



## Law and Order

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

I was thinking about a number of things I've experienced this past week or so that all have something in common:

A couple of weeks ago I went to a Sharks game and without realizing it illegally parked and ended up with a parking ticket. On Sunday I finally paid the ticket.

On Monday I got in a discussion with a family member about a property dispute she's having with a neighbor. She's had to use an attorney and has asked the city government for a ruling.

On Tuesday I scrambled to get my tax returns in the mail. Like many of you I was aware that if I missed the April 15 deadline I could incur some rather stiff penalties.

On Wednesday night I went through the arduous task of filling out what's called a FAFSA application. I fill it out every year to get a federal loan that helps pay my daughter's college tuition.

On Thursday I read in the newspaper all about the debate that took place between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. I was reminded that in a little over six months we'll be selecting a new President.

And then on Friday I put my wife on an airplane. As we drove up to the airport the signs said there was a "high security alert." As I drove away I wondered how she'd negotiate the maze of security checks before she got on her plane.

What do all these things have in common? In different ways, they all demonstrate the involvement we have on a daily basis with government, whether it be at a local, state or federal level. Have you ever wondered, what's the Christian response to all of this? How should believers view law and order; politics and government? The Bible teaches we're citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Our ultimate allegiance is to the King of Kings—Jesus Christ. But at the same time we live here and we're also citizens of an earthly nation. How do we balance our dual citizenship?

This morning we come to Acts 25. One scholar calls this "the most political chapter of the book of Acts." The name "Caesar" appears nine times in reference to the Emperor of Rome. Let me set the context. Paul came to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey. Things didn't go so well there. He was beaten and almost killed by a mob of Jews. In the nick of time, a Roman commander took

him into protective custody. After a plot was uncovered to murder Paul, the commander brought him to Caesarea where he appeared before Felix, the governor of Judea. After hearing the case, Felix stalled. Like many politicians he didn't want to upset his constituents so he kept Paul in custody for two years. Finally, Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus. Festus didn't know anything about Paul. He probably thought he had bigger fish to fry than a little Jew who insisted that some dead guy named Jesus was still alive! That's where ch. 25 begins. Festus has just taken office.

I want to move through this chapter quickly and give you the highlights. When you first read it you might wonder why it's in there at all. But we know "all Scripture is inspired by God," right? It may not all be that inspiring, but it is inspired! And we can learn a lot here from how Paul interacts with the powers that be.

### I. Paul comes before Festus and Herod Agrippa.

#### A. Festus hears charges against Paul in Jerusalem:

In vv.1-5 Festus has just taken office. He sits down at his desk, puts a few pencils in his drawer, hangs a few pictures on the wall, and has a chat with his admin. After three days he says to himself, "You know, I'd better get down to Jerusalem and shake a few hands with the Jews. I need to stay on good terms with them." So he goes to Jerusalem and the first thing the Jewish leaders bring up is the matter of Paul. Verse 3 says they requested "a concession against Paul, that he might have him brought to Jerusalem (at the same time, setting an ambush to kill him on the way)." You'll recall in ch. 23 that a group of 40 of them had bound themselves to an oath to neither eat nor drink until they'd killed Paul (23:12). Two years have passed. I guess these same guys are getting a bit hungry by now so they're ready to try again. But Festus doesn't bite. He says, "Listen, I'm about to head back to Caesarea. If a few of you want to go back with me you can state your case against Paul there." Good call, Festus!

#### 2. Paul appears before Festus and appeals to Caesar:

Sure enough, as soon as they got back to Caesarea Paul is brought before Festus and his accusers. But they didn't have much of a case. Luke says in v.7, "the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing

many and serious charges against him which they could not prove." It was the same old stuff: "Paul stirs up trouble. He disregards our laws. He defiles the temple. He's not loyal to Caesar."

But Paul defends himself. In v.8 he says, **"I have committed no offense either against the Law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar."** He denies it all because none of it's true. Then Festus does something rather strange. He wants to do the Jews a favor, so he asks Paul if he's willing to go back to Jerusalem and stand trial there. Now he's caving into their pressure. But Paul is no dummy. He knows what that's all about. Look at his response in vv.10-11, **"I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you also very well know. If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is true of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar."** Paul invokes his legal right as a Roman citizen to appear before Caesar. Festus had no choice but to grant him that request. And so he says in v.12, **"You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go."**

**3. Festus explains to Agrippa about Paul's case:** But Festus had one major problem. When he sent Paul to Rome he'd have to include a report of the case. You don't want to waste the Emperor's time. You have to show that there is some kind of a case against the accused. Fortunately for Festus, there was a way to get help. Herod Agrippa was coming to pay him a visit. Herod ruled over an area NE of Caesarea. Best of all, he was an expert in matters relating to the Jews.

