

Say My Name

Building Bridges Without Compromising Convictions

Acts 21:15–25

Focus: Under suspicion from Jewish believers, Paul willingly adapts to cultural expectations without sacrificing gospel truth. This lesson highlights how mature disciples navigate cultural tension with humility, clarity, and a heart for unity.

I. Why This Study?

A. Objective:

1. To explore how Acts 21:15–25 models a faithful response to cultural misunderstanding and religious tension.
2. To examine Paul’s decision to adapt without abandoning the truth of the gospel.
3. To gain wisdom for how we build bridges with others while holding firm to our convictions.

B. Relevance:

1. Christians often face tension between cultural _____ and doctrinal _____.
2. Navigating misunderstandings, especially from fellow believers, requires _____.
3. This passage offers insight into how unity can be pursued without compromising core beliefs.

II. Context of Acts 21:15–25

A. The Background of Paul’s Arrival in Jerusalem:

1. Paul arrives in Jerusalem after his long missionary journey, knowing that arrest awaits him (v. 15).
2. He is warmly welcomed by fellow believers and reports God’s work among the _____ (vv. 17–19).
3. The Jerusalem church praises God but expresses concern about how Paul is perceived by Jewish believers (v. 20).
4. Rumors are circulating that Paul teaches Jews to abandon _____, _____, and Jewish customs (v. 21).
5. The church leaders urge Paul to join in a _____ ritual with four men under a Nazirite vow to show respect for the law (vv. 23–24).

6. They reaffirm their stance from Acts 15—that Gentile believers are not under the law—highlighting that Paul’s participation is not about doctrinal compromise (v. 25).

B. Historical Insight:

1. Jerusalem was the heart of Jewish-Christian identity, where many Jewish believers still practiced the Mosaic law out of _____ and _____ heritage.
2. Paul’s ministry to Gentiles often stirred suspicion among Jewish Christians who feared he was abandoning the faith.
3. The Nazirite vow involved temporary _____, sacrifice, and purification—a visible sign of Jewish piety. Paul’s participation was an act of solidarity, not _____.

C. Key Takeaway:

1. Building bridges often requires _____ and _____, but mature faith knows how to do so without compromising gospel convictions.

III. What Happens When I Build Bridges Without Compromising Convictions?

A. Unity Begins with Listening and Testifying (vv. 17–20a)

1. Key Verses:

“Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.” (v. 19)

2. Key Lessons:

a) *Paul doesn’t defend himself—he testifies. Listening and celebrating God’s _____ builds trust.*

b) *True unity is anchored in _____ praise, not _____ defensiveness.*

c) *Rev. Dr. Luke Powery writes: “Testimony has the power to rehumanize, to open space for common ground in the midst of cultural difference.” (Spirit Speech)*

B. Misunderstanding Requires Gentle Clarification (vv. 20b–22)

1. Key Verses:

“They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses...” (v. 21)

2. Key Lessons:

- a) _____, even among believers, can harm unity.
- b) Leaders must _____ misperceptions with both humility and clarity.
- c) Rev. Dr. Esau McCaulley explains: “Paul understood the difference between essential doctrine and cultural context. That’s what made him free.” (*Reading While Black*)

C. Adaptation Is Not Compromise When Motive Is Love (vv. 23–24)

1. Key Verses:

“Take these men, join in their purification rites... Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you...” (v. 24)

2. Key Lessons:

- a) Paul agrees to participate in a Jewish ritual—not to earn righteousness, but to _____ suspicion.
- b) Mature disciples sometimes lay down personal freedoms to win hearts, not _____.
- c) Dr. Willie James Jennings writes: “Paul’s yes is not to conformity, but to connection—to the deeper call of building belonging within the body.” (*Acts: A Theological Commentary*)

D. Convictions Are Preserved Even While Building Bridges (v. 25)

1. Key Verses:

“As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision...” (v. 25)

2. Key Lessons:

- a) *The Jerusalem leaders _____ the freedom of Gentile believers, upholding gospel clarity.*
- b) *Paul's accommodation is not a _____ of doctrine but a strategy of love.*
- c) *Rev. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil says: "Reconciliation doesn't happen by declaring sameness, but by valuing difference while protecting truth."
(Roadmap to Reconciliation)*

IV. Scholars' and Theological Insights on Bridge-Building Faithfulness

- A. St. Paul: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." (1 Corinthians 9:20, 22)
- B. Rev. Dr. Esau McCaulley: "The strength of Paul's ministry was not in denying his culture, but in being able to cross into others without losing himself."
- C. Rev. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil: "True bridge-building requires the courage to stay rooted while reaching out."
- D. Dr. Willie James Jennings: "The gospel creates a people whose boundaries are not built on blood or ritual, but on the wild grace of belonging."
- E. Rev. Dr. Luke Powery: "Unity is not the absence of difference—it is the presence of the Spirit in the space between us."

V. Prayer Focus

1. Pray for wisdom to know when and how to adapt without compromising your faith.
2. Ask God for a spirit of humility that allows you to listen before responding.
3. Pray for courage to clarify misperceptions with grace.
4. Intercede for the church to be a place of bridge-building across cultural and generational divides.

VI. Key Takeaway

Building bridges doesn't mean abandoning beliefs. Mature disciples know how to love, adapt, and engage cultural tensions while remaining rooted in gospel truth.

VII. Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. How does Paul's example challenge your approach to cultural or theological tension?
2. In what ways are you tempted to compromise—or to be inflexible—when faced with misunderstanding?
3. How do you discern the difference between healthy adaptation and doctrinal compromise?
4. What does this passage teach you about responding to rumors and false assumptions among believers?
5. How can your church create more space for grace-filled conversations across cultural or generational divides?