

God Honoring Compromise Acts 21:17-36

Introduction

Compromise

Whether you view compromise as a virtue or a vice might well depend on how you are defining it because there are two contrary concepts contained in that one word

The **largely positive** concept is to work out the details of a mutually agreed upon direction or a shared principle in a give and take fashion where each party yields on various points to reach a mutually acceptable outcome

This would be like a couple agreeing to go out to eat and then settling on a place where both could order the kind of meal they each wanted and both are perfectly content with the choice

The second concept which is **somewhat neutral** is for both sides of a disagreement to abandon their desires and decide to agree on a third way that doesn't actually satisfy either party

This would be like a couple where one wanted to vacation at a resort at the beach and the other wanted to go to camping in the mountains winding up in a motel in Akron, Ohio

(I don't have anything against Akron it's just the place that popped into my head because Akron is neither beach nor mountain and its claim to fame is that it's the birthplace of the rubber tire industry so...)

And a **negative** form of compromise involves the expectation that one of the parties should abandon their principles or their sense of fundamental propriety and completely cave in an effort to satisfy the other

We all remember that kid who would threaten to go home if their every wish wasn't met and expected everyone to go along with them for the sake of getting along

On the one hand we have the idea of yielding on non-essential matters for the sake of harmony and on the other capitulation or unconditional surrender – even on matters of principle – in an effort to keep the peace

We know that some amount of compromise is necessary if we want to live together with other people and we regularly make concessions for the sake of getting along with others

Because we know that some amount of compromise is necessary if we are to have normal, healthy relationships

But compromise has its limits and we know that there are areas of life where compromise simply isn't possible

Let me ask you this, "What lengths would you go to in order to fellowship with believers who had very different cultural customs and attitudes?"

Would you be willing to set aside your preferences and perhaps even your comfort in order to promote unity in the Body of Christ

Or would you be thankful for the least provocation that would justify not having anything to do with them?

The question is where to draw the line and whether there is compromise that is actually honoring to God

As we will see in our passage this morning it wasn't very long after Paul arrived in Jerusalem that he found himself being asked to participate in a ritual that involved a measure of compromise on his part

In the course of our study we will look at the particulars of that situation and try to determine the correctness of Paul's response and how we can apply what we learn to situations we might find ourselves facing today

Our passage this morning is Acts 21:17-36 so if you would join me there in your Bibles you can follow along as I read verses **17-20a** where we see that Paul met with **initial approval**

When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 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.

I. Initial Approval

The first thing we see is that Paul along with his company was warmly received by the brothers

We can't say for certain just who "the brothers" included but we know that Luke had to be indicating that at the very least the members of the church at Jerusalem were generally glad to see them arrive

And after a night's rest they went to see James and all the elders and Paul gave a detailed report of what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry

We need to note that Paul rightly credited God with the fruit that was harvested from his ministry

There is a significant difference between saying, "Look what I did with God's help" and "Look what God did through my ministry" and Paul knows well where the credit belongs

Consequently, James and the elders rightly gave God alone the glory for the salvation of the Gentiles

Then, after Paul's detailed report, James and the elders shared how God had also multiplied the church in Jerusalem as they numbered the believers there as being in the thousands

God had richly prospered both the ministries to the Jews and to the Gentiles and everyone was rejoicing and giving God the glory for the increase

The monetary gift

For some reason, Luke doesn't mention the monetary gift that Paul and the others were carrying until **24:17** when Paul makes his defense before Felix

This is likely because Luke simply chose to emphasize the events surrounding Paul's arrest

But the delegation undoubtedly presented the gift straightaway as that was a major reason for their visit

And it would seem natural that the gift contributed greatly to the warm feelings they had for one another as the Gentile believers were able to demonstrate the love they had for their Jewish brethren

And by accepting the gift the church leaders in Jerusalem signaled their recognition of brotherly solidarity with the Gentile churches

Their revelry was rather short-lived, however, as James and the elders almost in the same breath as their report of growth told Paul that he was being **accused of apostasy**

II. Accusation of Apostasy

Look with me at **verses 20b-21** where James says that those thousands of Jewish converts

...are all zealous for the law, 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.

Wow! Talk about a turnaround!

