

Acts 17:1-12 *When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ²As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. ⁴Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. ⁵But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, ⁷and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” ⁸When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. ⁹Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. ¹⁰As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. ¹²As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

It shouldn’t surprise us. I’m talking about the extreme reaction that many people in our world have when they hear the Gospel message about Jesus. Just make mention of Jesus and some people will physically react in a negative way. Some of the most hate-filled rants come from unbelieving people leveled against believers and even God himself. You can talk about almost anything these days with the exception of Christianity. That’s the one topic that seems to be off limits. You can talk about religion or spirituality in general. You can express your own thoughts and opinions. But state anything the Bible says and stand firm on it and people are instantly upset. Maybe upset is even an understatement. Downright angry...mad. They can become so upset that it leads them into hate-filled rants laced with scathing vitriol. Some even react violently to the message of the Gospel and those who bring it. But it shouldn’t surprise us!

Why? The hard truth that we are confronted with today is that the Gospel offends people. That sounds weird to say, but it’s true. The Gospel offends people. It offends their sinful nature to suggest that they aren’t able to bring about their salvation on their own. This is the reaction we see in our text for today. The Apostle Paul did what was his normal custom. As he traveled around and entered into a city, he would go first to the synagogue. It was common for them to let traveling teachers stand up in the synagogue and teach. Paul’s practice was to take the Jewish people into the Old Testament to help them understand that Jesus had to suffer and die and rise from the grave to bring about their salvation. This wasn’t a new thing that he did. It wasn’t an odd thing that he did. He did exactly what God had decided and the OT prophets had prophesied that he would do—suffer and die and rise again to sacrifice his perfect life for the sins of everyone and conquer death and render the devil powerless against God’s people. Because Jesus did what the OT prophets had said the Messiah would do, he had to therefore be the Messiah.

You would think that these people would have been overjoyed to hear this good news! The Messiah had finally come. The Messiah had come and brought to them the spiritual salvation from their sins that they so desperately needed so they could live with God forever in heaven. And we’re told that some Jews did believe as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. But there were others who not only didn’t believe but reacted in a completely opposite way. They were so jealous that they not only searched for Paul and Silas, they first went out and rounded up bad characters to form a mob and go after them. Their reaction wasn’t, “Hey, we should sit down with these guys and talk this through to find out what they are saying.” This was: we are going to get rid of these guys once and for all and completely eradicate this message along with anyone who holds to it from our midst. They were willing to go out and round bad people to take Paul and Silas out. When they couldn’t find Paul and Silas they dragged Jason and some other believers in front of the city officials and charged them with treason for which they could have been put to death. They weren’t messing around! They didn’t just not believe the message. This message offended them so greatly they were willing to trump up charges against these believers to have them put to death.

What offended them so much? For a Jewish person, the message that sinners are saved solely by God’s grace in Christ was repugnant. Every Jewish person had been taught from early on that the way to God’s favor was the conscientious, zealous observance of the Mosaic law. Now, they were being told that their righteousness, their favorable standing before God, was all a delusion and they needed this Jesus as a Savior from their sin and guilt. In addition, the whole concept of a suffering Messiah was a huge stumbling block. They had always viewed the Messiah coming with a show of power and earthly glory. They pictured the strong conqueror riding in on a war stallion in a display of earthly glory that would be unrivaled. To hear this message that the Messiah had to suffer was mind blowing to them. Their jealousy came in defending the Messiah’s honor and saving his reputation and good name. A suffering Messiah who would rescue me from sin and earn the righteousness that I need to stand before God in judgment? No way! Rather than stopping to examine the scriptures and listen to Paul and allow themselves to see how Jesus fulfilled everything the OT said, they let their offense blind them to the truth and lash out in anger and violence.

