

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH DIVIDING PEOPLE

Acts 14:1-7

INTRODUCTION

I came to faith in Christ in March of my junior year of college. My senior year I continued to live in a resident hall. At the beginning of the school year I knew of about five other Christians in my hall. The first night of the fall semester I got into a conversation with an upperclassman that I had partied with the year before and his roommate. Mike became very angry when he discovered I had become a Christian and believed that it was only through Jesus that sins could be forgiven and a person could go to heaven. Throughout the rest of that year Mike and a group of about 6 other guys on the floor made a point of mocking me and my faith. At the same time, Mike's roommate Dan joined a Bible study I started on our floor. In another room, two freshmen who were high school buddies were living together and enjoying the parties and the girls. One night, one of them, John, knocked on my door and asked if he could talk with me. He wanted to know how to become a Christian. I shared the gospel with him and he professed faith in Christ and joined our Bible study. He began to share the gospel with his roommate and to bring him to Christian meetings that we attended. The roommate showed some interest for awhile but then suddenly told John that Christianity was not true and he wanted nothing more to do with it. He joined with the group of other guys on the floor regularly mocking us Christians.

Over the course of that year, at least six guys on my floor professed faith in Christ and in the dorm as a whole, through the testimony of the other four Christians in our residence hall, dozens of students professed faith in Christ and joined the numerous Bible studies that were going on in our dorm. During most of second semester of that year a group of about 20 of us walked to church every Sunday morning from our dorm. At the same time there was a significant group of very vocal students who harassed and mocked and ridiculed the Christians in our dorm at every opportunity. That was a very exciting year as we saw so many come to faith in Christ but it also was a very stressful year as we had some pretty ugly confrontations.

Probably most of us who are trusting in Jesus have felt something of this division that the gospel creates between people. Many of us have family members who do not accept the truth of the gospel and who are not afraid to let us know of their disagreement. Maybe there isn't any open conflict but we know that we are not able to talk about anything important with them because we would end up in a significant disagreement if we did. We have felt this division with people on our jobs, at school, in our neighborhoods or maybe you've felt that separation from the broader culture simply by watching TV or listening to music or going on the internet. It is a fact that the gospel of Jesus divides people. That is what we observe in our passage this morning. A whole town, Iconium, is divided in half by this message about Jesus. Jesus himself told his disciples and us that this is what we should expect. He said, as we just had read for us, that he did not come to bring peace to the earth but a sword. He came, he said, "to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother... a man's enemies will be the members of his own house." Through the gospel God divides humanity. You can see this fact clearly illustrated in v. 4 of our text: "The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews; others with the apostles." Today we will see some of the results of God dividing people by the gospel.

MAIN POINT

God divides people through the gospel so that...

I. Allegiances reveal hearts (vv.2 & 4-5)

Before the arrival of Paul and Baranabas at the town of Iconium the city was divided by all the regular divisions within human societies. The city was divided by race and by religion. There were Jewish people who were ethnically and religiously different from the surrounding Greek, pagan, idol-worshipping community. There were divisions by age and gender and economic status and class and political party and education. These separations had existed for hundreds of years in this city. But then Paul and Barnabas, just as they did at Antioch, enter into the Jewish synagogue and preach the gospel to the Jews and God-fearing Greeks gathered

there. Remember, while these God-fearing Greeks, these Gentiles were tolerated in the synagogue, they were not included in it. They could only sit in the back or in a place separated from the main sanctuary. The Jews maintained strict separation from Gentiles due to the fact they were unclean and could make a Jew unclean simply through association; so not even the Gentiles in the synagogue were truly accepted by the Jews.

But after Paul preaches the gospel a great multitude of Jews and Gentiles believed. Suddenly, in a moment, in an instant of time, people who have been radically separated from one another are united by their common faith in Jesus. In fact, Luke, at the end of v. 2 refers to this great multitude of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus as “brothers.” These unrelated, culturally and racially distinct men and women and children from the various classes of the society of Iconium are now a family. They share a common parent, God the Father, and a common brother, our Lord Jesus Christ and a common life, God’s life by the Holy Spirit. It is by their affiliation with one another, by their allegiance to one another that they show that their heart is actually trusting in Jesus Christ.

