

When Conviction Met Convenience

Introduction. Dr. Clarence Macartney, an early-20th-century minister and author, once related a story about a supposed meeting in hell. Satan called his four leading demons together and commanded them to think up something that would trap more souls. “I have it!” one demon said. “I’ll go to earth and tell people there’s no God.” “It’ll never work,” said Satan. “People can look around them and see that there’s a God.” “I’ll go and tell them there’s no heaven!” suggested a second demon. But Satan rejected that idea. “Everybody knows there’s life after death, and they want to go to heaven.” “Let’s tell them there’s no hell!” said a third demon. “No,” said the devil. “Conscience tells them their sins will be judged. We need a better plan than that.” Quietly, the fourth demon spoke. “I think I’ve solved your problem,” he said. “I’ll go to earth and tell everybody there’s no hurry.”

Today’s text depicts the fourth demon’s influence on the Roman governor Felix. The setting is Paul’s sermon to Governor Felix and his wife Drusilla following his arrest in Jerusalem for preaching Christ. Accused of sedition, Paul used the occasion not only to offer his defense, but also to tell about his conversion and preach the gospel.

If you had the chance to preach to a couple like this, what would you say? Paul preached exactly what they needed. Instead of softening the message before influential people, Paul boldly addressed the spiritual concepts that could change their lives in Acts 24:25. It was a powerful three-point sermon that I’d like to look at today.

I. Paul Preached About Righteousness

- A. He spoke of righteousness to a couple who were grossly unrighteous, ungodly, and immoral. In a world that minimizes sin and treats it as a mistake, weakness, or mere error, people need to their real condition before God (Romans 3:23).
- B. Righteousness is doing the will of God. This term includes more than morality; it includes obedience.
 - 1. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, not because He had committed sin (Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5), but in order to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15), and to set an example for mankind.
 - 2. An individual may be moral, like Cornelius, but he can’t be righteous until he does the will of God, as Cornelius did when obeying the gospel and becoming a Christian (Acts 10:2, 48; 11:14).
- C. The will of God toward man is revealed in the Bible (John 3:16-17; 14:6-9; Romans 1:16-17; 4:13; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21). Hence the gospel is called the “word of righteousness” and the “law of righteousness” (Hebrews 5:12-14; Romans 9:31). When Paul preached of righteousness, he included everything by which the sinner is justified and reconciled to God: facts (1 Corinthians 15:1-4) and commands (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:26-29).

II. Paul Preached About Self-Control

- A. Neither Felix nor Drusilla knew much about self-control. They were ancient forerunners of today’s mantra: “If it feels good, do it.” Our culture likes throwing off restraint and satisfying every fleshly desire.