The Gospel still offends people today. The self-righteousness that was so prominent in the hearts of the Jewish people is just as prominent in the hearts of people today. When people hear about Jesus taking our sins away by his sacrifice and rising from the dead to conquer death and that because of this God offers eternal life to all, there are those who respond: "But I don't believe that. I don't like the idea that Jesus is the only way to heaven. I don't like being told that I'm sinful and need God's help. I don't like being told there are such places as heaven and hell. I want to believe the way I want to believe—that you're a good person, you do the best you can, then everything will be alright and in the end everyone will go to heaven. That's what I want to believe." This is how much of our culture approaches Christianity. In their offense at what they hear, they instantly proclaim, "I don't believe!" Some even go so far as to say, "I won't believe!" Jesus laid it out very clearly in our Gospel Lesson today: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* This is counter to our culture. It goes directly against our culture to believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven. It's not politically correct to say that people are wrong. The human ego doesn't want to hear it. So many people not only reject the message of Jesus, they reject it strongly just as the people did in the account before us today.

The truth is: you and I are just as offended by the Gospel. There isn't one of us who likes to hear: you are a sinner. Not only do I not want to hear that I am a sinner, I don't want to think that I'm bad enough to deserve to be treated the way that Jesus was as a common criminal. I don't want to think that I'm bad enough to have the almighty God turn his back on me and forsake me for the rest of eternity. That offends me! I revolt at that! I don't want to hear it! But it's the truth. And I can react either one of two ways. I can act like the Jews in Thessalonica and with complete offense refuse to believe it and react violently to it. Or I can act like the Bereans who were willing to listen to what Paul said and then go to the Scriptures to examine them and see if what he was telling them was true. Acting like the Thessalonians might bring some temporary relief to my offended conscience. It might help to restore my pride in who I am and how good I try to be. But it will not change the facts of the situation nor change my status when I stand before God. The Bereans on the other hand received the word with eagerness, examined the Scriptures and allowed the Holy Spirit to work through those Scriptures to create faith in their heart. They were openminded to the possibility that Paul wasn't trying to use this message for his own gain but cared enough for them to tell them the truth so that they could remedy their situation through faith in Jesus. They saw the good news that the Gospel brought to them and came to trust in the forgiveness and salvation God gave to them.

So what do we learn from this? First, I think it's important to work through what kind of person am I going to be? Am I going to let myself be blinded in my offense and unwilling to accept what God says in his Word or am I willing to listen with an open heart and search the Scriptures for the truth it shares? Even when we believe in Jesus as our Savior, we can be offended at different things that God says in Scripture and unwilling to listen to them. God's views on sexuality and homosexuality and roles of men and women fit here. In our offense, we might listen more to those in the world around us than we do to God in Scripture. Notice that Paul didn't resent the Bereans for searching the scriptures. He welcomed it. He knew that their study would not only confirm his message as God's message to all sinners but would also produce in them a greater, more joyous certainty of their salvation. Your study of God's Word does the same. There are studies that show that less than 50% of Americans read their Bible in a given week. Are you one of them? If we aren't searching the word daily, it becomes easy to just accept what someone else says is the truth and be led into error. Having a high regard for the truth will lead each of us back there daily.

The other lesson we learn from this text is that there will always be two opposite reactions to God's word as we go about the work of being God's witnesses to the resurrection. One will be to let the Holy Spirit work in the heart to believe the truth. The other will act in offense as the truth disturbs their notion of what is right and it will bring the worst out in them. We ought to expect this. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 2: *For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life.*" This will always be the opposing reactions. We can't argue people to faith or force them to believe. We can only do like Paul—reason with them from the scriptures and let the Holy Spirit do the work. When the Bible says reason, Paul wasn't trying to find a way to scheme them to faith. It means that he taught them by means of the question and answer method. He shared the word with them in a way that would stimulate their intellect to see the truths scripture laid out. As you see, even with this method some believed and some rejected it. That's the way it will always be. But we can't let the rejection of some stop us from sharing the word with all. We share the word with joy and eagerness knowing that it will work faith in the hearts of some and others will reject it. Our work is simply to be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

It shouldn't surprise us. The Gospel does offend people—you and me included. Hearing that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the grave causes us to face some very difficult truths about ourselves. But understanding those truths is extremely beneficial for us because it points us to the good news of life and salvation in Jesus. I pray that God the Holy Spirit open our eyes to see these precious truths and rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus. I also pray that he lead us to be confident in continuing to witness to the resurrection of Jesus knowing that while it might be the smell of death to some, it will be the aroma of life to others. We shouldn't be surprised. Amen.