

Somewhere in the Middle
Acts 17:10-34

1 Timothy 4
1 Peter 1
Responsive Psalm 46

Last week we barely touched on the last half of chapter 17, we focused upon what brought Paul and Silas to Berea, but we didn't spend any time on the events that transpired there. So this morning we are going to be looking again at chapter 17, but we will be looking at the last half starting in verse 10. So if you remember from last week, Paul and those with him had arrived at Thessalonica where for the first time we see recorded in their last few stops they found a synagogue, and a large presence of Jews. As was Paul's custom he stopped there to preach first, but the Jews there became jealous and sought to bring them before the city council by first causing an uprising among the people in the marketplace to help to fabricate this story about them bringing unrest, and rebellion against Caesar. So as we see, the brethren there, the fellow believers in Thessalonica sent Paul and Silas away by night, basically sneaking them out of the city so that they would not be caught.

So let us go ahead and read again our passage this morning, starting in verse 10, and going to the end of the chapter. This synagogue community here at Berea is set up in contrast to the one in Thessalonica. Thought not everyone believed, their initial reception of the gospel message was such as to provoke a careful, daily study of the scriptures, to as verse 11 puts it, "To see if these things be true" This response by the Berean's was the proper response, as Matthew Henry wrote in his commentary, "They had a more freer thought, and lay open to conviction, were willing to hear reason, and admit the force of it, and to subscribe to that which appeared to them to be truth, though it was contrary to their former sentiments, This is more noble. They had a better temper, were not so sour, or morose and ill conditioned toward all that were not of their mind. As they were ready to come into a unity with those that by the power of truth they were brought to concur with. This was more noble, they neither prejudged the cause, nor were moved to envy by the managers of it, as the Jews at Thessalonica were, but rather very generously gave both it, and them a fair hearing, without passion or partiality."

The Bereans reaction was the ideal, it is the model toward weighing teaching against the word. Far too often the preacher is taken at his word, it is assumed that he know what he is talking about, and it is because of this that many are lead astray by false teachers, into false doctrines and belief. Instead of looking to scripture to see if these things be true, people are deceived by preachers who manipulate and control their congregations, who do not preach the gospel, but rather use the gospel to further their own agenda. The Berean's here stand as an example to all of us as to how we are the measure that which we are being taught. We are to look to the scriptures, and test these things. It is commendable to wrestle with new ideas, to seek proof within scripture itself and not to blindly follow someones teaching merely because they are well spoken or articulate, who have an appearance of wisdom about them. But rather we should measure all things by scripture itself, weigh the evidences to see if what is being taught is true. And if we find that it is true, then we must be willing to admit it, to believe it, to embrace it.

I think of the debate that arises with our Reformed brethren, who staunchly seek to adhere to some semblance of the old covenant law. Though the new testament is quite clear that we who believe are no longer under such a law, but that it is has been fulfilled in Christ Jesus, who has established a new covenant in his blood, as was written in the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 8,

“But now he has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as he is also a mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.” Notice here, that this is truly a new covenant, this is not a reskin, or remodel of the old.. but a new one, established on better promises.

And here is the reason why there must be a new covenant verse 7, “For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.” Again, a second covenant, not like the first..again new, not just a reestablishment of the old..but something entirely different. Verse 8, “Because finding fault with them, he says, Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead the out of the land of Egypt, because they did not continue in my covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their mind, and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for all shall know my, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and lawless needs I will remember no more. In that he says a new covenant, he has made the first obsolete and growing old and is ready to vanish away.”

This stands as one example of an issue that is debated today, and one that so many seem to disregard scripture's teaching to instead adhere to their traditions. As you can see, the proper response to any such debates is to go to scripture and work out which side of the debate bears the weight of evidence, and it is the responsibility of the believer to then adhere and believe in that which scripture teaches. There is a fine balance that we should be striving for, it is commendable to have a sense of stubbornness, but that should never come at the cost of truth, and likewise we should not be so willing to change an except a new thing that we are jumping all over the place in our belief. We must stand firm upon our belief, but if scripture challenges that belief, it is scripture which is true, not what you perceive to be true.

