

In our passage last time we learned how many of the Jews became jealous when the people turned to faith in Jesus Christ. Everyone was following Paul and Barnabas, and nobody was paying attention to them. They were losing their power and prestige among the people. Their curiosity about the gospel message turned to hatred toward the messengers of the gospel. They denied the truth of the gospel. The devil got into their head and drove by these powerful feelings. They stirred up the religious women in the region, and the local politicians, who eventually ran Paul and Barnabas out of town.

In tonight's passage we will see basically the same thing happen. Only the names and places change, but the principles, and the spiritual battles repeat, not only in this passage, but also throughout the remainder of the book of Acts. After shaking the dust from their feet, an act of defiance against the Jews who opposed the gospel, Paul and Barnabas continued on their missionary journey and traveled to the city of Iconium. Let's see what additional insights we can learn as we observe Luke's record of what happened next. Please read with me, Acts 14:1-7.

After leaving Antioch Pisidia, the disciples traveled to Iconium, about 80 away. Both of these cities are in the region of Galatia, so when Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians, we can assume that the letter came to the churches in both of these cities. Iconium was a center of Greek culture, so the people were fully Hellenized. Greek philosophy and culture shaped every area of their lives.

Notice a repeat of the pattern that has already been set up for us in the book of Acts. Paul and Barnabas go first to the Jewish synagogue to preach the gospel. The Jews were familiar with the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. The scriptures say that the gospel was to be preached first to the Jews, and then to the gentiles. Paul consistently follows this practice.

In the synagogues there were devout Jews, and gentiles who worshiped, or who were at least were curious about, the God of the Jews. Paul, being a trained Pharisee, was right at home in the synagogues. His education included training in rhetoric, which made him powerful in speech, and in the use of the tools of persuasion. The Pharisees trained him to argue and defend their doctrines, so that Paul was able to make a compelling presentation of the gospel. Just as in their previous efforts, in other towns, many of the Jews and gentiles who heard the presentation of the gospel believed. While it does not say it directly here, the people's response stirred up feelings of jealousy and anger against Paul and Barnabas among the Jews in Iconium.

Where the bible says that they spoke in such a way that a great number of people believed, it should make us think about what it was in their presentation of the gospel that made them so effective. The most obvious conclusion is that the Holy Spirit was at work, as seen by the great number of souls that were saved that day. But, I want to point out that Paul and Barnabas did not go into the synagogue unprepared. Both men were leaders in the church. They were familiar with God's word. They had thought about the most compelling ways to share the gospel. They anticipated questions and objections, and they spoke with authority.

While I believe that the best way to share our faith is not to memorize a script, but to tell our story, and then tell His story, there is value in preparation, and training, in order to effectively share our faith. Yes we need to be prayed up, and yes we need to be full of the Holy Spirit, but if a person has not thought seriously about how to share their faith, he or she is likely to freeze up when the opportunity arises, or when someone challenges them on their core beliefs.

This is why we periodically offer classes that focus on evangelism, and personal witness, in our Sunday night specialty classes. Every born again believer can profit from better equipping

themselves to share the gospel. It helps to build confidence. It helps us to know what to say in different situations and in changing circumstances. We become more comfortable, and relaxed, which helps us to put the other person at ease. We can speak with authority, because we not only know what we believe, but why we believe it, thus we become more naturally persuasive in our presentation.

In verse 2 we see another repeated principle, where the bible says that the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and poisoned their minds against the brothers. Whenever someone has an agenda, they have to gain support from others in order to carry out their desired plans. The Jews reached out to all non-believers in order to get them to join in their opposition. As people of faith, our agenda should be to carry the gospel message to the whole world, so we train and encourage one another toward that end. When we take a stand, however, there will be others who will have an agenda opposed to ours.

As I mentioned last time, certain members of the Milton City Counsel want to have liquor sales on Sundays. They have devised a strategy to promote their agenda in the guise of giving the citizens an opportunity to vote on the issue in November. They need this additional support, in order to carry out their agenda. I am totally opposed to this. My agenda is to stop the measure, so I spoke out against it at the meeting where they voted for the wording of the referendum to be placed on the ballot. I went home and made a Facebook post urging others to call the mayor and city council men and women to show their opposition to this act, and I bring it up, from the pulpit, whenever it is appropriate. I plan to speak out against it right up until the day of the election, because if we do not stand together against Sunday liquor sales, it will be the reality for our community from now on.

