

Sermon 54, Be a Berean, Acts 17:10-15

Proposition: Luke contrasts the noble Bereans with the ignoble Thessalonians, teaching that true nobility is defined not by birth but by how you respond to the word of God.

- I. Nobility I: Paul Goes Right Back to the Synagogue, v. 10
- II. Nobility II: Responding to the Word of God, v. 11-12
 - A. Eagerly Receiving the Word
 - B. Searching the Scriptures Daily
 - C. Evaluating Paul's Message by Scripture
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- III. Ignobility Redux, v. 13
 - A. Personal Hostility to God's Word
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- IV. Ignobility Doesn't Stop the Kingdom; It Drives it Further, vv. 14-15
 - A. Paul Heads for the Sea
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, my childhood pastor used to say it all the time: "Be a Berean!" The name is near and dear to the hearts of many of you, as I know that some of you worshiped for years at the Berean church here in Gillette. When a church calls itself "Berean," or a pastor says to "Be a Berean," what do they mean? Just this: Read and study the Bible for yourself. If you hear a claim about God, go look into the Bible and find out whether that claim holds up.

That's what the Bereans did. And that is what Luke characterizes as genuine nobility of birth, contrasting it with the ignoble or base-born resistance to the word of God displayed by the Jews and mob of Thessalonica. True nobility lies not in who your parents are, but in how you respond to the word of God.

I. Nobility I: Paul Goes Right Back to the Synagogue, v. 10

The first noble thing that happened in Berea, a town 45 miles from Thessalonica, is that Paul returned to the synagogue. His persistence is not just admirable; it's downright unbelievable. How did he have the guts to go back again to the Jews who had repeatedly attacked him in city after city? Well, for one thing, they were his own people. They may have been rotten but they were his. If you were in Greece, you would probably be more comfortable in some ways among American expats than among ordinary Greeks, even if the Americans were godless and hateful toward Christians. But Paul didn't go to the synagogue for his comfort; he went there because, like it or not, it was the best place to advance his mission. There he could find everyone in town who knew the Scriptures and was open to hearing about how they had been fulfilled in Jesus. From there, he had a base, a group that was ready to be the mature and already-knowledgeable

nucleus of a new church. And so, nobly, he heads right back into the synagogue, as calm as you please. Did he know that they weren't going to riot and stone him? No, he didn't. He had lots of reasons to expect that kind of treatment, though you would think that by this time he was starting to get familiar with the signs that the Jews' patience was wearing thin and that their trigger fingers were starting to get itchy.

Anyway, he nobly fulfills his calling to evangelize his own people by going to the synagogue.

II. Nobility II: Responding to the Word of God, v. 11-12

And there, unexpectedly indeed, his work is rewarded. The Bereans are described in four different ways that form a paradigm of how to listen to God's word at any time and especially how to listen to a sermon. This is the definition of nobility: to respond eagerly to the word of God.

A. Eagerly Receiving the Word

That is the first characterization of the Bereans: Their nobility manifested itself in an eager reception of the word of God. They really wanted to hear it; they couldn't wait to sink their teeth into some meaty teaching from Scripture!

Does that characterize you, brothers and sisters? Are you excited to hear more from the Bible? Do you have an appetite for what the Scriptures say? If so, you will read them on a daily basis. You will come to church, both services, because there you can hear the word of God proclaimed. You will teach the Bible to your children, read it as a family, and know what it says. To eagerly receive the word of God means to be ready to hear it. Rather than working and playing late on Saturday, sleeping in as long as possible on Sunday, and then bolting out the door to church with a stiff argument with your spouse in the car on the way there to make you even more out of sorts, you need to get to bed early on Saturday, have enough time Sunday morning to prepare, and generally get ready for church as you would for any other important and exciting event.

Non-eager reception of the word looks like

- Rarely opening your Bible
- Thinking about other things during sermons
- Wondering how long this sermon will last
- Trying to decide whether the preacher's mannerisms or his tone are more annoying

And so on.

B. Searching the Scriptures Daily

This second one, though, is the one that I think preachers and churches mean when they say "Be a Berean." The Berean Jews searched the scriptures daily. They opened the Bible, read the Bible, and sought to put all the pieces of the Bible together. They didn't just read a chapter, close the book, and check it off a mental or physical checklist. They studied and examined the Bible.

Do you do that? Are you familiar with how the Bible works? With its history, meaning, and content? Are you able to respond Biblically to just about any idea that's thrown your way? Do you know what the key passages are for dealing with questions of doctrine and ethics? Do

you own and know how to use tools like concordances, Bible dictionaries, cross-references, and commentaries? That is what a Berean does. They are eager to hear the Bible and they study the Bible. Some people geek out about baseball stats and can tell you that Jackie Robinson's batting average was .311. Bereans geek out about Scripture and can tell you that Exodus has 40 chapters, that Jonah and Nahum are the only books that end with questions, and that Revelation is about the victory of the Lamb.

Brothers and sisters, the Bible says a lot more than “do good, be good” and “Jesus is Lord.” Search it to find eternal life. And search it every day. As you know, I don't often tell you to read your Bibles every day. But it is something that noble people do. If you want to be noble, read your Bible daily. If you care what God has to say to you, read your Bible daily. If you want to know your Savior and be like your Savior, read your Bible daily.

