

Ac. 21:17-36, "The Custom Conflicted Church," By Rev. Paul Hudson

Acts: Church Afire! Summary, Daily Devotional, & Study Questions, 6/7/26

Summary

Big Idea

The true freedom in Christ allows believers to navigate cultural identities without being bound by them.

In this passage of Acts, Paul returns to Jerusalem where tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers come to the forefront. Despite Paul's warm initial reception, he quickly encounters conflict over his ministry and teachings, perceived by some as anti-Jewish. James and the elders pressure Paul to adhere to Jewish customs publicly to dispel rumors and maintain harmony. Surprisingly, Paul complies, participating in purification rites, an act seeming to contradict his Emancipated view of salvation by grace, yet revealing his understanding of cultural engagement without compromising his faith identity.

The sermon highlights the tension between cultural customs and the Christian identity. Paul represents the struggle and resolution of maintaining Christian freedom even within traditional frameworks. Despite his actions, Paul remains centered in his freedom in Christ, willing to use that freedom for missional purposes, even at the cost of his reputation and safety. However, his arrest underscores the sermon's cautionary tale: while believers can try to bridge cultural gaps, the truth of the Gospel will often be met with opposition simply because of its inherent challenge to worldly identities.

Keys and Themes

1. Cultural Custom vs. Christian Identity

The sermon explores how cultural customs can define individuals, emphasizing that cultural identity often hinges on shared practices, beliefs, and values. Paul, while being Jewish, was defined primarily by his faith in Christ. This tension is evident in his actions, as he navigates between Jewish traditions and his identity in Jesus. This story reminds us that cultural practices are not innately binding on those who are free in Christ.

2. Paul's Emancipation and Cultural Flexibility

Paul's actions, though seemingly contradictory, demonstrate his freedom from cultural bondage. The sermon explains that true emancipation means being free enough to engage with cultural customs without being tied to them. Paul's compliance with the purification rites illustrated his use of freedom to maintain peace and witness to the Jews, a strategic choice, not a compromise of his faith. Such freedom enables believers to adapt culturally without losing spiritual integrity.

3. The Missional Use of Freedom

Paul's effort to become "all things to all people" exemplifies the missional use of Christian freedom. The sermon stresses that this is not about compromising the Gospel but removing obstacles that hinder others from seeing Christ. Our freedom in Christ empowers us to connect meaningfully with others for the Kingdom's sake, without sacrificing our primary allegiance to Christ. The goal should always be to draw others to Jesus, breaking down unnecessary barriers.

4. The Offense of the Cross

Despite Paul's efforts to accommodate Jewish sensitivities, he still faced arrest, illustrating that the Cross remains a stumbling block to unbelieving hearts. The sermon highlights that while cultural barriers can be removed, the offense of the Gospel cannot be. Believers must acknowledge that the message of Jesus inherently challenges prevailing cultural norms and will provoke resistance, a reality any faithful witness must be prepared for.

5. Balancing Identity and Belonging to Christ

The sermon concludes with a powerful call to prioritize our identity in Christ over cultural ties. Paul serves as a model for discerning what elements of our identity must be surrendered to fully embrace our new identity in Jesus. Believers are encouraged to evaluate what they are willing to lay aside to find true belonging in Christ, understanding that any competing identity can obstruct our spiritual growth and mission.

Daily Devotional

Sunday — Cultural Custom vs. Christian Identity

Scripture: Acts 21:17-21

Paul's experience in Jerusalem highlights how deeply cultural customs can shape our identities. While Paul was Jew by birth, his encounter with Christ redefined his understanding of cultural practices. He faced accusations of being anti-law, yet his true identity was rooted in Christ. This passage invites us to examine how our cultural customs align with our faith. Are there cultural practices we hold onto that conflict with who we are in Christ? Just as Paul navigated these waters, we too are called to discern our core identity as Christians while engaging with the world around us.

Reflect Questions:

1. *What cultural customs have shaped your identity?*
 2. *How do these customs align or conflict with your faith in Christ?*
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Monday — Paul's Emancipation and Cultural Flexibility

Scripture: Acts 21:22-26

In the face of scrutiny, Paul agreed to undergo purification rites. His decision reflects a nuanced understanding of freedom: recognizing that one can engage in cultural practices without being enslaved by them. The passage challenges us to consider how we use our Christian freedom. Are we flexible for the sake of others, without compromising our beliefs? By understanding our freedom in Christ, we can navigate complex cultural landscapes with discernment and grace, demonstrating love and respect without losing sight of our true identity.

