



Iconium – Speaking Boldly the Word of His Grace

Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ

Acts 14:1-7

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Last week's text in Acts 13 is one of those texts that draws the proverbial line in the sand and makes an indelible impression on the soul. It gave to us a clear picture of God's saving and judging purpose in this world and of the weight and worth of His Word. God speaks to us through His Word; He speaks to us through men appointed by God, and demands that His Word – the gospel and all of His truth that springs from it-- be received by us and treasured and obeyed. He demands a response from us like that of the Psalmist in Psalm 119 when he wrote: "Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain! Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways. Confirm to your servant your promise, that you may be feared. Turn away the reproach that I dread, for your rules are good. Behold, I long for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life!" (Psalm 119:33–40, ESV) And if that response is not forthcoming, if that is not the response of the people to whom God is speaking, He takes His Word away. We saw that last week with the religious and self-satisfied Jews and because their response to God's word was to hear it with contempt and to thrust it aside, "Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles." (Acts 13:46, ESV) Because they would not receive the words of life, would not receive the Word of God for what it is, the word of God and not of men, and thereby judging themselves unworthy of eternal life, God took His Word away from them. That's a terrifying thing.

But what last week's text also did was to bring us face-to-face with our own casual attitude, our apathy, our complacency to the Word of God, and our flagging response to it and, as a result, our growing coldness to Him and it brought us to a place of repentance as a body, a repentance that I am praying will be more than a momentary conviction, more than a momentary grief but one which will lead to an ongoing and fruitful repentance, to a renewed spiritual vigor, a

renewed passion, a renewed vision of Who Christ is and who we are as His people and I am trusting that the truths that are before us in the Book of Acts -- if we receive them as we should, if we embrace the challenge that they lay before us to be fully devoted and Christ-driven in all that we do, if we will let them shape and fuel and mold our hearts with the grace of God, beloved – that they will fuel lasting renewal of our souls and of this church.

I have to tell you that after last week's sermon, I felt a lot like Paul when he wrote to the church in Corinth saying: "For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter." (2 Corinthians 7:8–11, ESV) It was hard, very hard to speak those words to you. It was not a light thing, but I am grateful to see your hearts being stirred again and hear of your desire to return to a fervency for the Word of God, to a fervency to receive it and be conformed to its teaching, to a fervency to be found faithful to Christ and to His purpose for us as His people. I thank God for you and for your response, beloved, and I am praying and I am trusting that God will grant to us a full and lasting refreshment in Him as we press on and press into Him to find our fullest life and joy as His people. I am confident in Christ and in His power and grace in us as His people. I am confident of His preserving love toward us. And so it is with renewed enthusiasm and hope that I come to this text this morning with you – a chapter with much for us to glean, but we are only going to deal this morning with the first seven verses. Originally, I wanted to preach the whole chapter at once so you wouldn't miss the forest for the trees. But after praying about it, I reconsidered, for a couple of reasons. First, I believe that you are all sharp enough and spiritually sensitive enough not to miss the forest for the trees and second, I want to thoroughly consider these verses and not rush over them or give us all too much to think about. So let's dig in. Let's start reading together in verse 1 and read about

Paul and Barnabas in Iconium (1-7) "Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. But the people of the city were

divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, and there they continued to preach the gospel.” (Acts 14:1–7, ESV)

Having been directed by the Holy Spirit to leave the spiritual hardpan of Pisidian Antioch behind, Paul and Barnabas came to Iconium, some 80 miles southeast of Antioch. As their custom, they went first to the Jewish synagogue to preach. That decision, as we have seen already, was both theological and practical. Theologically, Paul was driven to take the gospel to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles and by going to the synagogue, he could do just that. There would be devout Jews in the synagogue along with Gentile God-fearers and so driven by his conviction so clearly stated in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16, ESV) – it was the perfect place for him to start. On a practical level, it also made sense. The people gathered in the synagogue would have been familiar with the OT Scriptures so it was an easy place to begin speaking of Christ as the fulfillment of those Scriptures; there was an immediate starting point with his hearers. Moreover, Paul would have had an instant platform from which to preach the gospel because he was a visiting rabbi whom the synagogue would have asked to speak a word of encouragement to them.

