

Is it *in* you?

Great Faith Series—Acts 17

[video clip: Culture of Thessalonica and Berea]

"There couldn't possibly be only one way... Does God care about your heart or whether you call his Son Jesus?"

"Claiming exclusive divinity would make Jesus the biggest egotist that ever lived... You are responsible for your life—the power of God is within you (whether you are a Christian or not), above you and through you. You control your life."

Oprah Winfrey, July 1998

"America has more religious institutions than any other nation on the planet. But what difference does it make? We have forfeited our historic ethics and morals to the gods of achievement and comfort. Our moral compasses have been reprogrammed to point to a new north. Our sense of the divine has been compromised so that as a nation we have almost no awe of God or intention of respecting his rules.

"We have replaced the presence of God with well intentioned but superficial religious activity. We have substituted cultural idols for the eternal God. We have swapped the preeminence of the Creator for the centrality and pampering of self. All these diversions have left us spiritually bankrupt, morally depraved, and ethically uncertain."

George Barna, 1994

Idols?! Today?! Come on!! We don't believe in that stuff!! We have rationalized those things away!

- We don't need the river god to keep the flooding down...we have meteorology
- We don't need the son god to stay happy...it has 20 million or so years of life left
- We don't need the fertility god to keep the plants and the crops growing...we have fertilizer and Marketplace
- We don't need the war god...we are perfectly capable of starting wars on our own

We have tamed the gods!

Mankind has conquered!

God is dead!

There are no more gods...

and yet... there are still gods ... little g's

yes, the enemy would like us to believe there are no more gods or idols being worshiped...but there are

"An idol is anything you turn to for help [or comfort] when God told you to turn to him for help."

Henry Blackaby, 1993

An idol is anything you turn to for help or comfort...

Well let's start with the obvious ones (the rest of you can feel comfortable for a second)

- **Alcohol**
 - "I just need a drink."
 - "It's been a long day."
 - "I deserve this..."
 - "It's under my control..."
- **Drugs**
 - "Just one more hit..."
 - "It makes me feel so good...when life just plain sucks."
- **Stealing**
 - "I want it..."
 - "I deserve it..."
 - "I'm taking it..."
 - "I should have it now..."
 - "Why wait..."
 - "Why earn it..."

(some of you are feeling pretty uncomfortable...
some of you are feeling really comfortable...)

- **Women** – can be an idol. Cause men often treat you like objects for our pleasure... those second and third glances... the mental undressing of a woman... the late night strip show on HBO... or the vast anonymous industry of Internet pornography. It's what men often turn to for help and comfort...

(getting nervous?)

- **Men** – can be an idol. Not in the same way as women (although that is possible). But in fantasy land... romance novels, soap operas, self-help talk shows offer help and comfort to women... Women worship men for their security and stability... Idolatry.

Nancy Ortberg has...

"a dear friend who is in a marriage that is hard, just plain old hard. And rather than face the pain of "the hard" she escapes for hours into a fantasy world that is starring another man in her church, who does not know about how she feels about him. So, she feels like it's safe. But it is an amazing amount of time she daydreams and thinks about this person.

"Sexual idolatry could take a turn where it's not fantasy, but something like pornography, and it's got such a grip on you that you know full well it is an idol for you. And you do not know how to get it out of your life, and it competes and it obscures who God is."

Nancy Ortberg

- **Food** – can be an idol. The Christian church talks a lot about the abuse of alcohol and drugs, but never about the abuse of food. Gluttony is a sin. America is plagued with overeaters (those who maintain comfort by eating) and under-eaters (those who maintain control and comfort by not eating). Food can be a source of comfort or a source of control... therefore an idol.

- **Money**

“What is the chief end of man? To get rich. In what way? Dishonestly if we can; honestly if we must. Who is God, the one and only true? Money is God. Gold and Green Backs, and Stock-father, son, and ghosts of same, three persons in one; those are the true and only God, mighty and supreme.”

Mark Twain

- **Self**

- “I can do it...
- “You deserve it...
- Self-help; self-control; self-esteem
- The disease of me

- **Stuff**

- Flat screen TV's
- Latest car or SUV
- Most beautiful home
- Up-to-date computer
- Digital camera
- New clothes
- Shopping
- Play Station 2
- New Mountain Bike or Road Bike
- New cross-country skis

- **Success**

- More money...

- **Achievement**

- Recognition of success and more money...

Idols.

So... by the public raising of hands...

How many of us are idolaters?

More so than you realized, eh?

