

A Sober Hope

Acts 17:1-15

Today's passage describes how Paul preached the message about Jesus (the gospel) in two cities, Thessalonica and Berea. In both cities the same thing happened: some people believed the gospel and others rejected the gospel and became aggressively hostile toward Paul. This passage illustrates a simple reality that we've seen repeatedly in Acts, namely, that ***People respond to the gospel in radically different ways.***

Our hope/confidence is that many will believe and find life in Christ. But it is a sober hope because we know that many will not. That was true when Jesus walked the earth. That was true in the book of Acts as the message spread from Jerusalem to Rome. And it is still true today. If you are a follower of Christ, chances are that you have family members and close friends who have heard the same gospel you did, and yet the haven't yet believed.

As we'll see, this reality doesn't suggest a type of determinism where we throw up our hands and conclude, "I guess some people will believe and some won't." No! ***There is a clear pathway to faith*** through the gospel and the rest of the Scriptures. If you are a believer, you can hold that out to people. If you're not yet a believer, you can engage your will and examine the claims of Christ honestly and wholeheartedly. That's what we're talking about this morning.

In Acts 17:1-15 Luke emphasizes three things in relation to the reality that people respond to the gospel in radically different ways. We will notice the importance of Communicating the Gospel, The Response of Believing the Gospel, and The Response of Rejecting the Gospel.

First. . .

The Importance of Communicating the Gospel. In both Thessalonica and Berea Paul and Silas followed their pattern of going to the Jews first and then the Gentiles (Romans 1:16). Notice the verbs used in verses 2 and 3 to describe the way Paul communicated the gospel in Thessalonica.

2 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

Paul reasoned with them (conversation, dialogue, interaction), explaining and proving (16:34 - Philippian jailer "set food before them") that Christ had to die and rise from the dead. Paul's methodology reinforces that the Christian faith is reasonable and coherent; you can examine it and study it and evaluate whether or not it is worth believing. Since Paul believed that the gospel was the power of God for salvation - that it alone revealed how sinful people could enter into a relationship with a holy God - he tried to persuade people to believe.

Notice the two basic points Paul made. First, he argued “from Scriptures” that “it was necessary (essential, not optional) for the Christ/Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead.” In the first century nobody really understood that the suffering Servant of Isaiah who would be pierced for our transgressions was also the descendant of David who would reign forever. That is a truth that we now understand in retrospect, but it wasn’t at all obvious before the death and resurrection of Christ. But this truth was “hiding in plain sight.” And so Paul reasoned from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was a Divine necessity for the Messiah to suffer/die because of the sinfulness of all humanity. And it was a Divine necessity for the Christ/Messiah to rise from the dead in order to reign on the throne of David forever. Point #1 was that the Christ had to die and rise from the dead.”

Point #2 was, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” That’s the message of the gospel that we proclaim here today: “Jesus died on the cross for our sins and God raised him from the dead, vindicating him and proving that he is the Lord who will reign forever.” That’s the gospel that we can either accept or reject.

Luke emphasizes that in Thessalonica and Berea some received and believed the gospel and others rejected and opposed the gospel. As we work through this passage, try to identify where you are on the spectrum of believing and unbelieving. Please know that where you are today doesn’t have to be where you end up; Paul began by rejecting Jesus but ended up loving him. You may find yourself somewhere in between these two extremes - neither believing nor rejecting the gospel. You can stay there for a while, but not forever. If you don’t eventually believe the gospel, you have implicitly rejected it.

Let’s notice ***The Response of Believing the Gospel***. (Acts 17:4, 10-12) In verse 4 Luke tells us how some in Thessalonica believed the gospel.

4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

Only “some” of the Jews in the synagogue “were persuaded” and became genuine disciples but “a great many” of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women” believed. By mentioning that Jews, Gentiles, and “leading women” all believed, Luke is showing that the gospel cuts across all racial and social barriers.

We’ll return to verses 5 through 9 in a few minutes. Notice the response in the next city, Berea. After Paul’s life was threatened in Thessalonica. . .

