

Acts 13:44-52 *On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him. ⁴⁶ Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” ⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. ⁵⁰ But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. ⁵¹ So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

1. The Good
2. The Bad
3. The Ugly

The three gunslingers stood facing each other in Sad Hill Cemetery. They had been on a quest for lost confederate gold and only one of them was going to walk away alive and with the cash. The Good, the Bad and the Ugly is a spaghetti western that starred Clint Eastwood, Lee Van Cleef and Eli Wallach in the title roles. Set in 1862 New Mexico, the plot revolves around the three gunslingers that are searching for Confederate gold.

Last week we heard that Paul and Barnabas presented the good news about Jesus to the people of Pisidian Antioch. In our lesson today, we see the reaction to the gospel message. The reaction is good, bad and ugly.

Paul was making his first missionary journey. Barnabas was with him. John Mark had left them and gone home. They were in the city of Antioch on the southern coast of what we know as Turkey.

Paul and Barnabas had been there a while and had a good response to the gospel when they preached in the synagogue one Sabbath. In fact, the response was so good that almost the whole city came to hear them on the next Sabbath. And that made some of the Jews jealous.

⁴⁵ *When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him. ⁴⁶ Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.* In the 1930s, there was a woman who was baking cookies. She was using a recipe that dated back to colonial times for butter cookies, but she wanted to do a twist on the recipe. Wanting to make chocolate-flavored cookies, she cut up a Nestle chocolate bar and put the chunks in the batter, expecting them to melt. Twenty minutes later she figured that the chocolate would have melted and she'd be taking chocolate cookies out of the oven. Instead, what she got were butter cookies studded with gooey chocolate chips. This was a failure, but her mistake became one of the most favorite cookies of all time. A successful failure.

Paul's gospel was rejected by the people he in the synagogue, but was warmly received by the Gentiles. A successful failure. *When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.* Luke records that those appointed for eternal life believed. This is pure grace. If you build a house, do you build n rock or sand? If our faith is built on our own decision to believe, our faith is built on weak and unstable sand. The solid rock on which to build is God's promise and election. That doesn't shift or change. The teaching about election from eternity is a comfort to us that we have forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation not because of anything that we do but because of what God has done for us. Our salvation is not based on our weak trust but on God's solid choice and grace.

Gladys was disappointed. She couldn't remember how many times she had tried some new treatment to find relief from her multiple sclerosis. There was nothing more she wanted than to walk away from her debilitating suffering. In desperation, Gladys finally gave in to her well-meaning sister-in-law. Gladys agreed to go with her to a faith-healing service. "What a dumb idea," she later confided. Nothing happened except to make her doubt her faith. "You just don't have enough faith" echoed through her mind. (Adapted from Jacob Preus, Just Words pp. 55-56) And there's where the problem is. When our salvation depends on how strong my faith is – that's shaky ground. That's sand.

Don't lose sight of God's grace. The teaching about election from eternity underscores God's grace. No one is worthy of God's forgiveness. It is only by God's grace that we are saved. Election is meant to comfort us in knowing that our salvation doesn't depend on us, but is totally the work of God for us. Trust God. Trust his promise. Trust the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Like the Gentiles in Antioch, let us receive that message with joy. That's good.

Now, the bad. *When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.* In his play, "Othello" Shakespeare said, "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on." Winston Churchill, one of the greatest leaders of the western world, had a father who was incredibly jealous of his own son's success. In Churchill's book, The Last Lion, he wrote, "I would rather had been an apprentice for a brick layer, or run errands as a messenger boy, or dressed the windows in the local shops, if I could have had the support of my father." Their relationship wasn't what it should have been all because of his father's jealousy.

In the book of James, the Holy Spirit inspired these words: "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing." (3:16) It was jealousy that fueled the unbelief of the Jews. They rejected the good news of salvation in Jesus simply because they were jealous of Paul's success.

I am going to read off some names. Tell me what they have in common. Steve Jobs, Tina Turner, George Harrison, Julia Roberts, Law Alcindor, Cassius Clay, Fidel Castro, Napoleon Bonaparte, Brad Pitt and Joseph Stalin. What do they all have in common? All ten of them walked away from Christianity. Some of them turned to Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism. Some said there is no God. How can you walk away from the faith and be something else? This is an even harder question: How can you walk away from the faith and say there is nothing at all? That's bad.

And it turned ugly. *But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.* The Jews not only rejected the gospel, but they used the authorities to persecute the apostles. It's interesting to note that unbelief uses the same tactics today. A Christian baker in Colorado lost a lawsuit because he refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple. Unbelievers used the government to persecute believers.

Luke doesn't tell us what that persecution consisted of here, but Paul once recorded all the things he suffered for the faith. He wrote to the Corinthians, "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones." (2 Corinthians 11:24-25) One of those lashings or beatings may very well have been here in Antioch before they threw them out of the region.

On June 24, 2015, a Christian was shot in Suez, Egypt. It was not an accident. He was shot twice in the chest. The reason? He was murdered because he refused to denounce his Christian faith and accept Islam. In our world today, being a Christian is no longer a safe thing. Maybe it never was. That's ugly.

When's the last time you told someone what Jesus means to you? Like Paul, you will get three responses. Some will love to hear it; that's good. Some won't want to hear it; that's bad. Others will get angry and want to make you stop talking about Jesus; that's ugly.

But that leads us back to the good. *And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.* The joy of faith can't be ruined by the ugliness of rejection and persecution. Do you have that joy? Don't take it for granted. With fresh ears hear again the good news: You are forgiven through Jesus. I know you have heard it before many times, but that's the message that faith clings to. That's the message that brings us joy. Don't replace that joy with the passing happiness of this world. Rather feel again the burden of sin lifted off of you. Rejoice again as forgiveness through Jesus is proclaimed to you. Feast on God's verdict of not guilty. Your faith clings to God's verdict. You are forgiven in Jesus. That's good and that brings eternal joy.