We have seen it for a while now, the worlds march toward relativism, an attempt to kill objective truth. We have seen it for years within some who claim belief, rejecting the inherent truth of the gospel believing instead in their emotions, how they feel about something, and own self perception of truth even when it is at odds with scripture. There has been a real attempt to discredit the gospel, to say that the bible is a book of fairy tales, or at the very least...a good book to learn some life lessons but overall is nothing more then an exaggerated collection of fantastical stories. And we even get such ideas from the pulpet from false teachers, who rarely ever use scripture itself in their teaching but instead guide the listener to listen to the heart, to be guided by their feelings and emotions...again eroding away the fact of the abject truth of scripture. The reality is, if the bible isn't truth, if it isn't more then just a collection of moral stories, if it isn't the word of God... then what are we even doing here this morning? If the word of God isn't truth itself, then what is the point of even believing in such a God? We can't cherry pick what we like out of scripture and disregard the rest. We can't believe God is love....and he isn't also vengeance, for if that were so, he wouldn't be a just and holy God.

Mankind has become a god unto itself, by that I mean, mankind believes it is they who are the final judge of what is truth, and that truth is what ever we perceive it to be. The phrase, “my truth” gets tossed around a lot in our society today...which in reality implies not that the thing is actually true, just merely you believe it to be.

And that your truth, can differ from another's truth..yet both can be true. We are living in a lost world that has even eroded the sense of truth with in our own society to the point that we see its effects even with in the churches. Truth is that which speaks the loudest now, there needs not be evidences, there needs not be proof...truth can be manufactured by the manipulating of emotion, and the brain washing effect of repetition.

This is why the Berean's stand out, for they would not allow themselves to merely be swayed by public opinion, or by what is popular, or jump on the latest and greatest bandwagon. Yet, they also were not so dogmatic and stubborn as the Jews in Thessalonica were, that they were open to hearing...yet always testing, always checking to be certain of truth. In this chapter Luke sets up for the reader 3 examples here of the handling of hearing something new. You have the Jews at Thessalonica, who were a cold, aggressive, people unwilling to listen, who indeed sought violence to rid themselves of Paul. Jealousy was stirred up in them, their decisions were driven by emotion, by anger, and hatred toward anything that challenged their own belief. Then you have the Bereans in the middle, open to hearing but testing, searching, reading, and checking to see if these things align with scripture. They were willing to listen, willing to grow and no so dogmatic and arrogant in their belief to think that they could very well have mistaken. They are set up, and commended as those who stand as a model to the Christians way of thinking. For it is how we grow, it is how we learn. Then the last example is in Athens, to which Luke describes them as a people who spent their time in nothing else but to either tell, or hear something new.

They were not grounded, and indeed stand as a representative for much of what we see today. Chasing what they perceived as truth, yet the truth they find is no truth at all for it changes, and moves about with every new thing that comes along. To the Athenians, and much like our own society today, truth is malleable, changeable, shape-able, there is the idea that we can create our own truth, even when it is at odds with proven, factual, unchangeable truth. It has become about more of how we perceive and what we feel is true then searching and seeking to find truth. This mindset has also infiltrated the churches, it has taken hold within the Christian psyche, trusting more upon what we feel is right as opposed to what scripture says is right. A good and obvious example of this is in the debate about salvation itself. If we are to look at what scripture says, verses what many believe to be true we find a stark difference. Scripture says, "There is non righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God." Yet, there are many who seek to appeal to mans will, there are many who label themselves as "seeker sensitive" churches, looking to appeal to the emotion and feelings of the individual as opposed to appealing to the heart and soul.

