

Proclaiming a Better God Acts 14:8-28

Main Point: *The (true) gospel reveals the idols of the heart/culture by pointing people back to the true source of life, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Introduction:

Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 12. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 14 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)...

Pastor Grant's Facts of Life

As we prepare to hear from God's word today in Acts, I want to help chart a course for the next several weeks as we work through what I consider to be some of the most relevant material from Acts for our day and age. Chapters 14-19 record Paul's travels to Greek/pagan cities throughout the mediterranean region, which was the basin in which the early church and Christianity would eventually grow into the global faith that it is today. However, we are not just interested in history and what "happened" but how Paul's Christ-centered and Spirit-annointed ministry can help churches like our spiritually thrive and bear fruit for the Living Jesus Christ, even in the midst of a culture that is becoming increasingly indifferent and hostile towards Christian beliefs.

So what we find in these cities Paul goes to is the fact that people in the ancient world act the same way people act today: *idolatrous*. Everyone is religious, but the question is: what is their religion? What are they worshipping? When you discover that, the idol of the heart, then you have an inroad to share the gospel. One of the challenges in our day is discovering the idols people worship, exploit them, and then proclaim a better God.

In my previous church, I did a teaching that I called "Pastor Grant's Facts of Life". Here they are:

Everyone lives by faith

Everyone worships something

Everyone longs to be happy

Idolatry: taking a good (created) thing, turning it into a "god-thing", and thereby making it a bad thing

Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story

A brief reminder on where we are in the story of Acts so far. After the Lord Jesus is resurrected back to life, He appears to His disciples and other followers for 40 days, teaching them about the kingdom of God. They ask the burning question that any faithful first century Jew would ask (one that many are still asking today): is now the time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel? Jesus answers the question by redirecting them to the wider purposes God has for them: they will receive power of the promised Holy Spirit, and when they do, they will be witnesses of Jesus's kingship for not only Israel, but for Samaritans, and eventually the ends of the earth (Gentile people).

And so Luke has taken us on a geographical journey, from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria (Philip), and now to Gentiles. What began with the conversion of a single Gentile under Peter (Cornelius) has now become a full blown mission with the church in Antioch, and the sending out of Paul & Barnabas.

Lets turn to Acts 14...Two weeks ago, we saw how the Apostles were traveling along the Roman roads from city to city preaching the gospel of Jesus. Their pattern was to start in the synagogue first, and then to the general Greek population. Last week they were in the city of Iconium, where hostilities from the Jewish local population force them to leave. Next they come to Lystra and Derbe, which were established Roman colonies. Lystra is roughly 20 miles southwest of Iconium.

Exposition of Acts 14:8-20:

Here is where we left things: Acts 14:5-7 - Notice, they didn't flee in fear or shrink back from the task which the Lord Jesus had assigned them, but instead continued boldly doing what they had been called to do.

Mission Principle #1:***Paul and Barnabas do not flee the surrounding culture, but enter into it***

This is what every missionary does. Now, entering a culture does not entail equally participating within it, as we shall see. There needs to be discernment, and care in which influences we allow ourselves and which we reject. But entering the culture does entail faithful presence within it, one that continuously points people to Jesus. So let's see what happens next...

Paul heals a crippled man Acts 14:8-10 - Paul arrives in the city, begins preaching the gospel and then sees a crippled man who, according to Luke's narration, had faith "to be saved" (i.e. experience God's salvation through Jesus Christ). Our English texts are a little bit misleading here, often translating "salvation" for "healing" or "made well". However, Luke's understanding of the word "salvation" helps to clarify. "Salvation" in Luke is often times wholistic, implying the deliverance, and full restoration of people to God. While it certainly includes physical healing, there is so much more. This man, listening to Paul explain the story of the Lord Jesus Christ and reconciliation with God, justification by faith alone through Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection, and hope of the world to come, he was buying in and ready to say yes to Jesus! So, as a confirmation of what has been said, Paul (through the power of the Spirit) heals the man. And as we have seen before, as we have seen throughout Acts, the miracle confirms the message! Just like with the ministry of Jesus, the miracle is a sign of God's active power, presence, and mercy being shown through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mission Principle #2:***Paul and Barnabas become vessels of God's power, presence, and mercy to the culture***

First and foremost for the missionary is to understand their task in fundamentally "salvific" or "saving" terms – that they are there to be conduits of God's salvation through Christ to people who need it most. Therefore, the posture a faithful missionary will have towards the culture is not first and foremost disgust ("THESE people are going to hell"), apathy ("these people are going to hell"), or judgement ("these people ARE going to hell!"), but rather one of broken-hearted sorrow and compassion for these people who *without the Lord Jesus Christ are going to hell*. We need to look over the great cities of our day the way the Lord Jesus Christ looked at Jerusalem...

Acts 14:11-13 - The crowds treat the Apostles like visiting gods

Now, there is some history here which makes their response understandable. According to the local myths of these communities, two of the most powerful gods in Greek mythology (Zeus and Hermes) had visited as humble beggars. Zeus is the highest of the Greek gods, the most powerful who gathers clouds, sends rain, thunder, lightning, and presides over the every day dealings of human communities, for either good or ill depending on his mood (he was temperamental) and how people responded to him. Hermes is Zeus's son, who acts as his messenger, and has the ability of crossing between the divine realm and the human realm, like a mediator between the gods and human beings.

