

## Scripture Reading:

Acts 13: “43 Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. 44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. 45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. 46 Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. 47 For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.' " 48 Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. 49 And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. 50 But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. 51 But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium. 52 And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 14:1 “Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. 2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. 3 Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. 4 But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles. 5 And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, 6 they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. 7 And they were preaching the gospel there.

## "Beware the Root of Bitterness"

We are in the midst of studying Paul's first recorded sermon delivered on his missionary journey at a Jewish synagogue. The Apostle Paul ended with a strong call to repentance and salvation and we began last week to consider the results that followed this proclamation.

- First we saw the positive response that came from Jews, proselytes and God-fearing Gentiles upon hearing the Good News.
- This week we consider the jealousy that arises among the Jews and will consider the warnings against allowing a root of bitterness to grow up in the midst of our covenant community.
- And finally next week, Lord-willing we will study how Luke demonstrates that the Gospel has divided the world just as God said it would in the Garden of Eden.

As we move through the Book of Acts we are striving to understand how Luke presents his orderly account. We must understand how the patterns which are established demonstrate how the Spirit of God will act throughout all of history, as He fills the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus

- And of course we must also understand and remember the lessons we are called on to learn as we faithfully serve our Lord and Savior.

As our text for this week and next, shows, there is perhaps no more destructive force that can come against the advance of the Kingdom than for God's covenant people to allow a root of bitterness to take hold and poison their work.

Remember how Paul came to Antioch of Pisidia along with Barnabas and they were welcomed into the synagogue and even asked to share with the worshipers who had gathered.

After Paul's sermon there was an encouraging response from all quarters: Jews, proselytes and God-fearing Gentiles. As the week went on, discussions continued and by the following Sabbath Luke tells us that almost the whole city turns out to hear what the Apostles have to say! Rather than rejoice at the advance of God's Kingdom, it is the Jews, God's covenant people who respond poorly and become enemies of the cross. Luke tells us, "45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul."

➤ Why does this happen?

It comes down to jealousy and pride. They are not happy that they are no longer the center of God's attention and certainly do not want to have to share God with the Gentiles on a grand scale.

So Paul confronts them directly: "46 Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. 47 For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.' "

➤ At bottom their argument is with God, not with Paul and Barnabas, which is always the case when a root of bitterness is allowed to take hold.

All Paul has done is proclaim the promises that all of them should have known from God's Word. Peter, Stephen and now Paul & Barnabas have all quoted from the Prophet Isaiah which these religious leaders would have known well... The problem is they did NOT want to hear what the prophet had to say about the Gentiles even though it could not be avoided with any honest reading:

Isaiah 42:1 "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.

Isaiah 49:6 Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.' "

Isaiah 60:1 Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of Jehovah is risen upon you. 2 For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But Jehovah will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you. 3 The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising. ... 11 Therefore your gates shall be open continually; They shall not be shut day or night, That men may bring to you the wealth of the Gentiles, And their kings in procession. 12 For the nation and kingdom which will not serve you shall perish, And those nations shall be utterly ruined."

The religious leaders of Israel had done with these passages what we often do today with places in the Bible that do not make us comfortable: They adjusted them to their way of thinking. Rather than being light to the Gentiles and bringing salvation, these proud leaders argued that all the light shone only on Israel and that the Gentiles were not even to be visited.

This is what we see here at Antioch: It was fine when the Gentiles came and converted to Judaism and it was even OK for some God-fearing Gentiles to listen in at the Synagogue meetings. BUT when the Good News that Paul and Barnabas were sharing began to be embraced by Gentiles throughout the entire city it was too much for these proud leaders to control and so, as we often see in religious circles, this movement had to be crushed.

This will be a pattern that we will see over and over again as we move through the rest of the Book of Acts and one that we must understand continues down to our day.

When we speak about a “root of bitterness” today, we usually limit this to actions by individuals in a family or church. It can certainly affect an individual as we saw with Simon:

**Acts 8: 20 But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! 21 You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. 22 Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." 24 Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."**

What I want us to consider this morning is how the Scripture more often focuses on the problem of bitterness impacting a community: The principle is laid out in the Old Testament.

**Deuteronomy 29: “9 Therefore keep the words of this covenant, and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do. 10 "All of you stand today before Jehovah your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, 11 your little ones and your wives--also the stranger who is in your camp, from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water-- 12 that you may enter into covenant with Jehovah your God, and into His oath, which Jehovah your God makes with you today, 13 that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 14 "I make this covenant and this oath, not with you alone, 15 but with him who stands here with us today before Jehovah our God, as well as with him who is not here with us today 16 (for you know that we dwelt in the land of Egypt and that we came through the nations which you passed by, 17 and you saw their abominations and their idols which were among them--wood and stone and silver and gold); 18 so that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from Jehovah our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations, and that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood; 19 and so it may not happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my heart'--as though the drunkard could be included with the sober. 20 Jehovah would not spare him; for then the anger of Jehovah and His jealousy would burn against that man, and every curse that is written in this book would settle on him, and Jehovah would blot out his name from under heaven.”**

- Even the most famous verse that we quote about bitterness from Hebrews in its proper context is a warning to the congregation of the Saints:

**Hebrews 12: 12 Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. 14 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: 15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; 16 lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.”**

The kind of bitterness that we are being warned against is certainly begun by individuals like Esau or the Jewish leaders here in Antioch but the impact quickly grows.