I would be surprised if Paul didn't suffer a bit of whiplash with the speed of turning from rejoicing over the success of his ministry to being accused of teaching against the Law of Moses

James states that "all" of the Jewish converts are "zealous for the law" and even if he was engaging in a bit of hyperbole it seems clear that a good number of them have a problem with what they believe Paul is teaching

Specifically that Paul is teaching the Jews in these far-flung areas of the world to ignore the cultural practices of the Law of Moses especially in the area of circumcision

The issue was and was not:

First of all we need to recognize that this was *not* an issue of how one is reconciled to God – that is to say this was **not a disagreement about salvation**

It was an issue of ethnic identity and Jewish cultural distinctiveness that had been in place for thousands of years that the Jewish Christians very naturally wanted to maintain

It was also *not* an issue of morality because it was understood by all that all Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, must live in accordance with God's **moral** law

So the dispute really was over whether it was **preferable or even permissible** for Jewish Christians to continue to live like cultural Jews by continuing to observe Jewish cultural practices

What Paul taught

As is true in most cases, the rumor that had reached the ears of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem wasn't totally without validity

For instance, from Paul's writings we know that he taught that circumcision was unnecessary

Look with me at **Galatians 6:12-15** –

*It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. **For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.***

However, the issue in Galatians was whether a Gentile had to be circumcised to become a Christian whereas the issue that was upsetting the church in Jerusalem was that Paul was leading Jews to abandon their heritage

Still it's easy to see how such a teaching could be perverted and misrepresented to make the claim that Paul, in teaching that circumcision was *unnecessary* for salvation, was advocating against Jewish Christians continuing in Jewish traditions

But in spite of the fact that Paul opened himself up to such criticism by teaching that salvation was apart from the Law there is no evidence that Paul ever spoke against Jews remaining culturally Jewish

In fact, Paul spent a good deal of time in his letter to the Romans teaching on how to be sensitive regarding matters of conscience and we saw in **Acts 16:3** that he had Timothy circumcised so as not to give unnecessary offense to the Jews

If anything, Paul had bent over backwards to be accommodating to the cultural sensitivities of his countrymen

And James knew this was true so the suggestion that came next, to engage in **judicious appeasement** of those who had been wrongly informed and inflamed by false rumors could have been insulting to Paul

III. Judicious Appeasement

In **verse 22** we see that James and the others knew that there was likely to be trouble as soon as the misinformed Jewish believers found out Paul was in town

Look with me at **verses 23-25** where we see the proposal made by James and the elders to mollify those who were upset in hopes of heading off a nasty confrontation –

Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 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. 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."

There were four Jewish believers who had placed themselves under a Nazarite vow which is detailed in Numbers 6

Remember that Paul had just recently been under the same sort of voluntary vow while in Corinth in order to remind himself to remain pure in the midst of the debauchery that surrounded him there

And now the suggestion was that Paul should identify with those men by paying their expenses at the end of the vow thereby giving proof that he wasn't antagonistic toward the Law but that he in fact supported Jewish customs

And what the elders were suggesting was a significant gesture as we see just what those expenses would involve in **Numbers 6:13-15** –

“And this is the law for the Nazirite, when the time of his separation has been completed: he shall be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and he shall bring his gift to the Lord, one male lamb a year old without blemish for a burnt offering, and one ewe lamb a year old without blemish as a sin offering, and one ram without blemish as a peace offering, and a basket of unleavened bread, loaves of fine flour mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared with oil, and their grain offering and their drink offerings.”

So, James and the elders were asking Paul to provide **a yearling male lamb, a yearling ewe lamb, a ram, unleavened bread and wafers**, along with **grain and drink offerings** for each of the four men who would soon be completing their vow before the Lord

This stood to be a significant financial burden for Paul who we know worked with his hands to support himself and those who travelled with him

And, like I said, Paul very well could have taken it as an affront but he didn't

You know, I would like to think that James and the elders tried to straighten out the wrong information and to stop the rumors and the upset that they were causing in the church

But sometimes words alone aren't sufficient because no matter what is said, no matter how truthful and logical it is, or how sincerely or how often it is said, words alone can't get rid of an idea once it takes hold and something more is needed

And in this case, the church leaders decided that a tangible act by Paul was needed to show people the truth

And Paul was humble and accommodating as we see in **verse 26** that he undertook the necessary steps of personal purification for seven days having become ritually defiled by living among the Gentiles and went to notify the temple leaders of his intent to provide the necessary offerings for the four men

