

When People Say that Christians are the Problem, Keep on Being Part of the Solution

Acts 17:1-12

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.² As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,³ explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said.⁴ Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.⁵ But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here,⁷ and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.”⁸ When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil.⁹ Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.¹⁰ As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.¹¹ Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.¹² As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

Imagine that you are a reporter for the Thessalonica daily news. You hear that there has been a riot in the marketplace. You scurry down and the riot has ended, but you notice a few stragglers. You start to ask questions. Soon it’s clear, the riots center around a certain man who has been preaching at the local synagogue. His name: Paul. So you start asking questions – “Who is this Paul,” you ask one of the men lingering in the marketplace who is still visibly angry. “He wants to overthrow the government!” the man says, “He’s riling up the Jews trying to get them to follow a different king – some guy named Jesus.” You walk past a market booth and talk to the distraught owner, “Can you believe this?!” he shouts as he points to his broken tables and destroyed merchandise. “That Paul – who does he think he is? I wish he had never come to Thessalonica! Who’s going to pay for this?” You start down the road to the synagogue and soon come across a man with fresh bruises and blood on his face. “What happened?” you ask. “I can’t understand it—they’re saying we want to overthrow the government. That’s crazy! They say Paul is some sort of rebel – nothing could be further from the truth. He’s just a preacher. This king he’s talking about, his name is Jesus, but he isn’t any sort of opponent of our emperor. He’s the king of a spiritual kingdom. Thank God I did meet Paul. I’ve been confused my whole life about the Messiah. Everybody seemed to have a different idea about him. Well, Paul sat down with us for days and walked us through the Bible and showed us how Jesus is exactly who God promised. And he was so good at explaining what that means – that our sins are forgiven, the God sees us as perfect even though we aren’t – that we can be absolutely certain of a place in heaven. People are just mad at him because they don’t like his message. He didn’t come here to hurt anyone or make life difficult for them. And do you know what? He’s a man of integrity too! He doesn’t just stop because people are mad at him. He goes and preaches the same thing in another city because he cares about our souls. He’s on his way to Berea right now.”

Two very different takes on Paul, wouldn’t you agree? One views Paul a bringer of problems; the other sees him as the bringer of a solution to his problems. Not a lot has changed in the past 2000 years in this regard has it? Christians are still viewed by many as the problem. I just came across a book entitled, *20 Reasons to Abandon Christianity*. Here are some of the chapter topics—it preys on the innocent, it is based on fear, it breeds authoritarianism, it encourages acceptance of real evils while focusing on imaginary ones, it breeds arrogance, it is riddled with contradictions, it is the reason for many of history’s wars and conflicts, etc. Maybe you’ve experienced it on a more personal level. “Oh you Christians are so intolerant – you want to control everything!” “Oh here comes the morality police again!” “You Christians are always sticking your noses in other people’s business!” And boy, it’s no fun not to be liked, is it? It really is a challenge to our faith when we are accused of being the problem. It’s tempting to be silent. It’s tempting to go with the flow. It’s tempting to try and live in our own little bubble with a “leave me alone” attitude. So what should we do? How should we handle it when people accuse us of being the problem?

We’ll go back to the lesson before us this morning. Was Paul really the problem? No. So why are those opposed to him so adamant, so committed to silencing him? It’s because of what his message means for them if what he is saying is true. If Paul is telling the truth—the truth being that Jesus is the Savior of the world—for many, that message is a threat to their ego, a threat to their power, and a threat to their concept of life after death. It’s a threat to ego because if Jesus is the world’s savior, that means they too need saving. In other words, they need something outside of themselves. They are

not self-sufficient. Nor are they “deserving” of what they have or what they will get. That is certainly a blow to the ego. A person wants to think, “I can produce everything I need.” “I deserve everything I have and more!” If a person is living by that creed, for them to be told that this won’t be enough, hits the ego hard. It’s not something people like to hear. The message of Jesus was also a threat to their power. Those who had positions in the synagogue had influence and the respect of the community. Now this Paul comes along and if he is right – then they need to change everything. Many of the Old Testament laws and cultural practices meant to point ahead to the Messiah were no longer necessary. They might lose their audience. They might lose their living. To think of losing all of that truly was a threat to their power. Finally, the message of Jesus was a threat to their concept of life after death. We are not told exactly what the members of this particular synagogue believed – maybe they weren’t even all on the same page, but many Jewish people in Paul’s time connected their place in heaven, either with their good deeds, or their blood line as Children of Abraham. “I follow God’s laws better than most, so I’ll go to heaven when I die.” “I am a descendant of Abraham. That makes me one of God’s chosen! That means I’ll go to heaven when I die.” If Jesus is the world’s Savior, that comes crashing down too. And that made many people in Thessalonica angry with Paul. They turned on him, incited a riot, and accused him of treason. That could get him the death penalty. But the anger is misdirected isn’t it? Their issue is really with God.

So let me ask you, do you think Paul enjoyed this? Do you think he enjoyed being harassed and beaten and slandered? Do you think he enjoyed it when Jason, a convert who had allowed Paul to stay at his home, was harassed and arrested? Of course not. But what does he do? Once he escapes, he goes right on to the next town and starts all over again. In this case the town is called Berea. In spite of how he is viewed by those people, in spite of the real and hurtful threats and actions leveled against him and his follower, Paul keeps it up! Why? Because he understands that he carries with him the solution to the biggest problems that any of us have – the problem of death, the problem of not having lived up to God’s standards. As difficult as the pain was that he experienced—physical and emotional—inflicted on him by God’s enemies, Paul also got to watch as God’s message changes hearts and lives and eternities. In Thessalonica, Jews, Greeks, men, women, people of standing – they finally heard the truth that set them free! They didn’t have to offer this or that sacrifice or perform this ceremony in that temple, and buy this trinket from another temple to be right with God. They didn’t have to go to bed at night wrestling with where they might go after death, wondering, “Have I really been good enough to please God? Will God really take me to heaven?” They finally tasted the certainty offered in Jesus, God’s son. And they were even willing to suffer here for it.

As hard as it was for Paul to endure what he did in Thessalonica, just imagine how uplifting it was for him in Berea. We usually don’t connect these two accounts, but they happen in succession. We hold up the Bereans as a good example of those who took the Bible seriously. They realized that Paul was right, their hearts were changed. Paul wasn’t the problem. He was part of God’s solution. The lives and eternities of many in Thessalonica and Berea were changed forever by the words that he spoke. So how about you and me? What do we do when people say that Christians, that you and I, are the problem?

Well, first remember that the same Jesus Paul was preaching, has solved your biggest problems. Moms, what a relief to know that your little ones aren’t just in your arms, they are in God’s. What a comfort to know that even if the worst were to happen, you would see your little one in heaven again. For all of us, what a relief to go about our jobs, and our service to God without having to worry that if we make a mistake, he might not let us into heaven. What freedom to know that God has us in the palm of his hand each day preserving and protecting us. The road in front of us might be murky, but our future is certain. No, Christian, you aren’t the problem, I am not the problem. That doesn’t mean we are perfect, far from it. But that has never been our claim. We are part of God’s solution – bringing the one truth that actually brings hope that actually sets free. Oh some won’t believe it, and some might lash out. And the truth is, they might make this life pretty tough on us, at least for a while. But it isn’t because we are the problem, it’s because they have a problem with God. Don’t let them stop us. Keep talking to your friends. Keep inviting to church and bible class. Keep on living in a way that shows others your love for Christ. **When People Say that Christians are the Problem, Keep on Being Part of the Solution. AMEN.**