

Acts Series Part 64

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 January 2012

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Are you a law-abiding citizen? I hope and imagine that you are. Is it difficult to be a law-abiding citizen in Scotland today?

It ought not to be. Indeed, I think we can say that in our lifetime and in the lifetime of our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, and indeed we could go back further, it has not been difficult to be a law-abiding citizen.

Now, why is that? Well, one of the reasons is that we have been and continue to be blessed in great measure with laws that are grounded in the Bible, in the Judeo-Christian ethic, and as a result, our own convictions of faith, our own convictions concerning what is right and wrong are largely reflected in the laws of the land.

And so, consequently, we live in that favored situation of being able, without great difficulty, to keep the law of the land.

But in this past week, I believe, and in honor of the one who has had his 70th birthday, I think Bob Dylan had his 70th birthday this past week, and the times, they are a-changing.

[1 : 35] Of course, they're not just been a-changing in the past few months or years. We could probably go back decades to identify how that happy situation in which we have lived as a nation is changing, is being undermined.

And though it's been going on for decades now, it is now doing so with accelerating pace. There are a number of laws already on the statute book, be that in terms of UK law, be it in terms of legislation that has come out of the Scottish Parliament, or indeed looking further to the European Parliament, and without going into all the details, we're aware of laws that are coming onto the statute book that at the very least begin to threaten that favored situation where the law of the land, the law that we are subject to as citizens, largely reflects our own convictions concerning what is right and wrong.

In the whole area of equality legislation, employment law, hate speech, what's very much current at the moment in terms of legislative projects, laws concerning sectarian speech, same-sex marriage, and we could no doubt mention other examples, all are laws that begin to shape that foundation, and that probably puts it quite mildly.

And so it is the case that it is now becoming increasingly likely that we will, at the very least, be accused of law-breaking.

We who as Christians consider ourselves, I hope, as law-abiding citizens, we wish to be law-abiding citizens, we think it's important to be law-abiding citizens.

[3 : 29] Nonetheless, increasingly, it is likely, probable, that there will be occasions in which we are accused of law-breaking. There have already been some examples that I won't mention now for reasons of time, but you're aware of examples that have already arisen in these past months and recent years.

Well, what should we do? Do we, as Christians, submit timidly when accused of breaking the law?

Do we accept any punishment as a badge of honor? You know, there is a current where the idea of being imprisoned or being punished is almost something to be proud of.

Persecuted for the faith. Is that the attitude that we should have? What about the law itself? As of today, it is still largely grounded on Christian principles.

Should we energetically lobby legislators to at least endeavor to ensure that this state of affairs is maintained? Or do we stand back, keep our heads down, and hope for the best in the assurance that, though this world is rotten to the core, heaven awaits?

[4 : 49] And really, that's all we're interested in. Getting to heaven, the health of our souls, and these matters concerning laws and parliaments and the like really ought not to concern us unduly.

Does the Bible have anything to say about these matters? Well, the Bible is not silent on these questions.

And as we do this evening, return to the book of Acts, we will find there principles of conduct in these matters in the manner in which Paul makes his defense before the Roman governor, Porcius Festus, there in Acts chapter 25.

I confess that when we were last in Acts and as we were going through these final chapters, I don't know how you found it, but I found that Paul was always seemingly in front of judges and magistrates, and it just got a little bit tiring.

And in terms of, well, what can we take from this occasion when once again Paul finds himself before a judge, before a magistrate, making his defense, what can we take from this that would be useful, that would be helpful?

[6 : 06] Well, I hope this evening the manner in which we'll deal with this passage will be in at least some measure helpful in this regard to identify principles that Paul demonstrates in his defense concerning how we relate to the civil authorities and how we respond when we are or may be accused of law breaking, as Paul was here, hence the trial.

Now, just to get a little background, it is a few weeks since we were in the book of Acts, so hopefully very swiftly to locate ourselves in terms of the occasion that's described for us here in chapter 25.

You will remember that way back in chapter 20, Paul speaks of how he was compelled by the Spirit to return to Jerusalem. His missionary journeys had taken him many years.

