

A Tale of Two Synagogues (Acts 17:5-15)^a

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Context

- Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke on the 2nd Missionary Journey
- Preaching in a synagogue in Thessalonica, Greece
- Reasoning from the OT Scriptures that Jesus fulfilled the predictions concerning the expected Jewish Messiah
- Some Jews were persuaded along with many Greeks
- Other Jews rejected Paul's message

Passage (Acts 17:5-15)

[5] But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. **[6]** But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. **[7]** "Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus." **[8]** And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. **[9]** So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. **[10]** Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. **[11]** These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily [to find out] whether these things were so. **[12]** Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. **[13]** But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. **[14]** Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there. **[15]** So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.¹

1. "A Tale of Two Synagogues"

Synagogue in Thessalonica

1. *but the Jews who were not persuaded [from the scriptures], becoming envious (v. 5).*

A. "Unpersuaded" is from ἀπειθέω [apeitheō]

I. Elsewhere translated as "unbelieving" (Acts 14:2) and "disobedient" (Rom. 11:30).

II. Not just passively unconvinced.

III. Speaks of “the most severe form of disobedience, in relation to the gospel message disbelieve, refuse to believe”²

2. Motivation: Jealousy/Envy

A. “Envious” is from ζηλόω [zēloō]

I. From which we get “zeal” and “zealous”

II. As we’ll see, they were zealous for Judaism, but not zealous for righteousness

B. The Gentile component of their jealousy

I. *And some of them [Jews] were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas (Acts 17:4).*

II. As more Gentiles respond to “the God of Israel”, their jealousy increased

III. The unique historical relationship of the Jews to God

a. God is described as “the God of Israel” over 200 times in the Bible.

b. Romans 9, Paul describes the privileged position of the Jews, “my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites”

i. He explains the unique historical relationship and benefits of the Jewish nation before God

▪ . . . *to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God (Romans 9:3–5a).*

c. God made some uniquely preferential promises to the Jews

i. . . . *Before all your people I will do marvels such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation; . . . it [is] an awesome thing that I will do with you (Ex. 34:10).*

ii. . . . *the LORD has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who [are] on the face of the earth (Deu. 14:2).*

IV. Consider Paul’s defense before his fellow Jews of Jerusalem in Acts 22

a. *“Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance and saw Him [Jesus] saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.’ . . . Then He said to me, ‘Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.’ ” And they listened to him until this word, and [then] they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a [fellow] from the earth, for he is not fit to live!” (Acts 22:17-22).*

b. They listened until *this word* — what word? GENTILES

V. Earlier, in Acts 13,

a. Paul and Barnabas were preaching in a synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia

b. Notice to the response of the Jews as large numbers of Gentiles express interest in Paul's message

i. (As in the gospels, we can glean much information by noticing listeners respond to the truth.)

c. *On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes [these were Gentiles], they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles." (Acts 13:44-46)*

C. This Jewish jealousy is part of God's design to motivate unbelieving Jews to reconsider their rejection of Jesus

I. *They have provoked Me to jealousy by [what] is not God; They have moved Me to anger by their foolish idols. But I will provoke them to jealousy by [those who are] not a nation; I will move them to anger by a foolish nation (Deu. 32:21 cf. Rom. 10:19)*

II. *I say then, have [the Jews] stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation [has come] to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:11)*

III. *For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy [those who are] my flesh and save some of them (Rom. 11:13-14)*

IV. It is God's intention for the faithfulness of believing Gentiles to the Jewish Messiah and the God of Israel to drive unbelieving Jews to distraction!

3. The faithless Jews of Thessalonica were zealous, but for what?

A. Represent themselves as zealous for God, yet willing to use whatever means is convenient to their cause—even Godless means

I. Willing to use evil men, to produce a mob

a. "rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace" (NIV)

b. “gathering together some worthless men from the rabble in the marketplace” (NET)

c. Their zeal is pragmatic and unprincipled — the end justifies the means

II. They misrepresent Paul as teaching that Jesus was a threat to the present geopolitical king, Caesar.

a. . . . *these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus (Acts 17:7)*

b. The chief priests employed the same technique to condemn Jesus to the cross.

i. . . . *Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar!” (John 19:15).*

c. But, in Thessalonica, Paul was not preaching Jesus as a geopolitical threat to Caesar’s government.