And preach it, he did. Luke tells us that they spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. God graciously blessed and empowered their preaching and a great number of souls were brought to faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. Those who believed what Paul and Barnabas were preaching from the Old Testament received by faith the truth that he was the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Just like us, they believed that their sin, shame and guilt had been dealt with by Jesus at the cross, and they received the Holy Spirit who would now enable them to live as they were meant to live, as an act of worship to God. Paul preached with effect and Luke describes for us the character of Paul’s effective preaching -- that it was marked by boldness, that it was a message of grace, and that it was authenticated by God.

When Luke describes the tone of Paul’s preaching, he describes him as “speaking boldly for the Lord.” Now I am sure there are any number of words that he could have used to describe Paul’s preaching, maybe other characteristics that he could have emphasized, but the one he chooses to highlight is boldness. To speak boldly is to speak openly, with confidence in the

message, to speak clearly and directly without concern for who is listening, without fearing or worrying, without concern. Boldness speaks of courage born of conviction. It speaks of certainty in what you are saying. It speaks of authority and the right to command. Paul had all of those things from Christ. It was one of the chief characteristics of his ministry, so much so that he asked of the Ephesian church to pray for him “that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.” (Ephesians 6:19–20, ESV) Boldness was the chief characteristic of Paul’s preaching and yet, ironically, boldness and authority in preaching is one of the least appreciated characteristics of preaching in our “touchy-feely,” “everyone has the right to be his own authority” secular and church culture in which we live. And that is one of the great downfalls of the modern church era. We often want our pastors to be anything but bold, anything but authoritative. We would rather they be our buddies, good for some advice, but not too direct. But boldness in preaching is just what the church needs. I’m with John MacArthur on this. He said: “Soft preaching makes hard people. You preach a soft message and you’ll have hard, selfish people. You preach the hard truth and it will break the hard hearts and you’ll have a soft people.” The church needs boldness in the pulpit that translates to sensitive hearts in the pews when it comes to Christ and His gospel demands. No boldness, no power.

Paul’s manner was boldness and his message was “the word of his grace,” which is to say, the message was the gospel and its implications and application. Look, Paul described his ministry saying: “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:1–2, ESV) Paul didn’t come as a philosopher or a salesman; he came as a witness (proclaiming to you the testimony of God). Paul was certainly a man who could reason and debate with the best of them, but he didn’t use that approach in preaching of gospel. He made a conscious decision (I determined) to boldly put the emphasis on Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It does not mean that he didn’t teach the whole counsel of God, but rather that he had the gospel, with its crucified Messiah, as his central focus and passion, and all other teaching and doctrine came from this truth.

It is this central message, the gospel, that people need to hear and to hear again, to respond to and to respond to again, to believe and to believe again and again. Those in the synagogue, just like us, needed to hear that salvation does not come through human effort, does not come by keeping the law of God, does not come by trying to clean yourself up, does not come by following a code of morality and being a “good person.” Salvation is not the reward of your

personal worthiness, for your spiritual attainments, or because you have lived a relatively good life. Salvation is not a reward for your hard work, not a payment for your church activities. Salvation in all of its fullness -- eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, peace with God, a righteous standing with God as if you had never sinned, adoption into the family of God, the transforming power of God in you to become a new person reflecting the image of Christ and to walk in the newness of life, you're standing with God -- is and always will forever be a gift of God's grace through faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Lord. It is a gift secured by the great love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the pouring out of His blood for hell-bound, hell-deserving sinners, in order to reconcile us to God and make us new creations in Christ, forgiven and accepted by God, purchased by Christ's own blood to be His own people, to fully and completely belong to Him as His own precious possession over whom He rules with love, kindness and discipline. And it is something that we need to hear and hear some more. There is always a tendency in the human heart to revert to a merit system with God and not to see that salvation in all of its parts is by grace. There is a tendency to fail to remember the gospel of grace and so we must always be reminded of the truth or we will forget.

