

# Paul and Felix, or Preaching and Procrastination

by Charles Finney

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*Charles Finney's sermon emphasizes the urgency of responding to the gospel and the dangers of procrastination in seeking salvation.*

**Scripture:** Acts 24:24

**Topics:** "Urgency of Salvation", "Procrastination"

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## Description

Charles Finney discusses the encounter between Paul and Felix, emphasizing the tension between preaching the gospel and the procrastination of accepting it. Paul boldly reasons with Felix about righteousness, temperance, and the impending judgment, causing Felix to tremble with conviction yet ultimately choose to delay his response, seeking a more convenient time. Finney highlights the danger of procrastination in spiritual matters, illustrating how Felix's desire for convenience led him to dismiss the urgent call of the gospel. The sermon serves as a warning against the complacency that can arise from delaying one's commitment to Christ, urging listeners to respond to the gospel without delay.

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## Transcript

"And after certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ.

"And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season; I will call for thee." --Acts 24:24-25.

Paul, on a visit to Jerusalem, had been seized by the bigoted and hostile Jews. A conspiracy was formed against him to take his life. Several men had madly taken a solemn vow not to eat or drink till they had slain him. This came to Paul's ears--was by him communicated to the Roman officers; and in consequence of this a strong guard removed him from Jerusalem to Cesarea, the residence of the Roman governor. Here Paul lay confined, awaiting trial. The history describes the commission of Ananias the high priest, with the elders, and an orator named Tertullus, to appear against Paul before Felix the Roman governor--their charge and plea, and Paul's defense. All these you can read at your leisure in Acts 24. They present a beautiful specimen of Roman justice, developing the principles of law, then in current practice, and especially that celebrated usage of their courts, whereby the accused were allowed to answer each for himself. It was in pursuance of this usage that Paul as in our text was brought before Felix

and there permitted to plead his own cause.

On this memorable occasion Paul appears before us, not absorbed in the interests of his own individual case, though this involved personal liberty if not even life;--but we see him true, as he had long been, to his work as a preacher of Christ's gospel and intent chiefly to save souls. He preached "concerning the faith in Christ." "He reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come." On these points he spake with such power that Felix trembled, and answered--"Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee."

In pursuing my remarks upon this wonderful defense, I remark,

I. That it gives us a clew to the apostolic manner of preaching salvation through Christ.

You will observe that, it is said that he preached concerning the "faith in Christ." This was made in those times, the great question. The Jews had long held that salvation is to be obtained through works. Paul speaks on the subject as if salvation must be only by faith in Christ. Here then was the issue as between the self-righteous Jews and the apostles.

Now observe Paul's manner closely. What did he preach? Our text is explicit. "He reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come." And he so reasoned on those points that Felix trembled. The narrative begins with saying that Felix "heard him concerning the faith in Christ;" but you will observe that as it progresses to the details, it specifies that he "reasoned of righteousness, temperance and judgment to come." Did he, then as some seem to suppose, preach Christ, Christ, nothing but Christ? Did he begin with an unenlightened uninstructed sinner--a sinner who had no just sense of his sins, and preach only Christ, with no allusion to that sinner's guilt and need of such a Savior as Christ Jesus? We can easily see how it was. Paul carried his appeal at once to the conscience of his royal hearer. It mattered little whether this king was or was not familiar with Jewish law; Paul did not care. Paul knew he had a conscience, and that upon this conscience his appeal would take hold with convincing and condemning power. He therefore made this his first effort. He first appealed to the conscience of Felix on the great law of right--brought up to his own notice the life and conduct of the man--the sinner, and set all his past deeds in array before his eyes, and as they stand forth in the light of a judgment to come. Whatever good works Felix may have supposed himself to have done, were not brought into the account at all. Indeed we must presume that this sermon left him no room to think of his good works at all. Probably it threw them all utterly out of view and showed him that he labored under the greatest mistake if he supposed they were of the least conceivable value. The method adopted by Paul compelled Felix to seek salvation elsewhere than the Heathen seek it, for it showed him that they can find no salvation adequate to meet the case of a lost sinner. It held him to his obligations to a life of righteousness and temperance as in view of a coming judgment, and thus made him feel his need of such a Savior as Christ. Paul knew well that this reasoning must condemn the entire life of Felix, and that the only hope of ever doing him any good lay in an attempt to force conviction upon his conscience. Hence his policy.

