

Receiving, Responding and Believing - March 17, 2024

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.--Acts 17:10-12

What is truth? Pontius Pilate famously asked Jesus this question when the chief priests and teachers of the law brought Jesus before him, accusing Jesus of “subverting the nation” with His teachings. Before a witness can give her testimony in a court of law, she takes an oath to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. But what is truth? In our increasingly secular nation, many people believe that truth is relative, and that there is no absolute truth. Throughout human history people have searched for truth. Our Declaration of Independence states that it is a self-evident truth that all men are created equal by God, yet the struggle for equality in our country continues. For many, truth is elusive and uncertain. Without a sense of truth people can fall into cynicism, a sense of futility and fatalism in which life has no meaning or purpose. So, again, what is truth?

As Christians we believe that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God-- God’s truth. We look to the Bible as God’s revelation to humanity about Himself and His purposes for us. We believe that the Bible provides everything we need to know to be reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus Christ, and to be spiritually transformed into His likeness. This doesn’t mean that everything in the Scriptures is *literally* true, as some people insist. For instance, if we focus on whether or not there was really a Good Samaritan in Jesus’ parable, we miss the point that He was making about who is our neighbor. The Song of Solomon is a love poem filled with metaphors and similes that are poetically descriptive, not realistic. Within the Scriptures there are many types of writings. There is the history of the Jewish people-- their relationship with God, their kings and conflicts with other nations. There are prayers, proverbs, prophecies and allegories that are not meant to be taken literally, but still reveal God’s character and promises to His chosen people. According to 2 Tim. 3:16-17, [All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.](#) So, for Christians the Bible is the final authority on any and all issues it covers and should be the source of truth against which everything is evaluated and compared.

This morning we’re going to look at a group of people mentioned in the Bible who took the Scriptures very seriously. The Scriptures were their touchstone for God’s truth. The Apostle Paul preached the gospel to these people during his second missionary journey. He had previously preached the gospel in Thessalonica, but while some Jews and Greeks there put their faith in Christ after hearing what he said, others who were threatened by what Paul preached, gathered a mob and ran him out of town. He fled to a town called Berea about 50 miles away, which was a center of Greek culture and learning. It was off the beaten path rather than on a main route but had a large enough Jewish community to have built a synagogue. As in other towns where Paul preached, Berea was largely populated by Gentile Greeks, many of whom would come to hear rabbis and others preach. Many Greeks gathered to hear new ideas and discuss them, and synagogues were one of the places they would go to hear to local and out-of-town speakers. Wherever Paul went during his missionary journeys, he would speak at the synagogue in town first, and there would often be non-Jews present, as there were in Berea. In Acts 17:10-12 we read, [Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.](#)

I’ve always kind of wondered what it was that made the Bereans “of more noble character than the Thessalonians.” The Greek word used to describe them this way is *eugenesteroi* that indicates that the Bereans were more receptive, open-minded and free from prejudice than the Thessalonians who had run Paul out of town.

They were more committed to discerning God's truth than those *who just listened but didn't actually study the Bible carefully for themselves*. They listened with eagerness to what Paul had to say about Jesus: how He fulfilled the prophecies in the Scriptures of a messiah who had to suffer to atone for our sins, but who was raised from the dead and, before He ascended into heaven, He gave His disciples authority and the power of the Holy Spirit to share this good news to the ends of the earth. They *received* Paul's message. They didn't just dismiss what he said because it differed from what they had heard before or what they believed. They apparently leaned in and listened carefully, too, so they could later check what Paul said against the Scriptures to see if what he said was true and consistent with the revelation of the Bible, as was their practice.

