



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

FOR AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ OCTOBER 31, 2021

Our Scripture reading today comes from Acts 17:1-9 (ESV).

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ²And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” ⁴And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. ⁵But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” ⁸And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.



A young concert pianist had earned the privilege of making his big debut in Carnegie Hall before the discerning New York audience and the terrifying New York critics. At the conclusion of the young man's program, and as he walked off the stage, the entire audience jumped to its feet and applauded wildly. Backstage both his manager and the stage manager told him that he had earned the privilege of offering an encore, but the young man said, "No! I will not offer an encore until every person in the hall is standing."

They responded, "What are you talking about? There are about 2,000 people out there all standing up and cheering."

He said, "Not every one of them is standing." He opened the stage door just slightly, and he said, "**That** person is not standing."

They asked, "Out of 2,000 people one is not standing. What's so special about that person?"

"**That** person," he said, "is my piano teacher."

Applying that concept to our lives, I am reminded of what the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:9, "We make it our aim to please Him." The Apostle Paul did not preach for the approval of men. During the great Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther would not have given two pfennigs for the admiration of the public. John Calvin did not do what he did for personal affirmation. George Whitefield and Billy Graham did not preach for the applause of adoring audiences. All of them, at one time or another, faced the condemnation of the intelligentsia. All they did, they did for an audience of One. Certainly, they were sustained by the encouragement of those with understanding, but most of all it was a Holy Spirit-driven commitment to the truth that mattered most.

This is a profound example to us all: Live life for an audience of One. We should make it our aim to please Him. We all understand that pleasing Him does not earn us our salvation; rather, it is because we are saved that we wish to live a life pleasing to the One we love most. All our actions, all our decisions, all our attitudes, the way we

relate to one another are all to put a smile on His face. We might ask how we know for certain that we are pleasing to God. Let me ask you this: In the Word, where are the times when God is specifically quoted as being “pleased”?

When I ask a Bible class this, the first answer I usually hear is “Creation.” Moses does make the observation that when God looked on what He had made He saw that it was good. But where was He specifically quoted as actually saying He was pleased? The first time was at Jesus’ baptism. Remember? When Jesus came up out of the water, John and the crowd heard a voice say, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). The other time was similar, except it was on a mountaintop during the Transfiguration. Moses, the giver of the Law, was on one side of Jesus and Elijah, the Prince of the Prophets, was on the other when the apostles heard a voice say, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him” (Matthew 17:5). This time He had added the phrase, “Listen to him.” If we follow that logic, how do we know we are pleasing to God? It is the extent to which our lives reflect the Master; the extent to which our lives are according to what He taught and what He showed us. How do we know that? How do we know what Jesus requires? It is right here in Scripture! It is our source of God’s truth! That is why during the Reformation it was proclaimed *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone).

We must have a basis for our faith as well as a basis for truth. Now, what did all these fellows that I mentioned a moment ago have in common? What they had in common was that they all preached with laser focus. “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ” (Acts 17:3). They preached Christ without reservation; boldly and without apology, not halfway. They gave the whole Gospel, the whole Counsel of God, and in doing so, from the pagan perspective they were turning the world upside down. It was the power of their witness that came from the power of the Gospel message.

George Whitefield once said, “Some may preach better than others, but no man can preach a better Gospel if he preaches Christ.” Those

leaders preached a Gospel worldview on the authority of the One who said, "I am the way the truth and the life" (John 14:6). All those men helped their listeners to see reality through the lens of Scripture and the revelations of Jesus Christ which turned the worldly perspective upside down. My friends, this Gospel is exactly what the world is starving for, whether they realize it or not. Whether they recognize it or not, the answer to their longing, to their hurt, for their lack of peace, for their lack of hope, for the bitterness and despair that plague so many is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the answer they are starving for.

This is how God used the Apostle Paul and many others to plant and grow churches and to transform communities. This is how the Reformation transformed the culture of the 16th century and still impacts the world today. As we remember the Reformation, we must be clear that Martin Luther and the others were not trying to start anything new. They had no interest in starting a new church. They were just trying to reform the Church they loved; but the way they went about doing it was to return to that which was old ... to return to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You might ask, "Why go back? Don't we progress? Don't we go forward? Shouldn't we keep evolving and changing?" We go back because of the immutability of God, which is our subject today.

Today's Call to Worship says, "Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus does not change, and because He does not change His Gospel does not change. The times may change, the culture may change, and we may need to reengage the Gospel in light of new experiences. Like the times when I have had sorrows in my life and have had to go back to the Gospel and encounter again all those things I have said and believed about God before the current tragedy or trouble occurred. All those things I sang in those hymns, and all that was just affirmed so beautifully by our musicians today, are still true! I may have changed, my world may have changed, but the Gospel message is the same.

