**Stand Firm**

Acts 24-25

There are two great **tests of character**: secrecy and pressure.

Who you are when no one’s looking… What you do and think about when no one is around, when you have time just to yourself. That is the test of secrecy.

The other is pressure. How do you react under pressure? When you are shaken, how do you respond?

***Take a cup of water*** and shake it - what comes out? Why did water come out of this cup? Because it was shaken - yes. But why did WATER come out, not coffee or acid? Water came out because WATER is what was in the cup.

***What comes out of you when you are shaken?***

That is the key test of character. And that is what we see in the apostle Paul as pressure increases upon him. What comes out of Paul is his character and confession. He remains consistent in his character and he takes every opportunity to be clear in his confession of Christ. ***What comes out of Paul when he is shaken?*** The consistent answer is THE GOSPEL.

Oh, that we could all say the same!

Let’s look at these two sides of our witness. What made Paul so effective as an evangelist? It was this **combination of character and confession**. If either is missing, your witness is crippled. But if both are present and strong, your witness can be powerful, as it was for Paul.

**Consistent Character**

“I cheerfully make my defense. You can verify… They did not find me disputing…” Acts 24:10-11

**Paul’s testimony** here is contrasted with the lead counsel brought by the Jews. Their guy, Tertullus, drips with flattery for Governor Felix. Paul addresses the governor with respect but without undue flattery. Paul simply presents his case, inviting scrutiny. He has nothing to hide. He says, “You can check your sources - ask around. You’ll find their story doesn’t hold up and mine does.”

Paul hears the accusations against him and very simply refutes them. I wasn’t stirring up a riot. I wasn’t (in that case) even having a public debate.

**Consistent Character**

“They found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult.” Acts 24:18

When they arrested Paul, all he was guilty of doing was worshiping the Lord. He was completing a seven day period of prayer, fasting and worship to be ritually purified along with four other men whose expenses he had paid.

Here we see the consistency of Paul’s character. He was not doing anything malicious or nefarious. He was praying. He wasn’t bringing Gentiles into the Temple area, as they accused him of doing. He was bringing Jewish men into the Temple to fully honor God with their devotion.

Paul shows integrity and sincerity.

The trial of Paul is very much intended by Luke to parallel the trial of Jesus. Just as Jesus was falsely accused, so was Paul. Just as Jesus was declared numerous times to be innocent, so was Paul. Here is **what Festus concluded** in the next chapter:

**Consistent Character**

“I found he had done nothing deserving death.” Acts 25:25

After another review with King Agrippa, the two rulers reached the same conclusion:

**Consistent Character**

“This man is doing nothing deserving death or imprisonment.” Acts 26:31

After considerable scrutiny from Governer Felix, the new Governor Festus and even King Agrippa, Paul was vindicated by all of them as innocent. And this was not a short a cursory trial. He was held there in Caesarea for over two years. If anything else could have come up about him, it would have come up. The Jews tried everything they could to get some accusation against Paul to stick - just as they had with Jesus 30 years earlier.

And so **Paul’s character became a platform for him to share the gospel**. Since it was solid, consistent and sincere it set him up to share the message of Jesus.

**Consistent Character**

“He reasoned about righteousness and self-control.” Acts 24:25

How could Paul preach the gospel of the righteousness of Jesus Christ and His justifying grace if Paul himself did not live a life of righteousness and self-control?

***How strong is YOUR PLATFORM for gospel witness?*** How consistent is your character? How solid is your integrity? When you are alone, are you the same? When you are under pressure, does your faith and resilience come out - or does other, less attractive, stuff come out when you are shaken?

We looked at the life of **Billy Graham** a couple of weeks ago, but this point was so true of Billy. His character was a strong platform for his message. Take away the consistent unimpeachable character of Billy Graham through his 60 plus years of preaching and he would not have reached a fraction of the people he reached. He made commitments early in his life that he stuck with. He made sure to have accountability partners around him to keep him grounded.