At the same time, when this large number of Jews and Gentiles believe the gospel another group of unbelieving Jews form an alliance with the Gentiles for the purpose of opposing this new family. They spread rumors and slander and all manner of accusations against these believers among the Gentiles until finally they so provoke some Gentiles and some of the political leaders of the city that they make a plot to capture, torture and kill, at least Paul and Barnabas but potentially more (v.5). This new alliance with the despised Gentiles reveals the hearts of the Jews, that they are unbelieving or disobedient to the gospel. The agreement of the Gentiles with the Jews to harm and kill the Christians is evidence that they do not believe the gospel. The word that Luke uses in v. 2 that is translated “refused to believe” is used repeatedly in the Greek translation of the OT to describe the disobedience and unbelief of the Jewish people throughout their history. In particular it is used to describe their disobedience from the time God brought them out of Egypt until they entered the Promised Land 41 years later. Moses, just prior to their entering the land of Canaan says (Deuteronomy 9:24), “You were disobeying (same word) the LORD from the day that I knew you.” Isaiah, at the end of the history of Israel as a free nation records the Lord saying, “All day long I have held out my hands to those who disobey and who oppose me.” So God describes his relationship with Israel as a parent holding out his arms to embrace Israel but who is rejected by his child. If you will remember, last week Luke described the motivation for the violent reaction of the Jews in Antioch with the word “oppose” and now this week he uses the other verb God used to describe the Jews in Isaiah 65:2. The point Luke is making is that the reaction of the Jews to the gospel is no different than how the Jews have historically responded to God and his word.

Just as Israel’s demanding that God give them meat to eat (Exodus 16) and their worshipping the golden calf (Exodus 32) and their refusing to go into the land of Canaan (Numbers 14) and their demand to return to Egypt (Numbers 14 and others) and their persistent worship of idols (2 Kings 17) revealed the heart of unbelief that existed within Israel through the centuries so this alliance of Jews and Gentiles aiming to mistreat and stone the Christians reveals their heart of unbelief. Just as the believing hearts of those Jews and Gentiles was revealed by their association with Paul and Baranabas so the unbelieving hearts of those Jews and Gentiles who worked together to oppose and harm them were exposed. The people to whom you are loyal and the way in which you treat professing Christians is an infallible litmus test as to where your heart stands in relation to God. People who trust and love Jesus delight to be with and to love those who trust and love Jesus. People who do not trust and love Jesus love to be with those who do not trust and love Jesus. The people who have your allegiance reveal what your heart depends upon and loves.

God divides people through the gospel so that...

- *Alliances reveal hearts*
- *And so that...*

II. God’s grace is made evident (vv.1-3)

In the face of the hostility and slander of the unbelieving Jews and Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas continued to preach the gospel, to talk about Jesus. Notice that they did not form a political party or an army of militants to

fight against those who hated them. They did not seek to use the Roman legal system to demand their rights. They preached the message of God's grace to the very people who were seeking to harm them. In addition, Jesus himself bore witness to the truthfulness of this message of grace by enabling Paul and Barnabas to perform signs and wonders. These signs and wonders were acts of healing of the sick and setting people free from demonic oppression. So the hatred and hostility of the unbelieving Jews and Gentiles is set in sharp contrast to the gracious conduct of the believing Jews and Gentiles and of their message. The gospel has not created another special interest group that is angrily fighting for its rights but a community of people who not only love each other but who love their unbelieving neighbors and who talk openly about the gracious act of God in Christ.

While the church proclaims this message of grace and performs acts of grace the surrounding community grows increasingly divided and eventually makes plans to silence the leaders by stoning. Why does this message of grace, accompanied by acts of grace generate such a violent reaction? The answer lies in understanding the nature of grace. Grace is the opposite of justice. Justice means that people get what they deserve. Justice means that I am commended and rewarded for my good deeds but that I am punished for my bad deeds. Grace on the other hand means that I am rewarded with good even though all I have done is evil. I don't get what I deserve; rather I am rewarded with good even though I have done evil and deserve to be punished. All human beings naturally demand justice be done in their case. As soon as children learn to speak they begin to demand their rights. Children, without anyone explaining justice to them, when they observe their sibling get a bigger piece of pie cry out, "That's not fair." Humans, from birth, naturally assume that because of who we are and what we have done that we deserve to be treated well, to have good done to us and for us. We are shocked when bad things happen to us or when others get more or better things than us because we naturally assume that we deserve to have good things happen to us because we are essentially good people.

