

Acts 21:4

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<PRAY>

A doctor and a lawyer were talking at a party.

Their conversation was constantly interrupted by people describing their ailments and asking the doctor for free medical advice.

After an hour of this, the exasperated doctor asked the lawyer, "What do you do to stop people from asking you for legal advice when you're out of the office?"

"I give it to them," replied the lawyer, "and then I send them a bill."

The doctor was shocked, but agreed to give it a try.

The next day, still feeling slightly guilty, the doctor prepared the bills.

When he went to place them in his mailbox, he found a bill from the lawyer. <PAUSE>

One of my favorite theologians, Irma Bombeck...offered this advice in her book.

1. Never loan your car to someone to whom you have given birth.
 2. Seize the moment. Remember all those on the Titanic who waved off the dessert cart.
 3. Know the difference between success and fame. Success is Mother Teresa. Fame is Madonna.
 4. There are no guarantees in marriage. If that's what you're looking for, go live with a Sears battery.
 5. Never be in a hurry to terminate a marriage. Remember, you may need this man or woman someday to finish your sentence.
- <PAUSE>

People love to give advice. Most of the time, the advice we give is meant to be helpful. This morning we find in our study of Act 21 well meaning people giving the Apostle Paul advice about his ministry. However, as we will see, the advice of men may not be the will of God.

Let's begin our study in verse 1.

1 When we had parted from them and had set sail, we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara; 2 and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we came in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo. 4 After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.

A major issue in every Christian's life is knowing and doing God's will. When you are in the center of God's will and doing exactly what God wants you to do, your life has fulfillment and direction.

The Apostle Paul was on his way to Jerusalem. We know from what he writes in 2 Corinthians that he was going there because he was carrying a large sum of money for that Church. On his way he stops in several cities as we see from verses 1 – 4. But when he gets to Tyre, Luke mentions that the disciples there warn Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Verse 4 even says that they were speaking by the Holy Spirit.

But how do you know God's will for your life? What happens when Christians give you conflicting advice regarding what they believe is God's will for your life? Who do you listen to?

2 Cor 5:7 says,

7 ...we walk by faith, not by sight. It is the job of every believer to wait upon God for a sense of peace while trying to understand His will for our lives. Sometimes we rely on the counsel of a friend or a

respected person. If we talk with two or more people, however, we may receive clashing advice.

Besides this, there are several things that can often conflict with God's voice when we're in the midst of trying to discern His will. Let pause to think about a few of these.

The first one is our conscience.

In each of us there is a small voice that we listen to. Most people call it their conscience. Disney's Jiminy Cricket spoke the famous line, "Now, remember, Pinocchio, be a good boy. And always let your conscience be your guide." What do you think of that saying?
<WAIT>

Your conscience doesn't always tell you the truth. Some of you come from very bad backgrounds where your parents said things that were very hurtful to you. They may have told you will never amount to anything or called you even worse things. Some of you carry around in your head the voice of your mother or father and every time you decide you want to try something new or do something out of the ordinary, you hear this voice in your head telling you that you are worthless or that you will fail.

Remember the story of Moses? At the age of 80 he stood before the burning bush where God told him go to Egypt to deliver His people. Moses' response was, "Who am I that I should go?" Why did Moses say that to God? <WAIT>

Moses remembered back 40 years when he murdered an Egyptian and tried to cover it up. And over the years he lived with the memory of that. The advice from his conscience told him that he was not good enough to do the job God asked him to do. But the voice in his head was wrong. God had chosen him for the job.

We have to be careful about listening to the voice inside our head. It may be God's voice or it may be a tape going off from your past that isn't true.

Another way we attempt to find the will of God is to seek advice from others.

Prov 1:5 says,

5 A wise man will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel.

My job is in Human Resources. When people ask me what I do, I often have to pause because I really don't do much. <PAUSE>

If you followed me around all day, you would see that my major responsibility is to give my advice and counsel to others in the organization. I guess the reason they pay me so much and keep me around is that I have given the right advice.

But the truth is that there have been times (I know it is hard for most of you to believe) that I have been wrong. <PAUSE>

I once interviewed a person for a position and wrote in my report that I thought the person had no chance of being successful in our company and recommended that we not hire him. Subsequently I learned that this person was hired by DuPont and he is now the President of their largest division. <PAUSE>

Do you remember when Nehemiah felt called to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem? He had prayed for months for God to open up an opportunity for him to speak with the King. Finally, God opened the door and when Nehemiah reached Jerusalem he was met by the elders of people who said in essence, "Nehemiah, you're doing this out of false pretense. You're motives are all wrong. You will never be successful."

These men were respected people and their counsel might have intimidated lesser men, but how did Nehemiah receive their counsel? <WAIT>

Finally, advice on God's Will might be discerned by your own logic and traditions.