- We must not be so arrogant as to think that such sins can never occur in our community or to us as individuals.

For example, sometimes we need to sit back and reflect on major moves that we have seen in Church history and ask ‘why?’

- How did the great advances of Christendom in the 1<sup>st</sup> millinium descend into the religious nightmares of the Roman and Orthodox Churches of the middle ages?

- How did the European religious and intellectual forces that brought the great reformation descend into the higher critics of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century that gave us men like Marx, Lenin and Hitler?
- How did the Great Awakenings in our nation descend into the liberalism that we see in the mainstream denominations today?

In each case the root cause can be seen as forgetting some pretty simple Biblical principles:

Christendom forgot the priesthood of all believers and the proper distinction between Church and civil authorities.

The children of the Reformers sadly forgot about the authority of God's Word and began to look more to man's wisdom

And here in our nation we fell headlong into that ditch of antinomianism that we considered last week thinking that we no longer had to obey the Laws of God.

- In each case it is pretty easy for us to look back and say, they should easily have seen where such thinking would lead!

Just as these Jewish leaders should have understood what the promises to Abraham meant when the Prophet Isaiah explained them very plainly!

In each case it begins with a simple temptation, not unlike what Satan did to our first parents when he said, "hath God said..." We need to understand the past so we do not repeat their errors:

Beginning with Pope Gregory they began to say sure all Saints are priests but there is also the greater office of priest in the Church.

The higher critics were "improving" our understanding of God's Word by properly evaluating what parts were REALLY true.

And in our nation we have wandered so far from God's standards that we struggle to oppose the killing of unborn children or how to define marriage, all in the name of grace and love.

Not only must we heed these lessons of history but we must also be aware that Satan is always looking for new errors to attract us too and they will come in much the same way. Just as the faithful Jews of that day were persecuted when they embraced the truth that Jesus was the Messiah, so we face similar situations today if we hold to and affirm basic Biblical truths:

Truths that we affirm that we believe each week when we recite the Apostle's Creed:

The Trinity! Remember that the fast growing religion of our day is the cult of Mormonism which is a direct attack on the nature of God.

Creation! There is a reason that we read together the creation account every few months here at Church of the King -- There is perhaps no more central doctrine that comes under such vicious attack in so many areas today!

- If we lose this battle, we lose the proper understanding of God as Creator and man as made in His image and neither can be compromised without a great cost.

Depravity – Election! Seeing man's true state under sin and his need for salvation by grace has already been lost in many churches today and obviously it is anathema to the world who believes that man is basically good.

The Resurrection! As it has been since that first Easter morning, the world the flesh and the devil do all they can to attack and water down the truth that Jesus lives!

- Today, it is fine for us to each have an individual “resurrection experience” whether it comes in church or the yoga class, but how dare we talk about the resurrection of Jesus in space and time confirming that the sins of His people have been forgiven!

**Eternal Life – Damnation!** Next week we will consider how the coming of Jesus has divided the world in more detail but for now think how offensive it seems to modern ears for us to proclaim that simple truth that Jesus is the Truth, the way and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through Him!

- The Kingdom will advance when we as God’s servant proclaim these truths boldly and live out all of their implications in our lives.

When we fall prey to the tempter’s snare and turn from them the Spirit is grieved and His work is hindered: Remember those sobering words from Mark’s Gospel when the authority of Jesus was questioned in His own community: Mark 6:5 “Now [Jesus] could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. 6 And He marveled because of their unbelief.”

- God’s plans can be hindered because He has chosen to fill the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus using jars of clay: Sinful men.

**BUT** we know that His plans cannot ultimately be thwarted: Eventually all the nations will be discipled and at the final judgment every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the Father.

If we focus on all the problems and shortcoming of history and our times it would be easy to be discouraged...

But we should look to the Gentiles of that time in Antioch as our example:

48 “Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”

In conclusion what I want us to consider is how Paul and Barnabas, as well as the others who believed, responded in the midst of all these controversies, divisions and persecutions: After the Apostles had been expelled we read: “51 But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium. 52 And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.””

This is NOT the modern concept of ‘picking up my toys and going home.’ Paul & Barnabas do exactly what Jesus had instructed His disciples to do when the Good News was not welcomed:

- They shook the very dust of the city off their sandals as a warning to those who were hardening their hearts.

This is not a final judgment because we know that after the resurrection Jesus sent His disciples to be His witnesses in ALL of Judea and Samaria, so they returned to these cities with the Good News. Jesus said that sins against the Son would be forgiven, but that sins against the Holy Spirit would not and that is a warning we must take seriously in the age when the Spirit is working to fill the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus!

- As ambassadors for Jesus we have Good News to preach and that should fill us with great joy!

We will be reminded again next week that this Good News divides the world into those who respond in faith and those who harden their hearts.

The lesson that Paul and Barnabas leave us with today, is that we are not to allow any root of bitterness to take hold in our lives and we must not fear to leave the dust of sin with those who choose to harden their hearts.

- Our joy comes in going where the Holy Spirit leads us, whether to family and neighbors near or missionary fields afar, to tell the Good News that Jesus saves!

**Communion Meditation: Luke 24:25-32**

**“[Jesus] said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.**

**When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"”**