First we see the importance of consistent character for gospel witness. Then we hear Paul’s clear confession of the gospel, preaching from this solid platform.

**Clear Confession**

“But this I confess to you, that according to the Way… I worship the God of our fathers.” Acts 24:14

Paul denied the accusations of the Jews but openly confessed his faith in Jesus. “The Way” was **the way of Jesus**. Jesus said, “Come follow me.” He invited people into a belief system that produced a totally new lifestyle - a new way of life. Jesus said, “I am the WAY, the truth and the life.” To know and follow Jesus was to commit to Him and His way. You cannot claim to follow Jesus while rejecting His way.

He said it’s like **a narrow path** that you enter through a narrow door or a low gate. And he said up front that this narrow path ran in the opposite direction to the broad road that most people in this world follow.

So here Paul ***connects character with confession***, saying you can tell from my life that I follow this Jesus. But notice what Paul does here - he says, very truthfully, that he worships the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He claims continuity with the beliefs of the Jewish people.

**Clear Confession - One God**

“‘I worship the God of our fathers…’ And heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus.” Acts 24:14,24

There are three elements to Paul’s confession - the first is of **ONE GOD**, the God of Israel. And Paul is crystal clear that this One God had appeared on earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The center of Paul’s message was his proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord. Lord was the covenant name of God from the Old Testament. So that core confession of Christianity was a bold assertion of ***the full divinity of Jesus*** - saying He IS the Lord, Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel.

The title **CHRIST** is also a profession of the glory and supremacy of Jesus who was the long awaited Messiah of Israel, the promised King who would reign on David’s throne forever. Jesus is the One True God, come in the flesh. He is the full and final revelation of the nature of God.

The second part of Paul’s confession was of the One Authority found in Scripture.

**Clear Confession - One Authority**

“I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and… Prophets.” Acts 24:14

***Jesus was the fulfillment of everything*** in the Old Testament. The Law and the Prophets are a catch-all phrase for the whole Jewish Bible. Jesus said “everything written about me had to be fulfilled” and Paul said, “everything in the Old Testament finds in Jesus its Yes and Amen.”

***What was the authority*** Jesus appealed to for his life, ministry and teaching? The Bible. What was the authority Paul appealed to for his life, ministry and teaching? The Bible. For them, the Bible contained only the Old Testament - though for Paul pieces of the New Testament were being added all the time, some from his own pen.

As we share the gospel with people it is important that we be clear: we are talking about One God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our message is based on one authority - the Bible.

The challenge today is that there are so many **other authorities** people appeal to:

* Science, education
* Other religious writings like the Quran, the Hindu Vedas, the writings of Buddha
* The traditions and teachings of the Catholic Church
* And the biggest alternate authority today: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE.

I’ve shared this story before but it’s so vivid in my memory. I was on an airplane and the guy next to me was **a Quaker**. I was intrigued by his beliefs because I hadn’t met a real live Quaker before. He explained his beliefs as I asked questions and probed deeper. Quakers are universalists - they believe everyone will be saved. But they also try to be Christians - believing everyone will be saved by Jesus. I wondered how that was possible and he calmly explained that the light of Jesus is present in everyone, but some people ignore it or cover it up. But in the end, that light will break through for everyone even if it takes 1,000 or a million years to do so.

After listening for a while I shared some **Bible verses** to explain that the Bible doesn’t say everyone will be saved, but that Jesus Himself said most people choose the broad road that leads to destruction and only a few choose the narrow path that leads to life.

So I pressed him to explain the basis for his beliefs. I said, “The Bible doesn’t teach that all people will be saved. In fact, no holy book teaches that. The Quran says only faithful Muslims will enter paradise. Buddha taught that only a few will reach Nirvana. The Vedas of Hinduism teach an endless cycle of reincarnation that only the most devout will ever escape. So what is the basis to believe what you believe?”

