

J.R. Miller:

Paul had just come to Jerusalem after the close of his missionary journey. The elders feared there would be trouble when it became known that he had come. They arranged, therefore, for an observance of Jewish rites in the temple, in which Paul would take a public part. It was when this observance was about completed, that he was discovered in the temple by some foreign Jews, who recognized him, seized him, and raised a great clamor against him. For him there was nothing new in this hostile outbreak.

They thought they had caught him in the very act. They cried out, "This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place." Their words were a gross misrepresentation. Paul never had uttered a word against the Jewish people, the law or the temple. Many people take the words of others, give a wrong sense to them, and then repeat them! Others exaggerate what they hear. There are many ways of misrepresenting others and many people who are ready always to do it.

Misrepresentation is a grievous sin. Many a calumny that destroys a fair name, grows out of a mere misstatement, an inexact reporting of what is said or done. We should be scrupulously careful in repeating, if we must repeat a matter at all—that we state the precise truth. No fault of speech is more common than lack of accuracy in quoting or narrating. Most people's ears seem to hear with a bias in favor of their own prejudices. Then, in reporting what they have heard, the bias is too apt to show its influence a second time in the way the speaker's words are twisted or distorted.

This is only part of the misrepresentation, however. They charged further that Paul had taken Gentiles into the temple, thus defiling it. Some of them had seen Paul on the street one day in company with a Gentile Christian from Ephesus, and now when they recognized Paul and his four companions in the temple, they jumped to the conclusion that this Gentile was one of the four. The charge was an entire misrepresentation. They "supposed" that this Gentile was one of the men with the apostle. The supposition was altogether groundless. But that is the way a great many evil stories about people are started. Somebody "supposes" something about another, and tells his supposition as a fact, and it goes on its ruinous errand! A good man does an entirely harmless and proper thing—but someone imagines something wrong in back of it, and reports his imagination as a fact, and a character is blackened! Many a scandal grows out of what some evil-disposed person supposes.

The lesson is, the duty of sacredly cherishing the good names of others, never permitting ourselves to infer evil—when there is no real basis for it. We have no right to "suppose" that another has done a wrong thing and then state our supposition as a fact. A large proportion of the miserable gossip which is retailed by idle people in drawing rooms and other places—is started just as this story about Paul was started.

The government of Rome was not intentionally friendly to Christianity. In the case of Paul it, not only delivered him at this time from the hands of his own people who were his bitter enemies—but a little later carried him without personal expense to Rome itself, where, under the continued shelter of the government, though a prisoner, he wrought as a missionary in the very capital of the Gentile world! So the wrath of man—is overruled for the glory of God.

God is always active in the affairs of this earth, overruling all the things so that they work together for good. We need never be afraid to put into his hands, the things that seem to be against us—the enmities, the dangers, the plots, the hurts of life, with the confidence that none of them can do us any harm—if only we stay close to Christ and leave all in his hands. The mob in the temple that day tried to kill Paul—but they only started him on his way to Rome with the gospel of Christ! Enmities and efforts to harm us—will always bring good rather than evil to us and the cause of Christ—if we let God take care of them and keep our own hands off!

The mob did not know why Paul was being dragged away. They did not know what the charges against him were. They did not understand the motives of the Jews who had raised the first clamor against him. They merely saw his arrest, and then heard the violent outcry against him, and joined the crowd—they did not know why.

The same thing happens in these days. Somebody starts an opposition against a man—and others join in the clamor, not making any inquiry into the matter to know whether the charges are true, or even to know what the charges are! People are like sheep. If one sheep starts in a certain way, all the flock will follow. Common justice requires, however, that we investigate assertions and accusations against others before we believe them and join the crowd of maligners. It is a crime against a man to pursue him with evil charges, or to take any part whatever against him, without knowing the truth about the matter.

Lysias, too, had a wrong impression about Paul. He thought he was a notorious Egyptian, who had led four thousand assassins in sedition. This passage is full of misrepresentations and of unjust charges against the apostle—charges, too, not based on any testimony—but simply inferred. Lysias supposed that Paul must be a bad man, a great criminal in fact, or the people who not have set upon him so mercilessly when they found him in the temple.

We should never take anybody's opinion about another when it is evil, without first making inquiries of our own to see if the things alleged are true. We should not join in every hue and cry raised against another, and begin to shout, "Away with him!" because that is the voice of the rabble. We should inquire into the truth of the charges and know upon what grounds they rest. Then if we find that the person is falsely charged and is suffering innocently, we should be brave enough to become his friend and defender—instead of his enemy and defamer. That was the course of Lysias here. He inquired who Paul was and what he had done, and when he found out the truth he protected him from the mob. Every man should have the benefit of our charity—until we know he is guilty. To condemn anyone unheard—is an act of gross injustice!