In a condescending tone, one City Councilman told me that people of other religions have no problem with drinking. It was if he were saying, you ignorant, backwards, narrow-minded fool. Sit down, and shut up. He used rhetorical tools to raise opposition to my point, in an attempt to poison the minds of the other members of the council against me.

This is basically the same thing that happened in Iconium. The unbelieving Jews stirred up the gentiles, who being fully Hellenized, did not believe in the one true God, and from their pagan perspective, would not understand how the Son of this God could take away the sins of the world. The Jews appealed to the people's secular nature, in order to poison their minds against the disciples.

So how did Paul and Barnabas react to this opposition? They remained for a long time, and spoke boldly for the Lord. If there is one central lesson that the book of Acts teaches us, it is that there will always be opposition to the gospel, and the truth of God's word, but God's people must be bold, take a stand, and speak out against that opposition.

In Iconium the lines were clearly drawn between those who became followers of Christ, and those who opposed, not only the gospel, but also those who promoted the gospel. This is the nature of our spiritual battle today. When we live for Jesus, we should expect opposition from the world. When we embrace a biblical worldview, people who do not recognize the authority of God's word will oppose our core beliefs. We wonder how our world could have become so dark in recent years. We marvel at the godlessness being imposed upon us. We wonder why God would allow all of this to happen. May I suggest that we are in the mess that we are in, at least in part, because God's people have not been bold in their stand upon the truth of God's word.

In any battle, if one side does not defend itself, if they refuse to fight, they will be completely overrun, and defeated. Even now, God's people are being overrun. Daily, our core values are dismissed in our culture, because of the apathy of people who claim to be Christian.

We must speak out against all unrighteousness, and be bold in our witness for Christ. In dealing with the many godless movements in our culture, we must exercise our right to vote, before we loose that weapon altogether.

When Paul and Barnabas took their bold stand in Iconium, the Lord testified to His grace by granting that the disciples could do signs and wonders among the people. As we have seen earlier in the book of Acts, when the gospel reached a new people group, God sometimes granted the Apostles the ability to perform miracles in Jesus' name in order to reach more people. You would think that seeing these miracles would convince everyone to believe, and they did convince some, but not everybody.

Many refused Jesus when He performed miracles, and many rejected the Apostles even though God used them to demonstrate His grace in supernatural ways. What about today? Would it make a difference today if God were doing supernatural miracles through His people? God is in the miracle business today, as is evidenced by answered prayer. God has done a great miracle in your life, if you have been born again. The problem is not that God isn't at work today. The problem is the lack of effective witness to the grace of God in answer to prayer. This is why I say that the most effective testimony is for each one of us to share what God has done, and is doing, personally in our lives, and then share the gospel message.

The bible says that the people were divided, and they took sides. Today, whether it is the gospel message, or standing on biblical principles, the people of the world are divided, and we all take sides. What we have to ask ourselves is which side am I on. There really isn't an option to ride the fence. A voice unheard is a voice for the opposition. A vote not cast, is a vote for the opposition. To not stand upon the principles of God's word is to give in, without a fight, to the godless agendas that are destroying our way of life, and the future we leave to our children and grandchildren.

Just like what happened in Antioch Pisidia, the Jews, solicited the support of people with a secular worldview, and the support of the local politicians, until Paul and Barnabas were in danger of loosing their lives, and forced out of town. When the time comes that we are in danger of loosing our lives for sharing the gospel and standing upon the truth of God's word, we will need to evaluate our situation and make decisions based upon the leadership of the Holy Spirit, but we are in no way near that point today.

The opposition we face for standing upon the gospel and the word of God is just vocal. People may speak all manor of evil against us. They may ridicule us. It might cost us a promotion. We may have to leave our jobs, and make adjustments to our lives, but none of that is too big for God to handle. I promise you that if we are in the center of God's will, doing everything that God would have us do, sharing the gospel at every turn, and standing upon the truth of God's word, God's grace will be sufficient. He has never let us down and we can trust Him completely.

After all, God loves us so much, that He sent His Son to be our Savior. If He is our Savior, then He is also our Lord. We honor Him with our lips, serve Him with our lives, and with the aid of the Holy Spirit, we become useful to His purpose. If there is anyone here who would like to know more about how to be saved, we would love to help you come to know Jesus, so that you can have victory over the world.