"Idolatry, whether ancient or modern, is the futile attempt to look to anyone or anything other than the one true Creator and Provider.

- Whom do I thank when things go well?
- To whom do I look when things go badly?
- Where is my source of security?
- Where do I gain my sense of worth in the world?
- What am I striving to achieve in life, and why?

"The answers to questions like these will help determine whether we are honoring God or whether we are idolaters."

Scott Hafemann, 2001

So, you may be thinking:

"Idolater..."

"Idol worshiper..."

"...man, I never realized..."

Augustine said, "Idolatry is worshiping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that is meant to be worshiped."

Augustine, ancient

Well anyway...

Paul is traversing his way through Macedonia. He just left Philippi, where he and Silas were flogged and imprisoned in stocks, and yet God rescued them and the jailer and his family were saved and baptized. The city officials learned that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, and were alarmed and tried to appease them and asked that they leave the city. So Paul and Silas jumped on the *Egnation Way*, the Roman highway and walked... toward Thessalonica... about 90 miles away.

[Read Acts 17:1-9]

Thessalonica was a very affluent city. It was the capital of Macedonia. These people were rich and comfortable for they had the security of the greatest empire the world had ever known.

This city reminds me of Beverly Hills in Los Angeles, California. The hottest fashions, the most prestigious cars and SUV's, and beautiful, spacious villas and mansions are found here. Wealth and comfort provided by the security of the greatest "empire" the world has ever known.

Paul found the Jewish synagogue and preached Jesus as Messiah to them for three Saturdays.

Note the response:

Acts 17:4

"Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women."

Note the response to the response:

Acts 17:5

"But the Jews were jealous...and started a riot in the city."

Why were they jealous?

- One reason is postulated that the Jews had a large gathering of Greeks that attended their synagogue and when Paul won many of them over, they were jealous...
- And yet... it is true that turmoil often results when the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges people to change their lives, and usually such turmoil originates with those who reject this challenge.

And so...Paul *fled* Thessalonica, the Beverly Hills of the ancient world and the church he established... and traveled south off the Roman highway to the city of Berea "under the cover of darkness."

Berea was an agricultural market kind of town... more of your down-to-earth, work with your hands kind of place. It reminds me of a small Midwestern town in the U.S. where people knew each other and each other's business, and yet were free of the major distractions of big city or affluent life.

[Read Acts 17:10-15]

True to form, Paul found the Jewish synagogue and preached Jesus as the Messiah.

Note the response:

Acts 17:12

"Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men."

Wow!!

Why the many Jews here and only some Jews as in Thessalonica?

Acts 17:11

"The Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians; for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures everyday to see if what Paul said was true."

What made the Bereans noble?

- maybe their eagerness to hear from God and respond to what they heard
- maybe the Bereans came down from their pedestals as people of high standing or as people of high Jewish heritage and, like hungry children in need of food, they sought God's Word
- maybe the very fact that one refuses a claim of nobility, makes them noble... humble
- maybe nobility means childlikeness...

Mark 10:14

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

"People brought their children to be blessed by this important rabbi, Jesus, and he takes a child in his lap (children had no status in that day) and tells them they need to be like this no-status-child to have a share in the kingdom... You must give up your human status, is what Jesus is saying... to give up your important status to serve in the kingdom."

Ray Vanderlaan

[Story:]

I was watching a group of boys play football this last Wednesday at the Hayward Intermediate School during their recess. One of the boys got mad about something (probably not getting passed the ball...) and just sat down on the field in the middle of play. The boy was right in the way of the QB. The student who was playing QB, instead of playing around him or just ignoring him as most would have done (as I would have done or expected), bent down and said a couple of things to this boy. I do not know what was said, but whatever it was made the boy jump up and start running. And this kind QB through the football to that undeserving boy. It did not complete, the boy did not catch the ball, but that was not the point. The essence of that QB's character, the humbleness of his child-like heart, got a cheer from the sidelines of heaven and brought a tear of joy to God the father's face. That young man displayed what the kingdom of God is about.

[pause]

The Bereans received the message with great eagerness, studied the Scriptures everyday to see if what Paul said was true, and many believed.

I know we do not all do this... statistically only a few do.

- but may I encourage the ones who do study, search, examine, and believe the Scriptures everyday, to continue
- and may I challenge those who do not study, search, and examine the Scriptures everyday, to do so. Be like a little child in your heart, believe, and enter the kingdom of heaven.

Note the response to the response:

Acts 17:13

"When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the Word of God at Berea, they went there, too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up."

Jealousy knows no bounds...

