

Generous Love in Action

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Text: Acts 21:17-26

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Paul Visits James

[17] When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. [18] On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. [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. 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, [21] and they 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. [22] What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. [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. 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. [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, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” [26] Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them. (ESV)

I. They rejoiced together in gospel success

- Paul had traveled from Ephesus with Luke and at least two other brothers.
- Upon arriving in Jerusalem they sat down together with James and the elders to share the stories of God’s grace at work through the gospel.
- How were they received? Paul and his companions were “received...gladly” by the brothers in leadership at Jerusalem (verse 17).
- It was evident that among the true believers in Jerusalem there was joy in the work of God and joy in the advance of the gospel.
- It demonstrates true love for God and His work when we rejoice in the gospel success of others.
- Love for God rejoices in gospel success.

II. Brotherly love exemplified in generous giving

- Paul was eager to get to Jerusalem to bring the love offering that he collected on his missionary journeys.
- Now the offering has been collected and is being presented to the Jerusalem church.
- Though Luke doesn't mention it here in this passage, Paul gives this offering to the church in Jerusalem, which is referenced in passages like Romans 15 and 2 Cor. 8-9. It's also referenced in Acts 24.

“Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple” -- Acts 24:17-18

“For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.” -- Rom. 15:27

- Brotherly love is exemplified in generous giving to the needs of others.
- Love for God is exemplified in generous giving to the needs of others.

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— 5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. -- 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

“Sharing our possessions with other believers in need, then, is an act of obedience to the commands of God and an evidence that we are in the community of believers.”
– Jerry Bridges

III. Gospel love amidst slander

- Paul begins to hear the report from James that his ministry is being falsely reported.

Acts 21:20–21 [20] And when they heard it, they glorified God. 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, [21] and they 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. (ESV)

- People saying that Paul was teaching Gentile converts to forsake Moses saying they should not get children circumcised and should not follow Jewish customs. This is a false, slanderous report.
- Yes, Paul was preaching the gospel, that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, through Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. But he wasn't teaching the forsaking of Moses.

- The law was not a means of salvation, however, the sacrifices of the temple were no longer necessary. Christ had become the ultimate sacrifice for all people for all time. That was Paul's message!
- James and the elders suggested a course that they thought may best help the situation along and Paul. Their suggestion was that Paul voluntarily take four men who were under a Nazarite vow and participate with them

“Those under a Nazarite vow would abstain from wine, strong drink, grape juice, grapes or raisins...and avoid any contact that would defile them and would not cut their hair. When the time of the vow was over (often 30 days) they would cut off their hair and present an offering in the temple. If Paul went with them and personally paid for the cost of their offering, it would show that he did not object to Jewish converts following OT customs voluntarily, so long as those same customs were not required of Gentile believers” ESV Study Bible

- It appears that Paul is simply to be seeking to become like a Jew to minister to the Jews and not be a stumbling block to them (1 Corinthians 9:20-22). In so doing, he seeking to love them.

Conclusion

- What posture do we take in loving God and His good work? We rejoice in the success of fruitful gospel ministry. We demonstrate brotherly love by our generosity.
- We also press forward in gospel love even when others say wrong things about us. How do we do this? We do it by keeping our eyes on our Generous King. He has freely given, we have freely received. Now we can freely give!

Questions for Discussion/Application:

- Re-read the text, Acts 21:17-26. What initial observations and insights do you have from reading this text?
- The Apostle Paul took a Nazarite vow and paid the expenses of his friends so they could fulfill their Nazarite vows. He willingly made this sacrifice in order to not present an unnecessary stumbling block to fellow Jews embracing the gospel. Clearly, Paul's mission mindset, his concern for the lost led him to make this sacrifice. In what kinds of ways might a mission mindset lead us to step outside of our comfort zones for the sake of the gospel's advance? What kinds of sacrifices might God be calling us to make individually and together for the gospel?
- Jeremy talked about generosity in the context of the offering Paul took among the churches for the Jerusalem poor. He cited the example of the Macedonian believers who out of their extreme poverty gave to this offering. In exhorting the Corinthians to follow the Macedonian's example Paul said, "[9] For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 9:9)" How can meditating on the gospel help us to cultivate increasingly generous hearts? What scriptures come to mind that help you to reflect deeply on what Christ has done for you? What hymns or worship songs help you to do this?

- Paul's life, as this story illustrates, was clearly all about the glory of God and the advance of the gospel. In full dependence upon the Holy Spirit, what can we do in order to cultivate greater passion in our own hearts to see God glorified and the gospel advanced?
- Consider taking time to pray that God would continue his good work in our hearts of helping us to live lives of sacrifice and generosity of the sake of His name!