

Words and Deeds: Mistaken Identity
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 97; Matthew 4:1-11; Acts 14:8-20

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 14:8-20. Listen now to the Word of God. "In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe."

Have you ever wondered why people fall for crazy scams and conspiracy theories? I think about some of the strangest ideas I've ever heard...that the earth is flat, not round...that we didn't actually land on the moon...that Elvis is still alive. Or think about some of the swindles people try to pull. Just before I started writing my sermon, I got a call telling me to go to AmazonSales.co (not .com, but .co) to make tons of money as an Amazon employee. Or have you ever had a friend try and get you into the perfect work-from-home job where you'd only have to work eight hours a week and make a trillion dollars? We've heard them all.

Why do we buy into them? I believe events in our past, the things we've been taught, and the beliefs we hold can steer us in the wrong direction. It's not surprising if someone's been lied to a lot in their lives that they would be reluctant to believe what the news says is true. On the other hand, a lot of Christians are taken in by scams that seem too good to be true. Why? Probably because we teach love and trust – and so sometimes, we trust those we shouldn't. We have something in our background that says it's OK when there are a ton of red flags.

Let's think about this on a more serious subject. It used to be that cohabiting – moving in with someone before marriage – was frowned on in our society. Yet in the past 50 years, cohabitation rates have gone up 900% -- it's going up so fast that they can't even track how many young people are living together before marriage. On the low end, it's 67% -- on the high end, it's over 90%.

Now the church still teaches that the godly way is to marry before moving in together. But in our culture, to marry without having lived together first is the exception, not the norm. For someone to marry without moving in with the person for a couple of years looks absurd. Our culture asks, “How do you know that person is right for you without living with them a while? How can you commit a lifetime to them without knowing if it’s going to work out?” We can’t be terribly hard on people because everything they’ve learned teaches them to expect it.

I bring all of this up because it directly relates to today’s passage. This is a strange tale, one that comes up unexpectedly. At first, it doesn’t seem to have much to do with us. But in fact, it has *everything* to do with us. The bizarre incident Paul and Barnabas face in Lystra is going to explain why we have cultural problems understanding Scripture, why people often reject God in the modern era, and give us some idea what we can do about.

So the story starts like many others we’ve heard in the gospels and the book of Acts. A man lame since birth is healed and is suddenly able to walk, based on the word from Paul. Now we have to take a moment to acknowledge that this is the instigating incident – it’s what causes everything else to happen – but it’s not surprising to us now at all. This was so common, so regular, we’ve read about this sort of thing so many times, that we aren’t surprised at all.

I don’t want to spend much time on it, but it should make us reflect on the fact that we should expect to see miracles when the gospel is preached, especially to those who haven’t heard before. I think we rarely see miracles in our churches because we’ve stopped believing in them. Our culture has told us they are impossible. When we do see a miracle, we’re looking for a logical explanation that puts God in the background. Keep that in the back of your head, because it’s cultural conditioning just like what is up ahead in the story.

Now Paul had been preaching the gospel, right? Everyone there was being told who Jesus was. Paul never tried to give the impression that he himself was somebody important. It was preaching Jesus. But when the people see this amazing healing, all the Jesus Paul has been teaching to the people suddenly goes out of their heads. It’s as if they haven’t heard a word.

Instead, all of them start going off on how Paul and Barnabas are really Hermes and Zeus in disguise. Now we might guess that Paul and Barnabas aren’t really sure of what’s going on, because this outcry about Hermes and Zeus is going on not in Greek (which they know and use to teach) but Lyconian (which almost certainly they don’t). I’m not convinced they really understand what’s going on until the priest of Zeus shows us up with a big crowd ready to sacrifice to the apostles.

Why is this happening? It’s possible that Paul and Barnabas really didn’t know. It goes back to a legend written by the poet Ovid about 50 years prior. Long ago, supposedly, the gods had visited earth. Zeus and Hermes had dressed up as peasants and gone house to house in this valley looking for someone to take them in. They went up to plenty of rich homes, but no one welcomed them. Finally they went to the cottage of a couple named Baucis and Philemon. They were poor but incredibly hospitable, willing to kill their only goose to make them a meal.