- It crosses over into another city, to another land and infects, distracts, and kills... like a virus... it is contagious

Does your jealousy infect others?

...has it crossed over to another land?

...another home / family / person?

...and infected, distracted, and killed their spirit?

That jealousy will infect your own heart ... distract it ... and eventually kill it.

And so... Paul *fled* Berea, the down-to-earth, receptive city of the ancient world and the church he established, and traveled to the coast, then by sea to the city of Athens.

Athens was a grand city...one with rich history in the classic tradition and one with tremendous influence upon the entire world...even to this day. In Paul's day, it had lost some of its grandeur, but it remained the symbol of the great philosophies in popular opinion (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle). The marketplace Paul spoke at was the Agora, the main public place in the city adorned public buildings and colonnades...it was the economic, political, and cultural heart of the city. Athens reminds me of New York City...the hub and symbol of our western economy, with the New York Stock Exchange and Times Square and the ornate display of our nation's freedom: The Statue of Liberty.

[Read Acts 17:16-34]

Again, true to form Paul found a synagogue and reasoned with the Jews God-fearing Greeks. He also went to the marketplace, the hub of ancient Athens and reasoned there with the best of philosophers. They wanted to hear more, so they invited Paul to a meeting of the minds at the Areopagus.

The Areopagus was the main administrative body and the chief court of Athens. It seems the Athenians were willing to give the "strange ideas" of Paul an official hearing.

Paul preached six simple points:

1. God is the Creator of the universe
2. He is the ruler of the nations
3. He is the sustainer of life
4. He is the father of us all
5. He wants to be our Savior
6. He will someday judge the world

Simple, yet extremely profound.

Note the response:

Acts 17:32-33

"When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, [others wanted to hear more], and a few men became followers and believed...among them Dionysius, the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and a number of others."

There are many scholars who maintain that Paul's preaching at Athens was a failure because it was so poorly received. I do not think Paul would have said that. Why? Because Paul was faithful in proclaiming Jesus to these people.

[Story:]

In the 1800s, a famed British preacher once got a skeptic to promise him that he would attend his church for four Sundays and listen as the basic tenets of Christianity were presented. The skeptic was faithful. He listened intently to the sermons. And after the fourth message he became a believer.

The preacher was delighted and could not resist the impulse to ask which of the four sermons brought him to this decision.

The skeptic replied, "Your sermons, sir, were helpful, but they were not what finally persuaded me. What changed my mind, he said was an elderly woman he helped on a slippery walk. He said, "She looked up into my face and said, 'I wonder if you know my Savior, Jesus Christ. He is everything in the world to me. I would like you to know Him, too.'"

[pause]

As a proclaimer of the message of Jesus Christ, I do not presume to be a great speaker or a talented persuader of the Good News. What I do presume is far more powerful and effective. I believe in the Holy Spirit. The One who does presume to guide you into truth and draw you to Christ. And the Spirit uses more than my words... he uses regular, ordinary people, in regular, ordinary instances of life.

Do you allow the Spirit to use you in the regular, ordinary instances of life?
...like the elderly woman?

Are you a man of the Spirit?
a woman of the Spirit?
a teenager of the Spirit?
a child of the Spirit?

Are you free of jealousy, distractions, and idols?

[turn]

Which reminds me of our introductory conversation... idols.

The Ten Commandments are quite clear on the use and practice of idols
AVOID THEM!!

Exod. 20:3-4

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them..."

And Paul, amidst the vast amounts of idols in Athens, says:

Acts 17:30

"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent."

[announce:] "All of us idol worshipers..."

"God calls us to repent. We are no longer ignorant. We must repent."

Repent and believe in Jesus called the Christ, the one who lived a holy life, died a gruesome death, and rose from the dead in glorious fashion.

He alone is the way, the truth and the life, no man comes to the Father except through him. This is an exclusive call to the Father through Jesus Christ, there is no other way.

So, what is your response?

Belief or rioting.

Belief or jealousy.

Belief or sneering.

Belief or some other time.

The time is now... Jesus says, now is the day of salvation.

Is it *in* you? The famous Gatorade commercials. You've seen them ... where there are athletes in black and white video running, playing basketball, tennis, while sweating blue, orange, yellow, green Gatorade.

Is it *in* you? The famous call to repentance. You've seen it before ... people rushing toward altars, tears of joy and laughter, hands raised high in submission, Jesus entering into the hearts and lives of people while sweating and oozing belief and faith.

Is it *in* you? Belief.
Is *he* in you? Jesus.

Accept and believe in Him today.

Let's pray.