

## Rejecting the Truth

### Acts 17:5-9

By Phillip G. Kayser

In my last message I looked at the remarkable reasoning of Paul that persuaded a multitude in verse 4. If I could reason like Paul, I would be thrilled. And we looked at his tactics of triage, logical reasoning, constant appeal to the authority of God's Word, his ability to skillfully marshal the facts in an argument, his patient willingness to give answers to objections, his ability to keep the conversation focused, his goal of convincing people of the truth (not simply winning an argument and losing a friend), his ability to connect with people and his constant passion live out what he was teaching so that people could see what they were hearing. He was a master at reasonable reasoning. And so it might be somewhat of a mystery to see that there were people in verse 5 who were not persuaded and who ended up persecuting Paul and Silas. Had he not clearly explained and demonstrated that Jesus was the Messiah? Yes he had. Verse 3 says that he had. The truth could not have been more clearly presented. And one commentator pointed out that this presentation likely went on for a period of about three months.

#### I. A Discouraging reaction

##### A. *Evidence alone is not enough (v. 5 with vv. 2-3; Luke 16:31; Rom. 1:18,28)*

But the first thing we need to understand when talking to people about the Bible is that evidence alone is not enough. People have depraved hearts. They are resistant to the truth. Even believers can be resistant if they are not constantly clinging to God's grace. Verse 5 says, **But the Jews who were not persuaded...** When you realize that there was ample time, ample information and ample opportunity to have their doubts answered, this lack of persuasion demonstrates that evidence is not enough. These people didn't want to be convinced. Romans 1 says that the natural state of man is to resist the truth. Verse 18 says, **For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, [get this phrase:] who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.** That's their natural state. Their sinful pre-commitments make them squirm when they are confronted with portions of the Bible, and they suppress that truth. They don't *want* to believe. 1 Thessalonians says that these persecutors **do not please God** (1

Thes. 2:15). In other words, their goal in doctrine was man-centered, not God-centered. They wanted to believe a doctrine that they would be comfortable with. His second letter to this church says that as a result, these persecutors were set-up for demonic delusion **because they did not receive the love of the truth.** That's what God's grace gives to us – the love of the truth. A person who loves truth wants to know God's will whether it is uncomfortable or not. These people didn't have that. So 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12 says, **“And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.** Scary stuff!

***B. People are not usually as objective as they would have you believe (v. 5b)***

That last verse demonstrates that people are not usually as objective as they would have you believe. It was their desire to hold onto sin that made them susceptible to doctrinal confusion. In John 7:17, Jesus said, **“If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.”** Your inward desires can affect your judgment. He said, “If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine...” People have a predisposition away from the truth if they have not experienced God's grace. So verse 5 goes on to say, **But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious...** That envy gives one motivation for why they did not believe. 1 Thessalonians gives some others motivations that were present. I think studying those can be helpful for you to understand why it is that some people reject the truth (whether it is dealing with abortion, or whatever it may be). There can be many other predispositions that make people angry against the truth and unwilling to listen to it. But let's analyze this envy a bit because I think it is rather interesting.

**1. Envy implies desire**

Envy implies desire. And specifically, it desires something that you don't have. What was it? They didn't desire the Gospel. They didn't desire to join the church. What was it that they wished they had? Matthew 23:15 gives us a hint. Jesus said, **Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.** These Jews were aggressive at winning converts from among the Gentiles. They had worked hard at getting these Gentiles to start attending their synagogues, and now come along these upstarts who in three months had won far more people to

Christ than these Jews had won in years. The success of the apostles made them jealous. They were also losing some of their own converts. So Paul and Silas were in direct competition with them. And they took it personally. 1 Thessalonians tells us that these Jews forbade Paul from preaching to the Gentiles. That really grated on them. Their goal in this debate was not to come to truth, but to poison people to the competition. Sure they argued, but their arguments were designed to uphold their desires.