He had been absent from Jerusalem for several years, but there is this desire on his part confirmed by God that he should return to Jerusalem. Indeed, his desire was to be there in time for Pentecost.

Well, he arrives in Jerusalem and very deliberately, though seemingly uncharacteristically, keeps a very low profile. I think the reason probably being that he didn't want to in any way appear to be challenging the authority of the Jerusalem leaders of the church.

[7 : 33] He dedicates himself to conversations with them and to private matters in regard to the temple commitments that he had made. But though he is keeping a low profile, he is followed to Jerusalem, if not deliberately, but circumstantially by those who were his enemies.

On his missionary journeys, he had made enemies, and very particularly in the province of Asia. And Jews from the province of Asia find themselves in Jerusalem, also presumably for Pentecost, discover that Paul is there and begin to stir up trouble for Paul.

We've covered this ground on previous occasions. Very particularly, Paul is accused of defiling the temple by bringing into a part of the temple a Gentile beyond the court of the Gentiles where the Gentiles were allowed to be.

He is accused of bringing a companion beyond that point. This was a very serious event, certainly within the Jewish legislation, indeed, a capital offense.

Now, in the midst of all this, there is an attempt at mob justice from which Paul is spared by the Roman commander. Paul is then brought before and accused by the Sanhedrin, and in the light of a further plot on his life being discovered, is sent by the commander to the Roman governor, Felix, in Caesarea.

[9 : 04] In Caesarea, he stands trial, and the accusations are presented by a lawyer employed by the Jewish religious authorities, and a summary of the charges are recorded for us in the previous chapter, in chapter 24, from verse 5.

We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple, so we seized him, and he goes on.

Now, what happened there was that Felix, recognized that the charges were without foundation, and that really, Paul was innocent and should be released.

However, he didn't want to make enemies of the Jews. He knew that the Jews wanted him to remain in custody, indeed, more than simply remain in custody, but at the very least remain in custody, and so he simply sits on the case.

And two years pass, and Paul languishes in the cell there in Caesarea, while Felix chooses to do nothing.

[10 : 11] Well, we've come to the point where Felix is replaced by a new governor, by Festus, and Festus is concerned to move things on. He arrives in Caesarea.

We're told that he immediately makes his way to Jerusalem to make the acquaintance of the Jewish authorities there, and they very quickly bring to his attention the case of Paul and their desire for Paul to be brought to Jerusalem to stand trial, and Luke tells us that the intention really was to ambush him on the way and kill him.

Festus will not be told what to do by the Jews, and so he says, no, there's no need for this to be in Jerusalem. I'm returning to Caesarea, come with me, and there the trial can proceed, and that is what we have recorded for us here, this trial in Caesarea, the second time that Paul finds himself on trial for the same supposed offenses, now under the direction of a new governor, Festus.

We're not told, coming now to the passage, we're not told in this passage, in the verses that we've read in chapter 25, what the charges were. They're simply described there in verse 7 as many and serious.

When Paul appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges against him. Presumably, the charges were the same as the ones that had been made two years previously.

[11 : 43] were also told that those who brought the charges, not surprisingly, could not prove them. They had no evidence to prove what they were accusing Paul of.

Then the time comes for Paul to present his defense, and it's here that you want to identify three elements of his defense that provide us with an example and also applicable principles for ourselves as we relate to civil authorities that God has placed over us and as we prepare ourselves, we might say, for the prospect, indeed, the possibility of being accused of law-breaking that is related to our Christian profession and conduct.

This is the reason Paul was being accused, because he was a Christian. there's no doubt about that. That is the cause that may happen to us. How do we respond?

Well, I think Paul can give us not only an example, but perhaps more importantly, principles of conduct. There are three important strands to his defense here as he stands before Festus.

I'll mention what they are, and then we'll think about them briefly in turn. First of all, the importance of being innocent. It may seem blindingly obvious, but I want to just make the point and comment on that.

[13 : 11] The importance of being innocent. The second principle I think we find here is the importance of submitting to due authority. And then thirdly, the importance of knowing and exercising your rights.

First of all, the importance of being innocent. Then in verse 8, then Paul made his defense. I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar.

Luke records this as the totality of Paul's defense. It may be that it was more extensive than what we have recorded, but it's possible that this is all that he felt was necessary to say.