The message of grace is so offensive to human beings because grace is only given to the unworthy, to those who deserve condemnation, who are not good, but evil. It is this fact that is the reason for people's hostility to the gospel. Right after Jesus called Matthew, the tax-collector, to follow him as one of his disciples he went to a party at Matthew's house. To be a tax-collector in Israel in 30 A.D. meant that you were a traitor to Israel. Matthew, though Jewish, was working for the hated Roman occupiers taking money from his fellow Jews which he gave to the Romans to pay for the troops who were occupying their country. In the eyes of Jewish law, he was defiled and unacceptable to God because of his regular contact with Gentiles and his cooperation with the occupying army. The religious leaders were furious that Jesus would dare to hang out with such ungodly and unacceptable people. It was a violation of God's justice, of what was right. When they openly criticized Jesus for hanging out with Matthew Jesus asked them, "Who do doctors visit, the sick or those who are well?" Obviously the answer is that doctors spend their time with sick people. Jesus said, "In the same way the Son of Man did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

The news that Jesus lived and died so you can be forgiven of your sins and made right with God, not because of anything you have done or decided but only on the basis of what he has done is only good news to people who know they are sick, who know they are sinners, who know they do not deserve good things to happen to them. Proud Christian is an oxymoron. To be a person who is constantly offended by how you are being treated is to be a person who is not living in grace. To be a person who is continually crying, "that's not fair" is to be a person who is outside of grace. The message of the gospel is the message that God has made a way through Christ for him to give hell-deserving sinners eternal life. Thus the gospel is good news for all who know themselves to be hell-deserving sinners but bad news for those who believe they deserve to have good things happen to them. Thus when division occurs between people over the gospel of Jesus then God is manifesting his grace in the joy and humility and kindness and peace and contentment of those who have found in Christ the solution to their greatest burden, their own sinfulness.

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III. The beauty of Jesus is made obvious (vv.3 & 7)

There is a short, three word clause in v. 3 that arrested my attention as I was studying this passage this week. Paul and Barnabas, knowing that the unbelieving Jews are seeking to provoke city wide opposition to the gospel remain in Iconium for some time speaking boldly “for the Lord.” I have heard many people over the years ask, upon reading the book of Acts and seeing the unusual courage and boldness of these first Christians, how did they do that? How were they able to joyfully suffer torture and unjust accusations and imprisonment? What motivated them to do these things? We find in these three words the source of their motivation and courage. They spoke boldly and suffered the loss of so much joyfully “for the Lord.” The person of Jesus is so beautiful and admirable to them and his reputation matters so much to them that they cannot help but speak and act to promote him and his saving work. They do not speak primarily for the sake of those who do not yet know Jesus. They do not speak because it is their duty to speak. They speak of Jesus boldly because Jesus himself is so dear to them. In these three words we see that the primary allegiance of Christians is not to a set of doctrines or to a moral code but to a person. The crucified and resurrected Christ is the center of our attention and of our affection and so we speak for him.

Two weeks ago last night the mayor of Milwaukee, Tom Barrett, was leaving the State Fair about 10:30pm with his sister, niece and two daughters. They heard a woman screaming and Mayor Barrett, after sending his sister with his daughters to the car went to investigate. He discovered a young man threatening an older woman with a little child. He confronted the man and sought to calm him down. When the man remained aggressive he pulled out his cell phone to call the police. It was at that time that the man attacked the mayor with a pipe, hitting him several times in the head and body. Evidently the mayor landed at least one blow as his hand was broken in the attack. The man fled when he heard the police coming. How do you think that grandmother feels about Mayor Barrett? What do you think she is saying to all her friends and neighbors? What do you think she will do if he runs for mayor again? It’s not only that he came to her defense but also that he is the mayor of Milwaukee. Not only is he the mayor but he was wounded in her defense. How will she respond to anyone who does not treat the mayor with respect or attacks his person or character? You can be sure that she is speaking boldly for Mayor Tom Barrett.

We have been delivered from a far greater danger at a far greater cost by an infinitely superior person. We know, by personal experience, through the work of the Holy Spirit that the Jesus who is the subject of this word of grace is a wonderful friend to sinners and a beautiful savior for the rebellious and a glorious protector of all who are oppressed by their sins. Though the world mocks him and ignores him and minimizes him we speak of him for we are amazed that one such as he would give his life for people such as us. When we speak of Jesus in the face of hostility we demonstrate how beautiful he is, how glorious and sufficient he is. When we do not speak it is because Jesus does not appear to us as the glorious savior that he is. Our failure to speak is not so much a failure of courage but a failure of love. We fail to apprehend how glorious it is to have this Jesus for our Savior and Lord. We fail to see that he is the best of all beings. So we need to pray, not for courage but for spiritual apprehension and for hearts that do trust and love Jesus supremely because he is supreme.

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- *God’s grace is made evident*
- *The beauty of Jesus is made obvious*

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