And we Christians need to be careful that we are not blinded to exegesis because of our desires. People sometimes want the Scripture to not say such and such because it would be very inconvenient otherwise. Every time they think of the doctrine they can find the sense of resistance rising within them for one reason or another. Next week we will be looking at how wonderful the Bereans were. But this week I am examining the psychology of what goes into resisting the truth.

## **2. Envy implies pre-commitments**

Secondly, envy implies pre-commitments. They were committed to something before the debate had even begun. We speak of these as presuppositions. And everybody has them. You couldn't reason without presuppositions. The difference is that some people are willing to have their presuppositions challenged by Scripture and others are not. But it is important to understand this when you are debating. Some people get very frustrated that other person can't see the facts that are so clear. But they are clear to us because of our worldview. Our worldview to a large degree determines what facts we consider relevant, and which ones we will accept or reject without a hearing. James Sire defines a worldview this way: "a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or unconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world."<sup>1</sup>

Why is clearly stated truth rejected? Often because we are desperately holding on to comfortable presuppositions. When you are in debate, it is important to address those presuppositions. Otherwise you won't get anywhere. You can't just debate facts; you must also address the assumptions by which people interpret those facts.

## **3. Envy keeps people from being objective**

The third thing implied by envy is that they were not being objective. It wasn't the facts that were unreasonable. Everything pointed to Jesus being

---

<sup>1</sup> James Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), p. 17.

the Messiah. It was that the facts flew in the face of what they wanted. Their envy kept them from being objective.

#### **4. Envy prejudices people**

And ultimately, this envy made them prejudiced against Paul and Silas. And prejudice closed their minds to the truth. Later in verse 11 Paul says about the next city, **These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.** That's the opposite – that's fair-mindedness – that's a willingness to examine one's presuppositions. Closed-mindedness is foolish. Proverbs 12:1 says, **he who hates correction is stupid.** Proverbs 13:18 says, **Poverty and shame will come to him who disdains correction, but he who regards a rebuke will be honored.** So even though the reactions of these Thessalonians is rather bizarre, we can learn from this passage how to avoid rejection of the truth in our own lives.

### ***C. When people cannot compete in the free market place of ideas, they will resort to other tactics***

#### **1. Using people they don't even agree with to oppose the apostles (v. 5c)**

Point C shows how these people resorted to unfair tactics when they couldn't win the debate openly. It shows the depraved extent of their prejudice. Verse 5 goes on to say, **becoming envious, they took evil men from the marketplace...** I find this interesting. There is no way that these Jews could have been in agreement with the Gentile evil men that they used. Ordinarily Jews would have been at odds with such evil men, but a common enemy (Paul and Silas) made them able to work together. Pilate and Herod were enemies, but they became friends in their opposition to Jesus. The Herodians and Pharisees were bitter enemies, but they got together in their attempts to embarrass Jesus. Don't be surprised when strange bedfellows get together in their opposition to you.

#### **2. Organizing opposition (v. 5d)**

They then organized a mob. People don't want to be alone in their error. They usually seek out others who can undermine the truth. They talk about it and try to get others upset with the truth. We've talked in the past of the characteristics and dangers of mob psychology. The right people can

very easily manipulate a mob. But any group can be poisoned to the truth by enough talk and slanted information.

