

“APOSTLES VILIFIED AND DEIFIED.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Text for the Sermon: Acts 14:1-18

Prayer: Holy Father, humanly speaking the task before me is impossible. Rule and over rule now, like a stream of water direct all our hearts and minds to the truth of your Word and its application to our lives. Come, Holy Spirit, hear and help, for the sake of Jesus, in whose name we are bold to make all our requests. Amen.

Introduction.

What is the hardest thing you have to do? What is your biggest challenge week in and week out? What presents you with the most daunting obstacles?

Is it seeking to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, or resisting some sin or temptation, or loving someone hard to love, or striving for a Christ-centered marriage, or raising godly children in the home, or doing your work with integrity, or serving others, or engaging the culture in a war for morality and truth, or taking the Gospel to the lost?

The most serious challenges we face in life are never just one skirmish or one battle, it's continual warfare. To quote my favorite motto: "It is a sore fight to the end, laddie, a sore fight to the end." It is a hard fought battle and it is to the death.

Galatians 6:9-10 Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. 10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

I Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

What hard things have you been called to do? What are you most timid about, or hesitant to say, or fearful of? Why are we that way when we face so much less danger than the apostles?

It takes courage to be a Christian. Take to heart the example of Paul and Barnabas, their boldness when being vilified and attacked, and their humility when being deified and praised.

Acts 14:1-7, boldness when vilified in Iconium.

Having been run out of Antioch by all the important people, Paul and Barnabas walk another 90 miles to Iconium, in Galatia, central Turkey. Talk about out of the frying pan and into the fire. They were beaten and run out of Antioch, only to be mistreated and stoned in Iconium.

You would think they would give up this line of work, it is not conducive to their health.

They are undaunted. They were prepared for conflict, for doing battle with Satan.

They go to Iconium and walk right into the synagogue there. They didn't "avoid hostility, they feared no danger, they showed confidence, eagerness and zeal" (Calvin). They don't run at the first sign of trouble. They had good reason to be afraid, but persevered.

And in the face of hostility Paul and Barnabas do the exact opposite of what most people would do. They remain right there, and for a long time, and they continue to speak boldly.

How do people do that? They are able to when they have the confident assurance that there is a God and He is faithful and present and with us always. They are able to when they take God at His Word that the gates of hell will never prevail against the church and God's chosen people. They see the outstretched hand of God at work, they see the fruit, they sense God's peace and protection.

Notice what they preached. They bore witness to the Word of Jesus' grace. Grace. A Gospel free from works righteousness, free from the burden of merit, free from the impossible requirements of the law in order to be right with God.

To the Jews Paul preaches a Gospel of grace, of our justification being by grace through faith in Jesus so the Jews would see the inadequacy of the Law of Moses to save us and justify us with God. It is in Jesus and Jesus alone that we find favor with God.

This Gospel was lost again in the middle ages and resurrected in the Reformation. And we still need to hear it. We are easily bound up in legalism and trying to win God's favor and approval.

Do we appreciate the Gospel? Do we appreciate the cost, the sacrifice, the obstacles overcome for the Gospel to come to us? We have this Gospel through the blood, sweat and tears of countless thousands who laid down their lives so we could believe.

Acts 14:8-18, humility when deified in Lystra.

Paul and Barnabas are brave and courageous, but not foolish. So now they leave the second city they have been kicked out of. Do they quit? No, they walk about 20 miles to the next town.

In Lystra Luke records Paul's first public miracle which has remarkable parallels to Peter's first public miracle in Acts 3. God confirms Paul has the same power and authority as Peter.

This is impressive, a man who has never walked is now running and leaping. It is meant to get everyone's attention. In Lystra the apostles are dealing with pagan Greeks who are worshiping Zeus and a pantheon of other gods and goddesses.

The point of this miracle in Lystra is to expose their idolatry. They have to give up what they are worshiping in order to worship who they must worship.

Zeus and Hermes were widely worshipped in this region, there were temples and priests in many of the cities. Archeologists have uncovered carvings, inscriptions and statues. There were stories of their gods coming to earth disguised as humans.

It is no surprise that they immediately credit this miracle to their gods. They interpret the events of their lives in the light of their idols. And so do we all.

How many of us are bad interpreters of God's providences, of what things mean? How many of us have superstitions, ways we trust chance, or give power to delusions, falsehoods, fantasies? Do we have lucky socks, a rabbits foot, a certain way of doing something, only one way?

The World Series just ended and I saw the reminder how full of superstitions baseball is. Wearing your hat a certain way, not stepping on the base lines, crossing yourself. It robs God of His glory when we credit to some superstition (idol) what belongs to Him.

You might keep this in mind whenever you are talking to a non-Christian. You are talking to an idol worshiper. They are worshiping something other than the true God and if you stay in the conversation long enough, you will hear what it is. It is something important, something valuable, something they spend a lot of time with or working for.

This miracle is a huge deal for the people of Lystra. Imagine what the priests of the local temple are thinking. The gods have favored their city more than all the others. There is fame and fortune written all over this. This is the sort of thing that must be cashed in on, seize the moment.