- B. But Christ calls us to deny ourselves and walk according to the Spirit who reins in our passions and helps control sinful desires (Galatians 2:20; 5:22-23; 2 Timothy 3:1-3; 2 Peter 1:6).
- C. Developing and exercising self-control is critical to being faithful. Therefore, what are some ways that we can all grow stronger?
1. Saturate your mind with God's Word.
 - a) Hiding the Word in your heart renews your thinking and strengthens your ability to say no when temptation comes (Psalm 119:11).
 - b) Be honest with your temptation (covetousness, food, spending, social media, sexual lust, anger, profanity, gossip, etc.), and memorize 1-2 verses directly tied to your struggle and recite them when tempted (e.g., Romans 13:14; 1 Corinthians 10:13).
 - c) Keep in mind that grace doesn't just pardon; it trains (Titus 2:11-12). You develop self-control by staying close to the means of grace. We don't want to "white-knuckle" it; we want to walk by the Spirit which develops what you can't produce on your own.
 2. Practice small, daily disciplines.
 - a) Paul "disciplined" his body so he wouldn't be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:25-27). Self-control grows like a muscle; repeatedly practicing restraint, even in small ways, strengthens your overall resolve.
 - b) You widen self-control the same way athletes grow strength — through repeated, intentional practice. People with strong self-control often design routines that reduce temptation instead of fighting it all day.
 - c) Maybe you fast from something good (social media, desserts, soda) one or two times a week to train your heart to say no. Or you set modest limits (no phone in bed, a spending cap, mentally counting before talking) and keep them to develop your power in other, greater temptations.
 3. Guard your heart and your environment.
 - a) The heart will be the key (Proverbs 4:23). Proverbs 25:28 compares a person without self-control to a city with broken walls — vulnerable to every attack.
 - b) Identify triggers (places, times, people, apps, emotions) tied to loss of control. Remove or limit access where you habitually fall (Matthew 5:29-30 applies this principle radically to lust, but it apply in a general way). Then build "walls" which are filters, schedules, and habits that make obedience easier and sin harder.
 - c) Invite trusted Christians to ask you hard questions for accountability and pray with you about specific areas.
 4. Fix your eyes on Christ and the bigger story.
 - a) We're all learning how to lay aside every weight and look to Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2). Self-control grows as you connect the battle of this moment to the joy set before you in Christ.
 - b) When tempted, deliberately picture what obedience protects: intimacy with God, integrity in ministry, trust with family, eternal reward; etc. Meditate on passages that show Christ's self-giving obedience (Philippians 2:5-11), and pray to God to form that mind in you.

- c) In worship and the observing of the Lord's Supper, you're being mindful of Christ's sacrifice and your union with Him, which both humbles and strengthens you.
- D. Freedom in Christ doesn't give Christians liberty to cast off moral restraint, nor does it call for a withdrawal from life and its temptations. It calls for a self-disciplined life following Christ's example of being in the world but not of the world (John 17:14-16). This instruction was a terrible blow to Felix, who was living in adultery (Matthew 19:9; cp. 15:19-20).

III. Paul Preached About Judgment

- A. Paul's reference to the judgment of mankind definitely grabbed Felix's attention. Luke says Felix "trembled" (afraid, alarmed, terrified, frightened). It was the same fear that struck the women who had come to the tomb, the disciples in Jerusalem who had seen the resurrected Lord, and Cornelius who had seen the angel (Luke 24:5, 37; Acts 10:4).
- B. Sadly, his fear didn't result in repentance or conversion. Instead, Felix told Paul to go away. The convenient opportunity never came. Why did Felix procrastinate? Why did he order Paul back to his prison cell?
 - 1. Perhaps he didn't want to give up his sin. He couldn't give up his adulterous relationship with Drusilla. How many today are married to the pleasures and lusts of the world?
 - 2. Perhaps he's too busy with his job. People who are slaves to wealth love the world and wait for a more convenient season. There's no time for Jesus.
 - 3. Perhaps he can't give up his position. He wouldn't give up the governorship of a Roman province to become a follower of the lowly Nazarene, a member of the sect that "everywhere is spoken against" (Acts 28:22).
- C. In keeping with his normal custom, he described the wrath of God to be visited upon the world of the ungodly (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; 1 Peter 4:17-19; 2 Peter 2:9-14; 3:3-10). Felix and Drusilla walked away into eternity in their sinful state. The fourth demon won. They lost.

Conclusion. Death is the leveler of all of us because in one fell swoop, everything will pass away. Why will you sacrifice redemption and immortality for the indulgence of fleshly lusts? Why not obey Jesus now (2 Corinthians 6:2)?

This soul-gripping narrative stands as a warning to all who know they should obey the gospel, yet continue to put it off. It's also a call to each of us not to wait for a "convenient time" to do good and obey what we know is right (James 4:17).

The tragedy of procrastination is that the "convenient time" often never comes. J. Oswald Sanders said, "Procrastination, the thief of time, is one of the devil's most potent weapons for defrauding us of eternal heritage." Satan rarely needs to persuade people to reject God outright. More often, he simply whispers, "Not now."

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