

*Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.*

*The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed. Acts 17:1-15*

In midst of having just gone through another Christmas season, it is once again abundantly clear that those of us who live on the North American continent are living in pretty comfortable times. When we consider all the gift giving over the past few weeks, it is clear that most of us have far and away more material possessions than the vast majority of the world’s population. And by the standard of that same majority, we live in some pretty spacious homes or apartments. We own at least one car if not more, per family. We have cell phones, computers, Ipads, Smart TVs and plethora of new technological gadgets to make life comfortable. If we need something, we go to stores stocked with a multitude of choices to buy whatever we want. Our grocery stores contain an overflow of countless varieties of food and drink.

Living in such a world, it is pretty easy to fall into a comfortable, convenience style of Christianity. Like our grocery stores, many Christians shop around, seeking churches that offer services that make them feel good. And so they attend, if they are not too tired, or it fits into their busy schedule. A few years back a cartoon in a Christian magazine poked fun at the way the church has played down commitment to attract attenders. It showed a billboard in front of a church that read, “Come Join the Lite Church: 24% fewer commitments, home of the 7.5% tithe, 15-minute sermons, 45-minute worship services; we have only 8 commandments—your choice. Everything you’ve wanted in a church ... and less!” We may chuckle at this, yet pollster George Gallup contends that fewer than 10 percent of evangelical Christians could be called truly committed. His surveys reveal that the majority of those who profess Christianity don’t know basic teachings of the Bible and don’t live any differently because of their Christian faith.

In Mark 8:34-35 Jesus said: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”* The life of the apostle Paul gives us a concrete example of what that means. In our previous text we read that, having been arrested and publicly beaten in Philippi, Paul and Silas leave Philippi and travel to Thessalonica, where they boldly proclaim the gospel in the face of opposition - the greatest being an angry mob accusing them of upsetting the world and of promoting a king other than Caesar: *“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”* (Acts 17:6- 7).

In one sense, both charges were exaggerated and false. It was Paul's accusers that were upsetting the world by stirring up mob violence. Paul exhorted his followers to live quiet lives in all godliness and dignity and he also instructed believers to be subject to the governing authorities. But there is another sense in which both charges *are true*, or at least *ought* to be true. *Christians should upset the world*. We should turn the world upside down by confronting it with the gospel. And Christians do proclaim that Jesus is King and Lord of all, even over Caesar. Thus God wants us to upset the world for Jesus Christ. But in order to truly upset the world for Jesus, we need to be men and women who are truly committed to Jesus Christ - and truly committed the share and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the mission statement at ABC. *"We passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people."*

*"These men who have turned the world upside down have come here!"* Brothers and sisters: The world needs to be turned upside down! Ever since the fall of the human race into sin, people have been in rebellion against the Creator and Lord of the universe. We are born into sin and we continue in sin unless we are upset by the gospel that confronts our sin. In sin we lost our love for God. Our passions, appetites and desires are now for the things of our own creation rather than for our Creator. Sin has made the world stand on its head, and only Jesus Christ can turn it upside down, which makes it right side up again. We live in a world that has brazenly cast-off God. We have cast Him off as the Creator, insisting that science proves that we all evolved from pond slime through sheer chance billions of years ago. If God is not the Creator, then He does not need to be obeyed. If humanity is the product of millions of years of chance, then we need not fear judgment or eternity, because at death God doesn't exist. And so we can determine for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. Today there is no absolute moral truth, binding on everyone, except for the absolute truth that there is no absolute truth!

And so now it's legal to kill perfectly healthy babies in the womb right up to the moment of birth, but we spare unrepentant murderers with a few years in jail. And it's also the law of the land that physicians, who are trained to save lives, are now required to give assistance to people who want to be put to death. And now we all face the reality that the world has passed numerous laws against God, giving us the right before God to decide what gender we want to be, regards of how God created us. Genesis 1:27 says: *"God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."* A world that is so arrogantly self-righteous and smugly complacent in its brazen sin, and in rebellion against God and in its rejection of God - needs to be upset or turned upside down!