There is a perception that man is at his core, basically good..and that he is just tainted by sin and all it will take is for him or her to make a decision, come to their own conclusion, to exercise their own faith to believe. Yet, what does scripture say? In Jeremiah it says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" The heart is wicked, it is deceitful, it lies, it desires sin...and this is the heart that will seek after God? This is why the Psalmist, who was Quoted by Paul in Roman's said, There is none righteous, no, not one..and there is none who seeks after God, because the heart is deceitfully wicked. So, we in our witness are expecting a deceitful heart, full of selfish desire to trust? And believe? This is what many teach in the church today...disregarding what scripture teaches of the state of mankind, to instead trust in their own feeling, and own understanding of the matter...believing that first man is basically good, even though scripture tells us that it is the opposite...the heart of man is wicked, deceitful, selfish, arrogant, and full of envy. So therefore we must not appeal to this dead heart, but rather appeal to God who is able to change hearts, It is not our job as witness's as many believe to appeal to man's will and emotion to drive them to a confession. No, we are simply to share the gospel, but not only by our words, but by our life.

For we have no ability to change man's heart, we have no ability to change man's will, and we as mankind have no ability to change it within ourselves, despite what many preachers may tell you. For again scripture says the opposite, Roman's 9, For this is the word of promise, At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son. And not only this, but when Rebecca had also conceived by one man, even by our father Abraham, for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God's election might stand, not of works but of him who calls, it was said to her, The older shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." Again this points out a truth in scripture that many overlook or make excuses for not wanting to believe the simple truth....Jacob have I loved, Esau I have hated. Paul, expecting the argument of modern man asks the question that is already on their tongues, "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?" Is God unrighteous for hating Esau and loving Jacob? ...as Paul says, Certainly Not, For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion. So then it is not of him who wills....it is not of him who decides, or convinces themselves, nor is it of him who runs, it is not of him who works righteous deeds seeking to gain favor...but it is of God who shows mercy.

I have a saying...one that Aaron is quite familiar with for it has come up often in our conversations. It seems, that the correct answer to most things is found in the middle. Far too often in life, as well as in our Christian walk we can tend to favor one extreme over another. And the accounts that Luke wrote about here in this chapter sort of set up this very same argument within the structure of the accounts. This chapter has 2 book ends, both on the extreme side of an issue, on one hand there is those who are violently opposed to the gospel preached by Paul, and they resort to some pretty extreme actions to try to silence him. They hired trouble makers and incited a riot within their city. Then on the other end with the Athenians, you have a group of people who appeared to except anything. In not wanting to offend, or in a move to cover all of their bases as Paul points out they had a monument built to The Unknown God....just in case there is one out there they hadn't heard about yet. Then, in the middle...the Bereans, who in demeanor, and action prove to be the middle ground between these two extremes. They don't rush into belief like the Athenians, yet they aren't so closed minded and arrogant as the Thessolonians.

We must be a people who are not swept up in the excitement of the extremes. As Aaron also, always points out... no one ever gets excited over the middle ground. But I argue that is precisely where we should be. A quiet people, not given to extremes, who are patient, who are kind, and who take the time to test against scripture so that we may know the truth. We ought not to be a reactionary people, nor are we to be an unmovable stubborn people, unless we are standing on that which has been proven to be true. If we are to be stubborn, we ought to be sure that we are being stubborn for the right reasons. In fact a measure of stubbornness is necessary, otherwise we become a people who is tossed around by every new doctrine, every new thing. It is right to be stubborn in your belief, in your stance, but when faced with an undeniable truth we must be willing to accept it and not be so dogmatic in believing to borrow a phrase from today's society....that our truth, is true. How many of us have been attacked by fellow christian brothers and sisters over the issue of God's method of salvation. It is right to stand upon the truth of what scripture says in the matter, but the reverse is also true...if what you believe does not bear the weight of scripture, then instead of lashing out in arrogance and pride, maybe you should sit down a moment, calm down a bit and read scripture...search it out, be like the Bereans and test to see what is true.