Another thing. It does not appear by any means from the history that Felix had ever heard the evidence to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was the true Messiah. Be this as it may, it does not appear that Paul tarried a moment on this point on the present occasion. Instead of setting himself to array and substantiate these evidences, he goes at once before the conscience of his auditor, by one powerful appeal shutting him up at once to the necessity of having such a Savior as Christ. He talks to him of a judgment to come; shows him from the laws of his own moral being that there ought to be such a judgment and that from the

righteousness of God's throne, there must be. Such was the strain of his appeal.

II. Let us next notice the effect of this method. It is told in few words. Felix trembled. Conviction of guilt flashed upon him. Although the preacher was before him, a prisoner in chains, yet an arrow had pierced his conscience and it made him quail on his throne of state. He saw that there was a King on a higher throne, before which himself stood arraigned and guilty. He saw there must be a judgment to come and that the great God must surely judge him there. He saw that Paul spoke only the words of truth and soberness, for his own conscience affirmed and endorsed every charge which the preacher made. Hence when Paul appealed to his conscience about law, sin, and a coming judgment, he was shut up and condemned, and hence prepared to enquire whether there can be any way in which God can be just and yet justify the sinner who believes in Jesus.

III. I next observe that we have in our text a specimen of the manner in which sinners reject the gospel and evade its claims.

We see how apostles preached Christ; how, beginning with the law and making its appeal to the sinner's conscience, they shut men up to the gospel and compelled them to flee to it for refuge if they would have any refuge at all; but how did sinners then evade this duty? How escape, or at least try to escape the pressure of this appeal?

We can readily see. Felix did not and could not deny the truth of what Paul had preached. He saw and in some degree felt the fearful truth as to his own sin and guilt, and righteous doom as a sinner. He must moreover have seen his remedy. The gospel was before him in its greatest plainness and simplicity, no doubt, and therefore he knew that he might have Christ now as his own Savior, if he would. Yet though so convicted before the chained apostle as to tremble on his very throne of judgment, he did not bid this gospel welcome. He was still so selfish that he sought to make this matter of personal salvation a thing of convenience. "When I have a convenient season, said he, I will call for thee." The subject agonized him and he wanted therefore to dismiss it for the present at least. Besides he managed, as most sinners do, to work in another quite incidental question and give it an entirely undue influence. Shall I sympathize, said he, with a man who is a prisoner before me, and take sides with a despised Christian against the whole Jewish nation? What effect would such a course have on my popularity?

He could not say--I will never accept the gospel, I will never have anything to do with it. No; he knew too much of its truth, and too deeply felt his own need of it, to allow him to turn off the matter thus. In fact, he was in precisely the position of thousands in our own land; entirely convinced of the truth of the gospel, yet by no means ready to embrace it. Political motives restrained and embarrassed him, and under their influence he could readily believe that he could yet have this salvation at some quite convenient time when he should be prepared to attend to it and embrace it. He held it to be an offer that he could accept at his own convenience, and therefore, though he deeply felt its great importance, and though his nerves trembled and he could not rest, yet he could at least delay; and this he resolved to do. In this decision he did not stand for what was right as between his soul and his offered Savior: nor did he heed the influence of his example, nor consider his responsibilities as affecting the salvation of hundreds besides himself.

Moreover, he did not purpose to reject this gospel offer finally and forever; by no means; he still hoped to be saved at last. But, here was a door open to get some money; and this hope ravished his selfish soul. He hoped Paul or his friends for him, would offer a bribe for his release, and therefore--to get some money--not to get salvation--"he sent for him the oftener and communed with him." But with the hope of a

bribe in his eye, how could he come down in the spirit of a little child, self-emptied and self-condemned, and embrace the pure and self-humbling gospel? He did no such thing. It does not appear that he made any advances in this direction, even after the first fatal hour, when he said--"Go thy way for this time." Beyond this the descent was precipitous and no power could retard his rushing speed to ruin. He never found the convenient time to close up this concern by giving his whole heart to Jesus, and bidding welcome to his needy soul the offers of free salvation.

#### REMARKS.

1. It is worthy of notice that the inspired teachers always assume the true philosophy of mind, and hence the true way of teaching it and controlling its decisions. True, the Bible does not intend to teach mental philosophy in a scientific way,--nor indeed in any direct way; yet by inference the Bible does teach mental science most clearly and most fully. If any man will give his mind to this subject and ask--"What does this command imply as true in regard to the mental constitution of those to whom it is addressed?" he cannot fail to arrive at the correct answer. He must see that a command, imposed by a good Being, implies the possession of power to obey it. So let him take up also the promises, and put the same question, asking, what is assumed to be the moral state of those to whom such promises, are addressed? There can be but one answer, and that will reveal just principles of mental science. See how Paul approached and appealed to this heathen man. Did he assume that this Heathen had a conscience before which he could make and lodge his appeal? Most clearly he did, and acted promptly upon this assumption. He knew that however dark his mind might be as to revealed religion, or how ever sophisticated by false reasoning, it would still cry out, Amen, AMEN, whenever God's truth came clearly before his intelligence.