No evidence had been brought. no coherent case had been made against him. He didn't really need to go into great detail to defend himself other than simply to state the fact that he was innocent.

And as we just for a very brief moment ponder on this and the importance of this, the importance of being innocent, Paul's declaration of innocence is threefold.

[14 : 24] He declares himself innocent with regard to the law of the Jews, the temple, and against Caesar. And if we think of each in turn, first of all, the law of the Jews. His innocence goes beyond a strictly legal innocence.

And what I mean by that is this, that the law of the Jews, that he declares himself innocent vis-a-vis, involved regulations the breaking of which would not have constituted illegal conduct for a Roman citizen and certainly would not have merited a trial before the Roman governor, such as Paul was subject to.

And yet, Paul is both able to declare his innocence even of such wrongdoing. I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews.

He is, if you wish, to use a phrase that we use, whiter than white. It's not just that I've done nothing criminal. I've done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews.

He goes on to say that he has done nothing wrong against the temple. Now this really is one example of, or one incident of the law of the Jews that he declares himself innocent of.

[15 : 41] And it's the unfounded charge that we commented a few moments ago of sacrilege, where all this business began. Now this was one aspect of the law of the Jews that the Roman authorities had conceded was worthy of judicial punishment for lawbreakers.

the Jews were under the yoke of Rome. They couldn't decipher themselves. Certainly those things that would be capital offenses, but curiously, what to us seemed something of not great consequence, but of course for the Jews was, this particular matter of bringing a Gentile into a part of the temple that he ought not to have been, that the Romans themselves said, well if that happens, we delegate to you the right to make use of the capital punishment.

But of course Paul declares that though he is charged with this, he's innocent. He hadn't done what they said he had done. But he also says that he's innocent with regard to the law of Caesar.

Of course this was potentially the most, more serious matter for Paul as he stands before Festus. the charges as regards Roman law or crimes against Caesar presumably refer to what had been mentioned a couple of years before when he was first tried of stirring up riots.

We read the verse in chapter 24 as stirring up riots. Now that in its worst manifestation I suppose could have been painted as sedition of some kind against the emperor, against the power and authority of Rome.

[17 : 24] Or at the very least some kind of first century equivalent of breach of the peace. But it was against Rome that he was being accused of criminal activity.

Well how does Paul respond to that particular charge? Well by simply declaring the truth that he had done no such thing. He was innocent. So there is this declaration of innocence in the part of Paul.

and as we fast forward to ourselves and apply it to our own circumstances as we do move into circumstances where it is at least more likely that we could be accused of law breaking, our greatest defense should be as Christians that we are innocent, that we may be accused of many things, but that with Paul we are able to confidently, humbly, but confidently declare we are innocent.

Charges there may be many, but we are innocent. And I think with Paul it is wise and right and proper that we should see to be whiter than white. Innocent not only of criminal activity, but innocent of antisocial behavior or selfish behavior or behavior that would give reason for people to think badly of us or maybe wish us harm for whatever reason.

With Paul we should be concerned not simply with a bare law keeping, but of going the extra mile in keeping the law, respecting the authorities over us, and indeed society around us.

[19 : 06] The importance then of being innocent. So when the day comes that we are accused of law breaking, we should be able to demonstrate a clean record, be able to show that we are law abiding citizens.

Our lives are an open book. If anyone wishes to dig for dirt, they can dig away, as none will be found. The importance of being innocent. I should say, just to clarify, that I have not broached the situation where we could find ourselves on the wrong side of an unrighteous law and are legally, if not morally, guilty.

That scenario is also possible. It's not the case here for Paul, hence the reason why I'm not touching on it. But I recognize that that scenario is also a possibility, and it's a slightly different scenario.

But I leave that to one side. The second principle that I find in this passage that I think is relevant for us is the importance of submitting to Jew authority. Paul firmly declares his innocence.

Indeed, he's dismissive of those who frivolously, frivolously accuse him. Notice the language he uses in speaking there to Festus in verse 10. I am now standing before Caesar's court, but I ought to be tried.

