

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (6-8-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 24:24 – 25:27

Righteousness, Self-control, Judgement

Introduction

Paul had a second interview with Felix, this time in the presence of his Jewish wife, Drusilla. Paul was asked about his faith in Christ. This was a wonderful opportunity for Paul, and he used it to the full. His listeners were from the highest ranks of society. They would never have attended a Christian meeting, but they were curious and seeking, and not satisfied. In front of them was a man who knew where he stood and his remarkably changed life spoke of the reality of his personal claims to know Christ. They wanted to know more.

The prisoner soon dominated the scene, despite his chains and captivity. The royal audience chamber was turned into an evangelistic meeting. So powerful was the sermon that Paul preached that the king, with all his finery and earthly pomp and power, trembled. He sent the prisoner away, and said that when it was convenient he would call for him again.

We are going to look at this sermon and the effect it had. There is something here for every Christian, every preacher and every unbeliever to learn.

Appropriate and relevant sermon

Sometimes people are heard to say “What an interesting sermon, well illustrated and delivered with sincerity”, but too often the trouble is that the preacher was scratching where it didn’t itch. That certainly was not the case with Paul’s sermon to Felix and Drusilla. The relevance of Paul’s words is not clear till we look below the surface.

Felix was the Roman governor, who had worked his way to the top from lowly beginnings. A slave by birth, he became a freed man, then the Procurator of the Province of Judea (like Pontius Pilate before him). He was the first slave in history to become a governor. Tacitus recorded, “He wielded the power of a king with the mind of a slave.” However, Felix was notoriously corrupt. His court reeked with blood and debauchery. He kept Paul in prison hoping for a bribe, against all the rules which decreed exile for bribery. Felix was unjust, unscrupulous, and was prepared to murder his closest supporters. At length he was recalled to Rome after the massacre of thousands of Jews following mob violence, when he looted the houses of the wealthiest Jews in Caesarea. This was reported to the Emperor and so he lost his job. Only his brother’s influence with the Emperor saved him from execution.

Not only was he a thug, but he was also very immoral. The woman at his side, Drusilla, was the youngest daughter of King Herod Agrippa I, and at this time (57AD) she was not yet 20. At 16 she had married a king of a small Syrian state, but had been persuaded to leave him and marry Felix, becoming his third wife, all of whom were princesses. Their son, Agrippa, died in the eruption of Vesuvius in 79AD, along with his mother.

So here was the scene, and here was the need of the two before Paul. Paul did not flatter them, as Greek philosophers would have done. He was straight, faithful, fearless, and immediately spoke of their sinful state. They were a guilty pair, who thought they could do anything with impunity. But now the prisoner before them became judge. How often Christian witness is called to be very straight with the sins of the upper class, e.g. John the Baptist with King Herod; John Knox with Queen Mary. They were not worried about what men would think was too personal and plain. God's men have a message to deliver, and it is more important to please God than to please men.

Paul spoke of righteousness, God's law, justice, truth, honesty, fair dealing. He spoke of self-control to the loose-living governor and the pleasure-loving princess. The law of God taught do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not bear false witness, and do not covet. **Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God** (1 Corinthians 6:9).

Paul spoke of the judgement to come. They might do what they liked now, but one day life would end, and all men will be judged by the supreme judge and receive the rewards due for their deeds. This is the highest court, and the decision will be final. Such a message was so applicable to Felix and Drusilla because of the depths to which they had descended, but it also has a general application.

Lives have to be brought to these standards. We might not come into the category of Felix and Drusilla, but still by God's yardstick of righteousness we fall short. He knows our deeds, words and thoughts. Our deeds and words might seem passable, but can we dare to say we never stumble when it comes to our motives and desires? God knows all about our self-control and self-indulgence.

*“Kind but searching glance can scan
The very wounds that shame would hide.”*

When judgement day comes, all will appear individually and inescapably before his judgement seat. **He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead** (Acts 17:31). On that day, lives will be laid bare, secrets revealed, true character will be known. Thank God to be in Christ Jesus, to know He has borne our sins and penalty. **There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus** (Romans 8:1).

The affected congregation

As he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled (Acts 24:25 AV). Felix winced under the hammer blows of this faithful preacher. Everything he had done came back and crowded into his mind. The widow he had defrauded, the bribes he had taken, the innocent men he had sent to their deaths, the man whose wife he had stolen. He was terrified. Sitting on his throne, he saw in his imagination himself before God's throne.

What power there is in the Gospel when the Holy Spirit speaks through it. “Conscience makes cowards of us all”. We come under deep conviction. The arrow of truth finds its mark. A voice says, “Thou art the man”. We arrive at a crossroads, a watershed. What road do we take? Do we yield or resist? How important it is to respond to the truth at the time when we feel its power. There is a tendency for truth to lose its power by repetition, and for emotions to become fainter and fainter when not acted on. God’s voice gets fainter and fainter. We mentally yawn; we’ve heard it all before.

What of Felix? The man trembled, he was convicted – but he let the opportunity go. He told Paul to leave him now. “Don’t call us, we’ll call you.” The greatest opportunity had come and gone. He failed to seize it. The dye was cast. He did not strike while the iron was hot. Never again would he be so deeply impressed with the truth and so likely to respond. He missed his chance. Although he met Paul again and spoke with him, never again was he concerned.

Lamentable disappointment

Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee (Acts 24:25). Felix did not like this plain speaking, and cut short the interview. He was guilty, a sense of his need had been aroused, but instead of asking, “What must I do to be saved?” he put the matter off. Saying he would speak about it on another occasion was a sap to his conscience, but it was a deathblow. Atheism has slain hundreds, vice its thousands, and procrastination its hundreds of thousands.

Why do people procrastinate on such an important matter?

- (1) They desire to get rid of a disagreeable subject. It is painful and unpleasant, and they don’t want to have to deal with it. They must sense something is wrong, but they would rather not get to the bottom of it.
- (2) They feel they are too young to worry about it. All of life is before them, and they are full of vigour and health, so no need to consider eternity. They will think about that when they are older; meanwhile they have ambitions to fulfil. The problem is, apart from there being no guarantee of anyone living till tomorrow, once habits are ingrained and mind set firmer, they are even less likely to respond in old age.
- (3) They don’t actually say “no”; they just crowd out the decision with other things – their jobs, holidays, and football. Trifles of the passing hours obliterate concern about eternity.
- (4) It is too costly. The thought of having to undo wrongs, give up evil pleasures, lose friends and influence, is more than they can cope with.

This is a moral problem, not an intellectual one. Eternity is more important than time. **You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you** (Luke 12:20). **What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?** (Mark 8:36). It is crucial to see life in the light of eternity and prepare selves for it. We none of us know how many days we have left to worry about what others think of us, to hug sins and to pay the price.

There are vital and pressing reasons to decide for Christ as Saviour, Master and your all. No time is more suitable than the present. Every time you hear and ignore, you

only injure yourself, making yourself less capable than before to respond. The truth loses its power by repetition. We should cherish the faintest impression which may lead us to Christ and walk with Him. Why delay possessing the highest blessing, the deepest peace, eternal security, and full assurance? Why keep the best and most loving friend at the door? Act now. Do not gamble with uncertainties. Remember, tomorrow may never come.

Conclusion

The characters of Paul and Felix illustrate the two alternatives open to us. One was in Christ, and the other was out of Christ. One had eternal life, the other had eternal death. One had a disordered life, perverted desires, a growing hardness and sense of emptiness and futility. The other was able to look God in the eye because the sin question had been dealt with, he was in the family of God, and he had assurance about the future and satisfaction now. **I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life** (Deuteronomy 30:19).