It is curious to observe also that the true philosophy of conversation is always implied by the apostles in their modes of effort to secure this result. Understand this subject practically, they always made their appeal, not to the sensibility, but to the intellect and through this to the conscience--bringing men first to see the truth--then to feel its moral pungency and power: and then to obey it. Thus and only thus did they attempt to subdue the will. Now in the effort to change the entire moral position of the will towards God and holiness, it makes all the difference in the world whether the appeal be made to the sensibility, or to the conscience. If it be made to the sensibility alone, then as soon as the excitement subsides, the mind falls back again to its old position.

It deserves special notice that Paul appealed to the common life of Felix. He reasoned before him of those very sins of which he knew him to be guilty. Of these intemperance in the general sense of incontinent indulgence of appetites and passions, was one. Yet not this alone, but we must suppose that the preacher overhauled his entire life of sin, and if he did not say out openly--You have done this, he at least made his meaning unmistakably plain. Paul wielded a sharp sword, which cleft its way to the heart and the conscience and made its thrusts most sensibly felt. Else the proud king had not trembled on his throne and before his courtiers. Paul laid open to view the guilty life of the king and then assured him that a fearful judgment was coming. This doubtless was the manner of Paul, not only with Felix, but with all other sinners: and not only the manner of Paul, but of Peter and of other apostles. They made sinners see first of all, that they were lost; and then showed them the way of rescue and of life. The course opposite to this is utterly unphilosophical and unreasonable. It is like offering a remedy to a man who feels himself well and believes he has no disease upon him. Not unlikely, he takes it as an insult. Those who feel themselves whole, never apply to the physician. Sinners unconverted are certain never to embrace an offered Savior.

Convicted sinners generally suppose they need to have great feeling before they can repent. They assume that they must act under the influence of feeling--than which a greater mistake can hardly be made. One is amazed to see how strangely they talk and think of this subject. Do they not know that God expects them to act intelligently, and according to the decisions of an enlightened conscience? And yet they will tell you they cannot come to Christ because they have not feeling enough. They must wait for more feeling.

A short time since, I conversed with a young lady who had been brought up under religious influences, but yet remained unconverted. I soon caught a glimpse of the true difficulty in her way. She fancied that she should become a christian at once if she felt right. Have you tried to become a Christian? said I. Yes. What have you done? I have tried to get right feelings.

It is wonderful to see how common this mistake is--to think that religion consists in right feelings, or at least that if they could only get up feeling enough, it would certainly move the will and secure conversion.

This is the exact way in which thousands fail to being truly converted. Instead of looking at the truth, and becoming deeply convinced under its power that they are all wrong and God wholly right, so that under this conviction they can intelligently turn right about, justify God and condemn themselves, and then turn their whole souls to God;--instead of this, they try to get feeling;--but as this course does not succeed, what feeling they have soon subsides, and they fall back fatally and forever.

In this way many of you have been waiting, and waiting and waiting--but wholly to no purpose. The right way and the only right way, is to study the truth, to learn what it is, and what its claims upon yourself are, and then meet those claims and perform those duties. Then truth being known, act in all things according to its demands as seen in your intelligence, and inferred by your conscience.

There is no end to the errors into which men fall through failure to understand this simple idea, of obeying the truth. A man came to me with great solicitude, saying--"I think I am not a christian, for I certainly have not all the feelings that I expected to have. Indeed I do not know about my experience at the time I thought I was converted. I was acting rationally all the time; I seemed to understand my own relations to God and my duty towards Him clearer than ever; I knew the reasons of my conduct at every step, and never was more calm, and never seemed to myself to see duty more clearly. Now how can such an experience as this be real conversion?"

But, said I, is your heart changed? That is the great question. "I don't know, said he, I thought the Holy Ghost was to change my heart if it were ever truly changed; but at the time referred to, I seemed to change it myself. How can this be genuine conversion?"

Men seem to think they shall see the Holy Ghost as it were with their very eyes, if He comes. They have exceedingly vague and often mystical notions about his work. You will observe that Jesus said of the Holy Ghost, that when He should come, "He should not speak of Himself," but should only "bear witness of the truth." He should come to "reprove the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment." Sinners don't seem to see that the Holy Ghost is in the preaching of truth from the minister's lips, and that, thus coming, He conceals Himself and shows only the truth, it being his only object to present and enforce the truth so that sinners shall be made deeply sensible of sin and shall be persuaded to renounce it. The sinner, thus convicted, sees the truth and is not conscious or at all aware of seeing anything else. The Holy Ghost is indeed there, else this sinner would have no such conviction of truth; the Holy Ghost is there and at work, doing his appropriate business, yet wholly unseen. Therefore you should no more wait for the Holy Ghost

to change your heart than you would for me to do it if I were trying to persuade you to turn yourself at once to God.

