

Text: Acts 17:1-9
Intended audience: Christians
Topic: Evangelism
Theme: Evangelism's mixed effects
My purpose for this message: Be prepared for the possibility that the gospel you present may not be well-received.
Delivered: June 13, 2004 @ KEFC

[Book Thesis: *The Power of God Spreads the Gospel*]

The Trouble with the Gospel

(It makes some people happy, and others angry!)

In my opinion, Ronald Reagan was one of the greatest presidents Americans have ever sent to Washington D.C. Last week, even those who loathed his policies could not deny the character and conviction of the man; nor the greatness of his leadership.

When he came to office in 1980, he was dismissed as a lightweight, a pretender to the presidency. After all, he was an *actor*. But his critics grew alarmed when he began to say quite baldly that he believed the Soviet Union was evil, and that our goal should be nothing less than its defeat.

He was called everything in the book: simplistic, naïve, a throwback to the 1950's when people built bomb shelters as protection from Soviet missiles. But President Reagan continued his battering, even saying face-to-face to Soviet Ruler Mikhail Gorbachev: "let me tell you why we mistrust you." The trouble was, while some of us thought he was on the right track, many remained appalled.

Reagan stayed on message, so fixed on his goal, that the naysayers were little more than background noise. And one day in March of 1989, the world as I had always known it, began to change. Hungary held free elections and removed its fence on the border with Austria. Gorbachev allowed it. In June, Poland held free elections and the communists lost. In July, thousands of East Germans "vacation" in Hungary, then flee to Austria and the west. In October, 70,000 East Germans march, demanding an end to the regime. And in November, the Berlin wall fell. Freedom won; Ronald Reagan won. Because he was not deterred.

You and I have in our hearts, a message more enduring than political freedom. More urgent. Rom.10:14-15 asks, "How can they believe without hearing, and how will they hear without a preacher?" And just as there were those who scoffed at President Reagan's message, there will continue to be those—many more, who will scoff at ours.

The Trouble with the Gospel... is that it doesn't have the same affect on all: Some are grateful, some are hateful; some are thrilled, some are chilled. So, what will we do? Tuck our tails and run if there is opposition?

READ Acts 17:1-9. PRAY.

Story

The quartet of missionaries (Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke) was on the move again. With things hot in Philippi, they headed southwest, passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia, and 100 miles later arrived in the noisy streets of Thessalonica. Today, Thessaloniki is one of Europe's *oldest* cities, and Greece's second largest, boasting a million people. Here you'll find Phillip's tomb, father of Alexander the Great.

Maybe 200,000 lived in this major European seaport when Paul arrived. Later, it became Paul's practice to use a major metropolitan center as his base of operations for an

extended period of time: Corinth and Ephesus. Perhaps that was his plan for Thessalonica too.

As usual, Paul started ministry at the local Jewish synagogue. Start with people who—although they don't believe in Christ—already know the *God* of Christ; know the prophecies about the Messiah.

For 3 consecutive Saturdays, he preached Jesus from the OT. (Bet you didn't know you could do that. Christ is all over the OT, even if he isn't named there. He is called the Servant, the Prophet, the Messiah [Anointed One], Son of David, or the Son of Man, but not Jesus.) Like everywhere, the Jews in that city expected and longed for the Redeemer who would eventually come to redeem them from sin, *and* they believed also, from their persecutors; like the Romans.

Vv.2-3 say that he “reasoned” with them through the Scriptures, and explained & proved that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. Probably using texts like Is.53, he illustrated that the Messiah was not just a military commander, but a sufferer: a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Bruised for our sins and by his stripes we're healed.

This was systematic preaching, an attempt to persuade by the mounting evidence. It was not tickle your-ears-preaching, not make-me-feel better preaching, it was a reasoned, logical attempt to convince: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. And since they *did* prefer an Alexander-the-Great-kind of Messiah and not a hurt or dead one, Paul had a lot of convincing to do.