So Herod comes to Caesarea. He and Festus are having some lunch and Festus brings up this whole deal with Paul. He explains what happened at the trial in vv.18-19, **"And when the accusers stood up, they began bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting; but they simply had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a certain dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive."** He's thinking, "I can't send to Paul Caesar with just that! If he wants to believe a dead guy is alive, that's his prerogative."

Herod says, "You know I'd like to hear Paul. I know a bit about this Jesus thing." Agrippa's father was the guy in Acts 12 who put the apostle James to death. His great grandfather was Herod the Great who slaughtered the innocents not long after Jesus was born. So this guy's family had been intertwined with Jesus and his followers for some time. Agrippa wants a piece of the action. He want to hear about it firsthand.

**4. Festus presents Paul to Agrippa:** So amid much pomp and pageantry Paul is brought before Agrippa and his

sister Bernice. Luke wastes no words in describing the scene in v.23, **"And so, on the next day when Agrippa had come together with Bernice, amid great pomp, and had entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in."** It's quite a scene, isn't it? Festus would have been in a scarlet robe. Agrippa and Bernice in purple robes of royalty. All the high ranking officers and VIP's enter the auditorium in procession. It's like the red carpet deal before the Academy Awards. It's not a trial; it's a social event. Everybody who is anybody is there—just to hear Paul. Can't you just see him? Tradition says he was just a little guy, balding, with beetle brows (my kids call that a "unibrow"), a hooked nose, bandy legs (like he just got off a horse) and yet full of grace. Dignified. Fearless. Calm! Next week we'll see what Paul had to say, but I love what Festus says to introduce him. He says, "This is the guy they want dead. But I can't find anything to accuse him of. This is where I need your help, oh great King Agrippa." Look how he ends in v.27, **"For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him."**

**II. Paul related to governing authorities with respect and realism.**

Now I want to step back from this for a moment so we can see how it was that Paul related to the governing authorities because he is a model for us. Let me give you two words that describe Paul's interaction with the so-called law and order of his day: respect and realism.

On the respect side, notice that Paul was a law abiding citizen of the Roman empire. He can say, **"I've committed no offense either against the Law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar."** We know that's true because the Jews can't put together a case against him. Festus doesn't even know what to write in his report! So Paul models for us respect as a law abiding citizen of this world.

He also shows respect for the law by knowing it and utilizing it. He knew it was within his legal rights to appeal to Caesar and he did so. He used the system. Some people have criticized Paul for this. They say he was just trying to protect his own hide. Well, that's part of it. Paul didn't see any value in handing himself over to the brutality of men who had lost their sense of justice. But he also knew God wanted him in Rome. The Lord had promised to get him there (23:11). He longed to preach the gospel there. And he thought this was how it would happen.

So Paul respected the law of the land, but he was also realistic. It's very clear in this passage the Jews are willing to compromise their own law to kill someone they think is a threat. Paul knew that. It's also clear that Festus

was motivated by his own political ends. He goes to Jerusalem to schmooze with the Jews. At first he refuses their request to bring Paul to Jerusalem, but later he caves in because he wants to do them a favor. If he had the guts to do the right thing, he would have let Paul go after seeing the Jews had no case against him.

But none of this surprised Paul. Paul knew that people are people. I think Paul knew that power corrupts. I don't think he expected the people in power to act like Christians. But he didn't despair because he knew God was using all of this to fulfill his purposes. He trusted that God would get him where he was supposed to be in his own time and way. So he could stand before Agrippa and Bernice (his sister whom he was living with incestuously) and Festus and all the VIP's with calm and resolve.

### III. How to interact with governing authorities with respect and realism.

So what does this mean for us, practically speaking? What does it mean for us today—in a democratic society with a soon to be election—to be people who have respect and realism towards those in authority? Let me offer a few guideline.

**1. Pray for those in authority.** This is first because that's what Paul does in 1 Tim 2: **"I urge then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."** He doesn't tell us to pray for the ones we like or agree with, but for all those in authority. He tells us to be thankful for the good work they do, to ask God to give them wisdom and skill, and to intercede before God when we sense their leadership is taking us in a wrong direction. The goal of our prayers is that order, peace and justice might prevail in our nation. And so we pray for those in authority.

**2. Obey the laws of the land.** The God-given role of government is to preserve order and justice, and so authorities rightfully make and enforce laws to preserve that order. As people of respect, we obey those laws even when they seem silly, inconvenient or unfair. We obey them even when they seem to be hindering the advance of the gospel. For example, at CPC we aren't allowed to have a third morning service out of respect for our neighbors. We should abide by that. We're certainly free to try to change laws or to challenge their interpretation, but we do so with respect for the people involved.

