

*Words and Deeds: Examining The Scriptures*

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*Psalm 119:89-101; Luke 11:27-28; Acts 17:1-14*

Today's final Scripture reading is from Acts 17:1-14. May God speak to us today through His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. But the 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. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. 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. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea."

I'm going to let you in on a little secret – maybe not a secret to all of you, but to some of you. I'm going to tell you one of the worst moments in a five or six year old boy's life. It's that moment when you realize that "knight" is no longer a profession. When you're in kindergarten, first grade, they give you a little paper, they have you draw a picture of what you want to be when you grow up, to hang on the wall for parent-teacher conferences so parents can come in and be impressed with the sheer amount of learning going on at school.

You get a young boy in there, doesn't know anything about how things really work yet, he draws a picture of a knight on a horse with a full suit of armor and a big sword and says, "I want to be a knight when I grow up," and Teacher says, "You can't do that, honey, there aren't knights any more." Worst moment of a young boy's life. No knights. Every career choice after that is going downhill.

Knights haven't been around for hundreds of years, but we still tell stories about knights all the time. Tons of versions of the King Arthur story. Who are the central heroes in the billion dollar Star Wars franchise? Jedi Knights. The westerns that were so popular in our culture were the knights of the Old West. What's the other name for Batman? The Dark Knight.

I think we are drawn to the stories of knights, especially Christians, because the noble character of a knight appeals to us. Just as we follow the code of conduct presented in Scripture as a way to show our appreciation to God, we see knights following their code of honor even when it hurts. To be a defender of the realm, to rescue those in trouble, to live a life worthy of a king's notice...the concept is appealing. To be noble for our One True King – even more so.

Today's passage doesn't talk about knights or medieval courts or ladies in waiting, but there's a turn of phrase in this week's passage that really caught my attention. The Bereans that Paul ministered to were considered to be of high nobility. Normally this word "noble" is referring to someone born of a higher class structure. But here, it's talking about someone being noble because of their actions regarding God's Word. We're going to study that today and why we can be – and should be – following the lead of the people of Berea.

This passage is a tale of two cities. Thessalonica was a metropolis at the time Paul and Silas visited with a lot of commerce. Berea was large too, the capital of the province of Macedonia, and an important stepping-stone into Greece with a history spanning back as far as 1000 BC. They're 45 miles away from each other, about a two day journey in ancient times. The Romans had two roads that connected them. In a sense, they're sister cities.

But how they react to Paul and Silas' message is very different. As we've come to expect, on their arrival in Thessalonica Paul and Silas head to the local synagogue to preach the good news that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. And the early results are actually really promising. For three weeks, Paul gets the opportunity to present the case that Jesus' suffering and death were predicted by Scripture and prove that He is the Christ. Some Jews believe, a lot more Greeks, prominent women in the city – it appears like an immediate success.

But then the green-eyed monster enters the scene – jealousy. It's like when a three-year-old suddenly has a baby brother or sister and they can't stand not having mom and dad's full attention any more. The young upstarts are taking over the church with their strange ideas – can't have that! They aren't subtle in the least about it, either; they form a mob of the kind of characters they would never been seen with otherwise to create a riot, a panic.

Their rage spills over. When they can't find Paul and Silas, who are the ones fueling their rage, they're more than willing to make an example out of Jason, whose only apparent crime was housing the fellowship. But what made me stand up and take notice is their accusation against Jason and the disciples. "They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."

We've seen this before, right? At Jesus' crucifixion, when the religious leaders appealed to Pilate to have him crucified, they uttered, "We have no king but Caesar." The Jewish leadership who had fought Roman rule tooth and nail, who would not bow to or sacrifice to Caesar, who were deeply upset that they were under occupation, who eventually would play a part in a massive rebellion against Rome, that ended with the destruction of Israel and Jerusalem in 70AD, their argument is, "Punish these guys because they're telling us there's a different king than Caesar."

This is not our main lesson for the day, but one we must always keep in mind when we are dealing with politics and political parties, with issues of the day, with controversial subjects that come up. *While we can and should work with different-minded folks in our community, we must never lose our allegiance to Christ in the process.*

This situation showed the hypocrisy of the Jewish leadership of the day – not all Jewish people, not at all, but the leadership. They were willing to go against their deeply held religious beliefs in order to gain standing with the authorities in power to do what they wanted. For all their complaints – and eventually violence against the system – they did what was expedient, not what was right by their conscience.

But they are not that different from us. We live in a world where both our major political parties have deep flaws, led by deeply flawed individuals. As Christians, we want to support laws and lawmakers that respect the biblical worldview. At the same time, that biblical worldview also tells us that there's never a point that a law or lawmaker is above criticism.

And we certainly do not want to compromise our morals to win power and influence. That happens all the time in the secular world. It should not happen to us. Christ died rather than to exert the power that was rightfully His to save Himself. If we want others to come to Jesus from our example, we need to set a good one, not one that is fundamentally hypocritical. I can't tell you how that is going to look in every circumstance. What I can tell you is follow the Holy Spirit and not what seems to be the simple solution.

