

TURN FROM WORTHLESS THINGS TO THE LIVING GOD

Acts 14:1-28

Key Verse: 14:15b

“We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.”

In the last passage we saw how God made Paul and Barnabas a light for the Gentiles. Amidst much suffering, God gave them Isaiah 49:6, “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” To any human being, the greatest privilege and highest calling from God is to be a light for the Gentiles. In Chicago UBF we pray that God may make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. However, when we face rejection, we sometimes wonder what we are doing. We must believe that God is making us a light for the Gentiles. This clear conviction gives us great joy and spiritual strength to stand and deliver a clear gospel message.

In today’s passage Paul and Barnabas continue their first missionary journey by going to Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. They go deeper into the Gentile world. We find that Gentile ministry is somewhat different than Jewish ministry. We learn from Paul what kind of message the Gentiles need most. We also learn from Paul the spirit of a Christian, especially a gospel worker. May God help us learn the message and spirit of gospel workers through this study.

First, the gospel is planted in Iconium (1-7).

Look at verse 1. “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.” Paul and Barnabas usually started in Jewish synagogues. They were Jews and had everything in common with them. They also had a shepherd heart for the Jews. The Jews were God’s chosen people. God gave the word of God to the Jews. They were best prepared to understand and accept the gospel. The tragedy is that these very people were the ones who put Jesus to death and opposed the gospel message. Paul and Barnabas knew they were inviting persecution. Still, they went into the synagogue and began to preach. Like them, we must start gospel ministry where God wants us to start.

Paul and Barnabas spoke so effectively that a great number of people believed. Jews and Gentiles accepted Jesus as the Christ who fulfills the promises of God. Jesus brings forgiveness of sins and eternal life and restores our holy mission. They rejoiced over the good news of the gospel. They must have sung many hymns and performed special dances to express their joy and thanksgiving.

However, not everyone believed. Some Jews refused to believe. They had enough evidence. They heard a clear testimony. But they refused to believe. It was not an intellectual problem, but a matter of deliberate unbelief. They were stubborn and stiff-necked. They probably did not want anything to disturb their nice and quiet lives in the contemporary suburban environment. They felt so threatened that they wanted to get rid of the gospel. So they stirred up the Gentiles, making use of their ignorance of the law and the prophets, and poisoned their minds against the new believers. Suddenly, Gentiles were filled with hatred and malice toward the new believers for no reason. It created a hostile environment for the new believers to live in.

What did Paul and Barnabas do? They spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord. They taught the word of God again and again, emphasizing that Jesus is the Christ who fulfills the promises of

God to save men from their sins and give them eternal life. They must have emphasized the Lordship of Christ. Through his resurrection he conquered sin and death and ascended to the right hand of God. From there he will come back to judge the living and the dead. Those who believe in him will be saved, but those who reject him will be condemned.

The battle between the believers and the unbelievers was intense. But God helped his servants by enabling them to perform miraculous signs and wonders. New believers were strengthened and gained the courage to face the hostile environment. So the city was divided. We can see this same division in our nation. Some believe that Jesus Christ is Lord; others oppose Jesus. Sometimes this division is exposed over issues like school prayer. Sometimes it is obscured, such as at Halloween, when evil symbols are passed off as cute and harmless. In this spiritual conflict we must stand for Christ and depend on the Holy Spirit.

There is something more to learn from them. It is their wisdom in spiritual conflict: They knew when to flee. There was a plot afoot among the unbelievers, both Gentiles and Jews, to mistreat them and stone them. When Paul and Barnabas found out about it, they fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe. No doubt, Paul and Barnabas realized that it was not God's will for them to submit to the enemy's plot. Rather, it was time to make a strategic retreat. The new believers in Iconium had been strengthened through the gospel to stand firm. They were better equipped to deal with the local situation than Paul and Barnabas. Moreover, if Paul and Barnabas began to struggle with local politicians, they would not be able to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Jesus was often confronted with threats from religious leaders. Sometimes, he withdrew in order to teach the word of God and raise his disciples. Likewise, Paul and Barnabas withdrew from Iconium to continue preaching the good news in Lystra and Derbe. We must know that gospel work is a spiritual battle that requires life-giving courage. At the same time, gospel work requires God's wisdom. May God give us great courage and sufficient wisdom to be effective gospel workers.

Second, Paul's message to the people of Lystra (8-20).

Look at verse 8. "In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked." No doubt, God sent Paul and Barnabas to Lystra to help this man. He was a nameless cripple. People thought he was useless. But he listened to Paul's message carefully. His heart was not crooked due to his handicap. His heart was open wide to God. He drank the word of life like a thirsty deer. Paul looked at him prayerfully, and saw that he had faith to be healed (9). Paul wanted to give him what he really needed. So Paul challenged him, "Stand up on your feet!" It was a sudden call. But the man knew it was God's voice to him. He not only stood up, but jumped to his feet and began to walk. When he was willing and obedient, he was healed instantly.

This event reminds us of Peter's ministry in Jerusalem. Peter helped a crippled beggar to get up and walk in the name of Jesus. This reminds us of Jesus' ministry. Jesus said to a paralytic, "Friend, your sins are forgiven...Pick up your mat and walk!" (Lk 5:20) Jesus demonstrated the power to forgive sins by healing a paralytic. Indeed, the message of forgiveness of sins may be best understood through the healing of a crippled man. Sin paralyzes man's soul. Sin fills men with self-condemnation, fatalism and despair. Sin robs men of power to do good and makes them helpless and useless. But God sent Jesus to save men from sin. Through his death on the cross, shedding his blood, he paid the price for our sins. His blood has power to cleanse and remove the debilitating disease of sin and to restore our lives as God's precious

children. Jesus' death and resurrection heals any kind of spiritually crippled person, and makes us powerful servants of God.

