

Acts 17:10-15 Berea: Check Your Bible

How do you wish to be known? With what do you want to be identified in your life? What do you aspire to be? What's your ambition? Many people would answer those questions in many different ways, right? But I think you'll agree that, if you are an athlete, you want to be an all-conference athlete or an all-star athlete. If you are a student, you want to make the academic honor roll. I recently saw in the paper a special insert entitled "La Crosse's Best of the Best." If you are a small business owner in our area, you want to make that "Best of the Best" list. And you would want to be identified as those things not for selfish, self-centered reasons-not to boast, of course. Rather, you'd want to be identified as an all-star or as a scholar or as a great business because it is good to aspire to be the best at whatever it is you are doing. That, finally, is being a good steward of the gifts and blessings and talents which God has given you, right? So what do you aspire to be as a Christian? Now, that, too, is a question you could answer well in a number of ways. However, this Word of God before us today gives us a good goal to which to aspire. If you are a Christian, you would want to be a known as a Berean Christian. Because the Berean Christians exemplify a noble character which all of us should want to emulate.

So, it's interesting. For Christians that have come to be known to exemplify a "gold standard" characteristic of Christian discipleship, there's very little in the Scriptures that actually talks about these Berean Christians. In fact, these six verses from the book of Acts is the extent of what we know about them. But we are told is extremely noteworthy. So, we encounter these Berean Christians on the Apostle Paul's second missionary journey. You'll remember that Paul had been travelling west across Asia Minor when he received the vision of the Macedonian man, "Come and help us!" So Paul and his travelling companions went to Macedonia. And in the last couple weeks we heard about the gospel mission work which Paul did in Philippi and then in Thessalonica. And, if you caught Pastor Olson's sermon last week, you'll recall that Paul and his mission partners experienced persecution and trouble in Thessalonica. That's where this lesson from Acts 17 picks up. In order to keep them out of harm's way, the Thessalonian believers got Paul and Silas out of town in the middle of the night, and sent them on their way to this city of Berea, which was about 50 miles west of Thessalonica.

And in Berea Paul did what he typically did when he arrived in a new town. He went to the local synagogue. That was the Jewish house of worship in every town and city back then. It was a place where Paul would have a point of contact with the people in that new town. Because the Jews at the synagogue were well acquainted with the Old Testament. So Paul begins preaching in this

Jewish synagogue in Berea. And that's when the Bereans revealed that "gold standard" characteristic for Christian discipleship. It says, "**Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.**"

Yes! See, what Paul was preaching in Berea in that synagogue was what he preached everywhere he went. He was proclaiming Jesus as the world's Savior, the Christ, God's chosen one, the one God had been promising all along in the Old Testament, the true God who came into this world as a human and lived and died and rose to give us and all people forgiveness of our sins and the certain hope of eternal life. Keep in mind, these Bereans at that synagogue-that was a message they'd never heard before. Even though they were worshippers of the true God, even though we assume-since they were well acquainted with the Old Testament-that they knew about God's promises of a coming Savior, these Bereans had not yet heard that that Savior had actually come. They didn't yet know that Jesus had completed that work of salvation. So this is what Paul shares.

And what do the Bereans do with that message? They eagerly and willingly received this message about what Jesus had done for them. And that means they checked their Bibles. As Luke records in Acts 17, they "**examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.**" The Bereans wanted to verify that what Paul was saying about Jesus actually jived with what God said in his Word about the promised Savior. So they opened up their Old Testaments, looked at the prophecies about the Messiah and, by the Holy Spirit's power, concluded, "Yes! Jesus is our Redeemer!" That's it! That's the gold standard of Christian discipleship! To search the Scriptures eagerly and earnestly.

And I think it's important that we state why the Bereans went to the Scriptures to verify whether or not Paul's message was to be trusted. It's because these Bereans knew where authority resides. They knew who the author of absolute truth is. It's the Lord. And these Bereans knew that God reveals himself and the truth-his loving truth!-in the Scriptures. So these Berean Christians opened the Scriptures to compare what the preacher Paul said to what God says. They treated the Scriptures as the litmus test for determining whether or not something was salvation-giving truth or not.

And when, by the power and grace of God the Holy Spirit, these Berean Christians discovered that the Old Testament Scriptures had been speaking about Jesus, they rejoiced that God had revealed his salvation to them. And we're told that many people came to faith in Jesus as a result of Paul's preaching. Awesome!