[20 : 20] I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourselves know very well. He's very dismissive of the charges. These are trumped-up charges. There's no basis to them.

And so, with regard to those who accuse him, he is rightly very dismissive. But he is certainly not dismissive of the right of the Roman governor to try him, by no means.

He recognizes that Festus has every right to stand in judgment over him. On this occasion, as on many others, Paul makes it very clear that he is duty-bound to submit to properly constituted authority.

In this regard, we can just notice two things that he says that confirm this very eloquently. The verse that we read just a moment ago in verse 10, but particularly focusing on the first thing that he says there.

I am now standing before Caesar's court where I ought to be tried. Now, it's true that there is a sense in which Paul here really is saying ought to be tried in contrast to Jerusalem.

[21 : 29] I ought not to be tried there. I ought to be tried here. But I think he is also in these words recognizing that it is right and proper that he be tried by Festus, who was the one appointed for this task.

He has no difficulty with that. He has no protest with the fact that he is being tried. It's dismissive of the charges, but not of the principle that he can be charged and tried by this man.

But then there is another thing that he says which demonstrates very clearly his submission to Jew authority. Then in verse 11, if however, he declares his innocence, but then he says, if however I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die.

And again, Paul very clearly and explicitly verbalizes his submission to Roman authority. He recognizes the God-given authority of the civil magistrate to make laws and to punish lawbreakers, including apostles.

He is not free. He can't say, oh, I am an apostle. I serve King Jesus. Who are you, Festus? No. He submits to the authority of Rome, the very often tyrannical authority of Rome, but nonetheless, the duly constituted authority in that jurisdiction where Paul is.

[22 : 59] And of course, in this behavior of Paul, we find simply a reflection of his discourse. We read in Romans chapter 13, when he establishes very clearly the foundations for the Christian's relationship to the civil magistrate and our duty to submit to such authorities.

This recognition that as citizens we are bound to submit to properly constituted authority is also verbalized and developed very clearly in our own confession of faith.

What is made clear that our duty of submission is not limited to just or pious authorities, we must submit, as did Paul, even when the authorities are corrupt and self-serving, and indeed when they may be hostile to the faith, as is increasingly our reality.

indeed our duty to submit extends not only to bad rulers, but to bad laws. Now, it is not an absolute and unquestioning submission, we know that, and we're not going to develop that, but simply make the point that there is a point at which a line must be drawn, and that line is drawn at the point where the civil authority would require us to do that which God forbids, that we will not do, or where the civil authority would forbid us to do that which God requires, that we will also not be prepared to do.

But this was not the case with Paul as he stood before Festus. The question that does arise concerns an instance where we are duty-bound to break the law.

[24 : 47] Now, we could envisage such a situation where, in what I've just said, concerning where we cannot submit. Is it the case that where we are duty-bound to break a law, are we then entirely free from the authority of the state?

Well, clearly in practice we're not. We will have to suffer the consequences. But I would suggest that even in principle we should understand ourselves to be subject to whatever punishment the authorities have established for the breaking of that law, even if we consider it a law that we cannot abide by.

Now, in practice we'll have to do that. We won't be able to free ourselves. But I suspect that even in principle we are subject to, if we've done the crime, to do the time, even if we think the crime is no crime at all.

The importance, then, of submitting to due authority. The final thing that I want to mention very briefly is the importance of knowing and exercising your rights. I want to consider this just from two angles.

First of all, the right that Paul, the rights that Paul knows and exercises and also his reason for doing so. First of all, rights that Paul exercises here on this occasion.

[26 : 02] Firstly, the right to defend himself. We've already talked about what his defense was there in verse 8. And again, this may seem almost insultingly obvious, but I think Christians have in the past made the mistake of perhaps taking the example of Jesus in his trial as being normative.

Jesus chose to make no defense. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, he was led like a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before his shears is silent, so he did not open his mouth. So we too, it is argued, should allow ourselves to be trodden on for Christ's sake.

Not so. Paul exercises his right to defend himself. He also exercises his right to refuse unjust and irregular procedure.

Festus is between a rock and a hard place, much the same place that Felix had been in. He knows that Paul is innocent, should be released, but is unwilling to alienate the Jews so early in his governorship.

