**TURN FROM WORTHLESS THINGS TO THE LIVING GOD**

 August 21, 2016

Acts 14:1-28

Key verse 14:15b “…We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.”

In the last passage we saw how God made Paul and Barnabas a light for the Gentiles. Amidst much suffering, God gave them Isaiah 49:6, “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” To any human being, the greatest privilege and highest calling from God is to be a light for the Gentiles. However, when we face rejection, we sometimes wonder what we are doing. We must believe that God made us a light for the Gentiles. This clear conviction gives us great joy and spiritual strength to stand and deliver a clear gospel message. In today’s passage, we see what Paul and Barnabas did in the regions they went to: Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Perga and back to their home church in Syrian Antioch. Today, they go deeper into Gentile territory. We get to see what the world was like without faith in the true and living God of the Bible. They believed in many gods and strange myths. They were very superstitious. When Paul did a miracle there by healing a crippled man, they thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods and wanted to offer sacrifices to them. How strange it was! To these people, Paul and Barnabas gave the message, “Turn from these worthless things to the living God!”

Look at verse 1. “At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.” Immediately after being persecuted and run out of town in Pisidian Antioch by the Jews, Paul and Barnabas went “as usual into the Jewish synagogue” in Iconium. They did not allow the persecution in the previous town to dissuade them from their usual habit of going into the Jewish synagogue to give them the first opportunity at salvation. When they went into the synagogue, they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. What do you think enabled them to speak so effectively? Was it because they both received an “A” in their speech communication classes? They spoke so effectively because God was with them through the Holy Spirit. They spoke so effectively because they both were diligent students of the Bible who trained themselves to meditate on it day and night. They studied it and accepted it. Then they could be effective speakers as they spoke the message of God’s salvation plan. We should pray like this for ourselves that we may be effective speakers of the gospel message. When we have one word of the Bible in our heart and believe it, then the Holy Spirit will make us to be effective Bible speakers like Paul and Barnabas.

Paul and Barnabas’ message moved many to believe. However, not everyone believed. Look at verse 2. “But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.” It says that the Jews “refused” to believe. This is a very strong word. It was not that they didn’t understand. It was not an intellectual problem. They were not ignorant or slow learners. It was a stubborn and deliberate act not to believe. They refused to believe because the message of the gospel offended their pride. They could not humble themselves to accept God’s way of working. They chose to remain in the darkness instead of coming into the light to expose their sins and receive forgiveness. When they refused, they became instruments of Satan towards those who were just beginning to believe and poisoned their minds. These kinds of people Jesus rebuked harshly in Mark 9:42, which says, “And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.” Only a little poison, just a tiny drop is enough to contaminate and to kill. The Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds telling all sorts of lies and making up ridiculous and blasphemous stories about Jesus and the apostles. They made the Gentiles hostile towards Paul and Barnabas.

How did Paul and Barnabas deal with this growing spiritual conflict? Did they get up and leave and look for friendlier places? Look at verse 3. “So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.” Paul and Barnabas must have prayed diligently together and encouraged each other. They made a decision not to abandon their mission or abandon these young sheep or even abandon those who refused the message. When they prayed together, God gave them endurance to proclaim the message boldly. They overcame fear and God worked with them as they preached the message of Jesus again and again, emphasizing God’s forgiveness and God’s love as well as God’s judgment on sinners who refuse to repent and believe.

Look at verse 8. “In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked.” He was a nameless cripple. People thought he was useless. But he listened to Paul’s message carefully. His heart was not crooked due to his handicap. His heart was open wide to God. He listened carefully to Paul because he had never heard anyone speak with such conviction about the love of God and the compassion of God as Paul did. This man could sense that Paul was his shepherd. He drank the word of life from Paul like a thirsty deer. His heart began to open up wide to the gospel message. Paul looked at him prayerfully, and saw that he had faith to be healed. Paul wanted to give this man what he really needed. So Paul challenged him. “Stand up on your feet!” It was a sudden call. But the man knew that it was God’s voice to him. He not only stood up, but he jumped up and began to walk. When he was willing, trusting and obedient to the voice of the Lord through Paul, he was healed instantly! This was the Holy Spirit working through Paul. This great miracle caused quite a stir among all the people.

Look at verses 11-13, “When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’ Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.” It is interesting to note that they called Barnabas Zeus, and Paul Hermes. Maybe Paul was small and talking constantly like Kermit the Frog. According to their myth, a long time ago Zeus and Hermes came down, disguised as poor travelers. The only people who offered them hospitality were a poor old couple. So they destroyed everyone except the old couple. So when Paul did this miracle, they had fear that if they did not welcome them and offer sacrifice to them they might be destroyed. This is why they acted this way. The thought of that myth tortured their minds and hearts. They lived in constant fear and anxiety. If they were having bad luck, they said, “Zeus is punishing me again!” They depicted Zeus as a big imposing man with a lightning bolt in his hand ready to throw it down to earth to punish someone. They did not know the love of God. They represent the whole Gentile world living without God and the knowledge of God, enslaved to all kinds of myths and superstitions. Even today, some people dread Friday the 13th because they consider that something bad is bound to happen to them on Friday the 13th. Other people like to check their horoscope daily to find out what kind of day they might have.