Theirs is an incredibly important practice. It reminds me of one of my professors back in law school. As she grilled us on the case law, whenever one of us stated what a case's ruling established or struck down as a rule of law, she always asked, "What's your support for saying that?" and she'd keep asking that question until she was satisfied with our answers. She expected us to know and be able to discuss not just the facts of the cases we read, but also talk about the arguments and logic that led to the ruling of the case and what guidance and precedent it provided. In her class we couldn't just read cases and wait for her to spoon-feed us what we should have distilled from them. It sounds like this is similar to how the Bereans approached Scripture and tested the truth of what they heard. They were *known for searching and studying the Bible for themselves and not merely accepting what they were taught*. I would venture to say that most of us don't do this with what we hear from the pulpit. In the American church, we tend to be more passive receivers of information and Biblical literacy on average is pretty low. Part of the reason is because of the way Scripture is presented to us. In sermons, Sunday School classes and Bible studies, for the most part, we focus on a few verses or passages without a sense of how they fit into the Biblical narrative as a whole. So, it's easy to get an incomplete or skewed idea of what God wants for and from us and how this impacts our daily lives. This has become increasingly dangerous. *We live in a world of fake news, misinformation and propaganda. We live in a world where all manner of coercion plus social and spiritual manipulation is infecting the world. Ultimately, we can become victims of deception and psychological abuse whenever we fail to seek the truth or exercise any Biblical critical thinking. If we don't study the Bible for ourselves, comparing Scripture with Scripture, how will we know if we are mistaken or being deceived? How will we discern the truth?*

In Matt. 10:16 Jesus tells us that we need to *be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves* as we share His Good News. In Rom. 12:2 Paul exhorts us *be transformed by the renewing of your mind* so that we will grow more and more like Christ and be able to discern *His good, pleasing and perfect will*. This is what the Bereans did and why they are distinguished as being of such noble character. We are called and challenged to follow their example as we, by God's grace, become a 4-D church – looking inward into our own hearts, looking upward to the Lord, looking outward to find ways to minister to our community in redemptive and loving ways, and looking onward to discern and do what God is calling us to do as individuals and as a church here and now.

Knowing the Bible and seeking the help of the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us to love people as Jesus does is vitally important for our own souls and character as well as for the effectiveness of our witness as we share the gospel and work for the good of our city, our country, and our world. If we know Scripture by heart, but don't live by it in every aspect of our lives, our credibility as Christians is compromised. If we react out of our emotions and impulses but are not grounded in Biblical truth and godly love and character, our faith may be shallow or blind, and those yet to accept Christ as their Savior may reject whatever we say because they don't see God's truth and love for them reflected in our attitudes, actions and words. What our world needs is Christians who, in the words of Micah 6:8, *act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God*. To many of those who are skeptical about the Christian faith anything else is just noise and hypocrisy. Christianity has no appeal to them and holds out no hope for making any meaningful difference in the world or finding truth. But we can be a part of changing that.

Before I say more about that, I want to touch on another aspect of how the Bereans lived their faith. During Jesus' and Paul's time, few, if any, individuals had their own copy of the Scriptures. This means that in order for the Bereans to examine the Scriptures to determine for themselves whether or not what Paul preached was consistent with the Scriptures, they would have to go to their synagogue to read them. Given how communal Jewish life was, it's pretty likely that people would go read the Scriptures together in groups, maybe with a rabbi to help them understand what they read and be in on their discussion about how what Paul said compared with the Scriptures. They didn't have the luxury of doing personal devotions like we can, and it's likely that even if they had their own Bibles, they would have still gathered together to discuss the meaning and precepts of what they read. Perhaps their discussions were something like our Bible studies, but notice that they examined the Scriptures like this *every day*! Now, that's commitment to knowing God's truth. How much more credible would we be as witnesses and spiritual mentors if we had that kind of commitment? How much more would our lives be shaped and transformed by what God has revealed about Himself and His plans for us if we read, examined and meditated on His Word on a daily basis? How much more solid would our faith and relationship with God be? Are we willing to make that kind of commitment? If not, we might want to pray about that and look inward to see how and why we might resist doing so.