Criticisms

James and the elders have been criticized by some for making this demand of Paul and Paul has likewise been criticized for agreeing to it

So we need to consider whether they were guilty of compromising in the sense of abandoning their principles or merely being accommodating in compromising on non-essentials for the sake of harmony

I believe it's clear that they were seeking to facilitate unity by removing a stumbling block between the Jewish and Gentile believers so their motivation was honorable but the question remains as to whether their actions were proper

We have already seen that this wasn't a question of how a person is saved –

That had been decided during the first council in Jerusalem back in Acts 15

And now we see a restatement of that decision here in **verse 25** – so we know that this suggestion isn't a reversal of that former determination as to how a person is saved

Therefore we can safely say that this was not a compromise in the sense of abandoning a doctrinal position or even a matter of sacrificing a moral principle

The issue at hand is one of what part cultural identity, ceremony, and tradition should play in the life of the Christian

As we saw in our Scripture reading from **1 Corinthians 9** this morning Paul considered such matters to be of no significance to him – he recognized that they were not binding but he would voluntarily engage in them or refrain from them according to his present circumstance so as to facilitate acceptance of the gospel

The Gentile churches had come with an offering that symbolized their connection with and affinity for the church in Jerusalem and there was much joy expressed over what God was doing

And what it appears we have before us is the account of church leaders who very much wanted to promote harmony and unity between Jewish and Gentile believers and who wanted to make certain that a cause for animosity and division was removed

IV. Attempted Assassination

Sadly, as we see in **verses 27-36** the attempt was short-circuited by unbelieving Jews from Asia whose viciousness stands in stark contrast to the church leaders

*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, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” **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. **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. **31**And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. **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. **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. **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. **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!”*

We saw in **Acts 20:4** that among Paul’s travelling companions who were carrying the offerings from their respective churches were two men from Asia, Tychicus and Trophimus

Now we read that these Jews from Asia – in all likelihood from Ephesus – had recognized Trophimus who was also from Ephesus together with Paul in Jerusalem

There is an old saying that claims “No good deed goes unpunished” and that would seem to be the case here

Paul was only in the temple because he was trying to pour oil on troubled waters with the believing Jews by demonstrating that he wasn’t against following Jewish customs

And when the unbelieving Jews from Asia spotted him they either honestly but wrongly concluded that Paul must have brought Trophimus into the part of the temple that was off-limits to Gentiles or they maliciously made up the charge not really caring whether or not it was true

Either way the citizenry was already on edge over what they believed to be Paul’s teaching against Jewish customs and law, a charge the Jews from Asia also mentioned by the way, so they became enraged and they rushed to the temple and attacked Paul with the intention of killing him on the spot

There was a wall about 4-1/2 feet high that separated the outer court where the Gentiles were permitted and the inner courts and archeologists have uncovered two signs from this era that according to the Jewish historian Josephus were displayed on the wall at regular intervals in both Greek and Latin

These signs read: “No foreigner is to enter within the forecourt and the balustrade around the Sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death.”

And this sentence of summary execution extended to any Jew who brought a Gentile beyond that wall

And when we add in the fact that the Roman government acknowledged the right of the Jews to kill anyone who violated this prohibition even if that person was a Roman citizen we see that Paul was in serious jeopardy

Rescue by the Romans

But God had other plans and we see that word of the attack on Paul reached the attention of the commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem that was housed right next to the temple up two flights of stairs in the fortress of Antonia which Herod the Great had constructed at the northwest corner of the temple area

As we have discussed many times civil unrest was a serious matter where Rome was concerned and when the tribune learned that “all Jerusalem was in confusion” he marshalled his troops and rushed to quell the disturbance

Luke mentions that there were multiple centurions and soldiers and since we know that a centurion commanded 100 men that means that at least 202 Roman soldiers descended on the temple mob

Truthfully, they were more interested in keeping the peace than they were in rescuing Paul but they served God’s purpose in extricating Paul from the murderous mob

And their arrival on the scene must have had a temporary shock and awe effect on the mob because just seeing the soldiers caused them to halt the beating

The tribune arrested Paul, bound him with two chains, and took him into protective custody until he could sort things out and unable to get a definitive answer from the mob he had him hauled off to the barracks for questioning