Do you remember the story of Jonah? Someone tell us what happened. <WAIT>

It would have been logical for Jonah to want the Ninevites to die. They were the enemies of the God. So we can understand why Jonah wanted to run the other way rather than preach the gospel of repentance to these heathens.

How about Habakkuk who asked God what He was going to do with the godless, perverted nation of Israel. The Lord replied that He was going to send the Chaldeans to judge the Jews. Habakkuk couldn't believe that God would judge His chosen people with another godless nation.

But God can do anything He wants and He works in ways that are mysterious to us.

Back to Acts 21. Paul had made a decision to go to Jerusalem, no matter what happened to him personally. He had to deliver the money he'd collected to the Christians in need who lived there.

Why do you suppose so many people thought his desire to go to Jerusalem was a bad mistake? <WAIT>

Paul himself was convinced he should go. Look back at Acts 20:16. It says,

16 For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.

Paul was aware of the difficulties ahead of him, but he refused to put his own comfort ahead of the work to which he had been called.

Now look at verse 4 of chapter 21.

4 After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem. 5 When our days there were ended, we left and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out

of the city. After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another. 6 Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again.

There seemed to be a major disagreement with Paul the whole time he was with the people in Tyre. They just didn't want him to go to Jerusalem.

Next, out of nowhere, a prophet shows up. Look at verse 7.

7 When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day. 8 On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses. 10 As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

So first the Elders of the church in Ephesus tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem, then the disciples in Tyre tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem, and now a prophet named Agabus acts out what he sees happening to Paul if he does go to Jerusalem.

Finally, even Dr. Luke joins in the chorus urging Paul not to go. Look at verse 12.

12 When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem.

You can imagine that this must have been an overwhelming situation for Paul. He had to stand alone against all other believers. We don't read of even a single person who was willing to encourage him in what he was doing.

Why doesn't Paul change his mind? <WAIT>

Finally, Paul speaks up. Look at verse 13.

13 Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!"

15 After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. 16 Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge.

17 After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.

There is much we can learn from this situation. We all face times when we need the advice of others. At times we are in a position where we are giving advice to others on what we think is God's will for their lives.

But in the end, each of us must decide to follow the path that we believe God has given us.

Sometimes the decision to do nothing is wise. But you can't you're your life doing nothing. Freddie Fulcrum weighed everything too carefully. He would say, "On the one hand... but then, on the other," and his arguments weighed out so evenly he never did anything. When Freddie died, they carved a big zero on his tombstone.

There is a wonderful saying that I heard when I was a kid. It goes something like: "When you were born, you cried, and the world rejoiced. Live your life in such a manner that when you die, the world cries, and you rejoice."

In this section of the book of Acts, Paul is given advice on two different occasions by people who had a considerable influence in his life. These were people cared deeply about Paul and did not want to see him suffer; therefore, they urged him not to go to Jerusalem.

It is interesting that not everyone agrees on how to interpret Acts 21.

Some see this as an example of Paul's bravery while others see this as a grave mistake on the part of the apostle, arguing that Paul went against the Holy Spirit's clear directions not to go to Jerusalem.

What is your opinion? <WAIT>

Paul was of course human and made mistakes but I do not see this as a mistake on the part of Paul. Paul knew from the beginning of his ministry that he was going to suffer for the cause of Christ. He had seen first hand God's intervention when he was about to be killed. Paul knew that nothing bad was going to happen to him unless God allowed it. He had total faith in Christ.

Strong, sound, biblical counsel is needed many times in our lives and we need to learn both to give and to receive it. But let me make 3 observations regarding advice.

1. If you seek advice, be discerning. In those times when you need counsel, get it before the decision is made. It doesn't do any good to give people advice after they have made their decision. It is important that you weigh the facts and understand the pluses and minuses of the decision. Make sure that you ask the right person. Many people are willing to offer their advice, but only a few really should.
2. If you give advice, be wise. Before you give advice, try listening first to the person's understanding of the situation. It is easy to give advice when you don't have all the facts. When I first started teaching adult Bible classes, Susan and I had very small children and I was teaching people who were older than us. It was so easy for me to give advice on how to raise children. You might have thought that I was an authority on the subject. If only I could apologize to those people. I was such a fool but I only realized that years later as my kids went through their teen years.
3. Finally, if you decide against the advice, be careful. If God is speaking to you much louder than the person you respect giving you advice, you must follow God. God will never tell you to do something that is against His word.

God will not contradict Himself. In other words, he is not going to tell you to kill someone or steal something. So be careful when you make your decision. If your decision is Biblical and you have prayed about it and you feel at peace that God wants you to follow in a certain direction, He promises to NEVER leave us or forsake us. And for that we can say AMEN!

<PRAY>