If we are to have a positive impact on our community, our country and our world; if we are committed to intentionally cultivating unity by seeking common ground with brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we may disagree with about all sorts of things, we must be solidly grounded in our relationship with God, not just individually, but as a church and as part of the wider, global Church. This requires more than attending worship services and daily personal devotions. While these are definitely good things, we can go deeper individually and as a church. The Bereans examined the Scriptures, discussed and meditated on the passages they read. Discerning the will of God, what He has done for us, what He desires from us, and how He invites us to be involved in His efforts to redeem those who do not know Him yet requires reading, discussing and applying Scripture and being willing to change how we live our lives so that God's love and glory can be made manifest through our every thought, interaction, decision and action. Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his second letter to them in chapter 10, verse 5, [We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ](#). While Paul used hyperbole to make his point, he exhorts us to keep God and His character and purposes in the forefront of our minds at all times – not just on Sundays, during the hour we may spend every day to be in His Word, and when we gather for prayer or Bible studies during the rest of the week.

In the spirit of the Berean believers, our faith is more commendable, effective and credible when our lives reflect godly virtues, when our acts match our words. Do we respond in Christ-like ways when we read or see things on social media? Do we ask God's guidance on how to respond graciously and respectfully when an acquaintance, friend or family member behaves badly or spreads information that you know is untrue? Are our reactions grounded in a desire to be right or to connect with them wherever they may be on their spiritual journey, and love them like Jesus would? Sure, Jesus could be pretty harsh with religious leaders who, in their arrogance and pride, refused to consider that they could be wrong in how they interpreted and observed the Scriptures, but He also spoke truth to all who would listen, even a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who met with Jesus and asked Him questions, not to try to trap Him like the other religious leaders, but to better understand what Jesus had said. As we can read in John 3, Nicodemus humbled himself and acknowledged that God was with Jesus, otherwise Jesus wouldn't be able to perform the signs He was doing. This is all to say that in evaluating the truth or impact of things we see and hear, whether it's on social media, print media, or during conversations, lectures or sermons, including this one, we should look to Scripture as our touchstone like the Berean believers did, and discuss the Bible together with humility and grace, mindful that those who may have different perspectives than we do may

provide new insight and wisdom to us. After all, what Jesus taught challenged the status quo and pointed out how the religious leaders of the day were putting as much importance on their traditions and doctrines as they put on Scripture. In so doing they lost sight of the Spirit of God, got side-tracked by their legalism and couldn't consider that God was making things new through His Son Jesus. Actually, one could say that God wasn't doing something new as much as He was redeeming humanity so that He could have the covenant relationship with us that He has always wanted and created us for in the first place.

Some of you may have heard or seen a recent episode of Pastor Doug's video series, "At the Intersection," that addresses how to deal with all the disinformation that is plaguing our country. In this episode he calls us to "conscientiously prevent others from believing what you know is untrue." This standard of honesty involves 1) not sharing information that you have not or cannot verify with at least two reliable sources, 2) making sure your sources are still reliable, and 3) questioning yourself about why you believe what you heard, read or saw and not just relying on your feelings or instinct about it. I think these are helpful recommendations for preventing our being deceived, manipulated and overwhelmed by the sheer amount of misinformation and propaganda we are bombarded with every day. Yet, as Christ-followers, we also have the most effective defense against all of that in following the Bereans' example by testing everything with Scripture. Jesus would often say **You have heard that it was said...** and point out what the religious leaders and teachers were saying, then He would show that what they were saying was either wrongly interpreted or fell short of the Spirit of God's law, saying, **But I tell you....**

There are a number of instances of this in the Sermon on the Mount, starting with chapter five of the gospel of Matthew starting at verse 21: **You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment...and anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell.** Further down starting at verse 27, Jesus says **You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**

As we compare things we see, read and hear with Scripture, we also need to ask whether or not our conclusions are consistent with the heart and character of God as revealed throughout Scripture and the life of Jesus Christ.

