

When In Rome (Acts 28:11-31)

I'm sure you've heard the proverb: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." What it means is that it is polite, and might even be advantageous to abide by the customs of a society when one is a visitor and to a certain extent, there is wisdom in that proverb. The Apostle Paul would probably agree. In fact, he is on record as saying ...

*I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.
(1 Corinthians 9:22)*

He's talking about meeting people where they are, not offending their particular traditions so that they will remain open to the gospel.

But this is a proverb that can easily be taken too far. There were certainly many behaviors exhibited by the Romans that Paul would not dream of emulating. By the time he arrived in Rome in the middle of the First Century, it was a culture in decline.

Historians tell us that the city of Rome had a population of about two million. Half of those were slaves. The other half were Roman citizens, but even if you were a Roman citizen, chances are you were living in abject poverty. All the wealth and all the power were in the hands of a relative few. There were 700 senators, maybe 25,000 professional soldiers, a handful of successful merchants, but the majority of the folks were poor. There were constant slave revolts that had to be put down.

The elite maintained their power through a combination of distraction and force. Rome was saturated with pagan worship, which included cult prostitution. By 100 AD, the poet Juvenal coined the phrase "bread and the circuses" (or bread and games.) to describe the only things folks cared about. The government would provide a dole of wheat and other food, and provide cheap or free circus games as a means of maintaining political approval.

When Paul arrived in Rome, it was already a debauched place and he certainly would not stoop to the sort of pagan hedonism that was rampant among contemporary Romans. He would not do what the Romans did.

This morning, as we finish our journey through the book of Acts, I want us to focus on exactly how Paul approached his stay in Rome. Instead of doing what the Romans did, Paul did what every Christian should do when confronting a fallen culture. Paul did what we should be doing as we face our own fallen culture.

After being shipwrecked on the island of Malta, Paul found a number of ways to minister to the natives there. I'm sure a number of them came to saving faith in Jesus Christ as a result and the Maltese extended great kindness to the party and provided for their needs. This is where we pick up the story this morning.

After three months we sailed in an Alexandrian ship whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers, which had wintered at the island. And landing at Syracuse, we stayed three days. From there we circled round and reached Rhegium. And after one day the south wind blew; and the next day we came to Puteoli, where we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them seven days. And so we went toward Rome. And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. (Acts 28:11-15)

Here we find our first spiritual principle. When confronting a pagan culture, we must find strength through fellowship with other Christians. Christianity is not a solo enterprise. You don't have to face the world alone! In fact, you must not face the world alone. You need other Christians to encourage you, to hold you accountable, to teach you, to love on you.

Local churches are wonderful gifts of God, not only for the regular members of a particular congregation, but also for those who might be traveling through. We get a fair number of visitors here. Isn't it a special joy to worship with our visitors, to learn more about them, to learn about their home churches? When we welcome them into our congregation, they find encouragement. They find God's grace and God's mercy. They experience God's love.

We need to be refreshed wherever we find ourselves, wherever the Lord takes us. Whenever Kris and I find ourselves away from home on a Sunday, we try to find another Village Missions Church. It's always like finding long-lost relatives. Worshipping with fellow believers in other communities is wonderful. I highly recommend it.

I'm sure Paul took great comfort as he visited in Puteoli. And as he and his party journeyed on, these and other Christians sought them out. They came out to meet him.

When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. (Acts 28:15)

Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him. (Acts 28:16)

Being a Roman prisoner was no fun at all, but compared to most, Paul had it pretty good. Most prisoners were confined in a Roman prison and the conditions were horrible. Paul would experience that later, but not at this time. He was chained to a guard twenty-four seven, but he was actually given a remarkable amount of freedom. He could receive visitors. He obviously was able to preach and teach. He was able to write letters to individuals and churches. We have four of those letters preserved for us in the New Testament: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon were all written during this period.

It's clear that Paul was highly regarded by the Romans. Felix knew he was innocent. Festus knew he was innocent. Agrippa knew he was innocent. And after his demonstrated leadership during the shipwreck, I'm sure his character was communicated to the captain of the guard.

But of course, in all this, we recognize the providence of Almighty God. Jesus made a promise to Paul:

"Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome." (Acts 23:11)

Jesus always comes through.

For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us. (2 Corinthians 1:20)

Paul quickly took advantage of his limited freedom.

And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them: "Men

and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans, who, when they had examined me, wanted to let me go, because there was no cause for putting me to death. But when the Jews spoke against it, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation. For this reason therefore I have called for you, to see you and speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain." (Acts 28:17-20)

That Paul would call for the Jewish leadership is not at all surprising. He always preached the Gospel first to his own countrymen. But it's a little remarkable that they came. Paul's reputation must have preceded him.

We believe there were somewhere between seven and 12 Jewish synagogues in the city of Rome at that time. At one time, the Jews had been banished from Rome, but it seems that they were allowed back in under Emperor Nero.