It is true, of course, that modes of communication may have developed. The Church has always utilized new forms of technology, mobility, and communication; however, the Message has always remained the same. We are never called to preach a **new** Gospel. You might say, “Hasn’t the Church reformed through the ages?” Yes, it has, but we must understand how! During the Reformation, a principle proclaimed was “The Church **reformed**, always **reforming**, **according to the Word of God.**”

There are times when the Church—we as God’s Body—must come to terms with the truth that was already in the Scripture but which we had not seen. We must be willing to repent and to get in tune with the Gospel. Some erroneously quote the statement above by saying, “The Church reformed, always reforming”... period! This implies that the more the Church reforms and changes, the better; whatever cultural changes come, the Church has to adapt. No! Notice, what was proclaimed was that the Church has been reformed and is willing to reform **according to the Word of God!** That does **not** mean to change due to the way the cultural wind blows!

In every age, the world tries to corrupt the Gospel with worldly compromises. The challenge for the Church, and for each one of us as individuals is: Does the Church witness to the culture or does the culture witness to the Church? D. L. Moody once said, “A ship may be in the sea, but heaven forbid if the sea were in the ship!” Likewise, “The Church is in the world, but heaven forbid if the world were in the Church!”

Certainly, Christians of every age have looked at the world and their hearts have ached at what they saw. They ached because of the brokenness and the waywardness, the lostness and the despair, the misapplied pride and arrogance, and all that has gone on. We want so much to transform the culture, but how can we do that? Are we able to do it? The Holy Spirit can, and He has, and He does, and He will! But, from our biblical witness this morning, we ask the question: How did the Holy Spirit use Paul to do this in an even more pagan culture than we have now?

I think of what Paul (a very educated man, who was probably one of the smartest people on the planet) wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "I chose to know nothing, but Christ crucified." That is the bottom line! Everything else is built upon that! You might ask, How does that answer our question about transforming culture? We must understand that the mission of the Church is not to transform culture. The mission of the Church is to be God's instrument as the Holy Spirit transforms sinners. Our job is to let the Holy Spirit work through us, as a church and as individuals, to transform sinners who then become salt and light. **They transform the culture!** Christians in all walks of life are salt and light for the Master.

As an example, let me refer to my dear Uncle Paul. My Uncle Paul was for many decades working in the highest echelons of corporate America, where he rubbed shoulders with CEOs, corporate presidents, vice-presidents, managers, and numerous business leaders. After a miraculous conversion, he decided that because he was a born-again Christian, he should be in full-time ministry, so he started going to a theological seminary. It was a disaster! You must understand that my Uncle Paul was a very smart man, but he was not where God wanted him to be. After a while, he figured out that God was thumping him on the side of his head saying, "Wait a minute. Why do you think I chose you? All those CEOs and leaders you've been dealing with: They don't know Me. They don't go to church. We need to bring the Gospel to them! Don't leave corporate America!"

Uncle Paul started meeting with and getting to know people one-on-one. He started having prayer meetings in his office. He started having Bible studies with these men and bringing them to Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International meetings. The next thing you know, one after another started coming to faith! You know that if these men were becoming disciples of Jesus Christ in their positions of power and influence, it would impact the way they did business and the way they dealt with their employees. It was just one transformed sinner, my Uncle Paul, and his sphere of influence that began to change the culture.

Consider the Great Commission:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:19-20

Those of you who have been to the Christian Missionary Alliance have heard sermons on this many times, and you know that the most important word is the word “go.” But go do what? Go into all the world and make disciples! Does it say, “Go change the culture?” No, it says go “and make disciples of all nations...” How do we do that? First, put God’s sign of grace on them by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then by teaching them everything that Jesus commanded and not be afraid because He will be with you the whole time. Make disciples!

As we do this, our Scripture passage this morning tells us what we should expect and what the Church has always experienced. Paul preached boldly the truth of Christ, and it says that some were persuaded and became disciples. Even a great many non-Jews who had no foundation in faith became disciples, but some wicked men “set the city in an uproar” (Acts 17:5). Such is the impact of the Gospel. The rabble thought Paul was turning the world upside down, and from the pagan perspective, he was. But the apostles were actually turning the world right side up! From the pagan’s perspective up is down and down is up and right is wrong and wrong is right!

Those who have not yet discovered what we have in Jesus Christ respond in many ways. Some are incredulous out of ignorance. They do not understand the Gospel or the Bible, so they think Christians are crazy. Out of their genuine misunderstanding, they perpetuate falsehoods about Christians, about the Church, and about the Bible. Others may feel convicted, perhaps even threatened, so with a malicious spirit, they mock or spread deliberate lies. We must expect pushback.

In the latter half of Acts 17, the apostles went on to a town called Berea where the people were “more noble.” The Holy Spirit had already been moving there, and they were more receptive to receiving the Word. With all eagerness, they wanted to examine the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul had said was true. But those Thessalonians started sending people to Berea to upset the mission and to sabotage the apostles; nevertheless, many still believed.