It didn’t take long for the mob to regain their footing and Luke includes detail that shows just how furious they were as they dared to try to pry Paul away from the soldiers causing them to have to carry Paul to the top of the stairs as the Jews shouted “Away with him”

Whether he did it intentionally or not, by including that detail Luke shows another parallel between Paul’s visit to Jerusalem and that of Jesus some 30 years previously as another crowd had likewise shouted “Away with this man” as they clamored for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus which we read about in Luke 23

We’ll pick up the account with Paul’s speech to the crowd next week

But let's take some time to unpack what this passage says to us today about compromise and what God-honoring compromise looks like

Conclusion

As I said last week there are scholars - and frankly some of them are "go to" guys for me as I engage in Bible study - who believe that Paul should never have been in Jerusalem at this time in the first place

And for the reasons I laid out last week I have to respectfully and humbly disagree with their conclusion

Likewise, there are some who believe that James and the elders were wrong to ask Paul to accept the accommodation of ritual self-purification and of paying for the sacrifices of the four men who were under the vow

And if we take the view that Paul and the others were blurring the line between the Law and grace then they would have a point

But that doesn't seem to be the case here – Let me explain

We know that God included all manner of instructions in his law that served to distinguish the Jews from the rest of the world's population – dietary rules, fashion rules, etc.

And the Jews were understandably proud to be known as different because they were God's chosen people

The cultural aspects of the Law became very important as a means of identity and historical, ethnic continuity so it is understandable that many Jews would continue to observe the practices that represented their cultural identity faithfully even after accepting Christ simply because that is who they were – even as they accepted that those practices had no value for salvation or merit before God

Modern examples

In preparing for this message I endeavored to find a modern parallel that would illustrate this principle for us and the closest I could come up with is the observance of Lent

In some faith traditions, Lent is traditionally observed as a means of penance which means earning absolution from sins committed and thereby gaining favor with God through personal suffering and deprivation

But we know that Scripture is quite clear that our sins have been paid for in full by the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross, that forgiveness of sins is through God's grace alone, and that there is nothing at all we can do on our own behalf to pay for our sins and earn merit before God

So, let's say a person had been a part of a faith tradition that observes Lent in an unbiblical way but has now come to Christ but would still like to observe Lent as a means of focusing their mind and heart on God and the sacrifice that was made on their behalf by Christ on the cross knowing full well that it is not a meritorious act before God?

And perhaps they know that their participation in the Lenten season would avoid division and promote harmony within their family and circle of friends

Would it be proper for that believer to do so? Absolutely!

I'm certain that Paul would consider it to be a matter of minor importance that could be practiced without concern as long as the believer had clear understanding about it

We have Christian liberty in such matters and we should use our liberty to promote unity and harmony

But in order to do that properly we must have clear understanding about what we believe and why

Because in the absence of clear understanding of doctrine we are left with nothing to guide us except our preferences

Paul had clearly and forcefully demonstrated that he knew the Law was not a means of justification or even of earning merit before God so he was free to practice the various ceremonial parts of the Law in solidarity with his countrymen

And in so doing Paul was able to avoid unnecessary offense and was able to promote harmony between the Jewish and Gentile believers without fear of compromising doctrinal principles that should never be compromised

In this account we see beautiful examples of Christian unity through forbearance and acceptance

James and the church leaders in Jerusalem identified with the Gentile churches in accepting their offer of famine relief and in rejoicing with them and glorifying God for his work among them

Paul took the necessary steps to identify with his kinsmen and to alleviate the misconceptions about his teaching that they were under

And the actions of the Christians stand in stark contrast to those of the unbelieving Jews who were intent on rejecting the gospel and silencing God's messenger

Caution

So, how far should we go to promote unity and fellowship with those who are different from us or those who might do things different from us?

The answer is we should go as far as possible to get around, over, under, or through any unnecessary barriers and we should be diligent to avoid erecting unnecessary barriers that might prevent someone from joining with us

For the sake of harmony and unity we need to be flexible in those things that are indifferent and stand firm on those that are not

But we must be careful to understand the difference so that we don't unwisely compromise on those things that should never be compromised or elevate minor matters to major status

In other words, we need to embrace diversity while defending doctrine

And we need to ask God to give us the wisdom to know the difference so we don't unwittingly lapse into error or allow our personal preferences to become barriers to unity and fellowship in the Body of Christ

Let's pray