### 3. Inflaming emotions (v. 5e)

He goes on: **...and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar...** They sought to enflame the emotions of the people and to say, “Ah! That’s terrible. We need to do something about this. They are destroying the fabric of our society!” This too is something to watch out for. If you can get people mad enough, they won’t think logically. And you’ve probably witnessed this hundreds of times. Emotions poison the brain’s ability to think objectively. And those who cannot control their emotions will never mature. It’s better for you to just pass on an argument when you see the other person is getting emotional. It’s not going to accomplish much to talk with him. It’s one of the most common causes of rejection of the truth - a person gets angry, and he no longer reasons straight. If you find yourself getting angry, bitter or hostile, take a pause and try to look at how the other side is viewing this subject. It has sometimes helped me realize why they have been upset, and to deal with the real causes. Or it has helped me realize that they have a good point and that I need to change, or have failed to communicate adequately. But even when I have been right, it has been helpful. I remember one time in particular when a person had slandered me publically and threatened to turn my kids in to Social Services. And it was totally causeless. You can believe I was pretty mad. I can take a lot of attack against myself, but I get warmed up when they start unjustly attacking the family – especially with the threat of taking kids away. Well, I wrote a steaming letter that I thought would put them in their place. But as is my habit, I usually wait a day or two before I send letters that have been written in emotion. And as I cooled down I realized that even though I was in the right and they were in the wrong, and even though everything I said in the letter was right, it wasn’t going to accomplish what I wanted to accomplish. I realized that a soft answer would accomplish much more. That letter would have just aggravated things. And my point in bringing that up is that emotions can ruin your thinking even when you are right. It’s much better to wait a couple of days than to hit the send button on your email if you have written it in a state of being enflamed. Enough said on that.

### 4. Using force (v. 5f)

They then resorted to the common tactic of using force. **...and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.** This is what anger

does. When you discipline your children in fury, it is almost guaranteed that you won't do it right. You will be attacking the person instead of the problem. How many times do arguments end in fisticuffs among some people? Knocking a person down is not going to convince them of the truth. It's just going to intimidate them.

### 5. Using the law (v. 6)

In verse 6 they try to use the law - **But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too."** We will see that these magistrates are a bit more restrained than the ones in Philippi, but the Jews are trying to use government force to oppose Paul. The specific point of law was the imperial kicking of the Jews out of Rome. There had been a riot in Rome over a person named Chrestus. If that was what got the Jews kicked out of Rome, it is rather ironic that the Jews bring that up here. They were kicked out of Rome for doing exactly the same thing that they are doing with the Christ here – creating a riot. But emotions are rarely rational. So they say, **Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king – Jesus.** Any time you hear people saying, "There ought to be a law," question it. It's not in the best interests of society to constantly be appealing to force. I hear evangelicals doing this all the time – "There ought to be a law against tobacco! There ought to be a law that controls the Internet!" Well, be careful what you wish. You may be wishing yourself into more and more tyranny. Evangelicals want cigarettes taxed at a high punitive rate. But all taxes should be equal. Otherwise they could tax Bible's punitively too. They could get away with anything.

### 6. Creating anxiety (v. 8)

Anyway, these rabble-rousers know exactly what they are doing. Verse 8 says, **And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things.** This bringing up of insurrection made the magistrates anxious, because any potential opposition of Caesar had to be taken seriously. They could get in trouble if Caesar got wind of such accusations. They seem to know that there isn't much to these charges because they don't do much, but they feel like they have to take some action. We may get disgusted with rulers for the things that they do, but often they are being used by special interest groups who know just how to yank their chain. It's sad, but it's true. Rulers get anxious and they can be manipulated.

But they troubled the crowd too. In effect they were insisting that people needed to go along or they were not loyal to Caesar. “I’m telling Daddy on you” may not work if Dad is a fair dad who researches things, but the similar veiled threat “We’re telling Caesar on you if you don’t do something” put a bit of fear into both crowd and magistrates. They’ve already heard from Philippi that they better not beat Paul and Silas. But they don’t want trouble with Caesar either. So politics ensures injustice and verse 9 says, **“So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.”** You wouldn’t think that the simple preaching of Jesus would cause such a row, but when you have the world, the flesh and the devil all ganging up on you, you learn to expect anything. I have seen such irrational opposition to the truth down through the years that I am not surprised by much.

