

The Humanity of Spiritual Leaders

Acts 18:12-23

Introduction:

1. The apostle Paul was in the metropolitan city of Corinth. Paul was there for a year and a half (vs. 11) and had enjoyed a very fruitful ministry. vs. 8
2. How the people of the Corinthian church must have respected and admired Paul! However, the believers in Corinth became excessive in their reverence for spiritual leaders, and it became a divisive issue in the church. 1 Corinthians 1:10-15
3. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul corrects the Corinthians and sums it up in verse 21 by declaring, “*Therefore let no man glory in men.*” cf. 4:6
4. Paul knew that spiritual leaders - including him - were merely human, and that believers must keep their eyes fastened upon Jesus Christ (the only perfect man).
5. In fact, in our text, we will observe some very strange and bizarre actions from the apostle Paul that manifest his humanity. If we’re looking for perfection in Paul, we will be very disappointed. Scripture records his strengths and his weaknesses. We can learn much from both.
 - Because we here at CrossRoads recognize the distinct apostleship and message and ministry of the apostle Paul, some have accused us of giving undue reverence to Paul.
 - Paul said that he was the apostle of the Gentiles, and then he said, “*I magnify mine office...*” Romans 11:13
 - Paul magnified his office (his position), but he did not magnify himself. His heart was to magnify Christ. There are some churches that have, in fact, revered and magnified Paul to such a level where they cannot bring themselves to see any sin or shortcomings in Paul.
 - They remind me of doting parents whose kids can do no wrong. Paul was a human man with a high calling. But, he was a human being and was not perfect.
6. All believers must understand and accept the humanity of their spiritual leaders. How? Let’s learn from our text today.

First, by understanding that spiritual leaders are subject to adverse circumstances - vs. 12-17

1. Here we observe an entire group of people united by one common sentiment – a hatred for the apostle Paul. vs. 12-13
2. They dragged Paul before the governmental authorities and falsely accused him. Paul was not convicted of any wrongdoing, but the entire scene must have been an embarrassment and harassment to Paul. vs. 14-15
3. Many believers fail to realize the intense spiritual battles that their spiritual leaders face. Satan aims his most destructive artillery at spiritual leaders in the church in an attempt to completely decimate and destroy them. Why would he do this? He does it in order to wreak havoc, devastation, and ruin in the church.

- By the way, the entire plot backfired on these troublemakers. Gallio would not hear their grievances against Paul (realizing that it was personal) and drove them out, and their chief leader was given a sound beating by the Greeks (vs. 16-17). The plan didn't work out like they thought! But what an irritation for Paul.
4. Some Christians naively assume that being a spiritual leader means living a life of spiritual ease with the absence of heartache and spiritual battles. Paul encountered battle after battle. When you are on the front lines, the battles and struggles are intense.
 - Sometimes leaders get discouraged and need encouragement. vs. 9-10

Second, by realizing that spiritual leaders make mistakes - vs. 18-21

1. Verses 18-23 are quite perplexing and cause you to scratch your head. Paul left a fruitful ministry in Corinth in verse 18 and then left incredible opportunity in Ephesus in verse 20.
2. Does the scriptural record tell us that God told Paul to do this, or that the Spirit led him to do these things? Was it because of persecution or indifference to the gospel? These are the reasons that would normally lead Paul to leave a place, but none of these are mentioned.
3. Paul left Corinth, Ephesus, and his ministries among these Gentiles in order to keep a Jewish feast in Jerusalem. This was a ceremonial feast contained in the Old Testament law system for Israel.
 - This is the same Paul that declared that the law was not of faith, but was a yoke of bondage. Galatians 4:12, 5:1
 - Paul taught that Christ redeemed us from the law, and we are no longer subject to its ceremonial ordinances. Galatians 4:13, 24-25
 - Paul rebuked the Galatians for turning back to the law. Galatians 4:9-11
4. To make matters worse, Paul also took an Old Testament, Nazarite vow. vs. 18
 - Again, this was part of the Old Testament law which was done away with by Christ.
 - The great liberator from the law fell back under its bondage.
 - Furthermore, in allowing his hair to grow out (for the vow), it was a direct contradiction of a principle he gave to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11:4.
5. All of this may come as a shock to many, but it simply reinforces the fact that Paul was human and was not above making a mistake. What do we learn from all of this?
 - If you are looking for perfection in leaders, you will end up very disappointed.
 - In their lives, spiritual leaders will sometimes contradict what they teach others.
 - When this happens, it does not invalidate the truth that they taught.
 - Nor does it mean that the spiritual leaders' motives are corrupt.

Third, by recognizing that spiritual leaders battle sin like everybody else

1. Paul really had no legitimate reason for traveling to Jerusalem to keep this feast.
2. Early in Paul's ministry, Christ ordered Paul out of Jerusalem and made it clear that his primary ministry would be in reaching Gentiles with the gospel. Acts 22:18-21
3. Going to Jerusalem was like a besetting sin for Paul. This ended up being the reason why Paul was imprisoned, and his ministry cut short.
4. It also caused Paul to misplace his priorities. Paul left a thriving ministry in Corinth and left people in Ephesus who were thirsting for the Word of God in order to keep an Old Testament feast in Jerusalem. This doesn't sound like Paul.
 - It is interesting that there is no record of any spiritual accomplishments in Jerusalem. In fact, nothing is even mentioned about his trip there. vs. 22
5. We should not allow all of this to lessen our esteem of Paul. It simply reveals what we already know – our spiritual leaders are not perfect and are apt to sin like anybody else.
6. Just as people tend to make their Bible heroes perfect, we tend to place our spiritual leaders on a pedestal and make them perfect. Indeed they are not!

In Conclusion:

1. So how should a believer respond to these principles that we have learned regarding the humanity of our spiritual leaders?
2. Paul had some very good friends - a husband and wife named Aquila and Priscilla. They provide a great example.
3. Paul had discipled this couple at Corinth and took them with him to Ephesus. He left them there while he went and did his vow and feast business in Jerusalem.
4. Did they allow Paul's inconsistent behavior to destroy them? No, but rather what do we see from them?
 - They still received instruction from Paul. vs. 19
 - They kept serving God. vs. 26
 - They loved and stood with Paul. cf. Romans 16:3-4