

Words and Deeds: The Dividing Line
By Jason Huff
January 6, 2019
Isaiah 8:11-15; Luke 12:49-53; Acts 13:42-14:7

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 13:42-14:7. May God bless the reading of His holy and sacred Word. “As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue [in Pisidian Antioch], the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the good news.”

Do you ever go into the holidays just praying that everybody stays civil? We have visions of beautiful Christmases with everyone gathered around the tree, multiple generations, cousins, relatives all together, everyone sings and everyone loves each and every present and everyone loves each other, kinda like Hallmark on steroids?

But in reality, that’s not the case. We just want the liberal aunt and the conservative brother-in-law not to get into a fistfight. We just want a few strands of lights on the Christmas tree not to burn out before the big day arrives. We hope a couple of gifts hit the sweet spot. We love the fantasy, but we’d take everyone treating each other with respect and kindness one day a year. We don’t want to be divided on those special family days.

In a society that is growing more uncivil, we see all sorts of dividing lines. People try to divide us into different ethnic and racial groups, different political groups, different gender categories – when there’s no common thread that binds us together, division happens naturally. But the one real dividing line has always remained the same – the dividing line of faith.

What you believe at the core of your being about faith determines everything else. Faith brings together folks who would never come together otherwise. But faith also divides us. We love those who oppose us – Jesus taught us to do that – but we recognize they are on the other side. Today’s passage shows that the dividing lines aren’t what we think they are. Instead, faith is what makes us different from everyone else. We’re going to look at that a little bit. We’re also see how outreach to others should look, and even how we come to the faith in the first place.

Before our Christmas series we saw Paul and Barnabas in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch preaching about Jesus. Paul showed how Jesus was the promised messiah in David’s line that would never see decay because of His resurrection from the dead. And this sermon of Paul gets a lot of attention. Many of the devout talk with Paul and Barnabas for a long time after the worship service. The people are so amazed, word gets around so fast that virtually the whole city is there on the next Sabbath, Jews and Gentiles alike. But this time there’s controversy.

The crowds make the unbelieving Jewish congregants upset. Their synagogue is overrun with pagans who think that they might have a place in God’s Kingdom. This is their place, not a place for Gentiles! (Have you ever been in a church where a family has sat for the last 80 years? Heaven help you if you accidentally sit in their pew!) And this Jesus says that they aren’t good enough to enter God’s Kingdom, which offends them. So they start causing trouble.

They start attacking Paul’s message. The Greek word here is *blasphemountes*, and it’s exactly what you might think it is – it’s blasphemy. It’s slander, insults, and abuse against the truth of Jesus. They blaspheme against the faith. They refuse to believe. Paul doesn’t try to win them over. He doesn’t change his message to make it more friendly. He doesn’t charm them with a better speech or appeal to them to give him another chance. He says, “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.” No trying to win friends and influence people there!

But Paul and Barnabas are crazy successful. The Gentiles receive God’s message gladly. The promise that all nations would be a part of the Kingdom, the promise the magi came to honor, they prove it true. All who were appointed for eternal life believed. Until troublemakers rile things up, news of Jesus’ resurrection spreads like wildfire. Then Paul and Barnabas get kicked out when the Jewish leaders influence the city leaders to give them the boot. The same thing happens in Iconium. Great numbers there believe. Yet there is huge division in the city about Jesus, and eventually Paul and Barnabas have to escape in order to avoid being stoned.

So what’s here for us? First, understand this: *faith is what brings God’s people together across every line that once divided us*. Why are the Jewish people so upset at Paul and Barnabas and this message? They had been waiting and praying for a messiah, and now there’s a credible story that He’s arrived and ushered in God’s Kingdom on earth. You’d think they would be overjoyed. But they aren’t.