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.* Romans 1:18-21

The Bible and human history tells us that God uses men and women who passionately love God and who are committed to Jesus Christ - and truly committed the proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ - to upset the world for Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul was a man committed to stamping out Christianity as a false cult - until he was confronted by Jesus Christ. After that day, he was totally and fully committed to Jesus Christ and to proclaiming the gospel of grace that had transformed his life. Christianity is not a commitment to a religion, but rather, it is a love relationship with the person of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior. In Philippians 3: 8-11: Paul writes: *"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."*

Because Paul truly knew Jesus and was truly committed to Jesus, he got beat up in Philippi. And rather than taking a break, he traveled the 100 miles to Thessalonica, went into the synagogue, and began proclaiming Jesus was the Messiah. When he was forced to leave Thessalonica, he moved on to Berea and did the same thing. Paul was unstoppable in his commitment to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many today have a false idea that there are two optional tracks in the Christian life. One track is the committed discipleship track. This track is for obsessive types who have a fanatical bent – who give up the comforts of life, live without the gadgets and toys that the rest of us enjoy – and give large portions of their income to the cause of Christ, and sacrificially devote themselves and their time to Jesus.

If that track is a bit much for you, then you can choose to step onto the comfortable track of the convenience style of Christianity. In this, Jesus and the church are a nice slice of life that help to make life more pleasant. For them, Jesus is at the perimeter of their lives rather than the center. These folks wouldn't think of being inconvenienced for the sake of the gospel. But Jesus never offered this track to any of His followers. We're not all gifted to preach the gospel in the same way that Paul was. We're not all called to serve as missionaries in foreign lands. But we all are called to be fully committed to Jesus Christ! In Matthew 6:33 Jesus commanded us all, not just missionaries and pastors, to seek *first* His kingdom and His righteousness. In Revelation 3:14-22 Jesus warns us about the church in Laodicea, which he said he would vomit them out of his mouth because they are lukewarm in their commitment.

The Bride of Christ is a prominent symbol and metaphor used in the Bible to describe God's relationship with his beloved bride, the church. Portrayed as the bridegroom in this relationship, God reveals Himself to be faithful, loving, and committed to a covenant union with his church, comprised of all who believe in Jesus Christ and have accepted His atoning grace and gift of salvation. Consider the reflection of that truth in our own lives as husbands and wives when it comes to commitment and faithfulness. What is the expectation for us as husbands and wives to each other? Partial commitment and faithfulness to one another? 75 % of the time? 95 %? 99.9? No, we want 100 percent. The same is true with God regarding our commitment and faithfulness to Him and to Jesus, his church.

*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. Ephesians 5:22-32*

God does not call us to be nominal in our commitment and our faithfulness to Him when it comes to our relationships in our marriages and in our relationship with the church, which is the body of Christ, the physical presence of Jesus on earth. The book of Acts reveals to us how much God can accomplish with those who are truly committed followers of Jesus Christ! Even Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy were just four men traveling in an almost completely pagan world. They left behind inexperienced churches that were decisively in the minority - yet they upset the entire world for Jesus Christ! As John Wesley said: "Give me fifty men who love nothing but God and fear nothing but sin, and I'll change the world!" When we truly love God and truly treasure God, our commitment to God and our faithfulness to God will turn the world upside down – because there is no greater treasure on earth and in the heavens than being loved and saved by God through Jesus Christ. God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him.

Paul turned the world upside down by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Romans 1:16 Paul said: *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”* We see this in our text, as Paul, as was his custom, went first to the Jews in the synagogue. When they rejected the gospel, he then turned to the Gentiles. His heart’s desire was for the salvation of his own people, the Jews. If they repented and believed in the gospel, then they would fully embrace his efforts to reach out to the Gentiles. If they rejected the gospel, as they often did, then they had no basis for criticizing Paul for taking the gospel to those who would welcome it.

By its very nature is the gospel divisive. Jesus said: *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”* (Matt. 10:34) When the gospel is clearly proclaimed, it draws a line in the sand. People cannot be neutral. So here, as everywhere Paul went, he stirred up controversy and divided people. Some believed and followed Jesus. Others rejected the message and out of jealousy stirred up opposition. In fact, they were so vehement in their opposition that they followed Paul the 46 miles to Berea to stir up that city against him. They were especially jealous because Paul was drawing away from the synagogue the God-fearing Gentiles who had been attending the synagogue.

Before a person can believe in the gospel, they must first understand the content of the gospel. The context of the gospel centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. We read that Paul *“reasoned”* with the Jews from the Scriptures (17:2). The word *“reasoned”* indicates a dialogue, where Paul presented the truth and then responded to questions or challenges from the congregation. He reasoned and gave evidence *“explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, (17:3). “Explaining”* means to open. Luke used the same word of God opening the eyes of the men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:31. *“Proving that it was necessary”* literally means *“to place before or alongside.”* Paul would take one Scripture and place it alongside another Scripture to prove his point.