At any rate, these Jewish leaders show up, and Paul offers a brief defense. I can envision him lifting up and displaying his chain as he spoke these words. This is the sixth time he has defended himself against the charges. But notice that he gets right to the point:

... because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain.

The hope of Israel was Messiah. Paul's message was that Messiah had indeed come. His name was Jesus. He suffered and died, but He was raised again on the third day, and He ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father.

Then they said to him, "We neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you. But we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect, we know that it is spoken against everywhere." (Acts 28:21-22)

I find this interesting. The Jewish leadership in Rome had not heard anything regarding the charges laid against Paul. Luke doesn't offer an explanation. It might be that the message just hadn't arrived yet. Remember, Paul and his party caught a ship at the very end of the sailing season, so letters or a messenger might still have been coming. Or it might be that the Jews in Judea felt like their problem was solved with Paul out of the country.

But whatever the reason, they were curious and they were fair-minded enough to give Paul a hearing. They wanted to know about this Christianity, which they called a sect.

So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved. (Acts 28:23-24)

And there is our second spiritual principle. When in Rome, Paul preached the Gospel. He was single-minded. And when we Christians encounter our pagan culture, our duty is to preach the Gospel.

We need to do it with our lifestyle. We need to extend God's grace and love to everyone. Folks should notice a difference in our behavior. They need to see us display the hope we have within us.

And we also need to preach the Gospel with our words. We need to tell people the great things God has done for us and we need to share the message: “Yes, you’re a sinner, and that’s bad, really bad, but God still loves you.

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

And all we have to do is accept that wonderful truth by faith. If we confess Jesus as our Lord and believe God has raised Him from the dead, we will be saved!

This passage also illustrates the a third spiritual principle: When preaching the Gospel, we need to use the Word of God. Paul persuaded them from the Law of Moses and the Prophets. In other words, he used our Old Testament. We have an advantage over Paul, because we have the New Testament. The New Testament explains the Old Testament clearly, and the whole thing is about Jesus.

There’s a fourth spiritual principle here too: Whenever the Gospel is preached, there are some who will believe, and some who won’t. You can’t worry about it. You are not responsible for the results. You are, however, awesomely responsible for the witness!

Paul was pretty blunt with those who would not believe, though.

So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, saying, 'GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY: "HEARING YOU WILL HEAR, AND SHALL NOT UNDERSTAND; AND SEEING YOU WILL SEE, AND NOT PERCEIVE; FOR THE HEARTS OF THIS PEOPLE HAVE GROWN DULL. THEIR EARS ARE HARD OF HEARING, AND THEIR EYES THEY HAVE CLOSED, LEST THEY SHOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, LEST THEY SHOULD UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEARTS AND TURN, SO THAT I SHOULD HEAL THEM." ' "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" (Acts 28:25-28)

Jewish folks didn’t like to hear that. They thought they alone were God’s chosen people. They were descended from Abraham, and they were heirs to Abraham’s promise ... so they thought. But as Paul explained in his letter to the Galatians,

*Therefore know that **only** those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. (Galatians 3:7)*

It isn’t your genetic lineage that matters, it is your spiritual lineage. Like John the Baptist said:

... do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. (Luke 3:8)

If you trust Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you have been raised up as Abraham’s children!

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)

Isn't that great news? The Jewish leaders Paul was talking to probably weren't too happy with it, but it is wonderful news for a Gentile dog like me.

I sure hope you are a child of the promise. I hope you have placed your hope completely in the grace of God and the sacrifice of His Son. If not, why not? Salvation is a gift, absolutely free to you. It cost Christ dearly, but He was willing to suffer and die because He loves you so much. All you add is faith and God will even give you the faith you need to believe.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; **it is the gift of God**, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

Let's finish up.

And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves. Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him. (Acts 28:29-31)

Jesus fulfilled His promise to Paul. I'm not surprised; Jesus always fulfills His promises. Paul was a witness for Christ in Rome. And that's the Book of Acts.

If you think it ends a bit abruptly, well, you're right. The story is not complete. But Luke had no choice because the story wasn't complete during his lifetime. The story is still not complete. Jesus Christ is still building His Church. He will continue to do so until He returns. The only question is, will you choose to participate? When in Rome, will you do as the Romans do or will you do what the Christians are supposed to do?

We have our marching orders; Jesus said:

... you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Here we are in Coram, Montana. Paul definitely would have considered us to be at the very end of the earth! There is still work to be done, Christian!

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matthew 28:19-20)

Notice that we are not told to make converts. We can't do that anyway; making converts is the Holy Spirit's job. We're to make disciples. That requires us to build relationships. It requires us to love God with everything we've got. It requires us to extend God's grace and God's love to all God brings our way.

I pray that the Lord would find us as faithful as the Apostle Paul and when we finally enter into His presence, we will hear Him say:

'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' (Matthew 25:23)