Paul went on to Athens and engaged the philosophers there. Some suggest that Paul tried to find common ground with their worldly philosophy. Not at all! His preaching was as sharp as ever, contrasting the biblical view with the Greeks’ view, exposing their sin and their idolatry, declaring the Glory of God and the atoning work of the Savior Jesus, and calling them to repent or face judgment. This was a life-changing, world-transforming message—showing the Cross of Christ, the love of God in Jesus Christ, and the throne of judgment. We must always keep these before us. We must understand that God is a God of love and mercy, but at the same time, we must understand that God hates sin. That is why we need a Savior in the first place! There is something at stake! We will never fully receive the Good News of salvation until we understand this, and we realize what Jesus saved us **from**.

That is why I keep saying that I do not understand the concept of a grumpy Christian. Do we realize what we were rescued from? We should be bouncing off the walls with joy and want to do everything possible to please the One who saved us! Friends, the modern mind does not like to hear that part. All it wants to hear about is the “**good**” Jesus, the One who loves us no matter what we do. While that is true, we must remember that God hates sin, as should we.

Let me ask you a question (your answer is just between you and God): In the depths of your soul, do you truly hate sin—not only in the world, but in yourself? The problem is that fallen humanity does not always hate sin. At best we are indifferent to it or make excuses for it, and at worst we applaud it or, like Adam, we participate and encourage others to do likewise. The challenge that we have in every

age is that compromises are made, even by preachers and church leaders, to minimize the contrast between biblical truth and worldly ways to enable the Church to “fit in” better or to be attractive to non-believers sometimes even using the same language as traditional Christianity. But as some might say, “they are using the same words but not the same dictionary.” Half-truths offered as whole truths become whole untruths! Hitler was an expert at this. This is one of Satan’s favorite tools because he wants to take everything from us.

Throughout our recent century, many theologians have tried to “save Christianity.” To reach the modern mind and not lose the next generation to the dustbin of history, and to rescue us from cultural irrelevance, they believe we must cast off the “supernatural.” They claim that the modern scientific mind cannot believe in the Virgin Birth, the miracles, the atoning death of Jesus, the bodily resurrection, the parting of the Red Sea, or even a Creator God. They say that modern minds cannot believe in such fairy tales from the past! But the refrain from one of my favorite hymns (*I Love to Tell the Story*, written by A. Catherine Hankey and William G. Fisher) says,

I love to tell the story,
'twill be my theme in glory,
to tell the old, old story
of Jesus and his love.

We are not doing unbelievers any favor by watering down the truth. In his testimony, a new brother we met this morning encountered Christians, and experienced their love through everything they said about Jesus. They walked in the Way of the Master, and it melted his heart and transformed his life. The Bible is full of accounts describing the amazing, transforming power of God. His Word and the witness of 2,000 years of saints who have gone before us have transformed people, communities, families, churches, and even nations. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has changed the world and the world will never be the same! Jesus started with just 12 men, and even after losing one, changed the world through them, and with the mission of a multitude of faithful disciples, some of whom were willing to sacri-

fice their all for the Gospel. The great number of the redeemed will be secured, as described in Revelation 7:9-10.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

John was telling these persecuted Christians, "Look what I saw! All this persecution that you've been going through, all this faithfulness, all this burden you have carried for the Gospel ... this is the result! This is what it is all about! God will be victorious! His Kingdom will prevail!" Jesus has already won the victory over sin and death! Just as Jesus said when He renamed Simon in Matthew 16:18, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

The mission of the Church and each one of us is clear: God does not change, His Word does not change, the Gospel is the same; therefore, we must remain steadfast in our witness as a church and as individuals because the salvation of the world depends upon it. But it requires a few things, so I offer you this exhortation.

First, the extent to which we can be salt and light in our sphere of influence depends upon our continually making sure that our own spiritual life is in order. It depends on our own conversion, our own transformation by the Spirit, our willingness to repent when necessary and to embrace the life-giving atoning work of Jesus. We must submit our lives to the way of the Master in love. All of us, as God gives the opportunity and equips us, can effectively witness to those who do not know Christ.

As my Uncle Paul demonstrated, this does not require a seminary degree. It does not require a new Gospel designed to tickle the ears of the modern mind and compromise the truth. It only requires a contrite, humble heart that loves His Gospel above all else, a heart

that trusts and loves Him. As a result, we are able to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Second, we must all urgently, passionately pray for revival in this nation and throughout the world. We must pray for a mighty movement of the Spirit. As we look at history, all the great revivals were preceded by a group of dedicated Christians willing to earnestly pray for revival and for God's people. We must pray that God will transform our hearts and raise up more George Whitefields and Billy Grahams in our time. We must strive to secure the future of our own church and to ensure that we continually preach Christ, always embracing the authority of the Word of God, serving Him, and being His instruments in that greatest labor of love: the transformation of sinners into disciples of Jesus Christ.

If we do this faithfully, my brothers and sisters, we will do our part to turn this world upside down. Or better yet, right side up! ■

