

“The Way (Part 2)”  
Isaiah 48:12-19; Acts 24:10-22;  
Matthew 22:16-22, 34-40

May 12, 2013  
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As we come this morning, we might think of ourselves as a jury. If I were to say, “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I present to you Paul of Tarsus...” It’s not quite the way it was. Felix was the only one there. And yet, the question comes up, could he be convicted of being a person of The Way? He calls it a sect. Could he be convicted of being a follower of Jesus?

We think about what he has done. What is he really there for? He’s gone throughout Asia Minor and preached this new Way and somebody is upset about it. There are some reasons I think some people are upset. One reason the Jews really got upset, and it’s the reason I would like to focus on a little bit, is that when Paul was talking about going out into the world, he said he was going to the Gentiles. He was crossing those boundaries. When he tells Felix he wants to have a good conscience before God and *all people* what he is saying begins to cross some boundaries. Maybe Felix didn’t understand it. Maybe he thought of *all people* as Roman citizens. I’m not sure exactly where he might have drawn the line, but by the time you got down to slaves, I’m not sure they were considered people in the same way. It’s one of the things about early Christianity that was getting them into trouble. They weren’t paying attention to the boundaries. It didn’t matter who was rich or who was poor. It didn’t matter who was a slave or who wasn’t. It didn’t matter what status somebody had. So maybe this was one of the things that was getting Paul in trouble. Maybe we could convict him of being a person of The Way, a Christian.

It is this scene of him being on trial that made me wonder, what about us? Could we be convicted as people of The Way, as followers of Christ? What would it take today? It feels to me like it’s a different story than when Paul was being questioned. What is it today that would determine who we are, whether we’re a follower of The Way? And who gets to be the judge? That is one of the questions I would like to look at today because as we think about this trial with Paul, it’s pretty clear who the judge was. As we think about ourselves today, who’s the judge?

As we think about the idea of judgment and conviction, that word *conviction* is interesting, isn’t it. You can be tried and they can see something about you—you’re convicted. And yet we hold something that is also called convictions. Can we be people for whom those convictions show? And what about judgment? One of the interesting things about judgment today is the question about who is judge. Felix was judge. Do we feel judged by society? Does society feel judged by us? What’s the nature of judgment today?

I have been doing some reading by a guy named Daniel Bell. One of the reasons I want to think about this is because of the idea of judgment and how it plays out in our lives today. Daniel Bell claims that our traditional system has lost its traditional

legitimacy which was based on a moral system of reward rooted in a protestant sanctification of work. He says what's substituted in its place is a hedonism which promises a material ease and luxury. He goes on to say that in the 60s a radicalism grew that attacked society and its values and became the central way of things. It's interesting to think about. It's almost like looking in a mirror, but the idea he's trying to convey there, I think, is that the way of culture today is to say that culture is bad. Another way of saying it is that anything in the past is bad because any of the past would constrict us. There's a norm there, there's a system that would keep us from being able to do all that we should be able to do. Today, the idea is that we should all be able to find our own bliss; we shouldn't be the result of the past.

It's interesting that even on Mother's Day there's a little bit of tension over the idea that has come around that what we have done as parents has messed up our children. You know, that's the whole thing—all the past is wrong. I don't think that's true. But there's a way in which the whole culture has begun to say anything that has a structure, a norm, or a system to it is bad. And where does Christianity fit in there? It fits really well into that old norm, old stuff. It's the new stuff that's right, not any of that old stuff, because that old stuff is constricting, it's holding us in, it's restricting. It doesn't let us be the people we can be if we would just get rid of it. And if we see a Christianity that's trying to present something that's saying this is a good way, if we get a little overzealous about that, it looks like judgment and it fits right into that perspective.

So the two things that I'm trying to get at are that we live in a society that is moving further away, in my perspective, anyway, from being aligned with our Christian values. As it does that, the question of how are we going to be convicted of our faith comes to my mind. Society is telling us that what we really want is pleasure and luxury and the way to do that is to forget everything in the past and only see what is before us. Or even to blame the past for all of our problems today and if we can just let go of all that we will be fine. Again, I don't think that's true. But as we think about who we are, who we follow, and what it is that forms our life, how much of it is the society in which we live and how much of it is Christ?

Part of what's happening in relationship to all that is that when you say the past is wrong or that anything external to yourself is judgmental and only constricts and restricts, then one's decisions all come from inside. I don't know about you, but if I think everything is coming from inside me, I'm pretty lost. And yet, that's what the world today is saying. There is no external thing out there that we should listen to because it all comes from inside.

I don't know about you, but I have often been very fooled by things that come from inside. I get lost. Paul, as he is before Felix, is claiming there is one he follows, one that defines his life, one by whom he knows The Way and the way of God.

Jesus is doing the same thing as he is confronting the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the hypocrites that are there because they have their way and he's inviting them to see a new way, to see God's way. It's a little different for us because we are invited to

come out of ourselves and see God's way. We are invited to encounter Christ and to know that he has given us the Way. He invited us to look at ourselves and ask not only what do we say, but what do we do. Could Paul be convicted of anything if all he did was say something? My guess is, it's also his actions—that he has actually gone to people and shown the life of Christ in his. Jesus encounters the Pharisees and gives them a new way—a way that will always be new in relationship to a society that wants to go off in different ways, away from God. So he offers us a core of that way: to love God with our heart, mind, and soul, and our neighbors as ourselves.

As we think about what he offers us, it's not just something that's all about us. It's not something that he says is just simply going to come out of us, but it's something that we have to hear and take in and allow God to work and change and move us. It will be a process. That's why it called following. We keep going after. And can we be convicted of following Jesus? Can it be seen in our lives? In our society that's going one way, what direction are we going? I know one thing. There's one thing I think is worth being convicted of, and that's following Christ. I hope we might do so. Amen.

Gracious God, when we encounter a world in which there is so much that would guide us in different directions, telling us to forget the past, forget the old values, and to look simply within, help us to look to you, to open our ears and hearts to you and to recognize Jesus' words to us to love you with our heart, mind, and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves. Help us to follow him and live out that love. Through Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.