**D. Paul and Silas had to leave (v. 10a).**

**1. This security that “Jason and the rest” put up seems to indicate that they are guaranteeing that Paul and Silas will not return (1 Thes. 2:17-18).**

This security that was required of “Jason and the rest” was likely a large sum of money that would be forfeited if Paul and Silas caused any more trouble. So it would impoverish these believers. Paul and Silas probably felt like they had no choice but to leave. I believe this is what was being referred to in 1 Thessalonians 2:17-18

*But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire.*

*Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us.*

**2. Paul characterizes this eviction as Satanic in origin (2 Thes. 2:17-18).**

Paul characterizes the horrible tension that they faced in Thessalonica as being Satan’s opposition. And if you read the rest of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, you will see that they continued to face persecution from the Jews.

**E. There was continuing persecution of the church (1,2 Thessalonians)**

And in those two books Paul indicates that these Jews had crossed the line of committing the unpardonable sin and were doomed to damnation.

John Piper defines the unpardonable sin this way: “The unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an act of resistance which belittles the Holy Spirit so grievously that he withdraws for ever with his convicting power so that we are never able to repent and be forgiven.” When does a person step over that line? Nobody knows. And that’s a scary thing. It’s a very discouraging thing to face. There was a lot of discouragement at Thessalonica.

## II. But God is still in control

### A. *God’s control of grace in the lives of the elect (vv. 4,5)*

But I don’t want to end with how discouraging resistance to the truth can be. I want to end with an affirmation that God is in control of even that. Scripture is quite clear that everyone would resist the truth if it were not for His grace. This is known as the doctrine of total depravity. Men are not neutral; they are not objective; they are hell-bent. The only difference between the glad reception of the truth in verse 4 and the hatred for the truth of those in verse 5 was God’s grace. It is sovereign grace; it is powerful grace; it is a loving grace that rescues people from themselves.

### B. *God’s control of reprobation (2 Thes. 2:11-12)*

But God is just as sovereign in His reprobation of those who hate the truth. Paul wrote to these believers saying, **For this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.** It says that God was the one who sent them that delusion. It’s so easy to think that things are out of control when people reject the truth. But this is part of God’s plan as well. As Jude says, **who long ago were marked out for this condemnation.** We call this double predestination. It may seem harsh, but when you think about it, you realize that we all deserved to be marked out in this way. It is *not* a sign that things are out of control. It is simply a sign that they do not have God’s grace.

### C. *Paul and Silas must have “stepped out” at just the right time (v. 6)*

The third encouraging thing is that God controlled the details of Paul’s life. In the previous chapter, God made sure that they would be thrown in prison because the jailer needed to be converted. God has the right to do that. But in this chapter, Paul escapes despite the fact that everyone is

looking for him. Verse 6 says, **When they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city.** Paul and Silas must have stepped out for a coffee at Starbucks. For whatever reason, they had left the house they were staying in at just the right time. God orders our steps so that there are no accidents. And we can rejoice in that.

***D. Paul and Silas were turning the world upside down (which for us means right side up) (v. 6b)***

A fourth thing to rejoice in is the complaint of the mob leaders in verse 6 – **“These who have turned the world upside down have come here too...”**

That would be an incredible accusation to make of the church in Omaha, but I’m afraid that it wouldn’t stick. Most of the church in Omaha isn’t turning anything upside down. It’s quite content with the status quo, thank you. But wouldn’t it be great if others thought of us as those who turned the world upside down? If the world thinks it is upside down, then what Paul and Silas were really doing was turning it right side up. You see, the Fall of Adam made a mess of every aspect of this world’s physical, social, emotional, spiritual and relational life. It was really Adam that turned the world upside down, and God’s grace is reversing that. The Gospel hymn, Joy to the World, has it right when verse 3 says,

No more let sins and sorrows grow  
Nor thorns infest the ground  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found  
Far as the curse is found  
Far as, far as the curse is found.

