

August 23, 2016



*feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)*

Dear Church Family,

As we continue in the Acts story, I continue to consider how the story challenges us in the area of evangelism. This story, which focuses on the spread of the gospel, causes us to look at the story of our own lives. How much do you experience the spread of the gospel? How often are you seeing people come to Christ? If we do not experience in our lives what we are reading about in Acts, why not? That is a question that we all should be asking ourselves and one another.

What is our response to this? Certainly we can determine to apply ourselves more to evangelism. What might that look like for you? Would it mean getting involved in an evangelistic outreach or would it mean engaging people in your life? It is good to put more intentional effort into spreading the gospel, but we also need to pay attention to the gospel for our own lives. If we have a relatively shallow understanding and experience of the gospel of grace in our lives in all its various forms, we are not going to be very effective witnesses. On the other hand, the more impacted we are by the gospel as good news for us, the more we are going to want to share it with others. So, we need to continue to drink from that strong brew of grace that Stuart preached on last week for our own lives. But we then need to have that not only impact us, but also increase our desire to see others come to the grace of Christ. Robin pointed us in this direction during worship by referencing Jonah's failure to grasp that the grace he received in the belly of the fish was God's desire for Ninevah.

What can we glean from the Acts story of the spread of the gospel? It is surprising to see Paul have Timothy circumcised in chapter 16 in light of the Jerusalem Council decision in chapter 15. We see something similar in chapter 21. When Paul arrives back in Jerusalem, James asks him to visibly demonstrate that observance of the law is important to him because of Jewish believers who are "*all zealous for the law.*" Do these Jewish believers not properly understand the gospel of grace? Is their zealousness for the law legalism? Not necessarily. It is likely an expression of gratitude and devotion that understands that the law is pleasing to the Lord. This would be a natural expression of devotion for a Jew. Paul opposes Gentile believers being required to keep the law, but he will support Jewish believers keeping the law, both as an expression of devotion to God and the preservation of Judaism as a distinctive culture. This is an example of what Paul writes in 1 Cor 9:20, *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.*

It is interesting to note that James, all the elders and Paul, choose to conduct themselves in ways that allow Jewish believers to preserve their particular cultural identity as Jews. With the Jerusalem Council decision, there is a lot of emphasis on how Gentile believers were not required to adopt Jewish culture. But here we see that Jewish believers were not required to forsake Jewish culture either. So with regard to Jewish and Gentile believer in Acts, there is a unity in Christ, but a diversity in expression of devotion to the Lord. This has significant implications for cross cultural missions

which we explored briefly on Sunday. We too need to take care that we are not creating stumbling blocks in how we share the gospel and what we expect of new believers.

We see that Paul continues to face opposition, both from Jewish leaders, but increasingly from Gentiles as well. The common accusation that is brought against Paul and others is that they are a threat to peaceful community. But the story tells us that it was the enemies of the gospel who were causing the disturbance and then blaming it on Paul and others. So, like Jesus, believers face false accusations from those opposed to the gospel. They are accused of saying and doing things that are directly threatening or disrespectful to pagan religion or Roman culture which they have not done. We should not be surprised if we face the same type of thing in our lives. Note that Paul is generally indirect in his opposition to pagan religion. He does not come in and preach against false gods. In Athens we see how, though we are told that "*his spirit was provoked within as he saw that the city was full of idols*", he chooses to address the idol worship in a positive light, seeking a connection, "*Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.*" He chooses a non-threatening approach.

How do we relate that to our lives? We should be provoked by what we see around us, but that should not necessarily lead to criticism. Paul exemplifies 1 Peter 3:18 with regard to promoting and defending the gospel "*with gentleness and respect.*" But while the specific accusations are false, it is true that the gospel is a threat to the status quo of gentile (and Jewish) society. While Paul does not speak directly against pagan religion, those who convert to Christ through the gospel will no longer have allegiance to pagan gods. As we live out our commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives, we cannot expect that to fit in with those around us who do not share our commitment. And we can expect that our commitment will be threatening to some people, even when we are respectful and avoid any direct criticism. We should conduct ourselves with gentleness and respect, but we must not have as a goal to be respected and viewed positively by others. That is not how a truly lived out gospel life is going to be received by the world.

In his speech to the Ephesian elders in chapter 20, Paul declares twice that he did not shrink back in the face of opposition to the gospel. As we face the temptation to shrink back, what can we learn from Paul? Central to Paul's identity and purpose in life is the calling to spread the gospel. Clearly the highest priority for Paul with regard to his own life is this calling. Compared to that calling, Paul does not "*account my life of any value nor as precious to myself.*" Is that how I look at my life? Where would spreading the gospel fall on a priority list of my life in an honest assessment of where my time, energy and desires would indicate?

Paul is also motivated by a sense of responsibility for sharing the gospel in light of his conviction of the coming judgment of God. He is convinced that those who do not accept the gospel of Christ will be condemned in that judgment, both Jews and Gentiles. For him, to neglect or shrink back from this task is to bear some guilt over their fate. That is why he declares, "*I am innocent of the blood of all.*" We have a much weaker view of the coming judgment of God than Paul and how the gospel is the only way to be saved from that judgment. Generally, our view of the gospel is much more focused on the benefits it brings to someone's earthly life rather than their eternal destiny.

What we learn from the Acts story about spreading the gospel is challenging. We need more that to make some adjustments in our priorities. We are freshly aware of how much we need the Holy Spirit to equip us to do what we cannot do in our own strength. And so we seek him first, humbly bringing our weakness, putting our faith in his power to make us fishers of men and women. May he accomplish that amongst us in this season of church life.

Pastorally Yours,

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