Greed, money, profit, ambition, personal gain. Behind it all Satan is the driving force. Anything to capsize the Gospel, anything to derail this Gospel train.

Did Paul and Barnabas miss an opportunity here? Could they have ridden this wave of popularity and attention and turn it into good for the Gospel? How cool is it to have a big following, a fan club? Hey, this isn't that bad, it beats stoning.

What do we do with flattery, with praise, with being made much of? It feels good doesn't it. Appreciation is nice. Encouragement goes a long ways. We all want to be admired, thought well of, esteemed by our fellow man, or at least our friends, and accepted by our peers.

Do we care about the approval of others or what they think about us? Do we long for praise, affirmation, desire attention? Some people live for praise, they dress for praise, care about their looks for praise, do whatever they do for praise.

Social media feeds this. We can create this little universe with us at the center of it and then we measure how we are doing and how we compare. Who is a friend, who likes us, how often do they like us, how are we trending today? How are others doing? Am I a little better than others? How often do we checking email, Facebook, Instagram?

We don't like being unfriended on social media, or excluded from a social gathering, or avoided at work.

At some point this next week someone is going to compliment you or praise you or say something nice about you. Maybe in person, maybe in your social media. And when it happens how will you respond, what will you say, and what will you do with it?

Every praise leads to worship, either of ourselves or of God. Either we give God the credit and the glory for whatever good there might be in us, or we take the credit.

Trouble comes when approval goes to our head, when we start believing our own press, when we become puffed up. Paul and Barnabas set an example of humility in the face of being exalted.

“True humility does not refuse affirmation. It refuses to keep it for ourselves.”

Receiving affirmation is fine when we praise God for all His grace and goodness in your life.

John the Baptist had the right perspective on who he was and what he had.

John 3:27 A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.

Romans 12:3 ... not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.

Praise is like perfume, sniff it, but don't drink it, it will kill you.

Paul and Barnabas go to extremes to stop this, they want none of this and go beyond words to openly show how strongly they refuse any act of worship. Jews commonly tore their clothes whenever they heard blasphemy and this was blasphemy.

What do Paul and Barnabas' actions tell us? Their zeal is for the glory of God. They humbled themselves saying we are just like you, we are flesh and bones.

Acts 14:15-18, we are men like you, but we have better news.

Whenever people are under the impression we have done something impressive, we have a opportunity to tell them we never do anything impressive or meaningful in our own wisdom or strength or ability.

The apostles turn a bad situation into another opportunity to proclaim the truth of the Gospel. Now there is a novel idea. Can you think of a bad situation in the past week or more that could be turned to an occasion for saying something true about Jesus?

Notice Paul's brief sermon is very different from the ones in the synagogue. Paul is addressing pagan idolaters. Since this is not a synagogue Paul doesn't use the special revelation in the OT, he uses general revelation, nature, creation and God's providence in the world.

He begins at the beginning by explaining who God is. He draws a clear line of distinction between their many gods and the Lord God, who is the living God, the God who is the Creator of everything that is. Everything you have, everything you have experienced in life, all the good you have received, you owe to God. He calls them to turn from all that is vain and false and turn to Him.

This is bold truth, bold good news. Paul says their gods are worthless, their gods are dead, they gods can do nothing, they have no power. This is hard to say and hard to hear but it is the truth and it is part of the good news. Can we say this to the idolaters we know? "I am here to tell you what you worship is worthless, but there is a true God."

If you are so impressed by our miracle, then believe our words. We are denouncing all man-made religion and pointing you to God.

All mankind is left without excuse for God has bestowed His bountiful blessings on all humanity in all ages and in all places that testify to His power and goodness and presence. There is too much in all of nature that leaves us with no conclusion but that it is ordered and controlled by the providence of a supreme God.

Are we sensible to the goodness of God that fills our lives? Are we sensible to His provision of not just food, the basic necessities but our reasons to be glad?

In a world full of bad news, this text reminds us of the good news of God's common grace, His common providence, that He sends rain and fruitful seasons and goodness on all

creation. He is the Creator and He is good. God is not absent, He is present, He cares for you.

This Wednesday, the day after the election what is going to be true? You will wake up, you will drink your coffee, you will go to work, see your family, enjoy your freedoms, live your life, know the love of others. You will receive new grace and mercy for that day, grace worthy of worshipping the One who gave it to you. God will be on the throne, Jesus will be seated at His right hand praying for you. Jesus will still be Lord and Satan will still be defeated.

Implications and application.

Paul was an example of a person remarkably free caring about human approval, he worked for the approval of one person, God. He handle attack and applause with an equal amount of disinterest.

When he was attacked, he remained bold, he didn't stop sharing the Gospel. When he was applauded, approved, he was humble and deflected it back to sharing the Gospel.

Pray to be set free from the fear of man, the fear of human opinion and approval. It is a demon we all have.

“Find your identity and confidence in Christ, not in what people think about you or in your status here in this life. It will free us to tell the world the beautiful and offensive message it desperately needs to hear” (Marshall Segal).

Philippians 3:7-11 Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.