According to legend, Zeus and Hermes made a visit to this region, disguised as traveling beggars. No one acknowledged them, or offered hospitality. Finally, an elderly couple shared some supplies with them. The gods rewarded this couple by making them priests in the temple of Zeus (which was there in the city), and eventually transformed them into sacred trees who would inflict judgement on other people. For the rest of the town, they were destroyed by floods. So, the collective cultural memory would have been there among the people. So they see this Paul and Barnabas do this miracle and think, "Ah, they've come again! This time, we won't mess this up!" And so they offer the sacrifices to them. Notice how Paul and Barnabas respond:

Acts 14:14-18 - *Paul proclaims a better God*

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Paul and Barnabas rush to them and proclaim that they have the wrong guys! Instead, Luke gives a brief summary of Paul's speech. Now, most commentators, in my opinion, mistakenly assume that this speech is simply an affirmation that the God of Israel, the Lord of heaven and earth, exists and is the one true God whom they owe their allegiance to. In previous times, God allowed them to stay in their ignorance, but now He calls them to turn away from ignorance and back to Him. Curiously, the name of Jesus is not mentioned. The logic goes: before you get to Jesus, you have to first establish the fact that God exists, and this God is one – not many, like the Greeks had believed.

I want to challenge that idea, and instead propose that even though Jesus is not specifically mentioned in Luke's summary, that this short speech here is actually very Christologically focused. In other words, it's all about Jesus. Let's take a closer look at it: First, Paul calls their message "good news", gospel, which is always centered on the Lord Jesus, who reveals God the Father, the one true God, as one who governs/rules the world, but is also saving/redeeming it from the effects of sin/idolatry. "Good news" is always about God's deliverance; and in the New Testament, this deliverance comes through Jesus the anointed and risen Messiah, specifically!

Second, Paul calls them to "turn" (repent) from the vain things (idols) to the living God. Now, in the Old Testament, God is called "the living God", but the focus we have seen throughout Acts is that the "living God" is revealed, quite literally, in the "living God" of Jesus, who rose from the dead and is now seated at God's right hand as the world's true King/true Lord. This living God has a name and face – its Jesus. To "repent" is distinctly about turning from idols to God by confessing allegiance and faith in Jesus as the one true Lord.

Third, and here is where we need to do some more careful, biblical thinking: Paul appeals to God as the creator, sustainer, and benefactor of life. It's not Zeus, but it's Israel's God. Now, we need to go a step further. In the gospel accounts (Luke in particular), we see Jesus doing God-Creator like actions such as: stopping storms, controlling the seas, providing food/nourishment. Each of the acts described here, we see God the Father doing throughout the Old Testament and Jesus as Lord doing in the New Testament. God the Father, God the Son, acting in unison and as one. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul specifically says that Jesus is the co-creator with God:

Colossians 1:15-16 - ¹⁵ *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.* ¹⁶ *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.*

Finally, Paul says the times have changed. Previously, you experienced the grace of this God through His provision for you in the creation. But now, this God is revealing Himself through His apostles, with the miracle, and the message, by calling them back to Himself. To Him they all belong!

Mission Principle #3:

Identify the culture's idols, exploit them, and proclaim a better God

Every culture worships something or someone; its inevitable! As human beings, God made us this way. What is it that people are putting their hope in, their desires towards, their aspirations for? How do they expect to get blessing for life? The answer to these questions exposes the idols of the heart and the culture.

Acts 14:19 - Jewish leaders from Antioch and Iconium attack Paul

These same Jewish leaders, under the impulse of Satan, travel all the way from Antioch and Iconium in a united attack against Paul and Barnabas. But watch what happens next:

Acts 14:20 - Paul goes to Derbe

What do you do when you are knocked down and beaten up for Jesus' sake? Well, you just get up and move on to the next town and keep doing what you're doing. This is the way of the Apostles. Paul gets up and goes another thirty miles to the next town, Derbe, on foot, to keep preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 14:21-23 - *Paul & Barnabas continue their evangelistic/pastoral work*

Mission Principle #4:

Embrace suffering & opposition for Jesus' sake as the norm for fruitful/faithful ministry

It's odd that even though this is so clear in the New Testament and in history, yet so many American Christians seem baffled and confused as to why Christian beliefs are either dismissed or adamantly opposed in our day. Were you expecting something else? This is the new normal for faithful witness in our culture today.

Acts 14:24-28 - *Paul & Barnabas return to Antioch, having completed their first missionary journey*

Mission Principle #5:

Celebrate the Spirit's work by encouraging one another with testimonials of Christ's power & faithfulness

How did the early church endure suffering? By celebrating the fruit! Friends, we need to encourage each other with stories about ways in which God is opening up doors of opportunity and faith among people. When we see people turning to Jesus, it needs to be celebrated and acknowledged for what it is: evidence that the gospel is still the power of God for the salvation of all who believe, both Jews and Gentiles.

Main Point: *The (true) gospel reveals the idols of the heart/culture by pointing people back to the true source of life, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Application: How to preach to an idolatrous culture

What might this look like for us today? I want to suggest a few ways:

- 1) Discover the idols of the culture/heart

Individualism

- 2) Exploit the false promises of the idol

Anxiety, mental health, folly. Warnings and judgement!

- 3) Tell the story of a better God

Jesus, the joy and end of man's desiring. Lift up, describe, extol the beauty of the Lord Jesus as the joy of all man's desiring.

But here is the question: are we as eager as they were to tell the culture about a better God? Are we willing to suffer for this good news, even as they were? Maybe Moravians?

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Exposition of Acts 14:8-20:

Paul heals a crippled man

Acts 14:8-10

The crowds call the Apostles “gods”

Acts 14:11-13

Paul proclaims a better God

Acts 14:14-21

Paul & Barnabas complete their first missionary journey

Acts 14:19-28

Application: How to preach to an idolatrous culture

- 1) Discover the idols of the culture/heart
- 2) Exploit their false promises
- 3) Tell the story of a better God