That is how pervasive the Gospel should be. There should not be one nook or cranny of life that is not reversed and turned right-side up for King Jesus. Was politics upside down? Yes it was, but Paul had led Sergius Paulus to Christ in Acts 13:7. Was business upside down? Yes it was, but Paul had led many businessmen and a businesswoman to Christ. Was the jail system a mess? Yes it was, and God had strategically placed a man there to represent Christ. In fact, if you survey the earlier chapters of Acts you will discover that slaves and businessmen, poor and rich, magistrates and citizens had been strategically placed by King Jesus into this world to serve Him. There were peasants and aristocrats, a jailer and some prisoners, a doctor and two cripples, Jews, Gentiles, prominent men and women, Pharisees, priests and Levites had all been converted. There were common laborers and rabbis, people who were unlettered and those from the schools, soldiers and

centurions. Even though Paul hadn't converted very many people compared to the majority, every one that Paul has reached was having his or her own influence. And that influence was beginning to reach into every corner of society.

While there is no way that our ministry can compare to that of the apostle Paul's, each of you represents quite a cross section of Nebraska and Iowa. Scott works in the city gates and Brad within the jail gates. Steve has worked with many politicians. His ministry has opened the door for me to preach to three presidential candidates and their staff and hundreds of rank and file citizens. This church has common laborers, tradesmen, businessmen, a doctor, a writer, academics... The people that each of you contact is astonishing. And it's people like you who are turning the world right-side up. If you want to see what kind of threat you are, go the movie theatre and watch the movie, *Expelled*. The people in power are very nervous. They see you as a threat. Hallelujah!

As you have sent me out with Biblical Blueprints you have been able to extend the reach of this church to other countries where I have ministered to Christians who are lawyers, a mayor, a high ranking federal officer, businessmen, common laborers, jail birds, teachers and students. And among unbelievers our teams have had the privilege of preaching the Gospel to Hindu radicals, Maoist guerillas, a former prince of Afghanistan whose running for office (and whom we spent twelve hours with on the airplane), businessmen, students and extensive teaching of one Hindu legislator who was thrilled with the answers we were bringing from the Bible and who told me that he was thinking of leaving Hinduism. You never know the impact that this will have. But the desire of every one of us should be to be used by God to turn the world upside down. It wasn't really Paul who turned the world upside down. It was God's grace opening remarkable opportunities. And the same God who did it back then, can continue to do it today. It would have been very easy for Paul to get discouraged at how many people resisted the truth. But if he were to remember all that God had been doing, he would know why these people were so scared. We can be encouraged.

***E. There was something to be envious of (v. 5) – the powerful success of the Gospel (1 Thes. 1-3)***

So there really was something to be envious of in verse 5. The only thing that makes sense for these people to envy was the success in reaching and changing people. And you read through 1 Thessalonians 1-3 and you will see Paul waxing eloquent on the profound changes that the Gospel had made in these people who forsook idols to serve the living God. These were

people who had switched sides. Where once they resisted God's grace, they were now bold advocates for His grace. Where once they were aliens to grace, they had now tasted of its power. As Paul told these Thessalonians, **For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance... And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia...** That kind of transformation is something to rejoice in. What grieved Paul was seeing Christians who were Christians in profession only, but showed no transformation, no joy, no peace, no power. I love the book of 1 Thessalonians because it draws such a stark contrast between unbelieving resistance and those whose resistance was overcome by God's love.

Paul Stanley was an infantry company commander in Vietnam in 1967. And he relates this story:

I saw Viet Cong soldiers surrender many times. As they were placed in custody, marched away, and briefly interrogated, their body language and facial expressions always caught my attention. Most hung their heads in shame, staring at the ground, unwilling to look their captors in the eye. But some stood erect, staring defiantly at those around them, resisting any attempt by our men to control them. They had surrendered physically but not mentally. On one occasion after the enemy had withdrawn, I came upon several soldiers surrounding a wounded Viet Cong. Shot through the lower leg, he was hostile and frightened, yet helpless. He threw mud and kicked with his one good leg when anyone came near him. When I joined the circle around the wounded enemy, one soldier asked me, "Sir, what do we do? He's losing blood fast and needs medical attention." I looked down at the struggling Viet Cong and saw the face of a 16- or 17-year old boy. I unbuckled my pistol belt and hand grenades so he could not grab them. Then, speaking gently, I moved toward him. He stared fearfully at me as I knelt down, but he allowed me to slide my arms under him and pick him up. As I walked with him toward a waiting helicopter, he began to cry and hold me tight. He kept looking at me and squeezing me tighter. We climbed into the helicopter and took off. During the ride, our young captive sat on the floor, clinging to my leg. Never having ridden in a helicopter, he looked out with panic as we gained altitude and flew over the trees. He fixed his eyes back on me, and I smiled reassuringly and put my hand on his shoulder. After landing, I picked him up and walked toward the medical tent. As we

crossed the field, I felt the tenseness leave his body and his tight grasp loosen. His eyes softened, and his head leaned against my chest. The fear and resistance were gone—he had finally surrendered. - Paul Stanley

And when I read that I thought, “This is a perfect picture of us. We were once the enemy. We were once resistant and defiant and unable to be reasoned with. We were once resistant to the truth. But God’s grace broke through and we surrendered. Have you surrendered to the truth of God? Or do you still find yourself resisting the truth because of your desires?

***F. Christianity is a threat to tyrants (vv. 7-8) and impacts every area of life.***

But there is more to rejoice in. It’s not just individual salvation that Jesus brings, but the eventual capture of nations. We are in a battle for the nations, and until emperors and kings submit to the Lord Jesus, this battle will not end. Though these rabble-rousers are trying to put the worst spin on it that they can, it is true that we have another King – Jesus. And He is king of kings and Lord of Lords. Caesar found that a threat, and the Caesars of our own day might find Christ’s absolute sovereignty and His law to be a threat today as well. But it is part of the whole counsel of God that Paul preached. At the very least we can say that they were right about one thing in verse 7 – God’s law trumps man’s law. They said, **These are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king – Jesus.** Would the world even be able to remotely accuse us of this, or is our worldview so mushy that it is no threat to the ACLU?

***G. Paul was able to send Timothy to them (1 Thes. 3:1-8).***

I won’t dwell on the last two points very much since they aren’t mentioned in this chapter of Acts. But if you read 1 Thessalonians 3:1-3 (which describes Paul’s work in this town) you will see that God instills an incredible love for the truth in the church. He sends Timothy to minister to them.

***H. This church would continue to prosper in God’s grace (1,2 Thessalonians).***

And those books indicate that the church continued to prosper in God’s grace. There were some problems and issues that had to be addressed, but God’s grace was sufficient for each and every problem.

So next time you get discouraged by the resistance to truth that you see in the world and in the church, don't worry. It is not our responsibility to change people's hearts. It is simply our responsibility to reasonably reason with them (the passage we looked at last time – verses 1-4) and trust God's powerful grace to apply the truth when and where He wills.

The last admonition that I want to give this morning is to make sure that you do not give in to your flesh's desire to resist the truth. Be like the Bereans, men women and children who received a love of the truth, no matter how inconvenient. Charles Spurgeon once said,

It is my first public declaration that a thing which looks to be unreasonable and seems to be unprofitable, being commanded by God, is law, is law to me. If my Master had told me to pick up six stones and lay them in a row I would do it, without demanding of him, 'What good will it do?' Cui bono? Is no fit question for soldiers of Jesus. The very simplicity and apparent uselessness of the ordinance should make the believer say, 'Therefore I do it because it becomes the better test to me of my obedience to my Master.'

I love that quote! I love it. It shows that Spurgeon had been given a love for the truth by God's grace. That's the attitude that we should have. If God says, "pick up six stones and lay them in a row," we should do it gladly. May we model to the world that we have put off all resistance to the truth and embraced God's will by grace. May we receive what 1 Thessalonians speaks of as "the love of the truth." Amen.