True conviction is apt to produce a kind of trembling and a tearless agony of soul. I can well recollect the time when I first went to an enquiry meeting. I trembled so that my very seat shook under me. At that time I had never received such instruction as I needed; for if I had, I should have been converted at once. But in my darkness of mind as to what I had to do, I was in great agony, for I knew full well that God's wrath was upon me and that I was living on the very verge of hell. No wonder therefore that my soul was in great agony--tearless agony, for I could not get the relief of a single tear, and yet my whole being seemed to tremble and quake to its centre. I was not at this time under particular and special conviction, but only a general conviction of being all wrong. Such I have reason to suppose are not unfrequently the convictions of awakened sinners.

The convictions of Felix were wholly ineffectual. Convinced that Paul was innocent and with ample power to set him at liberty,--nay more, under the most sacred obligation to set an innocent man at liberty, he yet closed his administration leaving Paul bound, and this for no other reason than to do the wicked, malicious Jews a favor. Alas, how far was he from the kingdom of God!

There are few sinners in this house who have not sometimes had a strong and deep conviction that you ought to be christians, but you, like Felix, have dismissed the subject until it should be quite convenient. Like him, you have been convinced, and perhaps you have even trembled under those convictions, but less and less affected, after seeing your Paul repeatedly, you at length dismiss the matter forever. Perhaps like Felix you could even turn away and leave the christian cause in the hands and at the mercy of its foes. You find in your experience even now that truth affects you less and less, as it did Felix, and with a growing reluctance to its presence and claims, you are glad of any apology for turning it away. In the case of Felix, we hear nothing about his trembling, after the first interview; that point once passed, he became careless, and managed for a season to live without trembling.

But not always could he live without trembling, for the judgment to come awaited him and he is long ere this gone before God to meet his doom.

This first interview with Paul was the crisis in his history. While he sat there and the chained apostle stood and preached Christ before him, the crisis hours were passing. Then and there he might have had salvation; beyond that point, it was virtually impossible.

So you have your crisis-period. As it was said of some, "they came and went from the place of the holy," so it may be said of you. Often have you come and gone from the place where the saints worship;--but alas, no better in heart after the end of all than before the beginning. Says the inspired one--"I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy;"--wicked still, and none the less so for having frequented the place of God's saints. So with some of you. We shall soon bear some of you away to yonder hill--wicked till you die and then "driven away in your wickedness," to the place of the wicked forever. Now you sometimes tremble and sometimes are stupid; and with some of you the crisis is already past. With every lost sinner there must be some place where the crisis is turned. Most sinners pass the crisis just as Felix did. Like him they settle the question--by simple procrastination. Few say, I never will attend to this subject again. Commonly they dismiss it with--"Go thy way for this time." If the devil should suggest to them to take a solemn vow--"I never will have Christ--I never will even think of the subject seriously again"--it would startle them quite too much. Satan is too cunning for such imprudence.

Therefore he only says--Let it pass for this time. This answers all his purpose abundantly. Hence this is the very way in which most persons pass the final crisis. There is no need of anything more than this to make damnation certain. It would startle you to go the whole figure at one leap and solemnly swear--"I have done with the gospel of Jesus and with heaven, henceforth and forever." Therefore Satan is not wont to put you up to so daring a step as this. It is quite sufficient for all his purposes if he can persuade you to say--"Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season I will close up this matter as it should be."

But Oh, this fearful crisis-point! Have some of you passed it already? Have some of you quenched the Spirit quiet and grieved Him wholly away? Have you settled down in moral hardness--with no interest in these things? It is not difficult for you perhaps to recal the time when God's Spirit pressed the truth upon your conscience, but you resisted and delayed doing your known duty! Your conscience smarted under the sting of truth, forced home by the Spirit of God;--but you resisted--you repelled the Dove of heaven and where are you now?

Some of you may be about to take this fatal step today. Oh will you madly rush on your own certain damnation! Will you say--I mean to be a christian at some future time, but not now! Ah, when God says NOW--do you reply to Him, not now? Then there is no hope that you and God can agree! You need not expect his Spirit to co-operate in the renewal of your soul to holiness--for how can two work together except they are agreed?

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