

This morning we continue this series we're in called, The Story. It's a chronological walk through the Bible, helping us to see the big picture narrative of Scripture. We've gone from Creation to the life of the nation of Israel and God's promise of a redeemer/savior who would lead his people, to looking at the life of Jesus and how he fulfills those promises, to his unexpected death and even more unexpected resurrection...and now we're looking at the birth of the church, as Jesus' disciples didn't abandon the cause as every other teacher's disciples did, but rather they were emboldened to carry out this message of the resurrection of Jesus, and because of that message the church began to grow.

One of the key people who very unexpectedly became a part of the Church and was instrumental in its initial growth was the Apostle Paul. Initially, he was violently apposed to the early Christians: persecuting them, having them thrown in jail for their beliefs and even seeking their death for their beliefs. But then God got a hold of him, and he realized that what he was doing was actually working against the very God he thought he was serving. He had this realization that Jesus really was the Son of God, and that by serving Jesus and following Him, he would actually be serving God the Father. So he had a major wake-up call and a complete reversal in what he believed about Jesus. And Paul became the greatest evangelist and missionary for the gospel.

**(Map Here)** His gospel-centered travels took him all over the Mediterranean world (this map is of his second journey), from Israel to Greece, and then further west to Rome...and in his letter to the church in Rome he tells of his desire to go to Spain, though we don't know for sure that that actually happened.



This morning, we're looking at three different instances, in three different locations, of Paul sharing the gospel message. There are similarities and differences between all three in what he does and says, and there are similarities and differences in the people to whom he's speaking. And as we compare and contrast these three episodes, we'll see some things that impact us in our discipleship to Jesus and impact our efforts to reach people for Christ, too.

So, with that, let's read this morning's passages from Acts 17. We'll read verses 1-5, then 10-12, then 22-24 and verse 31. This is God's Word to you and me today. **(Scripture Here: Acts 17:1-5, 10-12, 22-24, and 31.)**

We're going to just dive right in. And the first thing I want to highlight here is the response of the people to Paul's preaching: **Some people were open to the gospel message, while others were not.** All three cities had some people who were receptive to the message of Christ crucified and resurrected, and others who weren't. But each town also had some general leanings one way or the other. Luke notes for us that there is a general receptivity in Berea that was not present in Thessalonica, and not in Athens, either – though Thessalonica was the most physically hostile.<sup>ii</sup>

He says in verse 11, **“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).** And I wonder: Could the same thing be said about us? Do we come to worship, do we approach our personal Bible Study, small group Bible study or classes or wherever else we have opportunities to receive a Biblical message and study the Scriptures...do we do so with great eagerness? Now, for some of you, you had *better* be saying “yes” to this, because a number of you (at the second service) are a part of a class that has adopted a title for yourselves called, “The Bereans.” ☺ Now, I am aware that lately the class hasn't been called that...but it was for many years. Regardless, I hope we're all living up to the standard set here of “noble character...receiving the message with great eagerness and examining the Scriptures every day.”

**When we come to the Bible with eagerness, we are much more likely to be impacted and drawn closer to God than if we come with a sense of reluctance or skepticism.** And I am fortunate to be pastoring a church that comes to the Bible with a sense of eagerness. I still remember interviewing with the Pastor Nominating Committee over five years ago, and their emphasis on a desire for Biblically based sermons. That was a heritage of this church, and that was something this church wanted to continue. That excites me. It makes me eager to prepare the sermon and to deliver it on Sundays. When I stand up here each Sunday I know you are people who desire to hear something from Scripture that will encourage you or comfort you or challenge you or somehow else move you forward in your journey with Jesus. You're not like the young man in Acts 19 who fell asleep during Paul's preaching. At least, most of you aren't! 😊 Of course, I'm not preaching for hours on end until midnight, either. But your attentiveness and eagerness is a fantastic quality for a church to have, and I'm grateful that it's a quality of Rose Hill. Let's make sure we continue to be eager for God's Word in our discipleship to Jesus.