The work of God through Paul was great. But the response must have been quite a surprise. When the crowd saw what happened, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" They called Barnabas "Zeus," the chief god, and they called Paul "Hermes," the spokesman. Then they tried to offer sacrifices to them. A manifestation of divine power to idol worshiping people can easily be misunderstood on the basis of their cultural and religious background. Sometimes, when the word of God begins to work, people become more religious in their own way instead of following the Bible teaching with obedience and faith.

How did Paul and Barnabas help them? At first, they did not realize what was going on because of the language problem. They must have asked someone to interpret for them. When they heard that the people wanted to deify them, they tore their clothes and ran into the crowd shouting for them to stop. They could have tolerated the behavior of the people, hoping to explain better as time went by. But they did not allow the people to deify them for a moment. They regarded it as the sin of blasphemy and refuted their action immediately. They are a great contrast with Herod, who accepted men's worship, and died immediately.

Look at verse 15. "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them." Their message was clear: "Turn from these worthless things to the living God." The Greek gods were nothing but myth. They were not real. They existed only in the minds of men. They were worthless. They had no value, no power, no merit. In fact, they were more like spoiled children than noble deities. They cheated each other, stole from each other and treated helpless mortals at random. They were not merciful or compassionate. The thought of them only tortured the minds and hearts of people. Man is made in the image of God to worship and serve God. Man needs God like a child needs its mother. Man's relationship with God is most important. This is why the first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me." And the second commandment says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" (Ex 20:3,4). To any human being it is most important to honor God as God and worship God alone from our hearts.

Then who is God? First of all, God is the Creator. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." In addition, God is Spirit and we must worship him in spirit and truth. God is also the living God. He is not a figment of our imagination. God knows our needs. God hears our prayers. God cares about us and wants to help us and bless us. God has revealed himself in Scripture and in his only Son Jesus Christ who he gave as a ransom sacrifice for our sins. He wants to have a personal relationship with us by living in our hearts.

Paul's message was to turn from idols to the living God. It was really good news. But it was a difficult message for the people of Lystra. It meant that their entire culture was based on worthless beliefs that they needed to turn from immediately. American culture is somewhat different, being deeply influenced by Christianity. Still, there are many practical idol worshipers in our country today. One young lady said she is a Christian. However, while she was willing to spend \$75 to attend a rock concert, she would not pay \$20 to attend Christmas worship service. There was even a television show called, "American Idol," dedicated to raising false gods who can steal the minds and hearts of young people. Our message to American idolaters must be clear and absolute: "Turn from these worthless things to the living God."

Paul's message did not stop with God as the Creator. He also went on to explain God is the Provider. Look at verses 16-17. "In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." God was tolerant of the Gentile nations while he raised his people Israel and used them to send the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. Now he was visiting them to bring a message of salvation. In the meantime, he had shown his marvelous kindness by giving them food to eat and joy in their hearts. Though the gospel seemed to spring suddenly on the scene, God's love and care for the Gentiles had been faithful and continuous, marked by his forbearance.

Paul's message was most appropriate. However, the people of Lystra really wanted to sacrifice to them. When their desire was frustrated, they were disappointed. Into this volatile situation came the Jews from Antioch and Iconium. They won the crowd over and persuaded them that Paul was leading them astray. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. Perhaps a stone struck his head, driving him into unconsciousness, and he collapsed. More stones struck his flesh, causing swelling and much bleeding. More damaging than the stones was the emotional pain of violent rejection by his own people the Jews. It was their intention to kill Paul, and they left him for dead, dragging him outside the city. But Paul had a secret in his heart. It was Jesus. He was united with Jesus in his suffering and death. The Spirit of Jesus, who rose from the dead, was living in Paul. When the disciples had gathered around him, Paul got up and went back into the city. Paul's resurrection faith was not just a theory. It was his life itself. Christians must practice resurrection faith in our daily lives.

Third, "We must go through many hardships..." (21-28).

Paul and Barnabas went to Derbe where they preached the gospel and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, the cities in which they had suffered much, to plant gospel faith in the disciples. They encouraged them to remain true to the faith. Only the gospel gives eternal life to men. Only the gospel opens the way to God and his kingdom. Paul said in verse 22, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." Paul himself suffered much to advance the kingdom of God. Paul taught the disciples the way of the cross. This really strengthened them. Many people baby their sheep and spoil them. Paul taught the disciples to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. Then Paul and Barnabas committed them to the Lord, appointing leaders in each church. They believed that God had begun the work, and God would finish the work.

They preached the word in Perga before going back to their home church in Syrian Antioch. Their mission journey was over. They had completed the task (26). They finished their mission to the end and went back to Antioch to report. They mainly emphasized that God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. It was like Mother Barry's report that the back door to Muslim mission has been opened. This expanded the vision and prayer of the Antioch church all the more and set the stage for the next missionary journey to the Gentile world.

In this passage we learn that the message to idol worshiping people is clear: "Turn from these worthless things to the living God." To proclaim this message is costly. But let's remember Paul's motto: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." We must go through many hardships as we pray that God would make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.