Some were waiting on a warrior messiah to conquer Rome, and Jesus didn’t fit that perspective. But the Jewish people in the town were also jealous. Have you ever known a three year old who thinks it’s great they’re going to have a baby brother or sister until the arrival date and suddenly everything’s not about them anymore? It’s kind of like that.

The Jewish people prided themselves on being God's chosen ones, His unique people, the only ones who had access to the one true God and assurances of His promises. But Jesus came for the nations, to let all who would come to faith into the Kingdom. These people they thought were immoral and filthy and unclean, Paul says can come into the Kingdom through Jesus!

Thing is, there is no one on the planet God can't reach with the gospel and give faith if He so desires. No race, no color, no particular background, no culture, no job background, no class, no sins in their past. Faith covers all those boundaries that keep us from relating to one another. We can sit here today, some of us look different from one another. Our ancestors came from different places. Some work blue collar jobs, some white collar. Different educations, different backgrounds, different messy histories. And we are made one in Christ Jesus. As Paul would write later to the church in Galatia, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Even though that's supposed to be true, we have a hard time crossing those division lines too. Sunday has statistically been called the most segregated time in America, and not just along racial and ethnic lines, but along economic lines as well. We don't reach out well across those boundaries. And we must always be willing to do just that in order to let Christ work through us.

Churches that say, "Those aren't our kind of people," aren't churches. They are social clubs. They have nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can send money overseas, we can claim to love others of different groups, but we must always be willing to sit by someone very much unlike us and love them in the Spirit of Christ. I believe we have done OK with that at CrossWay, and it's my hope and prayer that someday we'll see more people here, welcomed not because they look or sound like us or know the right words or "fit in" but because they are sinners in need of the grace of Jesus, just like everyone here.

Now this brings us to the next big thing – what is our responsibility in reaching others with the gospel? Because Paul's methodology seems harsh – he is not trying to win the Jewish congregation in Pisidian Antioch with a kinder, gentler approach. Yet his approach won Jews and Gentiles alike to Jesus. But what are we to do in our era?

Here's my best answer to that: *as far as it depends on us, we want people to hear the straight-forward, complete gospel – and then we let God do His work.* Paul's example is not an encouragement to give up on people or to not fulfill our obligations to invite people into a relationship with Jesus. However, it does give us some idea of where our obligation ends.

To be honest, we don't fulfill our obligations. I say it to myself as much as anyone else. My gamers' group knows they are welcome at the church, but I don't make the invitation explicit all that often. I don't say, "Would you like to come to church this Sunday?" We are reluctant to make the invite for fear that they'll say "no," or worse, that they'll think we're strange for having faith in this day and age. (If you're living out your faith, they already think you're strange, so there's no harm in it!)

God encourages us to live in a way that our faith becomes obvious to others, so it shouldn't come as a surprise when we talk to people about spiritual things or ask them to come to a worship service. In the last year, several of you invited friends who came to events like the Algonac Christmas Walk and Christmas Eve. God is using you, and many of us are stepping up to God's challenge to us. I'm thankful for that.

But when is enough, enough? Good question. There are many people I know, some of them who consider themselves Christians, who've never actually heard the gospel. Some of them are in local churches. Sounds crazy, right?

But if they don't know that they are saved by God's grace and not by their good deeds, they don't know the gospel. If they've been told that they need to get on God's side so God will give them stuff they want, or that God really just wants everybody to be positive and encouraging – that's not the gospel. If they have been in church but never hear about sin and salvation, Christ's perfect life and saving death and His resurrection, they haven't heard the gospel. Too many people out there haven't heard the good news that God saves us and that our relationship with Him is not governed by who we are and what we do but who God is and what He has already done. The confused, the misinformed, the mistaken, and the well-intentioned but wrong all need the gospel.

