

"By Raising Him From The Dead"

This morning we are going to taking a break from our Sunday morning series through the book of Deuteronomy. Instead, in light of the BBQ today, I wanted to preach a sermon that might speak a little more directly to any visitors that might be visiting us today, that might not know much about biblical Christianity.

And so let me start today by pointing out what might seem obvious. Our culture influences us. It affects how we think about things. It helps form our overall worldview. This is especially the case with religion. Now what the culture around us thinks about certain religions may or may not be what you personally think. But it's hard not to have your thoughts in some way influenced by the message that the surrounding culture is pitching all around you. Our culture influences how we think about the most fundamental questions of life, especially our faith and spirituality.

That was the case back during Jesus' earthly ministry. And it was the case during our passage here in Acts when the Apostle Paul is going out as a missionary to tell the world around him about Jesus. At that time, guess what the prevailing culture thought about Christians? They thought they were atheists. That's right. The early Christians in the Greco-Roman world were considered atheists by the culture at large. They didn't follow all the normal pagan gods like Zeus, Athena, Apollo, etc. And so the culture around them for a while thought they were just atheists. That would have colored how you would have at first received the gospel when a Christian came to tell you about it.

During the middle ages, Christianity became in many ways very popular, in terms of culture. Though unfortunately, that meant it got mixed in with the rest of pop culture, which at that time was full of various superstitious pagan practices. And so consequently it was during those Middle Ages that Christianity took on a lot of the non-biblical rituals and superstitions from the culture around them. While Christianity at that time tried to influence the culture, it too was influenced by the culture. Many of these practices were addressed at the time of the Reformation about 500 years ago. But again, the point is that culture has an effect on people's understanding of religion.

Well, today our culture, especially here in Marin, still has a major impact on how people think about religion. We need to really ask ourselves, what are our reasons for either being a Christian or not being a Christian? Am I a Christian because it was the social thing to do back when I grew up? Or am I not a Christian now in Marin for the same reason, that it's not the culturally popular thing to do here? Let's face it. Marin County in so many ways thinks biblical Christianity is backwards. There aren't a lot of churches here for a reason. And many of the churches that are in Marin are no longer what I would even consider biblical Christianity. So often, the Bible becomes just one of many voices in such churches, and Jesus becomes one of just many roads to God. As much as the culture had a negative effect on the church during the Middle Ages, the culture in Marin has had some very, very, negative effects on churches here.

Now of course any culture is complex. It's hard in a short sermon to narrow down exactly the influences that have caused these effects on the churches here. But one aspect of our culture here in Marin that I think has had an effect could be labeled as the "tolerance" movement. We hear a lot about tolerance in our culture now. It certainly affects how we think about religion. The culture has made a case to us. It's made a plea to our hearts that this concept of tolerance is one of our chief moral principles. Something to use to evaluate all religious claims to truth.

Well, the idea of tolerance, in the most basic and best sense of the word is something that I think is very good. A simple definition of tolerance I found via Google: "A willingness to recognize and respect the beliefs or practices of others." "A willingness to recognize and respect the beliefs or practices of others." I can handle that definition. I think as Christians, we should be tolerant of other's views, with that definition. I think Paul in our passage is operating from that spirit of tolerance. We should meet others where they are at. We can have fundamental disagreements with other's claims for truth, while still coexisting with them on this planet.

Unfortunately, this simple definition of tolerance is not always what parts of the culture are actually pushing for. A more extreme view of tolerance is often what's being pitched in practice. Sometimes when people in our culture today demand tolerance, they really are saying that we should only "recognize and respect" any religion that does not have anything exclusive to say. Any exclusive claim to truth that goes against another religion or worldview gets labeled as intolerant or maybe even as "hate speech." For example, Jesus teaches that it is only through him that man can find salvation, and that anyone else is on the path toward hell. If a Christian shares his view on that here in Marin, out of a biblical conviction that God's Word teaches that, that so often gets labeled as intolerant. That's a bad extreme of those pushing for a tolerance movement, when they become intolerant of a religious conviction, just because that religious conviction has something exclusive to say.

Another bad extreme of this idea of tolerance that I find a lot of our culture pushing for is this: when they say tolerance, they really mean acceptance. Our culture so often wants to demand that we all accept each other's conflicting views, even if you don't hold them yourself. This is more than just asking someone to recognize and respect a different view. It's asking that you essentially agree that their truth is somehow a legitimate truth for them to hold.