Anything that is said or done should be viewed through the whole witness of Scripture. The Scriptures tell us the story of God's desire to create and enter into a covenant relationship with people who He made in His image:

- *how the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, a man whose obedience to God was so complete that he was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, and God deemed him as righteous and promised to bless Abraham and his descendants who would become a great nation through which the Lord would bless all people;
- *how Abraham's descendants would become the nation of Israel, whose King David would be known as a man after God's own heart, and from whose line would come a Messiah who would redeem from sin all who would accept Him as their Savior and invite them to join in His work to show us the love and character of God and continue that work by loving one another as He loves us and love our neighbors as ourselves;
- *how Jesus Christ was the Word of God made flesh is the promised Messiah, who spoke with God's authority on the Scriptures to reveal the truths that religious leaders had either misinterpreted, misapplied or disregarded, and made a new covenant with all people; and
- *how that new covenant extended the covenant God made with Abraham to all people-- Jews and Gentiles – all who are made in His image, can receive the covenant blessings He desired to bestow on

us ever since He breathed the breath of life into the first man and woman.

When we can see ourselves as part of the great sweep of God's story as it is revealed in the Bible, and devote ourselves to looking at everything through the lens of Scripture, what it tells us about how we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds into Christ-likeness by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will see the wonderful plan that God has for our lives, and when we see that plan more clearly because we see that our story is embedded in God's story, we won't be so vulnerable or gullible when it comes to the news media, social media and foolish controversies because they will not resonate with God's life-giving Spirit that enlivens the Scriptures and helps us become more of who God calls us to be. Instead, our careful, consistent examination of Scripture will help us filter out things that are not edifying, that do not reflect godly character or purposes and do not bring glory to God. We will have a better understanding of godly character and purposes because we will look to whole council of Scripture, rather than make Scripture conform with our interpretations and instead, be transformed by Scripture and to become more like Jesus. We will trust in God and His ways rather than being lured by half-truths and lies designed to make us fearful and tempt us to turn to human leaders or institutions that twist the truth to gain influence and power, saying what they think we want to hear and promising to promote Christian values, even though their character and actions don't reflect those values.

Scripture declares in 1 Peter 2:9 that we are *a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light*. Do we reflect God's light and declare His truth in how we respond to things we see, hear and read? We must look inward and consider what are the things that most define who we are and what we stand for. There are countless things that make up our sense of identity: race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, level of education, gender, political affiliation, nationality and so on. The question for us as people of God is, does our identity in Christ take precedence over all of those other things? Does the way we live our lives, interact with others and respond to the challenges our country and the rest of the world are facing reflect the gospel truth? Russell Moore, editor-in-chief of Christianity Today, wrote in his book, *Losing Our Religion*, "We can choose to be a people who embody a credible gospel that is more than an illusion, more than a useful means to some end." I found this statement really inspiring. It is so easy to get sucked into foolish controversies and political wrangling, especially during an election year. Satan must be having a grand time watching Christians fall out with each other over where they stand on this or that issue rather than spurring one another on in good works, encouraging each other in our faith, and growing in wisdom and grace by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As Christians we have been crucified with Christ and raised with Him into newness of life. We are the ones who can bear witness to the saving power of the gospel and shine the light of hope in a God who is not a set of doctrines, a national deity or political mascot, but a God who is beyond our highest thoughts yet who is near to us and calls us by name to find ourselves in the ongoing life of Jesus. We can only know about this life if we read and examine the Bible as eagerly as the Bereans did. We can only reflect the love of Christ as much as we give ourselves over to that love and are identifiable by it. We must know the Biblical story so well that we can recognize counterfeit voices claiming to be Christ but are only coopting His name for their own selfish agendas and purposes. We must be vigilant in our discernment of anyone and anything that compromises on two essential truths of the gospel: that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. To compromise on either of these truths can lead us to believe that some people are lesser in some way and that we are better in some way. Such generalizations lead to stereotypes and tribalization, stereotypes and tribalization can lead to dehumanization. When we lose sight of the fact that every person is made in the image of God, we are on dangerous ground that can lead to civil strife and violence, terrorism and war, and even genocide. We must beware of compromise in trusting in and obeying God. Recall how the people of Israel turned to make alliances with other nations to protect them from their enemies rather than calling on the Lord. Are we

putting our hope and trust in anyone or anything before God? Again, no institution, no political party, no public figure or court of law can make us a more Christian nation – that’s up to us. When we strive to live according to what Jesus taught and how He lived a sinless, godly life, by the power of the Holy Spirit and recognize that the same Spirit also dwells in all those who have put their faith in Jesus as their Savior, we can boldly live and share His gospel. The Holy Spirit helps us to better embody Jesus’ character, and that’s what draws others to seek and find the Lord – seeing God’s love, grace and compassion in and through us.