The Word of God, the Bible, is the sole basis for the gospel. When you proclaim the gospel, take people to the Bible, and then what Jesus has done in your life. Sometimes people share a gospel booklet - but make sure that they know that the verses come from the Bible. And when you are sharing the gospel, read the verses out loud. Romans 10:17 says: *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”* If that person has never done so, encourage them to read the gospels, while asking themselves, *“Who is Jesus?”* Jesus Christ is the center of the gospel. Jesus’ question to his disciples is the key question for every person, *“Who do you say that I am?”* (Matthew 16:15). That is the main issue that people need to face. If Jesus is who He claimed to be, everything else follows. If He is not, then nothing else follows. To be saved, a person needs to understand who Jesus is and what He came to do.

Why does the gospel upset people so much? Well, when the gospel is proclaimed rightly, it confronts people with their sin and it calls them to surrender their lives fully to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. At the beginning of creation God created humanity in His image for the purpose of an intimate glorious relationship with Himself. But not long after sin entered the world and broke that relationship when the first humans rebelled against God and rejected God. It was then that God promised to send a Messiah to earth to mend that broken relationship. Jesus came into the world to restore that relationship by dying on a cross, in our place, for the penalty of our sins, so we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God, when we surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

The confrontation of the gospel centers on our sin and rebellion against *Jesus as King*. The Jews thought the Messiah would be a conquering King who would deliver them from Rome and other enemies, but they didn’t like the notion of Him suffering and dying for sinners. That implied that *they were* sinners - but they viewed the Gentiles as the sinners! They liked the idea of a King who would make life comfortable for them, but they didn’t like the notion of a King who would confront their sin! But the gospel proclaims Jesus as both the Savior of sinners and the Lord of all of our lives.

*“These men who have turned the world upside down . . . saying that there is another king, Jesus.”* The Greek word translated “another” means “another of a different kind,” that is, a king unlike kings or presidents or prime ministers or dictators of this world. When you read Paul’s two Thessalonian letters, you see the apostle’s strong emphasis he gave in Thessalonica on the kingship of Jesus Christ and the promise of His return. Jesus’ kingdom is neither political nor of this world and so the kingship of Jesus Christ is unlike that of all the rulers of this world. King Jesus conquers with ambassadors, not armies; and His weapons are truth and love. King Jesus brings fallen humanity peace by upsetting their peace and turning things upside down. He conquers through His cross where He died for a world of lost sinners. And so what that means for us is that - *we have not faithfully proclaimed the truth of gospel of Jesus Christ* - if we give out proclaim an *easy gospel* that *dodges sin* and lets the sinner *continue as his or her own lord and king*, using Jesus to make life more happy and safe and secure and comfortable.

Faith in Jesus Christ is not a matter of closing our eyes and leaping into the dark. Rather, it is based on the revelation that God has given us through the Word of God concerning His Son, Jesus Christ. Neither is faith in Jesus Christ an emotional decision based on good feelings after a concert or an evangelistic sermon. If your faith is based on good feelings, it will not stand up under the stress of life. Faith should rest on the revelation of the Bible regarding the person of Jesus Christ. We must recognize what the Bible declares, that we have sinned and stand guilty before the Holy God. But by His great mercy, He sent Jesus to justify all that would believe in Him by bearing the penalty that they deserved. Thus the Bible commands us to believe in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, promising that by the grace of God, we will be saved - when we surrender our hearts and lives to him as our Lord and Savior. What a blessing it would be for us in the year 2020 if we would ultimately become known as “The church who turned the world upside down . . . saying that there is another king, Jesus!” In order for that to happen we need to be truly committed and truly faithful to truth of the Word of God. The Bereans *“were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”* They did not examine the Scriptures as proud skeptics, trying to find reasons not to believe. They came at it with open hearts and open attitudes, seeking after the truth of the gospel. What that means for us is that we are to be controlled by the commitment to declare what God has said instead of manipulating God’s Word say to what we want to hear. Amen?

We also need to be truly committed and truly faithful to follow Paul’s example and those who upset the world with the gospel. In order to do that, we must follow Paul’s example of faithfulness in pleasing our Lord by proclaiming the gospel regardless of the circumstances. Paul was sensitive to Jesus’ leading and would go and do whatever he wanted - and he would not let opposition and persecution stop him. We must not fear what someone may say or do to keep us from telling the truth. We are responsible for being true to God’s word, not people’s reaction to it. Keep in mind that often those who mistreat us will claim to be Christians. It was for that way for Jesus. It will be the same for us. But we can overcome, because Jesus overcame. We can rejoice in the fellowship of his sufferings! Winston Churchill said: “You will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks.” May we passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people until all the dogs go home!

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:3-9*