Reflect Questions:

1. *How can you use your Christian freedom to serve others today?*
 2. *Are there cultural practices you engage in that could serve as opportunities for witness?*
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Tuesday — The Missional Use of Freedom

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Paul's commitment to becoming "all things to all people" highlights the missional intent of Christian freedom. His adaptability was not about blending in, but about building bridges to the Gospel. This reflection encourages us to consider how we can use our freedom to connect with others meaningfully. Are we willing to step into others' worlds for the Gospel's sake? The freedom we have in Christ isn't for self-indulgence; it's for serving and reaching others, removing barriers that might prevent them from encountering Jesus.

Reflect Questions:

1. *In what ways can you adapt to reach those who don't know Christ?*
 2. *How can your Christian freedom be a tool for evangelism?*
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Wednesday — The Offense of the Cross

Scripture: Acts 21:27-36

Despite Paul's efforts to show respect for Jewish customs, he faced hostility because of his message about Jesus. This story illustrates that the Gospel itself can be offensive, challenging the old identities that people cling to. It's a reminder that while we can address cultural concerns, some will reject the message because it demands transformation. Our role is to present the truth lovingly, knowing that it's ultimately up to God to open hearts. The uneasiness the cross brings should steer us toward prayer and deeper faithfulness rather than discouragement.

Reflect Questions:

1. *How do you respond when the Gospel message is met with resistance?*
 2. *What does it mean to you that the cross still offends?*
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Thursday — Balancing Identity and Belonging to Christ

Scripture: Philippians 3:4-9

Paul's willingness to consider everything a loss in comparison to knowing Christ challenges us to evaluate our own identities. Are there parts of our old selves we are reluctant to let go of? This freedom enables us to embrace our identity in Jesus as our primary focus, transcending all cultural, traditional, or personal identifiers. Our growth in faith involves constant reevaluation of what holds us back from fully belonging to Christ. Let us find comfort in knowing that true belonging and identity is found in Him alone.

Reflect Questions:

- 1. What aspects of your identity might compete with your relationship with Christ?*
- 2. How can prioritizing your identity in Christ lead to true freedom?*

Friday — Navigating Cultural Tensions with Wisdom

Scripture: Acts 21:19-25

Paul's meeting with James and the elders revealed their tension between cultural and religious identities. Despite their faith in Christ, the Jewish leaders at Jerusalem clung to Moses. This passage invites us to navigate our cultural and spiritual tensions with wisdom. How do we discern which actions serve the Gospel and which are mere concessions to cultural pressure? The wisdom lies in recognizing when aligning with cultural practices enhances our witness, versus when it detracts from our allegiance to Christ.

Reflect Questions:

- 1. How do you navigate the balance between cultural practices and your faith?*
- 2. What distinguishes wise cultural engagement from compromising your beliefs?*

Saturday — Identity in Christ Over Cultural Norms

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Paul's adaptability in ministry teaches us about balancing cultural identities with our identity in Christ. The passage challenges us to reflect on what it looks like to prioritize our faith over cultural norms. It's essential to consider whether our cultural affiliations serve as bridges or barriers to the Gospel. Through faith, we are empowered to break free from cultural constraints that limit our potential to fully embrace our identity in Christ. This calls for a willingness to lay down old identities and step boldly into our new creation in Jesus.

Reflect Questions:

- 1. What cultural norms do you need to reconsider in light of your identity in Christ?*
- 2. How can you ensure your actions reflect your commitment to Jesus despite cultural pressures?*

Study Questions

Read Ac. 21:17-36 and listen to the Sermon "The Custom Conflicted Church," 6/7/26

Observation

- 1) What was the initial reception Paul received in Jerusalem?
- 2) How did James and the elders instruct Paul to address the concerns of the Jewish Christians?
- 3) What actions did Paul undertake in response to the instructions from the Jerusalem leaders?
- 4) What triggered the uproar and ensuing arrest of Paul in the temple?

Interpretation

- 1) Why do you think Paul agreed to participate in the purification rites?
- 2) What does the sermon suggest about Paul's view of his cultural Jewish identity?
- 3) How does the sermon interpret Paul's actions in light of Christian freedom?
- 4) In what way does the sermon describe the contrast between cultural identity and identity in Christ?

Application

- 1) How can you relate Paul's struggle of cultural and Christian identity to your own life?
- 2) What are some aspects of your cultural identity you might need to reconsider in light of your faith in Christ?
- 3) How can you use your Christian freedom to become 'all things to all people' today?
- 4) What barriers might you be able to remove in your own life to help others encounter Christ?