A lot of this comes from our postmodern mindset in our culture today. A postmodern mindset holds to relative truth. What's true for you, might not be true for me. And so the culture often wants us to accept other people's truth convictions as true for them, even if you don't believe them to be true for you. But, I'm sorry that's just illogical. Biblical Christianity isn't just logic. But it certainly is a reasonable faith. And two conflicting things can't both be true.

It's our very postmodern culture that celebrates things like relative truth and a blending together of world religions that is influencing us today. As you sit there, if you find yourself not a Christian, or at least not a "biblical" Christian, I'd like you to ask yourself if this is out of a real investigated consideration of biblical Christianity? Have you made a real reasoned, heartfelt, genuine investigation of what the Bible teaches? Or have you just assumed whatever our postmodern culture has told you to believe? I find this ironic, because I think the culture today tries to tell us that biblical Christians have somehow been brainwashed to think a certain way, but what I'm seeing more and more is that it's the postmodern culture that's actually been doing the brainwashing.

You see, sadly, our culture has become very polarized today. On the one extreme, you have biblical Christians standing on conviction based on the word of God who are labeled as hate mongers and bigoted. That's a very unfair stereotype, and fails to recognize that some very loving passionate people of conviction have a very different set of truth convictions than the culture at large. On the other extreme, you have many people in the name of Christianity who have been quite intolerant, even using the best sense of the word. Actions like bombing abortion clinics, gay bashing, leading the crusades in the past, etc. What I propose is that you can be a Christian of conviction, based on conviction of what God's Word says, who is still tolerant of other viewpoints, while not accepting and agreeing with other viewpoints. You can believe things like salvation is only through Jesus, while still being "tolerant" in the best sense of the word.

But of course, tolerance doesn't mean that you can't share your convictions in a loving way. And I think that's what we see going on in this passage today. And so this passage speaks to both sides of the aisle. If you are a biblical Christian, this passage will give you a snapshot of how to balance tolerance with our call from God to evangelize. And if you are here today and are not a biblical Christian - maybe you are someone that's in favor of some of the more extreme views of tolerance that I've mentioned today. If so, I'd ask you now to be tolerant of Christianity as we consider today some of what Christianity teaches. I'd ask that you'd open your mind to hear from God's Word what the Christian faith is all about, and that you don't come with your mind already made up just because of what our culture may have told you to think.

I'd like us to look first at how Paul begins by establishing a point of contact with the people he's evangelizing with. But realize we see right away that Paul has a serious disagreement. It's a passionate difference of conviction. Look at verse 16. It says Paul's spirit became provoked within him when he saw all the idols throughout the city. This is a bit of righteous anger from Paul. He was really concerned about the widespread idolatry. But what did he do with his passionate conviction? He decided to share the gospel with the city. He speaks to the Jews where they were at - in the synagogues, and the Gentiles where they were at - in the marketplaces.

But then the focus of this passage turns to the more sophisticated thinkers of the time; the philosophers. These Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who would gather at the Areopagus to talk shop. They learn of Paul's teachings, are a bit confused over them, and so they ask him to share more. But Paul doesn't just walk in and angrily bash them over the head with the Bible. Paul begins by establishing a point of contact with them. In verse 22, he appeals to their religious nature. He actually says that they are very religious. In fact what we see here is that they loved to think about religion and philosophy. The fact that they asked him to speak shows that they were open to consider different ideas. Paul gives them an example of their religiosity. He points to the altar that they dedicated to an unknown god. Remember, they had all these idols to different pagan gods. Just in case they missed one, they had an altar to an unknown god. And so Paul acknowledges that they are religious people. They obviously have some genuine heartfelt desire to follow the Divine. They were sincere in their devotion. Paul respectfully acknowledges their convictions.

And yet at the same time, we know Paul disagrees with them. Paul, out of a firm biblical conviction, out of a firm conviction of having seen the risen Lord Jesus Christ, believes they are uninformed. And so Paul even points to their altar to an unknown god as a point of contact. It's Paul simultaneously affirming their desire to know God, while showing that they acknowledge that they don't have a sufficient knowledge about God. Paul begins to offer them the revelation of the one true God.

Now, if we had the time, we could analyze a bit further some of the specific ways Paul begins to teach them about God, in ways that might resonate with their existing belief system. The Epicureans and Stoics here had some very different ideas from one another, and some of the specific ways Paul teaches here looks like he appeals to some of the convictions that each group had, but then corrects them with biblical teaching. But maybe one clear example is in verse 28. He quotes two different pagan teachings. And he uses that as a point of contact to say that we are all offspring of God. That we are all created by God. Paul uses their own thinkers and turns it back around on them in verse 29. He says, if we all acknowledge that we are all created by God, then we should realize that we can't worship God by manmade idols. That the "Divine Nature" is not something captured in gold, or silver, or stone, or crafted by man's design.