How did Paul and Barnabas help the Lycaonian people? At first they did not realize what was going on because of the language problem. They must have asked someone to interpret for them. “Excuse me sir, can you tell just what these people are shouting about? Why are they so hysterical?” When they heard that the people wanted to worship them, they tore their clothes and ran into the crowd shouting for them to stop. They might have said to each other, “These people think we are gods. If we tell them anything, they will believe it. This is a gold opportunity. We can preach the gospel more easily.” One person thought that if God gives him a Nobel prize, he would testify about Christ at the award ceremony. No, it does not work that way. We do God’s work from the vantage point of humility; never from the vantage point of human exaltation. Barnabas and Paul did not allow the people to deify them for a moment. They regarded it as the sin of blasphemy and refuted their action immediately. They are a great contrast with King Herod, who accepted men’s worship, and did not give praise to God. Look at verse 15. “Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.” Their message was clear: “Turn from these worthless things to the living God.” The word “turn” here is like the word “repentance” which means to turn from sin and turn to God. Practically speaking, Paul and Barnabas were telling these Gentiles to repent of their idolatrous lives and turn to the living God who created all things.

Paul’s message was a clear and direct message that touched the root problem of the Gentiles. It was to turn from idols, or worthless things, and turn to the living God. This was really good news! But it was a difficult message for the people of Lystra. It meant that their entire culture was based on worthless beliefs that they needed to turn from immediately. Canadian culture is somewhat different, being deeply influenced by Christianity. Still, there are many practical idol worshippers in our country today. Perhaps sports figures are the most idolized. Movie stars, rock-n-roll stars and other music stars are also idolized. People are willing to spend money to travel and see and hear their favorite singer or see their favorite athletes. Some Christians go to worship service only when there is a celebrity speaker or celebrity music band. The message that Paul and Barnabas gave is still relevant to us today. It is for you and me. We have to pray like the Psalmist, “Turn my eyes from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.” (Psalm 119:37) We need to hear it again and again and tell others again and again so God may have mercy on us and our nation. God wants us to turn from these worthless things that don’t give us life. He wants us to turn to him, the living God and honor him as God. May God be the first place in your hearts and lives, and help you to practically turn from worthless things to the living God.

However, the crowd did not accept the message. They seemed unresponsive and unrepentant. Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They persuaded the crowd that Paul was leading them astray and ruining their culture. So they stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. Perhaps a stone struck his head, driving him into unconsciousness and he collapsed. More stones struck his flesh, causing swelling and much bleeding. More damaging than the stones was the emotional pain of violent rejection by his own people the Jews. It was their intention to kill Paul, and they left him for dead, dragging him outside the city. But according to verse 20, Paul got up and went back into the city. He was like a tumbler, or roly-poly toy. How could he do this? It was his resurrection faith. It was the Holy Spirit living inside him and it was Paul’s clear desire and spiritual attitude to advance the gospel message to the Gentile world.

Paul and Barnabas went to Derbe where they preached the gospel and won a large number of disciples. After this, they should have taken the next direct route to go back home as fast as possible. But they did not do that. Instead, they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, the cities in which they suffered much, to plant gospel faith in the disciples. They went back the places where they were stoned and mistreated. They thought more about their Bible students than their own personal comfort. Paul said in verse 22. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” What did Paul mean by this? Is he saying the requirement for entrance into the kingdom of God was to be persecuted and rejected and suffer hardship after hardship? No. We are saved by our faith in what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead and when we believe we have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. We become disciples of Jesus Christ. As disciples of Jesus Christ we follow Jesus. In order to do that, we need to deny oneself and take up the cross. We begin to encounter many hardships for living for Jesus. This is unavoidable and inevitable. It shows that God is working through us and among us. Jesus himself told the disciples that they would be hated and persecuted (Jn.15:18-25) because he was also hated and persecuted. So we should not give up when we face one hardship for Jesus and think it is easier to live without mission. Our hardships and sufferings will make us stronger and more fit for the life of faith. Paul faced many hardships. His own Jewish people hated him and wanted to kill him no matter where he was. But Paul did not give up. He only encouraged everyone to remain true to the faith and expect many hardships as they travel to their final and sure destination, the kingdom of God. So if you know someone is going through a hardship for the sake of the gospel, encourage them to remain true to the faith and not to let any root of discouragement enter their hearts. Encourage them to remain true to the faith because great is their reward in heaven. (Matt.5:11-12)

From today’s message we learn the spiritual attitude of Paul and Barnabas. They did not give up. They saw the harvest field of Gentiles with God’s eyes. They encouraged others to remain true to the faith and go through many hardships. They boldly proclaimed God as the Creator to the Gentile world. May God help us to learn their spiritual attitude and to proclaim the message, “Turn from these worthless things to the living God.” May God help you to love, honor and glorify God and endure many hardships for Jesus’ sake.