The results were mixed. The trouble with the gospel is that some will object while others accept. We don't like rejection, or hostility. What if they say “no!” What if they don't like me! They might not. Some Jews, and, even more Gentiles from the synagogue became Christians. (Since many were prominent women in the city, no doubt this revival created instant marital strife in many well-to-do homes.)

But there was also the dark side. V.5 says some of the Jews were “jealous.” To be jealous is to resent you for having what I want. The sourpusses wanted the people Paul was getting: Jews and Gentiles alike converting! Their church was losing people to another church. They were losing financial support. What would happen to their synagogue? They were losing their friends. They were losing some of their clout. Power is slipping from their grasp.

Had they been fully convinced God was on their side, they might have called a prayer meeting. Instead, *they* called a riot. They hired street thugs who recruited a mob which stirred up the whole city. Jason, likely one of the Jewish converts to Christ, became the mob's target. He and other Christians were dragged from Jason's home and charged with harboring revolutionaries.

The KJV & RSV put it this way: *These men (Paul and Silas) have turned the world upside down...* What an epitaph! Wouldn't you love to have that as your legacy! But this was an *accusation*. *And now they've come here to stir things up and Jason's harboring them.* What they were charging them with, was insurrection; revolting against Caesar. (7) *They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying there is another king, one called Jesus.* Talk about twisting things. But in the climate of the era, just such an *allegation* was dangerous. Even being *suspected* of undermining the emperor could jeopardize your life.

The judges were alarmed by the charges, but apparently saw that the charges were full of holes and left Jason go after posting bond.

The trouble with the gospel. Some liked it, some didn't. Some said yes, some shouted "No!" Same today. Every time you get the nerve to open your mouth to someone about Christ, there is a nagging fear that this will be one of those who says no. It may be. Then what? If Jim says "no," or Barbara says "no" or Cliff says "no," then what? Does the rejection serve to silence you? Do we conclude that the risk of rejection is too high and we can't handle it; so we're just going to keep quiet? Or, maybe we're not good enough at this and we'd better just keep quiet lest we do more harm than good?

Maybe we should get Jesus' perspective here. READ READ Matt.7:13-14. The road to heaven, the road to the kingdom of God, the road to faith, is not nearly as well traveled as the road to doom. READ Matt.13:3-8, 18-23.

When Billy Graham or Luis Palau share the gospel in stadiums and arenas, all four kinds of soil comprise the tens of thousands who listened. Some hear but by the devil's distractions, immediately conclude, "I'm not interested." Others say "yes" too quickly without counting the cost. And when things get rough, they're gone. Temptations, opposition, or problems seem too big, and they disappear. Others also say yes too quickly but their downfall is stuff; and worry about stuff. How am I going to pay the bills; I need more money. I like my stuff and I have to take care of it. What if this doesn't pan out right, or if that stays the same? They still worship another god.

Then finally, there is a portion of the people who say "yes" to Christ, "no" to their sin, and no matter what wind blows, or how good or bad things are, they faithfully serve Christ; they bear fruit. These are the only real Christians in the bunch. And they are in a minority.

Probably most of us would share Christ regularly if every response was a "yes." None of us would be afraid anymore; none of us would be tongue-tied. But sometimes it's no; more times than yes, it's a no. That's why we need first and foremost to have an encounter with God that leads to loving him with our whole being; that's why we need God to give us *His* heart for lost people. For our nature, our humanity, and our pride will still our tongues. God can release them.

Concl:

If you were to visit the modern city of Thessaloniki in Greece this October, outside the city's western walls you could participate in a great festival called Demetria, or the Feast of Demetrius. It is named after the patron saint of the city, who was high-ranking officer in the Roman army at the beginning of the 4th century. Unknown to most, Demetrius was a devout Christian. He secretly shared the gospel with people and was responsible for the conversion of many.

The emperor issued an order to the army to slaughter all the Christians in Thessalonica. Demetrius refused and exposed his faith. He was imprisoned and executed in 303. We have no details of how many believed his message versus how many rejected it. But certainly emperor Maximian and the authorities rejected the glorious message of Christ. This "trouble with the Gospel," he concluded he could live with; and was willing to die for.