You can read from a printed text. You can listen to audiobooks read by some of the best readers of our time. You can listen to sermons from thousands of outstanding preachers and teachers. You can read books that thoroughly investigate every word and sentence and passage of Scripture. Brothers and sisters, in our day more than ever before, there is literally no excuse for ignorance of the word. In Paul's day, a copy of the Bible might cost six month's salary, reflecting the expense of materials and the time it took to hand-copy 39 books. Same in the days of Origen, Thomas Aquinas, Dante Aligheri. But now, a copy of Scripture can be had for 10 cents at any thrift store in America. A brand-new copy can be had for \$5, which is less than 45 minutes' wage for the lowest-paying job in this country. And of course, there are hundreds of thousands of churches that will give you a Bible for free.

If you're not reading God's word, why not? Are other things more important? Is the latest episode of your favorite TV show more exciting to you? Do you have to catch up on the news? Do you prefer to nap? To stare out the window? To sign up for yet another activity? Brothers and sisters, the Bereans received God's word with eagerness because they were noble. God calls you to be noble and to receive His word with eagerness too.

C. Evaluating Paul's Message by Scripture

The third thing the Bereans did that showed their nobility was to evaluate Paul's claims by Scripture. They did not just say “Well, this Cilician rabbi who was very prominent in world Judaism says it's so, so it must be so!” They said “What does God's word say?”

Brothers and sisters, a lot of you have suffered from dishonest or ignorant shepherds who told you “Here's the basic Christian message.” You believed them, and suffered for it.

Luke is outlining a better way: When you evaluate the message of a self-proclaimed Christian teacher by Scripture, you will never be left out in the cold. You'll not be let down. You will know what is good and what's not, the difference between meat, gristle, and poison. Your palate will get more selective as you learn what Scripture tastes like. Your ear will get better as you learn what Scripture sounds like.

Imagine that I am listening to a performance of Beethoven's Fifth and that Leonard Bernstein, longtime conductor of the NY Philharmonic, is listening to a performance of Beethoven's Fifth. Who is going to hear it better? Who is going to get more out of it? And in the

same way, brothers and sisters, imagine that Paul is listening to a sermon and you're listening to a sermon. Who's going to hear it better? Who's going to get more out of it?

This takes us right back to Luke's other use of the word "nobility," which we looked at briefly last week. Remember, Luke uses this word in the parable of the minas to remind his hearers that the haves are rewarded and have-nots punished. The more Scripture you have in your blood, the greater your nobility and the greater your reward. The less Scripture, the less your nobility and the greater your punishment. If you have a knowledge of Scripture, double down on increasing that knowledge and learning to check every statement and teaching by Scripture. If you lack a knowledge of Scripture, set about getting one.

"Lord, he has ten minas!" Pray God that could be said about you and your knowledge of Scripture.

D. Believing in Jesus

Well, obviously, what happens when you evaluate Paul's claims in light of the teaching of the OT? You start to believe in Jesus. Precisely because they searched the Scriptures, "many of them therefore believed."

Do you want to strengthen your faith? Search the Scriptures. Do you want to believe in Jesus more than you do now? Search the Scriptures. Once again, Luke comments that women were not shy about believing in Jesus, highlighting, as he has before, that the gospel is for both sexes. Ladies, you can and should believe in Jesus!

III. Ignobility Redux, v. 13

Of course, the nobility of the Berean Jews was not unopposed. As had happened to Paul on his first missionary journey, the rage and envy of the Jews didn't care about short distances like 45 miles. And so the ignoble Thessalonians Jews hurried down the road to Berea.

A. Personal Hostility to God's Word

Again, Luke is stressing their ignobility, and showing it by their attitude to God's word. The Jews had received the oracles of God, the single mina that by trading and bearing gospel fruit could have produced ten minas. But they ignobly hid it in a napkin and refused to let it speak. The attitude toward God's word is the first mark of their ignoble nature.

B. Stirring Up Riots Against God's Word

The second mark of their ignobility is their activity in stirring up riots against the proclamation of the word. Hey, this tactic of Satan worked before, in Thessalonica and in other places where Paul had preached; and now, it works again. It prevents Paul from staying and making more converts among the noble Jews of Berea.

IV. Ignobility Doesn't Stop the Kingdom; It Drives it Further, vv. 14-15

But here's the thing Luke wants to leave us with: Ignoble resistance to the word of God doesn't stop the Kingdom; it only drives it farther.

A. Paul Heads for the Sea

Paul doesn't turn around and go back to Syrian Antioch. He instead makes for the sea. Berea is inland a little ways, not right on the beach like Philippi and Thessalonica. So he heads for the sea and eventually wends his way all the way to the capital of pagan culture.

B. Paul Goes 250 miles to Athens

Yes, that's right: The apostle to the Gentiles goes to the seat of Greek learning and culture, the highest high-water mark of human thought and art reached in the centuries before Jesus Christ. You want to find the world's most magnificent architecture? The best sculpture? The highest philosophy? The greatest drama? Then go to Athens, the cultural capital of the Mediterranean and the classical world more generally. I am not familiar enough with Eastern civilization; I have never read Confucius or studied Japanese architecture. But I have read Plato and Sophocles. I have profited from the works of Aristotle. No one can forget the sculptures of Phidias and Praxiteles.

And you know what? The kingdom went there. The word of God, driven out of no-name Berea, went to one of the most famous cities in the world.

Satan didn't win this round. He drove out Paul once again. But he was not so much patching the gates of Hell as just getting Paul to drag rescued people out of the kingdom of darkness by a slightly different path. It's a setback for the Kingdom of Light, but it is far from a disastrous one.

So be a noble Berean. Search the Scriptures. Turn your one mina into ten, and the nobleman coming to claim His Kingdom will reward you with more. Amen.