That means we have a lot of people to share with, a lot of people to pray for, and a lot of people to invite. But we don't have to water anything down. We respond to the Holy Spirit's leading to share, but we do not have to pursue them with something they don't want. Paul didn't chase down the hostile Jews. He bent over backwards to meet with and evangelize those who *were* interested. He and Barnabas stayed a while in Iconium to meet the need, and God provided signs and wonders to confirm what they were saying. But they did not go where they were not wanted. They shook the dust off their feet as a warning against them and they moved on.

Moving on can be hard when we're talking about a family member, a close friend, a relative, a son or daughter who is hardened to the Word of God. We want them to respond; we want eternal life for them. But if they have heard the genuine gospel truth proclaimed to them, the situation is out of our hands.

We in America are blessed in that many of us have heard the gospel all our lives. Some only get one chance; we support missions so even that one chance happens. We love everyone, and we will pray for their hearts to change. God does that all the time. But we are not God; we cannot reach in and change someone's heart. Only God does that. Our role when someone has rejected the gospel or set it aside is to pray, to ask God for what we desire earnestly – the salvation of those we care about – and then leave it with Him. It is far better we do that rather than to sell them on something less than true Christianity.

And that leads us to the final thought of the day, and it's about how faith happens. *God's saving us is why we believe and have faith and try to please Him, not the other way around.* Listen to this passage again: "When the Gentiles heard this – [that the message was for them now] – they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; *and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.*"

This runs contrary to what a lot of churches preach. We think it should be, “all who believed were appointed for eternal life.” But you can’t translate it that way. Every biblical translation is the same for this verse. The New Jerusalem Bible, the modern *Catholic* translation, goes so far as to say “all who were destined for eternal life became believers.” Catholics don’t hold to anything like Presbyterian thought on predestination. But they translate the passage faithfully, going so far as to use “destined” to explain what happened.

What does it mean that God appoints us for salvation? Maybe this will help. We idolize actors in our society. We listen to their viewpoints even though many are far less educated than any of us are. What do actors do? They say words written for them by someone else and move around in ways pre-chosen by a director who tells them what to do and how. An excellent actor can make a good film great. But there’s a reason the Best Picture Oscar goes to the people who were responsible for making the film happen and not the actors or even the director.

When it comes to our salvation, God is the One we should praise over and over again. Yes, we believe; that belief we hold to saves us. But who is ultimately responsible for making our hearts and minds in such a way that we now have faith? Who was it that directed events in history that we would now believe? Who made everything come together that as a young child or at 21 or 45 or whenever, you heard the gospel and you realized that you did believe in Jesus and you do trust in Him for salvation and you do want to live in a way that honors Him? That’s all God. Our response of faith was made possible through God’s work in our lives.

That’s what this passage tells us. Those who God has chosen, those He destined, He appointed, believe. We are involved; we are engaged; it is our belief in our lives. But God is the One who made it so that that faith is there. That should make us thankful. It drives us to honor Him with our lives, not because we must please Him in order to merit heaven but to say “thank you” for already choosing us to be by His side through eternity.

It also means that we share our faith honestly and openly with others, wanting them to come to faith, as God commands us to do. We prepare and learn so we know and understand our faith well and can be warm and convincing. We’ll live life with others praying that our testimony might be effective. But the results are in God’s hands. We do not have to freak out that we won’t get it right and that we’ve messed up someone’s eternity. God says that the Holy Spirit will work through us in those moments and give us what to say. God will bring about His results. Sometimes that will be faith; sometimes that will be rejection. .

But we can rejoice in that. Because salvation isn’t on us. God doesn’t save us because we’re good followers. I’m not. You’re probably not. Being a faithful Christian 24/7 365 days a year is tough, far more than I can possibly do. But God’s salvation, God’s choosing us, that’s why we can be faithful at all! We don’t have to worry about losing our salvation because we mess up. Keep your faith, turn from your sin, and keep on following, and all will be well. God has you in His hands. Trust that. And trust that when you share your faith as Paul and Barnabas did, the results may not always look pretty, but God will have worked through your life, and you can rejoice that He has chosen you for eternal life.