So after this mess in Thessalonica, the believers get Paul and company out of there by night, sending them to Berea. They follow their normal pattern of going to the synagogue. But what's surprising is that we don't learn how long they stayed before there was trouble. There isn't the rush to believe of Thessalonica, it doesn't seem. Instead, the Bereans are said to be of more noble character than the Thessalonians. Why? Because they were not only eager to receive the message, they examined the Scriptures every day to see if it was true. They didn't just come to synagogue on Saturday; they spent time daily in the Word poring over it to see if Scripture lined up with the message of salvation through Jesus.

And that's the core of today's message, what I have to remind myself daily, what we all need to grasp: *if you want to know God better, if you want to know His will for your life, if you want to be confident in your salvation, if you want to know God's love and mercy and acceptance, if you want to know how to please Him, if you want to be truly noble, examine the Scriptures.* The path to being a true knight of God's realm is through the noble act of daily looking for God in His Word.

The Christian world does not know the Bible well, and that is a great shame. You might think, "Well, a lot of terrible and shameful things happen in the church." Absolutely true. But many of them happen because we are not deep in the Word of God every day getting to know Him better.

Shame on me, because as much as I hear the Bible and study it for sermons and think about it, I am not intentional about getting into it, disciplined, every day. We've got to get past the shame of the past, though, because not reading it makes us feel guilty, and yet the guilt doesn't actually cause us to do anything differently. The thing that works is not guilt, not shame, not obligation, but discipline – making a time and doing it. Carving it out.

Examining the Scriptures would save us so much grief in the church. You might have heard over the last week about the proposed changes in the United Methodist Church, very similar to the changes our former denomination went through. They didn't pass, in large part due to delegates from Africa who stood firm on the Word of God and have not been swayed by popular American opinions. Even now, there is talk of a split in that denomination, one of the largest denominations in the United States, because of our unwillingness to examine the Scriptures carefully and follow what they say rather than what we want it to say.

There's also been a lot in the news about states passing new abortion laws – some restricting it further, others making it so that it's not a crime to let a baby out of the womb die if that's the parents' wishes. Trying not to offend anyone, much of the church has stayed silent far too long about this issue. When we examine God's Word, we see children called a "blessing from the Lord." Scripture shows us how, unlike all the other nations around them, Israel provided for their children and did not sacrifice them to false gods. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for such is the Kingdom of God." It doesn't take a Ph.D to come to the conclusion that all human life is precious to God, including in the womb.

And in both of these situations, a careful examination of Scripture shows us that there is grace for these situations and many more. Your sin is your sin. I've got mine and you've got yours. It does us no good to say that sin isn't sin any more, or to call something evil good. But we can say that because we believe in God of mercy, a God who forgives us when we call on Him and admit our sin and cling to Him rather than our old ways. You've been in the wrong relationships, you've made seriously wrong decisions with your life, well, OK, that's nothing new. We don't have to say that sin isn't sin because we can say, "When you come to Jesus in faith, your sin is forgiven."

And if your faith is ever flagging, if you're thinking that 2000 years is a mighty long time since Jesus came and it's hard to believe all that He said and did, examine the Scriptures carefully like the Bereans. When you look at Scripture closely, maybe with a guide if you haven't studied it in detail before, you'll find that Jesus fulfills hundreds of prophecies from the Old Testament. The New Testament points out many of them directly, but there are more that aren't even specifically mentioned. The more you read your Bible and the more you learn about the Old Testament – finding that the latest prophecies about Jesus were written at least 400 years before His birth, and most were written a thousand years before – the more you grow in faith that He was who He said He was.

As you read Scripture, you become convinced of God's love for you. Don't feel loved? Hebrews 13:5 repeating an Old Testament promise – “never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” 1 John 4 – “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins...we love because He first loved us.” Paul reminds us that we are “God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved.” As much as we listen to our feelings and go with our gut, this is what we need to know. This is what we need to hear. We need the Word of God that stands firm when every other voice is shouting something different at us.

It says something to me that when the troublemakers at Thessalonica came and started causing trouble in Berea, the believers there stood up. There is no riot. And while they send on Paul, probably because he was the one considered the source of the trouble, they continue to take care of Silas and Timothy. They have more to learn, more to ask, and so they're going to take the risk of keeping these “known troublemakers” in town so they can continue to grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus.

Friends, don't give up on reading the Scripture. Yes, it's hard. Even in easier translations, it doesn't always make sense the first time we read it – or second or third. But it does get easier. And there is so much God wants to say to you, so many ways God wants you to grow closer to Him through it, so much love for you He wants you to know. The Father parted seas and brought down nations for the love of His people; He resurrected His Son so that we might have eternal life through Him.

The more you examine the Scriptures, you more you'll realize what an awesome God we have. The more you examine the Scriptures, the more you will trust in Jesus and live a life pleasing to God. The more you examine the Scriptures and live by them, the more confidence you will have that one day, when you appear before Him in His Kingdom, He will say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”