Paul comes full circle in verse 30 and basically says that they had been acting out of ignorance. That's what he started with when he pointed to the unknown god. This is all about what they don't know, but recognize that they need. Paul starts with a

point of contact and then begins to give him the revelation of the one true God. Paul then begins to flush out some of the distinct teachings of Christianity with the claim that God has turned now to reveal himself and the gospel of salvation to the world.

It's at this point, I'd like to point out what you can't take from this passage. You can't look at this passage and say, well all religions are basically the same. That's what so many in our culture in Marin want to tell us. But the Bible here doesn't agree with that logic. This is Paul making an exclusive truth claim. Paul starts with a point of contact with them, but then shows them how their own system of worship is contradictory. He then goes on to teach them the true revelation of God. Whether you agree with Paul or not is a different story. But Paul doesn't see their religious system compatible with the teachings in the Bible. That's the problem with the idea today that all religions are basically the same. That logic doesn't do justice to what each religion actually teaches. When you try to find common denominators of each and boil them down into one combined religion, you haven't found the truth in all religions. You've just invented a new one. For example, the Unitarian Universalist Church. That's a religion that has tried to integrate beliefs from various religions. They hold weekly services and have a set of principles that are basically their beliefs. They have become just another religion.

And so Paul here points out to these people how inside them they know there's a God and a creator. He capitalizes on that as a point of contact. And then he looks to give them biblical revelation. Why? Because he believes the Bible tells us the true revelation of God. Because he believes that it is through Jesus that we can find eternal life. He believes that this is an urgent message that we all need to hear.

This leads me the second point I'd like us to see in this passage. Paul believes that the distinct message of Christianity is critical to consider. What makes that message critical is summarized in verse 30 and 31. Paul says that God is calling all people to repent because a judgment day is coming. Now some people might think that sounds like hate speech. But I believe this is love speech. You don't give someone a warning like this because you hate them. If you hate them, you wouldn't bother warning them. You'd let them face judgment. Paul's telling them about an impending judgment is an act of love. Now you might not agree that a judgment is coming. But that doesn't change the fact that Paul does, and I do as well, and so we out of a genuine conviction want to warn you about that.

Paul says in verse 31 that the judgment is a judgment about righteousness. We will be judged on our godly behavior. This is a very short summary of what Paul spoke about that day at Athens, but we know what Paul's getting at because we have other sermons from him and other letters. Paul says clearly, for example, in Romans 3:1 that no one is righteous, no not one. That would include Paul, by the way, and it would include you and me. That's the biblical teaching. On our own merits, we fall short on the judgment day.

But Paul goes on to say that the judgment is going to happen by the man ordained by God. Guess who that is? He's referring to Jesus. The New Testament in several places tells us that at the final judgment, Jesus will be the judge.

But notice that Paul mentions that Jesus rose from the dead. This implies an alternative, one that Paul also talks so much about throughout his writings, and that all the authors in the New Testament do as well. At the day of judgment, though we are not righteous on our own, we can be spared from a guilty verdict. We can be spared from an eternity in hell. We can instead spend eternity with God as his people in heaven. How does that happen? Well Paul only begins to explain how in our passage by his reference to repentance in verse 30. Jesus said right at the start of his ministry, "Repent, and believe in the gospel." Christianity teaches that we can find forgiveness for our sins through faith in Jesus. Jesus tells us to turn away from our old life of unbelief and rebellion against the one true God, and to place our trust in Jesus. That on the cross Jesus died in your place, to pay the penalty

for your sins. And that three days later, he rose again, so that if you trust in, that you also have the hope of a resurrection. Resurrection to eternal life with God in his heavenly kingdom.

Now this might sound hard to believe. Paul only begins to explain it here, and I know I've only just begun to explain it as well. As you investigate Christianity further, as you read God's Word further, it's an amazing revelation that is not only good news, but also makes sense. And not only that, it's one God has testified to through various miracles through the history of the bible. Miracles that coincide with the revelation that claims to come from God. Miracles testifying to its validity. But Paul doesn't mention all those many miracles here. Paul just points to one. And it is certainly the one that I think we all need to wrestle with. He points to the miracle of the resurrection. Verse 31. Paul says that it is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that is the crowning assurance this revelation has come from God.