He tries to cut his favor and buy time by relocating the trial to Jerusalem, which is what the Jews wanted. And he actually asks Paul, we find that, we've read that, he asks Paul if he is willing for this to happen.

[27 : 19] But I imagine that Festus just presumed that Paul would acquiesce with his request. But Paul does no such thing.

Rather in very clear, you might even say dating language, he declares his right to justice and a fair trial. Notice what he says there in verse 11.

At the end of the verse, no one has the right to hand me over to them. He says to Festus, you may be the governor, and I submit to you as the governor, but you do not have the right to hand me over to the Jews.

I have a right to stand trial here, and I will not accept what you propose. I have my rights, I know my rights, and I demand that my rights be respected.

It's worth noting, just as a practical point, that I imagine there would have been many citizens who would not have been aware of their right to refuse this proposal of the governor.

[28 : 23] I imagine, I'm speculating, but I imagine most Roman citizens, when faced by a governor saying, well, by the way, the trial is going to be in Jerusalem, would have said, well, what can I do?

So be it. But Paul says, no, it won't be in Jerusalem. My right is to be tried here, and I will be tried here. But then finally, his most famous right that he appeals to, the right to appeal to Caesar, there at the end of the passage.

Now, this appeal to Caesar was a peculiar feature of the Roman justice system. It had its origins in the Roman Republic, but a citizen could appeal to the people if he felt that he was being unfairly treated.

And he could appeal to the crowd. So what do you say? Well, this had evolved in the empire, and the public had been replaced by the emperor. And the Roman citizen, in certain circumstances, it wasn't an absolute right, but in certain circumstances, could appeal to Caesar.

Now, presumably, we're not told, but presumably, Caesar didn't personally deal with each of these cases. It seems highly unlikely that he would have been able to do so.

[29 : 30] But at the very least, the citizen was given the opportunity of a trial in Rome. The appeal, the word appeal to us kind of makes us think of appealing against a sentence that we disagree with.

But of course, this isn't what we have here. No sentence had been decided. This is an appeal, really in Paul's case, an appeal that would ensure, in his mind, or at least give him a greater possibility of a fair trial.

And so he exercises his right as a Roman citizen and appeals to Caesar. More can be said about this, but we won't. For ourselves, as we identify principles of conduct, the actual rights exercised by Paul are of secondary importance.

The main issue is that he knows and exercises his rights. And we can and should do the same. What are his reasons for exercising his rights?

He doesn't state them, but I think we can confidently assert one and suggest another. The one that we can confidently assert in terms of a reason for exercising and demanding his rights is simply that he had the right to do so.

[30 : 44] As a Roman citizen, he had the right to secure justice and protection for himself. And it is his right, and so he exercises. I think there may be, and many suggest that Paul here has a broader agenda.

Paul is aware that if he, even as a private individual, timidly allowed his rights to be trampled on on this occasion, what would be the consequences for other Christians?

Well, you can imagine it yourself. You see, if a precedent is set that a Christian, in this case Paul, could be falsely accused by the Jews, and that Christian says, oh, well, I just say nothing, and I allow myself to be abused and trampled on, well, it wouldn't end with Paul, clearly.

There would be others who would suffer as a result of Paul's silence. So Paul is concerned not only to protect his own interests, but to set a precedent that Christians also have rights.

Christian citizens have rights. He has rights, and those who share his faith also have rights. His stand is setting a precedent that will provide protection to others.

[32 : 02] To wrap things up, the times, they are a changing in Scotland, where God has placed us, and we do have to be prepared.

And as we've been able to spend a little time considering Paul's defense, I think we do find helpful principles that we can identify and draw on in terms of our own conduct should such circumstances arise for us.

And let's remember what they are. It is important to be innocent. That's something we can't wait until the crisis comes. That is about how we are living now, how we take seriously obeying the laws of the land, even those that we think are petty and trivial and unimportant.

It's now that we, if you wish, establish our credentials, not when the crisis comes. The importance of being innocent. The importance also of submitting to duly constituted authority, even when we perhaps have very little respect for that authority for maybe good reason.

And also the importance of knowing and of exercising our rights. Well, let's pray.