10 The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

The term translated “noble” originally referred literally to “people of noble birth” but eventually came to have the connotation of noble character (see Peterson, Acts 17:11).

Whereas the Jewish leaders in Thessalonica were small-minded and jealous, the Jews in Berea were noble-minded; above all else, they wanted to know the truth.

And so they “received the word with all eagerness,” as opposed to an attitude of apathy or obligation. With eagerness they “[examined] the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” They actively engaged their minds/wills and studied the Scriptures daily to see if the things Paul said lined up with the ancient teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures. And many of them concluded that Paul indeed had taught them the truth.

12 Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

Whereas only “some” of the Jews in Thessalonica believed, “many of them” believed in Berea, along with many “Greek women of high standing as well as men.” Jews, Gentiles, women of high standing, and men all came to Christ because they engaged their minds and examined what the Scriptures said about the Christ.

That’s the way it normally happens. I have opportunity to talk with lots of people about how they came to follow Jesus. The past couple of weeks two people told me that they came to faith in Christ as a result of “reading the Bible with Christians” they had met. They had heard about Jesus here and there growing up, but they came to faith in Christ only when they invested time and energy reading and discussing the Bible with people who already knew Christ. That’s how my Jewish mom came to Christ at age 25; she was invited to church and began studying the Bible with her pastor. That’s how I came to Christ in college. That’s how many of you came to Christ as children (discussing the Bible in your home or in a Sunday school class) or in Middle/High School, or college, or later in life. The pathway to faith is reading, pondering, discussing the gospel and the Scriptures more broadly.

This should give us great hope: ***the gospel really is the power of God for salvation.***

You will not come to faith in Christ by accident; not like catching a cold where you have no idea where it comes from. Faith comes from hearing (understanding and internalizing) the message about Christ. In Romans 10:17 Paul wrote:

17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

If you have not yet come to a place of faith in Jesus Christ, the best thing you can do is imitate the Bereans who “received the Word” and examined the Scriptures daily to see if the message about Christ is really true. Ideally, you would read and examine the Scriptures with another person or a group of people. If you don’t have that person, please let us know and we will find a humble, compassionate person to read the Scriptures with you. Just fill out the Connect Card and write “Bible” on the back of it and we’ll be in touch.

You may be thinking, “Who can afford to take the time and invest the energy in reading the Bible and examining it and discussing what your learning with someone?” Even

though we're all busy, important people a better question is, "How you afford NOT to make that investment when your eternity is at stake?" If God really has sent his unique Son to die for your sin, it's worth everything you've got.

I also want to mention that if you want to learn how you can be a person who reads the Bible with people who want to come to faith, stay tuned. This fall one of our missionaries who has served in Asia for many years will be leading a group on Monday evenings that explores this very topic. I'm planning to be part of that group myself.

The fact that some will believe the gospel gives us hope. But it's a "sober hope" because some people will reject the gospel.

Let's notice also ***The Response of Rejecting the Gospel***. (Acts 17:4-9, 13-15) After describing how some in Thessalonica were persuaded by the gospel, Luke describes how others rejected and opposed the gospel.

5 But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

Because the Jewish authorities were jealous they formed a mob from "some wicked men of the rabble" (i.e., the rough crowd) and incited a riot against Paul. They attacked the house of Jason who was hosting Paul, thinking they'd find Paul and Silas there.

6 And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, 7 and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."

Their basic accusation was that Paul and Silas were ***causing social and political unrest across the Roman Empire***. Some variation of this accusation is brought up repeatedly throughout the second half of the book of Acts. Luke seems very intent on addressing the issue of whether or not the gospel and the church are inherently disruptive to an orderly society. Honestly, people wonder the same thing in our day as well.

It wasn't a complement when they said of Paul and Silas that "these men who have turned the world upside down have come here also." They were accusing Paul and Silas of causing political and social turmoil everywhere they went. These people are not good for society.

Similarly, they also accused Paul and Silas of "acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." This was an accusation that Jesus himself faced in Luke 23:2 - "[Jesus] is misleading our nation, forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar; and saying that he himself is Christ, a king."