He very calmly answered, “It just feels right.”

I was stunned. “You are wagering your eternal soul on a FEELING?”   
  
“Yes,” he responded. “I’m good with that.”

And that was the end of the conversation.

As we connect with people and have spiritual conversations this is an important line to follow. Listen attentively enough to **learn what they believe about God**, sin and salvation. Be sure to explore what they think about Jesus and the role He plays (if any) in salvation. But then, whatever they believe, explore WHY… ***What is the basis for their beliefs?*** What is the authority on which their view rests?

Think about **a Catholic friend** or family member. They believe most of the same things we do about God, Jesus and salvation. They believe we are saved by faith and works and sacraments and church involvement; where we believe salvation is by faith ALONE. So it can be helpful to show them verses like Ephesians 2:8-9 - “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith… not by works.”

If done gracefully, gently, this can ***help them feel the authority of Scripture*** and begin to understand the amazing grace of Jesus that salvation is ALL HIM and not from us at all. We add NOTHING to the finished work of the cross. It is “not by works, so that no one may boast.” We have nothing to claim. Nothing to point to. Nothing to brag about. Salvation is 100% Jesus; 0% us. The Bible clearly teaches this.

But Catholics have a fuzzier view of salvation because ***their authority is not JUST the Bible***. It is one authority, but church tradition is another, supposedly equal authority. Many Catholics also elevate reason and science as equal authorities. And some elevate personal experience and feelings to an equal status with the Bible and the Church, which explains why 56% of Catholics now support abortion.

<https://fox8.com/news/majority-of-u-s-catholics-say-abortion-should-be-legal-in-most-cases-survey-shows/>

For me the Catholic Church as a whole is like Notre Dame in Paris - a huge and ***beautiful Cathedral*** filled with beautiful Biblical imagery and meant to be a place for the worship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But it is a large, ornate cathedral ***filled with fog***. Jesus is there in there in the center, hanging on the cross. But the meaning of his sacrifice is obscured by the fog of hundreds of years of church traditions, edicts from Popes and the great confusion of the enlightenment and the liberal protestant movement.

But **the Bible is like a huge fan** that can blow away that haze of confusion. That’s what Paul was trying to do as he stood on trial in Caesarea. He was lifting up the giant fan of the Jewish Law and the book of all the prophets and trying to blow away the mess of traditions and politics that was clouding the issue for most of the Jews and also these Roman officials. That leads to the third point of Paul’s confession.

He clearly proclaims One God, One Authority and One Hope.

**Clear Confession - One Hope**

“Having a hope in God… that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.” Acts 24:15

What ***a clear and bold confession*** from Paul. He denies the accusations of stirring up a crowd and defiling the temple, but he immediately admits that he is a follower of Jesus, a Bible believer - and because of the Bible and because of Jesus Paul professes his hope in eternal life.

The center of **Paul’s hope here is JUSTICE**. Isn’t that encouraging? No doubt it is sobering as well, as was certainly Paul’s intent. For the believer who is secure in Christ, the resurrection is our sure and joyful hope. For the non-believer who is not represented by Jesus, the resurrection to a final judgment is the ultimate terrifying prospect.

***Everyone spends forever somewhere.*** Everyone will answer for what they have done and said and thought. Everyone will have their day in court with the Lord. Everyone. **There is no exception and there will be no distinction**. No one steps into that divine courtroom with an advantage from their ancestry or culture or parents or ability or IQ. Jews do not have a preferred status. There is no TSA Pre-check for the final judgment, no Fast Pass line.

So the question is, what makes a person JUST or UNJUST? Other translations say RIGHTEOUS and UNRIGHTEOUS. The only thing that can give you the verdict of righteous is faith in Jesus.

The question before all people today is not whether you will stand before God for judgment. That is certain. ***The question is whether you have secured Jesus as your defense attorney.*** The retainer to establish that relationship is called personal faith. You simply call on Jesus. You fall on your knees before Him and ask Him to forgive your sins and become your Savior and Lord.