Before they can kill the goose, the gods reveal themselves and tell the couple to head for the mountains. Zeus floods the valley, killing all the people who refused to take him in, and makes the couple's home into a regal temple up on the mountain. They get to stay in it together throughout their lifetime, and as a gift, they die together, and when they do they become a pair of trees that watch over the flooded valley together.

The thing is, Ovid's tale is set in the exact same region where Paul and Barnabas are preaching! Everyone in this area knows the story by heart. We've got to imagine that they're panicked. Are they going to be drowned like their ancestors from centuries ago if they don't take care of Zeus and Hermes come in disguise? Of course the crowd is going to misunderstand the healing as a sign that the gods are in their midst. *Of course* the priest is going to come and offer sacrifices. Their own legends and history demand it! We should be shocked if they didn't!

Obviously, Paul and Barnabas are shocked and dismayed by this development. And their appeal after tearing their clothes – an ancient sign of their grief – shows that they didn't expect this. "Men, why are you doing this?" is the very first thing they say. They are quick to point out that they are just men. And what the crowds are doing is precisely what they don't want. They want all the Gentiles to know about Jesus and to turn to the God of Israel whose handiwork is seen in all the kindness He has shown to them throughout the generations.

Eventually, it's Paul and Barnabas' enemies that get the crowd on their side. They likely convince the crowd of what the Jewish authorities had been saying about all the Jesus-followers – that they were doing these miracles by some evil power. By the time they're done, Paul is left for dead on the side of the road after an unsuccessful stoning. He's OK, though, and the next day he and Barnabas head out for Derbe. Unlike the other cities where they've been, they have no intention of sticking around and trying to sort out this culture clash.

So now none of us is going to be worshiping Zeus any time soon, I don't think. We might think that this is nothing more than an interesting story showing just what Paul and Barnabas went through to make sure everyone heard the gospel. But I am convinced that much of what's going on in this passage is precisely why Christianity in our society is so lackluster, so confused, and so often antithetical to what Jesus and Paul and Peter and Barnabas taught.

Here's the first thing I want us to really think about today: *when we come to Scripture and to the worship of God, we've got to realize the biases we bring to the table.* This is not "bias" in the purely negative sense, for example, that we're biased against people from a certain nation or language or whatever. Everyone has biases that start forming almost as soon as we can sit up in a chair. The big deal is whether or not we realize our biases.

The Lyconians show off their bias in a big way. When they see a huge miracle done, they instantly assume Zeus is behind it. They fear him because of the legend and assume that they must worship him in order to avoid having to build themselves an ark. It happens naturally and instinctively. Everything they've been taught leads them to totally the wrong conclusions, but given the situation it's completely understandable.

What biases do *we* have? Where are our blind spots, especially when it comes to faith? I'll point out a few that virtually every American Christian must face. Every American has heard at some point, "God helps those who help themselves." We've been told that we become angels when we die. We've heard it said that being good is your ticket into heaven. We've heard that believers should be happy all the time and that God wants us to be happy.

We're told, "God won't give you more than you can handle." We think that God's love for us is determined by our behavior. We've also heard that because God is love and Jesus said "do not judge," we cannot call out another person's behaviors and be a Christian. And we're told that God wants us to "follow our heart." Some of these contradict one another, don't they? Our culture has set us up with some pretty big whoppers about God.

To hear the true gospel message, we have to set aside these pre-conceived ideas about God aside. We have to start listening with a new set of ears – it's really a set of ears God provides for us, because all those un-Christian ideas about God can be pretty deafening. Because if we come to God and come to His Scripture with all our ideas about who God is supposed to be, pretty soon we're not going to like what we read at all. We might do what a lot of people have done and shape the messages we read around what we already believe.

What makes it harder is that we're reading a Bible written between 1,900 and 3,400 years ago! To get it right, we have to not only try to remove our own biases, we have to try and understand things from someone else's perspective. It can be done, absolutely. But it takes work. Can someone be saved just from reading Scripture on their own and coming to believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord? Absolutely. But many of us need to work to get rid of the biases we bring.