Paul's manner was boldness; his message was grace, and God, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands, authenticated his ministry. Paul and Barnabas preached boldly the grace of God, and God did through them what only God could do – He moved in power. He demonstrated His power in unmistakable ways – mighty and irresistible power over every stronghold or obstacle, over every power of sin.

This is the kind of gospel ministry that all of us need, whether we know it or not, whether we value it as we should or not. This is the gospel ministry that meets with the pleasure of God and which transforms and shapes for good and for glory, the lives of those who receive it with gladness. Some in the synagogue did receive this gospel, but others, not so much.

There were some who were saved, But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. It is no great surprise that the preaching of the gospel met with resistance, nor is it a great surprise that the resistance came from the religious, from those who considered themselves to be “just fine with God” and who refused to believe the truth of their sinfulness and need for grace, who were “determined to be unpersuadable” – that's the idea. The pushback is more subtle than the outright persecution that Paul will face in a bit, but it is every bit as wicked. They sought to poison the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas. Do you see how wicked this is? They refused to receive the Word of God

from Paul and Barnabas, they rejected their message, but that was not enough. It wasn't just enough for them to reject the message; they had to undermine the potential faith of others and the only way they could do that, because they could not oppose the preaching and the teaching, was to undermine their confidence in the messengers and poison the minds of others against them, to keep them from responding to the truth. That is a dangerous game to play with God.

That word that is translated as "poisoned" is a word that means to "turn someone against" or "to cause him or her to dislike another." It is never a neutral word, never a benign thing, never presented as anything other than wicked and perverse in God's eyes. The way they poisoned the minds of the Gentiles was by questioning Paul and Barnabas' motives, questioning their heart toward the people to whom they were preaching, questioning their character, sowing bitterness toward them, whispering deceitful and poisonous propaganda and rumors about them.

The text makes clear that this poisoning didn't come out of nowhere and it didn't come from a "concerned heart" – it came from unbelieving hearts, from unreceptive and disobedient hearts, from sin-loving and authority rejecting hearts, in order to give themselves comfort in their sin and to justify their own rejection. Misery loves company.

Now here's the thing. Any preacher or any Christian that speaks faithfully for Christ is going to endure this kind of thing. It's unavoidable. Trust me, I've experienced this more times than I can count, from people outside the church and from people within the church, and you will too if you determine to be bold regarding the gospel and its demands. So what do you do about that? Well, you take a clue from Paul and Barnabas and you keep on keeping on. And that takes some thick skin and real confidence in Christ. Paul and Barnabas did not defend themselves; they didn't hold a press conference to clear the air. No doubt they heard all the rumors and knowing their character from the Word of God, they probably listened to see if there was any truth to anything that was being said, repented if they needed to, but they kept on preaching the "word of grace" with boldness. Why? Because they couldn't care less about the false accusations. They were self-forgetful, didn't care what those who refused their message thought about them. They left it to God to handle, just like Jesus before them who "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." (1 Peter 2:23, ESV) They entrusted

themselves to God and they were content to do so because they understood the nature of the gospel.

Here's the thing about the gospel and the reason why it causes such varied and strong responses. The gospel confronts every sinner with his true situation before God. It confronts them with their sin. It confronts every sinner with his guilt before God – confronts the immoral sinner with his immorality, the greedy sinner with his greed, the lying sinner with his lies, the sexually immoral sinner with his lust, the angry sinner with his bitterness and unforgiveness, the religious sinner with his pride, etc. Then it offers, for those who will receive it, the free grace of God who gave His own Son as the offering for sin, as the substitute for sinners. It offers life to everyone who will humble himself and confess His need and cry out to Christ to save Him and master Him as Lord.