If Jesus is your defense attorney, **the final judgment** will be quick and easy because Jesus is also the judge. He will simply get down from his judgment seat, look up at the Father as He stands next to you, with a hand on your shoulder and say, “Papa, this one is with me. Let’s look at the righteous things she did. Let’s see the good he did. All the sins are paid for, no need to look at those. Let’s celebrate what she did that no one saw but we saw!”

But if Jesus is not your defense attorney, ***if you choose to represent yourself, then the final judgment will be the ultimate agony,*** with no escape possible. The full tape of your life will play, uninterrupted, for the whole universe to see. Everything you thought was done in secret will be broadcast on the big screen across the entire Milky Way. You will have no excuse, no appeal.

Oh dear friend, **don’t delay**. Don’t risk another moment without Jesus as your Savior! He stands ready to save you as soon as you call on Him. He paid the full price, all that remains is for you to say “Yes,” to Him.

And Christian brother, sister, be encouraged. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” There is no judgment awaiting you in the future because your full punishment fell on Jesus in the past. This is our sure and blessed hope - that we will rise again to life everlasting as those who have been forgiven and set free from sin and who will live with fullness of joy forever and forever.

So this is our summary for today. To amplify your witness, you need:

**To Amplify your Witness you need:**

1. **Consistent Character**
2. **Clear Confession**
   * One God
   * One Authority
   * One Hope

We have talked about Billy Graham who finished his race so well, protecting his character and maintaining his clear message to the end. A modern day hero who is like Billy Graham today is **Francis Chan**.

https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/francis-chan-why-i-quit-my-megachurch-and-started-again/1183.article

If you’ve read Francis’s book *Letters to the Church*, you’ll know a little of his story. He was literally **born into tragedy**, since his mother died giving birth to him. His father remarried but this second wife died in a car accident when Francis was 8. Then Francis’ father died when he was 12. Thankfully, Francis was raised in a large extended family surrounded by believers, so the foundations of his faith in Jesus were strong, even if some key pieces were unclear - such as the love of God, which was overshadowed for him by the fear of God.

In 1994, at the age of 27, Francis ***planted a church in California*** that grew like crazy and was soon averaging multiple thousands of attendees. If you’ve seen his YouTube videos you won’t be surprised that people loved to come to see him. My favorite is the balance beam one.

The point is that Francis Chan is a modern day evangelist and church leader, a sought after speaker because he embodies these two points. ***His character has remained consistent*** for over two decades of Christian leadership. And ***his confession has remained Biblical and gospel-centered***.

In 2010 Chan felt he had to resign. He tells the story in Letters to the Church. It was both to help the church and to protect his own soul. He said doing mega-church in America is uniquely challenging for the Lead Pastor’s soul. You attain this celebrity status and can easily begin to believe all the hype - that you really are all that. So to his great credit, Chan moved to China with his family and lived in total simplicity. He left the California lifestyle, he abandoned the celebrity and the speaking engagements, and he got away with his family to love Jesus and serve people.

Chan is so funny. He said they only made it a few months in India and China and Thailand because they didn’t speak any of those languages so ***“I was more of a nuisance”*** he said. But it showed them the beauty of the simplicity of the church and of the gospel.

And they came back to California in 2011 and started a very ***simple house church network***. In 2020 he handed off that ministry and moved his family to Hong Kong to one of the poorest communities on earth. But they had to come back due to COVID and other issues.

Francis Chan represents for me **a faithful leader like Paul** who is doing the work to protect his soul. He knows the seductive dangers of this world and the weakness of his own discipline and so has many protections in place - including a commitment to fight against celebrity and fame. He is not on facebook. He is not on Twitter. Never has been apparently. But through Francis Chan the simple gospel resounds with beautiful clarity.

May the same be said for all of us!