

Truth for Today

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Paul was an instrument of God chosen for a special purpose. Jesus Himself told Ananias that Paul would bear His name before Gentiles, kings, and the sons of Israel (Acts 9:15). And he did. In Acts 24, this apostle stood before the wicked ruler Felix and preached to him about “righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come” (24:25).

Some sermons in the Bible are recorded in great detail, such as Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount or Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost. Others are given in summary: Philip “preached Jesus” to the eunuch (Acts 8:35). In this way, only the bullet points of Paul’s sermon to Felix are revealed.

Why would Paul choose these three subjects: righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come? As brother Bowman would say, because these “met the needs of the people.” According to Psalm 119:89, “Forever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in the heavens.” Since God does not change, His word does not change. What He has spoken is just as needed today as it was when He first said it. And the sermon Paul preached on this occasion could easily be entitled “Truth for Today.”

‘Righteousness’ speaks to absolute truth. As a governor, Felix was used to defining the law. Men in his position were not there to enforce the law or keep the law but keep the peace. He knew Paul was innocent of the charges but kept him in prison “wishing to do the Jews a favor” (24:27). That sounds a lot like one of his predecessors, Pontius Pilate. When Jesus said to him, “I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth,” he responded, “What is truth” (John 19:38)? To many people, righteousness is whatever you want it to be.

The word of God is what defines what is righteous. The reason Paul was not ashamed of the gospel was because it is the power of God to salvation. “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith” (Rom. 1:17). This righteousness is later spoken of by Paul as one that comes from God on the basis of faith (3:22, 9:30; Phil. 3:21). How does faith come? By hearing the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Righteousness is not what I think is right or what I feel is right. God alone is right. And He alone can determine the way of righteousness.

'Self-control' speaks to moral responsibility. This was an especially bold point when you consider Paul's audience. According to history, Felix was an immoral, corrupt, and covetous ruler. In fact, one of the reasons he kept Paul around was because "he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul" (24:26), a bribe for his release (cf. 24:17). Drusilla was his third wife, the daughter of Herod Agrippa. This man needed to hear about restraint.

The world says, "I can't help myself;" self-control says, "you must!" "Self-control" is listed as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). It is in stark contrast to the deeds of the flesh which are immorality, outbursts of anger and drunkenness. "Self-control" is also one of the attributes that must be added to our faith (2 Peter 1:6). People try to excuse their behavior because of their environment, upbringing, spouse, or line of work. But that does not excuse responsibility. God expects us to exercise "self-control in all things" (1 Cor. 9:25).

'The judgement to come' speaks to personal accountability. "Felix became frightened" (24:25). Why else would he be afraid unless he understood that he was accountable to a higher court than Caesar? Felix and Drusilla sent for Paul perhaps out of curiosity. Since Drusilla was a Jewess, they may have just wanted some information about her heritage. But Paul's preaching found the mark and evoked the fear of the Lord.

Fear caused Felix to say, "Go away for the present" (24:25). He had the exact opposite reaction as the Philippian jailer who, after Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to him, was baptized "that very hour of the night" (Acts 16:33). Many are moved to fear by the words of the gospel. But since the judgment is "to come," obedience can wait for some more convenient day. Sadly, that time never comes.

In the end, "Felix left Paul imprisoned" (24:27). After being succeeded by Festus, he was later brought before Caesar on charges of corruption. He died in exile. A tragic end when you think how close he came to obeying the gospel. What will be your response to truth? Today?