**3. Pay your taxes.** I can't help but think of what happened one spring evening at midnight in 1987: seven million American children suddenly disappeared. It was the night of April 15, and the IRS had just changed a rule. Instead of merely listing the name of each dependent child,

tax filers now had to provide a Social Security number. Suddenly, seven million children who had existed only as phantom exemptions on the previous year's 1040 forms vanished. Something is wrong with that. Jesus, when asked about paying taxes to a pagan empire, said, **"Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's"** (Mt. 22:21). That means pay your taxes, even if you don't like how government spends the money.

**4. Exercise your right to vote.** Respect means participating thoughtfully and prayerfully in the election of our leaders and the establishment of laws. Paul didn't have that option. Nero never asked for anybody's vote, and nobody ran against him. But Paul utilized the law insofar as he could and he'd want us to participate constructively in this process when given the chance. For us, voting is the most effective and fundamental way to do that.

It wasn't long ago that Afghanistan held free elections for what I think was the first time in its history. People walked for miles and miles over rugged terrain to cast their ballot; they stood in line in the snow for hours for the opportunity to speak their mind. They remind us to never take that right for granted. But still, less than half the population votes, even in presidential elections. And in the Christian community, less than 25% of believers voted in the last election.

You ask if a person's faith should influence their vote. Of course it should. It's not that our faith tells us who to vote for, but it tells us what to consider as we make a decision. The Bible tells us God cares about justice for the poor and oppressed, about the sanctity of life, about peacemaking, about the institution of marriage, about the welfare of children, about care of the Earth, about the dignity of human beings; about preserving a moral order. All those issues should be considered when we vote. The church's role is not to tell you how to vote, but to provide you with a biblical framework to determine your vote.

**5. Respect diversity within the body of Christ.** We have to respect the amount of passion and involvement others choose to have. I know some believers for whom this is their calling. They stay informed. They get involved at a grass roots level. Maybe they even run for office. That's great! But there are others who just aren't that into it. High School Civics was about all they could handle for a lifetime! That's okay.

We also must respect diversity in how we vote. In very rare cases is there a right way to vote. We have to be okay with the fact that there are reasonable, godly, Christ-following people on every side of the issues. We have to demonstrate to the world that there is something bigger than our political views that hold us together. In the 2004 presidential election, two students at the University of

North Carolina debated over who would Jesus vote for. One supported George Bush, the other supported John Kerry. When the exchange became heated, one of the guys hit the other in the face. His opponent fell to the concrete patio, suffering a head injury. I don't think Jesus cared that much about who was right, but he did care about how they treated each other.

**6. Sixth, resist when the circumstances demand it.** Most of the time, submission to those in authority will pose no conflict for us. But there may be times we can't cooperate with those holding office. When the government requires us to violate our Christian convictions, we should resist, but in a way that doesn't compromise the gospel. Sometimes voting and campaigning won't be enough; we need to find more assertive ways to bring about change. Government-sponsored segregation in our country didn't come to an end until people rallied, protested, and boycotted to express their indignation. Many who led the way were inspired by biblical principles of equality and justice. There may even be times when, as followers of Christ, we have to flat-out disobey the authorities. Peter said to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:38 when they told him to stop preaching, **"We must obey God rather than men."**

**7. No matter what happens, don't despair; God is still in control.** Some of the worst and most oppressive times of history for followers of Christ have ended up being the most fruitful. At the time Paul appealed to Caesar, the Emperor Nero was very moderate and peaceful in relation to Christians. But about five years later, he changed. Most people believe he was insane. In 64 A.D. a great fire broke out that destroyed Rome. The people blamed Nero and Nero hoped to placate them by blaming the Christians and then killing them. Nero didn't just kill Christians, he wanted to make them suffer first. He'd dip them in wax, impale them on poles around his palace, light them on fire, and yell: "Now you truly are the light of the world." Or he'd put them in the Circus Maximus in front of large crowds of spectators, wrap them up in animal skins and throw them to lions who would then tear them apart. Both Paul and Peter were killed in this time. And yet the church not only survived but thrived. It's true what someone said long ago: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the saints." So no matter what happens, don't despair; God is still in control.

## CONCLUSION

Here is where we need not just respect, but realism. People are broken. The laws and the governments we create with the best intentions are broken. But we don't hope in those things; we hope in God. And we know that whatever happens in the next election, and whatever happens in our country in the next 50 years, God reigns. Psalm 146 says, **"Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save... But blessed is he whose hope is in the Lord his God."**

I don't know who our next President will be. But whoever it is, he or she will deserve our respect and need our realism. And so we'll need to be people who pray for them, who obey the laws of the land, who pay our taxes, who continue to exercise our right to vote, who respect diversity in the body of Christ, who resist righteously when the circumstances demand it, and who don't despair because we know God is still in control. The time will come when the kingdoms of this earth will all crumble and give way to the Kingdom of God, and all flesh will sing with loud voices the song we hear in Revelation, **"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever"** (Rev.11:15). And you know who we'll sing to? That "dead guy, Jesus, who we say is alive."