The next two points I want to highlight have to do with how we then take the gospel message out into the world. The first of those two things to note and learn from is that everywhere Paul went he spoke to people about Jesus. Always. St. Francis of Assisi is credited with saying: **“Preach the gospel always; when necessary, use words” (St. Francis of Assisi).** The implication is that the usage of words in our “preaching” should be limited, and allow our actions to do most of the preaching. The older I get, the more I think that this quote does a grave dis-service to the gospel, because so many Christians rarely give any verbal indication to anyone that they're a Christian. It's as if this quote becomes an excuse not to articulate what we believe when we have the chance, or worse, it has perhaps become an excuse for not even *being able* to articulate what we believe. It's an excuse for mental lethargy. But that's not what we see throughout the New Testament.

Instead, we see that action is almost always accompanied by preaching. Jesus models this for us all the time. For instance, I don't think Jesus ever heals anyone without giving them some kind of spiritual teaching. If he does, it's a

very small percentage. Get a red-letter Bible (Jesus' words in red) and see what percentage of the Gospels is in red. It's a lot. We see this continue with Peter and Paul and the other early Christians, too, as they intentionally look for people with whom to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

I know Jesus said, **“Let your light shine before all people so that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).** It's one of my favorite verses. I simply believe, that more often than not, it takes words to connect our good deeds to our heavenly father so that others would glorify Him. Words about our faith are what distinguish our good deeds from the good things that others do. Without the words, most people today just don't make the faith connection.

So, do we look for opportunities for our words to accompany our actions? The occasional opportunity may “fall into our laps” but we're going to miss a whole bunch more if we aren't consciously aware of the people around us and looking for opportunities to gently share our faith. Do we talk about our faith, our church, and the ways we serve Jesus? Do we offer to pray for someone in a time of need, or invite someone to church? If we are willing to engage people like our neighbors or co-workers in a little conversation to find out things about them, we might discover that there are opportunities not only to serve them with actions, but perhaps to let some words of comfort or prayer or invitation come forth as well. Words are important and necessary, and we see that here as Paul speaks to people about Jesus.

The question then, is, **“What words do I say?”** And the answer to that is: **It depends on who you're talking to.** This is the second point about taking the message out to the world. Paul was the master of knowing his audience and how to connect with them. When he was in front of a Jewish audience as he was in Thessalonica and in Berea, Luke tells us that he “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead” (Acts 17:2-3). He turned to the Scriptures, because his audience was Jewish. They respected the Scriptures. So Paul could turn to passages that prophesied about the lineage of the Messiah, such as Isaiah 40 which prophesies about the Messiah being preceded by a messenger, which was fulfilled by John the Baptist; Zechariah 9:9 which prophesied of a king

riding into town on a donkey; Isaiah 53 which speaks extensively of his death: that He was despised and rejected...that he took our infirmities and carried our sorrows...that he was pierced for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities. All of these and more would be verses Paul could appeal to in his preaching to a Jewish audience.

But then in Athens he finds himself among Greek philosophers. **And here, amongst these Greek intellectuals who know very little or nothing of Scripture, Paul doesn't refer to Scripture at all. In fact, he starts with the spirituality of their culture, and an altar he found in town that was dedicated to "an unknown god."** And he uses *that*, rather than Scripture, to tell them that what they don't know is in fact knowable, and proceeds to tell them the gospel. He even quotes some of their own poets of their day. ("As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'") Paul is sensitive to his audience and uses whatever is best to reach them with the gospel message. And we can be just as sensitive. In fact, in American culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it is imperative to be sensitive to that, and realize that most people have no knowledge of the Bible. We are in a Biblically illiterate society. The people of Athens are much closer to our society than the people of Thessalonica and Berea, and Paul's conversation with the people of Athens is particularly helpful for us.

Besides being sensitive to the people around us, Paul is a great model of being prepared with something to say. Scripture admonishes us to always be prepared to give an answer for why we believe (1 Peter 3:15). Be able to share what you believe, and how God has touched your life in even just a few sentences. If we aren't prepared, then we are much less likely to say anything, and if we do say something, we might not actually help the cause of Christ. In fact, oftentimes we probably don't say anything because we aren't prepared and we don't want to say something unhelpful or even damaging to someone's receptivity to the gospel.

We see this illustrated in a story about a Christian man owned a barbershop. One night, at a church revival service, the barber felt greatly burdened to do more with his testimony for Christ. He wanted to be prepared with something to say about his faith. So, the next evening, the barber began attending an

evangelism class at his church. He attended faithfully every night for two weeks. He rehearsed all the material, took extensive notes, and memorized the assigned Bible verses. At the end of the two weeks he received a plaque acknowledging his completion of the course.