It means that we're going to need to read our Bibles thoroughly to understand them, so we don't take one passage out of context to make it mean what it doesn't mean. Otherwise, we could wind up with a Zeus and Hermes situation where we demean God when we think we're trying to honor Him. I cannot emphasize enough how regular, diligent study of the Bible can make the difference between misunderstanding Scripture and reading it as God intended.

Here's the second and related point: *many people reject the Gospel today because of their own unexamined biases*. It's not just us with the problem; it's everybody. The average person today looks at this passage and can't get past the idea that Paul healed someone just by speaking to him. Miracles don't happen, they say. Well, that's a bias, isn't it? It's the bias they've been ingrained with. Science says it can't happen. That's a bias too. Pure science is simply observation of the world around us to understand how it works. It cannot tell us what cannot happen, only what has and hasn't been observed.

Many people today are biased against the Bible because it calls specific patterns and behaviors sin – immorality. If you go into the Bible believing that you determine for yourself what is right and wrong, then no wonder you're offended by so much of what you read! I had a friend who said it seemed sexist of Jesus not to have female disciples. In a culture where women weren't taught to read? Luke 8 tells us a group of women traveled with the twelve and helped finance Jesus' ministry. Bias, plain and simple.

But again, we cannot be too hard on our friends and neighbors and loved ones who have bought into the lies of our culture. If we who are Christians, who have been hearing the Word of God preached, who have the Holy Spirit, can still be fooled by some of the lies about God in our midst, it's no wonder that unbelievers believe the lies told about Christianity in our culture.

And unfortunately, sometimes we've made the biases worse. When we've acted without love or grace to those in trouble, when we've shown more love for political power than love for our neighbor, when we've not shown Christ to others as He really is, it's no wonder. The reality is, only the Holy Spirit's work can eliminate the biases that make us hear that Zeus and Hermes are in town when it's clearly been said that it's the God of Israel at work.

So what do we do? Is there any way for us to see through the mess? If I have one suggestion for us besides becoming aware of our own biases, it's this: *listen with grace to your own story and the stories of others*. Even in their great distress, Paul and Barnabas were able to turn it around and help the people of Lystra see that God wanted them to know Him. When the Holy Spirit is working to reach someone, we can listen to the stories we're told and find ways to overcome the biases that stand in the way of belief.

Often one set of biases are really just feeding the real biases we face. We might hide behind science, for example, but the real issue might be that we grew up with an unkind, unloving, or absent father figure, so accepting God as a Father – especially a Father who in Scripture disciplines the righteous and punishes the wicked – can be really hard. We don't change who God is; we don't ignore God as Father or try to turn Him into "mother." But we help them see that God is the perfect Father who will always love them, support them, and do what is best for them – that even in painful and difficult times, He is fulfilling that Father role to bring us into His Kingdom transformed and made whole.

Or as we brought up earlier, sexuality is a big bias today in our culture. What do we say about the biblical teaching that marriage and sexuality is for one man and one woman for a lifetime? For some, the bias is based in lust and a desire for pleasure – that's hard to overcome. But for others, the bias is really that God is a harsh God who has arbitrary rules and who wants to punish us. That's the furthest thing from the truth. God gives us His laws so that we can thrive and flourish, that we can become what God intended for us. God tells us His ways not so we will be punished when we fail to live up to them, but so we can experience His best for us. These are just a few examples of how our biases can be overcome.

The way we overcome those biases is to know ourselves and to know others, to see ourselves and others as we truly are. So often the tender parts of our hearts are buried under a load of pain from our pasts. That makes some of us run to Jesus and others run away from Him. But as God is working in our lives, we can be part of the solution. We can listen and help others overcome their blind spots, just as we overcome our own. We can show them that there's been a case of mistaken identity – the God of the Bible is different from the god they think He is. He's better, more loving, more just, more gracious, and more holy than we ever thought possible – and a far cry from the Zeus and Hermes from legends of old.