This accusation is misguided but it's understandable. As I mentioned earlier, in the first century nobody could imagine a crucified Messiah. They believed that when the Messiah came he would be a political and military figure who would deliver Israel from the tyranny and the taxes and the injustices of the Romans. So when Paul said that Jesus is the Christ, that's what came to mind for many. And so it was a convenient accusation that the Jewish leaders knew would cause a reaction.

Of course, nothing was further from Paul's mind. If you read Romans 13 you will see that he was shockingly supportive of governing authorities such as Caesar. Paul didn't have the chance to answer the accusation, but if he did he would have said something along these lines: Jesus is our king. And one day "the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and Christ" (Revelation 11:15); but in this age, we give to Caesar what he deserves and to Jesus what he deserves. And if you make us choose, we will be loyal to Jesus and suffer the consequences."

We read in verse 10 that the believers in Thessalonica "sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea." When Paul wrote back to the church in Thessalonica, he described this departure as being "torn away from you" (see 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20). We read this in verse 13:

13 But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

Those who had persecuted him in Thessalonica followed him to Berea and stirred up the crowds there too. The irony is that they accused Paul of "turning the world upside down" while they were the ones stirring up mobs and inciting people to violence.

Verse 14 tells us that the threat to Paul was so serious that the believers "immediately sent Paul" away. Paul made his way to Athens where he sent for Silas and Timothy to join him. We'll study Paul's experience in Athens next week. It's been said that in this section of Acts Paul is more like a fugitive than a missionary (Bing Nieh, Christ Church Chicago). That is because of the reality that many people will reject the gospel and some of them will become hostile toward its messengers.

In Paul's day and in ours. . . ***People respond to the gospel in radically different ways.***

So what do we do with this reality? Given the reality that some people will be eternally grateful while others will be offended or worse, what is our responsibility? One passage that answers that question is 2 Corinthians 2:14-17. In this passage Paul uses the imagery of a first-century triumphal procession, which was basically a parade led by a conquering king. The king, typically out front on a horse, was followed by his victorious army as well as some of those taken captive. Such triumphal processions also included the burning of incense and spices. The aroma of that parade would be "the sweet smell of victory" to the king's army and people; but it would be the stench of death to his enemies. People would respond to this aroma in radically different ways.

In this passage Paul says that he and his fellow believers were. . . the aroma of Christ.

14 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

It's a sobering thing to realize that people make decisions with eternal consequences based on how they experience us and the words we speak.

Paul's question was, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Who can accurately and faithfully represent Christ when so much is at stake? Paul answers his question in 3:5 when he says, "We are not sufficient in ourselves; our sufficiency is from God. . . who has made us sufficient." They trusted that God would make them sufficient through the Holy Spirit, through Scripture, through the fellowship of believers, etc.

So what is our responsibility? As the body of Christ, ***we are to embody the gospel so that people experience us as the "aroma of Christ."*** That is God's simple plan. If we are the aroma of Christ, some will love us and some will hate us; some will accept the gospel and some will reject it. But ***our responsibility is to be the aroma of Christ*** (and nothing else). That only happens when we embody his teachings and his way of life.

How do people experience you? Do you embody the teachings of Christ? If we want to know if we are the aroma of Christ, we could take Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and ask, ***"Is this how people experience us?"***

- * Would people say that we "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (5:6) or that we're hungry for worldly goods and recognition?
- * Are we the light of the world and witnesses to what we've experienced with Jesus (living appropriately transparent lives, letting people see what we believe and how we live as followers of Christ), or are we stealth Christians (hiding our faith from people)?
- * Are we quick to reconcile with others when we've been angry and insulting (5:21-26) or that we justify our anger out of self-righteousness? [We don't model perfection; we model redemption.]
- * Do people see us loving our enemies and praying for them (5:43-48) or do they see us trash-talking and condemning them?"

We could multiply examples, but you get the idea. We are the aroma of Christ when we embody his teachings.

Remember this if you ever wonder, "Does it really matter whether or not I am seeking God and walking with Christ?" The answer from the New Testament is "Absolutely!" We have the privilege and the responsibility to the body of Christ. People often draw their conclusions about him based on how they experience us.