You see, in so many ways, the resurrection becomes the central issue. Did Christ really rise from the dead? Paul says elsewhere that our faith is in vain if that did not happen. But if Christ really did rise from the dead as he had predicted, then that is the shining confirmation of everything he taught. Yes, his entire ministry was repeatedly affirmed by various miracles, but certainly the climax was at the cross. His resurrection is so critical for you to consider. If he didn't rise from the dead, then we can all just go home right now. But if he did, then Paul tells us that's assurance that our faith is true.

If you are a skeptic; if you have your doubts about the resurrection, have you really, honestly, given it a fair investigation? If you really hear out the evidence, I believe the case is clear that he really rose from the dead. And yet so many people don't give the resurrection a fair hearing. I remember taking a college class at UC San Diego. It was a class about world religions. And when they talked about Christianity they devoted a whole class to trying to debunk the ministry of Jesus. And yet I was so disappointed, in one sense (from the poor scholarship), when they spoke against the resurrection. They basically conjectured from the Bible itself to question the validity of the resurrection. They talked about the swoon theory, for example, that maybe Jesus was drugged when they gave him something to drink on the cross. So that he only appeared dead, and so he might have actually revived later in the tomb and escaped from there. That's amazing that a secular institution would say that it's a credible possibility that Jesus did show himself alive after the cross. But do you see the problem with that logic? They use the Bible's report of the drink on the cross as evidence for their speculation. But they fail to read the biblical account in its entirety. Like the soldiers who were professionals at crucifixions verified Jesus' death by stabbing him with a spear in his side. If you are going to use the Bible as your evidence to disprove the resurrection, you have to deal with all the evidence in the Bible, not just pick and choose. And yet sadly, when they presented that case during class that day, most people just said, "Ahh, yes, this is all a sham. Christianity is false." People didn't get the opportunity to consider all the evidence, and when given just some of the facts, and told what to think, most people just accepted it as truth.

You see, you have to ask yourself today, what response you will have to the message of the gospel. Look at verses 32-34. When people heard Paul that day, some mocked him, some were willing to hear him further, and some actually believed. What response will you have to this gospel message today?

If you disagree with everything you've heard here today, you could be tempted to mock Christianity like they did Paul here. They called Paul a babbler in verse 18. But if that is where you are at, I'd ask you to indeed practice tolerance. That you not assume that every biblical Christian that you meet is working from some inner hatred of others and just trying to find some religious justification for their actions. Rather, see that we really, really, believe what Scripture says. We believe that God revealed himself by coming to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. That he died on

the cross to save all those who would turn to him in faith. Please understand that there are Christians acting out of a genuine conviction that this is true. That to share this message with you is an act of love for you and an act of obedience to God.

If you've heard this message and find that you believe it, then I say, "Praise the Lord!" Notice that those who believed Paul in verse 34 "joined" with him. They became a part of Christ's church. We'd want you too to join with us as part of our church through faith in Christ as well. I'd love to speak with you afterwards and answer any questions of what that looks like; of what it means to be a Christian and to be a part of the family of God.

And if you've heard this message today, and still have questions, that is okay. Maybe you are like the people here who are telling Paul that they want to hear more on this matter. Well, I think that is a great thing. I challenge everyone here today to really investigate the claims of Christianity. Obviously you can do that through the ministries of this church, like our Sunday services. We also are starting up a class in the fall called *Christianity Explored*. It's a ten week course on Thursday evenings starting September 17th. The whole purpose of the class is to explore the key teachings of Jesus through looking at key passages in the book of Mark. You won't be forced to answer questions, or to sing or pray. Each class will have an engaging video, and then we'll reflect on a different aspect of Christianity. We'll look at who Jesus is and what he came to do. This could be a great way to further explore Christianity in a responsible way.

Before we close today, I want to give one final charge to those here who are Christians. This is doubling back on the whole issue of tolerance. Paul gives us a great example of how to share your faith while having a spirit of tolerance, in the best sense of the word. Paul clearly has a passionate conviction here. But he doesn't blow up abortion clinics, or do acts of hatred. No, he does the greatest act of love here. He brings them the message of salvation. And he doesn't do it by talking over people. He does it by meeting them where they are at. He reasons with them based on where they are coming from. He doesn't hide his convictions, but he helps find points of connection with them and keeps leading them to Jesus. Let's all do the same. Amen.

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