And because the gospel does that – it draws a line. It divides. To some the gospel is the greatest news ever, the answer to their deepest needs – cleansing, forgiveness, freedom from guilt, the promise of righteousness, peace with God, a life of worth submitted to Christ as Lord and Master, freedom from self-idolatry, growing in grace and conformity to Christ, hating sin and loving Jesus – oh the joy of knowing yourself a sinner saved by grace. But to others it is the worst possible news – deny yourself, take up your cross, follow Christ – no way! See myself as I am and see Christ as He is – I refuse! Admit that I am broken and can do nothing to fix myself, that I am weak and needy – never!

The gospel always brings division, always brings opposition – whether it is open and violent or subtle, like the attempt to poison the minds of the Gentiles, but there is just no escaping that truth. The gospel does bring personal peace with God, it brings joy and satisfaction and blessing to the believing soul – and thank God that it does, but it brings a sword as well. Jesus said: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 10:34–39, ESV)

That they encountered opposition to the word of grace did not surprise or discourage Paul and Barnabas. What it did was convince them that they were preaching the truth, that they were being faithful to Christ. To the extent that they suffered for the sake of boldly preaching the gospel, they were encouraged that Christ was with them, that their lives and their devotion to Him were making a difference – and they would not turn back in their calling or in their faithfulness and obedience to Christ. They saw themselves as slaves to Christ, servants to the master and that was enough, more than enough for them. The apostle Paul never lost sight of his calling from the risen Lord. He had a clear understanding that once it was preached, the gospel was the power of salvation to Jew and Gentile alike, and he had no fear of what men may think of him. He knew that his preaching would cause spiritual warfare, would divide families and friends, even entire cities, just as it did here.

The division in the city ran deep and because it did, the opposition to the word of grace moved from slanderous talk to a conspiracy to murder Paul and Barnabas. Hatred and discontent will often produce strange bedfellows. Those who usually couldn't agree on a thing all of a sudden are able to agree on their hatred for Paul and Barnabas. And that is what we see here. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, and there they continued to preach the gospel. You have to love Paul and Barnabas. There is no quit, no backing down in them at all. No matter the cost, no matter what they may be walking into – Lystra was not going to be any more hospitable – they remained faithful to their calling and faithful to their Christ. These guys had the soul of a lion because the Lion of Judah had made them His own.

So, what do we need to learn from Paul and Barnabas? What should we model in them? The answer to that question, I think, is found in asking and answering another question – how did Paul and Barnabas endure and continue in the faithfulness to Jesus Christ in the face of mounting and persistent opposition, in the face of severe trial? The answer to that question is found in how they viewed themselves and how we ought to view ourselves as well. Paul wrote of himself and of his fellow servants in the faith: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” (1 Corinthians 4:1, ESV) That is all the acclaim, all the identity Paul ever cared to have – servant, literally slave of Christ. “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:5–6, ESV)

What spurred Paul and Barnabas on, what defined their lives was this simple truth – they were slaves of Christ. The Apostle Paul knew what it was to be a slave to Christ. It was one of his favorite ways of describing himself. He was a doulos of Christ and a doulos had no life of his own, no will of his own, no purpose of his own, no agenda of his own, no glory of his own, and no plans of his own. Paul was not his own, he had been bought with a price, the blood of Jesus Christ. He had been the recipient of inconceivable grace and so He viewed himself as the possession of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His slave exclusively. Paul lived always with the awareness that God in Christ had delivered him out of the miry clay of sin and put his feet upon the rock of righteousness and put a new song in his heart and he was committed to being the slave of Christ with all that was in him. That awareness did not temper with time or with a change in his circumstances. Paul was bound to Christ.