So what does this mean for you? Well, I pray it doesn't mean that you come to church or Bible class here at St. Paul's with a pessimistic skepticism about what you're going to hear that day. I pray you don't come here thinking, "What's this joker going to try to tell me today?" No. Believe me, I appreciate the fact that many of you come to church here at St. Paul's entrusting your spiritual health and growth to us pastors and our instruction. You're expecting to hear about God's grace and his forgiveness and life for you. You're expecting to hear about the implications of that grace on our everyday lives. And you are expecting and assuming that you'll be told God's truth. And I know I can speak for Pastor Olson and Pastor Ehlike when I say that we consider that a privilege and a responsibility, and we do not take that task lightly. It's good to be able to entrust yourself to a teacher of God's Word. But what I'm also saying and hoping and praying is that your trust and confidence in us as Bible instructors is not a blind confidence and trust. I pray it's a trust that's been earned-earned by a track record of spiritual instruction that is rooted in the authority of God's Word. In short, I pray you come to church here because you know you are going to hear God speak here from his Word, that God's Word is proclaimed here-nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. So there's a pattern that we as pastors and teachers should follow: we read the Scriptures, we explain the Scriptures, we apply the Scriptures. And we repeat that again and again. But it's always about what God says to us in his Word.

And that means that there is a pattern that you want to develop in your life. We want to be Bereans. To examine the Scriptures, to study the Word, to think about it, to meditate on it, to apply it to our lives-and not just so that you know that your pastors are being faithful to the Word of God (although that's important). But primarily, you want to be in the Word often-daily-because this is where God reveals his heart to us. This is where broken sinners like us see and experience the saving grace of God. It's as close as we can come to seeing God face to face right now. Being in the Word is what assures us that one day we will see our God face to face in heaven. What a blessing this Word is!

See, but that reveals the problem we have on occasion. And honestly, it's probably startling how often this happens in our lives. It's not the problem which those Jews in Thessalonica had which we heard about in Pastor Olson's sermon last week. Some of those folks in Thessalonica heard God's Word and they didn't believe it. In fact, what God's Word said ticked them off. They just outright rejected that the Scriptures were revealing God's grace in Christ.

No, that's us, right? It's not rejection of the Word. It's apathy toward the Word. It's indifference about the importance of God's Word in our lives. It's the attitude that says, "Personal devotion time in the Word, the importance of

leading our families deeper into the truths of God's grace? Meh. Regular worship, regular Bible study? Is it really that big of a deal?

You know, one of the most famous ways that Jesus describes himself to his disciples is as the Bread of Life. I think that's a really significant picture-that Jesus describes himself as our food. How often do you need food? They say that you can go somewhere between a month or two months without eating, and still live. But that's the extreme limit. If you go weeks without eating, your health will be compromised. You will get sick. You are in grave danger. To stay physically healthy, we need to eat often. So we make it our habit to eat a few meals a day. That's one of the reasons why Jesus described himself and his Word as the Bread of Life. Because we need to take in his Word often in order to stay grounded in his saving grace, to stay spiritually healthy. And to put ourselves on a spiritual starvation diet? To forego the Bread of Life for any length of time? Well, that's exactly what Satan wants. Because he wants to see us spiritually and eternally dead. That's why apathy toward the Word is so dangerous. It's deadly dangerous.

So I want you to be assured of this: Jesus came into this world for you because he wants to give you life. For every time we have failed to take seriously our need for that Bread of Life, Jesus has died to forgive you of that sin. He's died for every single one of your sins, no matter what it is. For all our spiritual apathy, for our neglect of his Word, Jesus was intent on fulfilling his Father's Word to go the cross to pay for all our faults so that we would be children of God. Jesus heard and obeyed his Father's Word so that one day we would hear our Father's Word as he welcomes us into his heavenly home. That's a pretty powerful thought, isn't it?

That's why your Lord wants you to be in his Word so often. He wants you to know his loving heart of salvation. He wants you to have that comfort. He wants your will to be conformed to his good will. And so, it is our godly ambition to be Berean Christians. **"For they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."** And when we do that, we grow closer to our Lord. More to the point, he draws us closer to himself. And when we are in the Word, we let God's mind and heart guide and shape our thinking. We're taught to put less value on the concerns of this world and far more value on God's kingdom truths. And when we are in the Word, we become more and more certain of the forgiveness we have in Christ, our standing as God's children, and the hope we have of our eternal life with the Lord.

May God bless us like he did the Bereans, that we receive his Word with great eagerness and as we examine the Scriptures every day. Amen.