should never grumble or complain at the success of other churches. If God happens to be blessing in a place—working in lives and hearts by the power of his Spirit, bringing the lost to himself and adding them to the church, giving Christians grace and strength in the face of suffering, pouring out a spirit of unity and likemindedness upon a congregation, answering specific prayers, blessing a congregation financially, etc.—then we ought to give praise to God. “Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!”¹⁷ The true Christian wants glory to redound to *God* for his blessing, not to *man* for his cleverness.

But with the great work accomplished through Paul’s ministry there came problems as well. The Jerusalem elders address him thusly: “You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and 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” (Acts 21:20–21). There were many “myriads” of Jews who believed. The King James has “thousands”: “Thou seest, brother, how many *thousands* of Jews there are which believe.” But the word in the original (μυριάδες) actually means *ten-thousands*.¹⁸ What this means is that the visible church, which numbered about 3,120 on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, had grown significantly. Jewish converts alone were many ten-thousands—too many to count. Surely this is in response to our Lord’s prayer, “thy kingdom come.” Those who love Christ enthusiastically pray this prayer. We want the nations to confess Christ. In the words of the hymnwriter, “We long to see thy churches full, that all the chosen race may, with one voice and heart and soul, sing thy redeeming grace.”¹⁹ We want to sing the praises of Christ with new converts, we want new converts to become fellow worshipers of Christ. Our Christ is so great, so glorious, that we want the sound of his praises to swell greater and greater. We want all the world to sing the Hallelujah Chorus: “Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth!” No amount of praise is too great for Christ. We anticipate that day when the courts of heaven will resound with his praises.

¹⁷ Ps. 107:8, 15, 21, 31

¹⁸ Gk. μυριάς (fem. pl. μυριάδες) essentially means *countless*.

¹⁹ https://opc.org/hymn.html?hymn_id=296 accessed 12-24-22

We are told that because of the so-called pandemic, churches have lost about 40% of their attenders. The church has shrunk by about 40%. I'm sure the devil is happy about this—professing Christians who fear a virus more than they fear the Lord who is our health and salvation. What does this say about their faith? What does this say about their priorities? If something is a higher priority than God, is not that “something” one's god? Man's chief end—chief priority—is “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” How important worship is to us is an indication of where our heart is.

So there were many countless thousands of Jews who had turned to Christ. Through the blessing of God the gospel had enjoyed great success, but with success came problems. These Jews had become convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. They had confessed him as their Savior. But they had lived all their lives as observant Jews. Observance of the ceremonial law is what had defined them. They had heard of the success of the apostle Paul's missionary efforts, but they were disturbed that Paul might be teaching “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” (v. 21). Now it is definitely not true that Paul taught anyone to “forsake Moses.” The moral law is a perfect reflection of the perfect character of our holy God. It is forever binding on every person, Christian and non-Christian. Every man, woman and child will one day be judged according to the perfect standard of God's holy law. Now, many of the Jews did not fully understand that circumcision under the old covenant is now replaced by baptism under the new covenant, as Galatians and Colossians clearly teach. So the Jerusalem session urged Paul: “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, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.” The church essentially decided that, before the destruction of the temple in AD 70, it was appropriate for Jewish Christians to keep ritual purifications in the temple, as a matter of things indifferent. These ritual purifications were not sin offerings. When Christ died upon the cross, his death was a once-for-all sacrifice for sin. From that moment on, bloody animal sacrifices for sin were no longer appropriate. But in this first generation of the Christian church it was appropriate for Jewish Christians to take part in ritual purifications. In time, this too would pass away. As Hebrews 8:13 teaches, “In that He says, ‘a new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” When the Roman armies captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, the sacrificial system ended permanently. Jews no longer keep the ceremonial law—it is impossible to keep the ceremonial law. The temple, the center of Jewish worship, came to an end; the Levitical priesthood came to an end;

the animal sacrifices came to an end; the sabbatical year and year of jubilee came to an end; the cities of refuge came to an end; the ceremonial law was abolished.

But before the destruction of the temple it was appropriate for Paul and the four men who had taken a vow to observe Jewish purification rites. As we read in our Old Testament text, “And for an unclean person they shall take some of the ashes of the heifer burnt for purification from sin, and running water shall be put on them in a vessel. A clean person shall take hyssop and dip it in the water, sprinkle it on the tent, on all the vessels, on the persons who were there, or on the one who touched a bone, the slain, the dead, or a grave. The clean person shall sprinkle the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall purify himself, wash his clothes, and bathe in water; and at evening he shall be clean. But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself, that person shall be cut off from among the assembly, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the Lord. The water of purification has not been sprinkled on him; he is unclean.”

This text graphically illustrates that sinful human beings are unfit for the presence of a holy God. As the prophet Isaiah said, “We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Isa. 64:6). This is why we need a Savior—a perfect Savior, a pure Savior! In order for Christ to make purification by his blood, he himself must be pure, holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.²⁰ He must be virgin-born, so he would not be tainted by original sin. “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22). Hence, the incarnation. Jesus of Nazareth was not the biological son of Joseph, the husband of Mary. He was the Son of God—the God-man. When Christ died upon the cross, his death was a once-for-all sacrifice for sin. From that moment on, bloody animal sacrifices for sin were no longer appropriate. The only way we can reach God is through the God-provided Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. Sinner, look to him and be saved. In him our sins are washed away and we are pure and holy. Amen!

²⁰ Heb. 9:22, 7:26