We are to be a “peculiar people,” set apart by our faith in Christ, who embody His life in our lives and declare His praises. In Acts 4 the Apostles Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin – the highest Jewish court – after they had healed a lame beggar and preached the gospel. The high priest asked them by what power or name had they healed the man and they were astonished by Peter and John’s courage as they testified [and they took note that these men had been with Jesus](#). Are people astonished by how your life has been transformed by your faith in Christ? I recently read testimony of a man who hated Christians and regarded them as “simple-minded and judgmentally hypocritical.” He was facing a career crisis and potentially losing his home, and both of his sons’ girlfriends died within weeks of each other, but he was struck by the kindness of two women he met at the two girls’ funerals.

One of the women approached him and his wife at the first funeral to offer her condolences and asked if they or their son needed any support with such genuine warmth and compassion, that he felt surprisingly comforted. At the second funeral, the same woman came up to him and asked about both of his sons, expressing her concern that his family had suffered two devastating losses in such a short time. Again, he was touched by her kindness but wondered, “Who is like this?” Then as he met the mother of the second girl who died, and who he knew was a Christian, before he could offer his condolences to her, she expressed her own concern for *his* family’s grief and asked if she could spend some time with his son. He was stunned that someone who had just lost her own daughter wanted to care for his son in his grief, and wondered, “Who does that?” While he felt something stirring in him, all the arguments against Jesus and the Bible stayed in the forefront of his mind.

But eventually he decided to read the Bible cover-to-cover, even though he’d sworn he never would, because he wanted to know if God was really there. Over the next two years, as he pored over the Bible, he began to recognize the stirrings he was feeling as God’s lovingkindness and encouragement. He started meeting with his pastor weekly to ask questions and attended a men’s breakfast where he could ask more questions and get more support on his spiritual journey. Today he is a pastor who praises God for the Christians whose “peculiar love” led him to read God’s Word and experience God’s love-- the love that can change how we live as Jesus lives in us. The point is, these two women demonstrated God’s love to this man with such genuine compassion that it led him to seek *and find* God in the Bible. The way they lived their faith demonstrates how the power of our actions when they match what we say we believe.

So, what is truth? The answer lies in the question of what it was about the Bereans that made them more noble in character. It was that their lives and minds were continuously on the things and ways of God because they looked to Scripture as *the* source of truth. As a result, they could not be easily led astray by foolish controversies, petty power struggles and worldly pleasures. They were diligent about making sure their lives were consistent with God’s truth as it is revealed in Scripture and they were growing in godly character. Their lives were focused on God, not themselves, and they did so as a community, encouraging and learning from one another as they examined the Scriptures together. May we follow their example and in so doing, be better equipped to avoid being misled and manipulated by worldly things and to lean into God’s covenant blessings and shed His light wherever we are.

Let us pray.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for the desire You had before the universe and all living things on Earth were created: the desire for a covenant relationship with us, that we would be Your people and You would be our God. We thank You for Your forgiveness of sins that was accomplished by Your One and Only Son Jesus. Thank You, Lord Jesus for humbling Yourself to take human form so You could live among us and show us how much You love us: so much that You laid down Your life for us so we could have eternal life. Thank You, Holy Spirit, for dwelling within us when we receive Jesus as our Savior, to help us understand the Scriptures, comfort and strengthen us when we are facing challenges and loss, and giving us the courage and strength to live our faith boldly. We pray that You will guide us to look for the eternal truth of God's Word and not fall prey to the lies, accusations and manipulations of those who would invoke Your name to accomplish their own agendas. Help us to be the kind of Christ-followers who change people's minds about the integrity, authority, courage and truth of our faith in You so that more of Your children will be brought back into the covenant relationship we have with You.