With every part of his soul, Paul could say: “I am a slave to the Lord Jesus Christ, I am absolutely sold out to His will. I am willing to do whatever he tells me to do. I am willing to say whatever he tells me to say, I am willing to go wherever he leads me, I find my greatest joy in being faithfully surrendered to Jesus Christ, not out of duty, nor out of compulsion, but out of the deep, rich love he has shown me and I want to reflect to Him. I have no rights, only the privilege of being chosen to be your slave.” That is what fueled his glad obedience to Christ. But that should not only be Paul’s testimony but ours as well. Every real Christian is a doulos of God.

You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1Co 6:19-20) You were ransomed from the slave market of sin not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ. Jesus has purchased you if you are a Christian.

It is that vision that will drive us to a life like this, a life that hangs on every word of God, that seeks with all that is in us to be obedient and faithful to Him, a heart that welcomes His correction as much as it welcomes His blessing, a life that is consistently amazed at the goodness of our Lord and which desires to make His glory known despite any obstacle or affliction, a life that is bound up in Him. It seems like these early disciples were completely fearless, thoroughly content in Christ, filled with purpose, exploding with joy, and were though they were constantly in trouble with someone, but they were secure in Christ. And I have to

tell you, that is an attractive lifestyle to me. It is the character that we should model. That's the first thing, but

What must we guard our hearts against? The answer to that question is fairly obvious from the text as well. We need to guard our hearts against opposing the Word of God. "Now, wait a minute. Nick, remember whom you are talking to. We are the redeemed, we're believers, followers of Christ..." Yes and amen. But the truth is that our flesh, though it has been dealt a deathblow, is not dead yet. It still seeks mastery over us, still seeks to master us and bring us under the sway of sin. The old words of the hymn ring true: "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." In our flesh still resides the wicked desire to oppose the word of grace, to stiffen our hearts toward the instruction of God.

As we have seen, opposition to God's Word does not always reveal itself in a loud and boisterous manner. Sometimes it's subtle. I can see it in my own heart. It can be as simple as selective obedience or selective belief of God's Word, prideful self-reliance and unwillingness to submit to the Word, and plain offense to the gospel truth we hear. Sometimes it reveals itself in a refusal to be convicted or sensitive to the word, in putting off action upon the clear teaching of the Word, in trusting in our own wisdom or our own emotions over the unambiguous teaching of Scripture. It can show itself in a heart that believes too highly of itself, that believes one has arrived spiritually and has no more need of growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. It can show itself in carelessness in hearing the Word or maybe giving ourselves a pass on some clear teaching because we are obedient in other areas. It can show itself in refusal to hear the message because by inventing false motives or reasons to mistrust the messenger. We can oppose the gospel by trying to lessen the conviction of God's word in someone else's heart. We can oppose the gospel by keeping the good news of Christ hidden, failing to speak the Word of Life to those in need. There are all manner of ways in which we can be guilty of opposing the Word of grace.

It is a constant and real battle, which is why the writer of Hebrews says: "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." (Hebrews 2:1-4, ESV) We must be constantly vigilant, taking every

thought captive to Christ and keeping our hearts sensitive to His Word. Then last, we have to ask

On which side of the line do you fall in regards to the gospel? As we saw in this text this morning, as we see throughout the Bible, the gospel of Jesus Christ divides – the saved from the lost, the forgiven from the guilty, the rescued from the perishing, those at peace with God from those under His wrath, the faithful from the unbelieving, the obedient from the rebellious, those whose destiny is heaven from those whose destiny is hell.

On what side of the division do you fall? Right now, where are you with regard to Christ? Do you know Jesus as the Savior who has taken away the penalty of your sin, the Lord who commands your life, your Redeemer who is continuing to break the power of sin in your life, your Treasure who is worth more to you than anything else? Where are you today?

I am pleading with you today, examine your soul in light of the Word of God, and place your full trust, your full faith in Jesus Christ today...

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