The next morning, in the barbershop, he hung the plaque and bowed his head. "Dear Lord," he prayed, "help me to witness to the first man to come through that door this morning." At that moment in walked the biggest, meanest, foulest man the barber had ever seen. The man had recently lost a bet with some "biker" buddies and now he had to get his head shaved. He was *not* happy to be there at that moment, and the barber did not feel very comfortable quoting Scripture and reciting everything he had memorized with this man.

The rest of the day did not go any better for the barber. At 5:00 p.m., the barber was sobbing with shame. He had not witnessed to a single person. He bowed his head again. This time he prayed, "Lord, if you will allow one more opportunity, I promise I will do my part." At that, the door opened and in walked a pleasant looking gentleman. The man smiled at the barber, apologized for coming in so late and took a seat in the chair.

As the barber draped the man in his protective sheet, he began to try to remember what he was supposed to say. He began to get very confused. As the barber put shaving cream on the man's face, he tried to remember the answers he had learned to the possible objections. As the barber began to sharpen his razor, he realized that he simply could not remember A THING he had learned. This made the barber very nervous and soon sweat began to break out on his forehead.

Finally, in desperation, with sweat beading up, he shook the razor at the man and screamed, "ARE YOU PREPARED TO DIE??!!!"<sup>iii</sup> ☺ You see, it's not so much about memorizing a script – though memorizing scripture is a good way to go. Mostly, it's about knowing what you believe and why – which is usually because of what God has done for you: on the cross in Jesus, the empty tomb, and other things that are unique to you. It's simply a part of who you are. Being prepared to share your faith story with others is the key to it

all.

You know: **For most all of us here this morning, the reason we are here** (the reason we have a relationship with Jesus Christ) **is that someone once took the time to share the gospel message with you in a way that resonated with you.** They prepared through knowing God's Word, through knowing how God had touched their life, and through knowing you and who you are. And then they were simply open to God's leading so that they might be His instrument in your life so you'd be drawn to Jesus. It might have been a parent, it might have been a Sunday school teacher, it might have been a neighbor or a classmate or a co-worker or spouse or someone else...and probably a combination of a few different people.

But someone put their arm around you in your time of need, or took time to know who you are, or modeled a life of faith for you, and ultimately told you about Jesus and how He impacted them. And if that hasn't happened to you, I'm here to tell you that **Jesus is the one you're looking for to have peace in life, peace in death, and peace with God.** You can have this peace through a relationship with Jesus beginning right here and now. If you *do* know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then you know how God worked through some people to impact you for Christ – whether they started with Scripture as Paul did with the Bereans and Thessalonians, or they started with some other point of contact as he did with the Athenians. Maybe even something that had nothing to do with faith – like work, or skiing, or art, or something else. But someone sat in a worship service or a Bible study and eagerly listened to what God was saying to them, and then, like Paul, looked for ways to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with someone. And at some point, the opportunity they had was with you...with each of us.

And: **Now it's your turn, and my turn, to continue what Paul and the first Christians did, and that someone did for us, and look for those opportunities to share our faith and invite people into a relationship with Jesus.** Let's be like the people of Berea and eagerly receive what God has to say to each of us every Sunday and every time we open our Bibles. Let's eagerly be looking for how God is moving in our lives. And then let's be ready to look for common ground with the people around us so that we can

be the hands and feet of Jesus in their lives and preach the gospel. As St. Francis said: “Preach the gospel always, and when necessary use words.” My friends, at some point, words are necessary. God will give you the words, but it helps if we prepare a little bit, so we don’t blurt out something like that barber. So like Paul did: let’s listen to the Lord, let’s know how he’s touched our lives, let’s be prepared to say something when the Lord gives us the opportunity, and then let’s say the words he gives us, so that others would come to faith in Jesus. Join me in prayer...Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Today’s sermon correlates to Chapter 29 in “The Story.” We took orders for copies of the book, “The Story” at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for “NIV The Story Bible” at their website.

<sup>ii</sup> Probably that had to do with the culture of the places – Thessalonica was a blue-collar port on the Aegean Sea, which is really just a part of the Mediterranean Sea, while Athens was perhaps *the* intellectual hub of Greece at the time. Berea is kind of a ‘tweener.

<sup>iii</sup> Sermoncentral.com and <http://www.churchww.com/Word-s-from-the-Pastor.html>