III. To engage the political/governmental machinery in their cause, they misrepresent Paul’s teaching as a threat to the government.

4. Unbelievers from Thessalonica are not passive, they are *actively hostile* to the gospel.

A. *But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds (Acts 17:13).*

B. Such folk generally represent themselves as “reasonable” and champions of freedom.

C. Yet they actually oppose freedom of information and freedom of conscience.

D. How do we know? Because they expend great energy to oppose the gospel—attempting to block its communication to others.

E. They will do everything possible to see to it that the “level playing field” is anything but level.

F. They vociferously demand access to the field and then rewrite the rules to ban Christians from even coming out on the field!

I. The “big bang” is objective science whereas creationism is a faith-based belief.

II. Government and education should be free of all religious belief and influence—meanwhile promoting secular humanism (a religious belief).

III. Free speech should be protected at all costs, except for Christian free speech—which is deemed to be “hate speech.”

Synagogue in Berea

1. Paul followed his established practice of beginning his evangelistic work at the local synagogue: *When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews (Acts 17:10).*
2. A different attitude in the Synagogue of Berea
 - A. *These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so (Acts 17:11).*
 - B. Fair-minded is from εὐγενής [eugenēs], meaning, “open-minded, of noble character,”³ “without prejudice.”⁴
 - I. See: the Bible endorses being open-minded . . . keeping your mind open to the truth of Scripture!
 - C. Eager to receive Scripture: “they received the word with all readiness.”
 - D. Knowledgeable of the Scriptures: “searched the Scriptures daily.”
 - I. Not a once-in-a-blue-moon cram session: an ongoing, daily partaking of God’s Word, guided by the Holy Spirit.
 - E. Submitted to Scriptures: willing to measure teaching by the Scriptures.
 - I. Gave greater authority to Scripture than opinions—either their own or of others.
 - F. They were willing to be *conformed* to Scripture rather than attempting to reinterpret Scripture to support their own sinful unbelief.
3. ***Therefore many of them believed... (Acts 17:12).***
 - A. The Word of God supported the testimony of Paul such that the Holy Spirit worked in their hearts.

Two groups of Jews

1. Both had:
 - A. The same Scriptures.
 - B. The same knowledge of Hebrew.
 - C. The same customs and cultural background.
 - D. Similar-looking zeal to serve God.

2. Similar in outward appearance, but citizens of opposing kingdoms serving different masters:

- A. Jealous Jews — those who rejected the gospel, whom Jesus refers to as false Jews (Rev. 2:9; Rev. 3:9).
- B. Genuine Jews — those who accepted the gospel, whom Paul refers to as “true Jews” (Rom. 2:29; 4:12; 11:7) and “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:1).

The lesson of the unbelieving Jews of Thessalonica: *there are people who profess God while zealously opposing God’s work.*

1. *Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’ (Mat. 7:21-23).*

- A. Who enters? He who does the will of God.
- B. These were very busy endorsing their activities with His name: “Lord, have we not [done *this*] in Your name, [done *that*], in Your name, [done *the other*] in Your name”.
 - I. Quick to attribute their zealous activities as being in the name of Jesus.
- C. His response: *I never knew you!*
- D. How does Jesus characterize their activities: lawlessness — their practices opposed God’s will, they ran rough-shod over boundaries/laws established by the very one Whose name they so frequently had on their lips.

2. Scriptural Examples:

- A. In the letters of Jesus in chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia.
 - I. Jesus refers to Jews who reject Him, as *false Jews*.
 - a. To Smyrna, he writes: *I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and [I know] the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but [are] a synagogue of Satan (Rev. 2:9).*
 - b. To Philadelphia, he writes: *Indeed I will make [those] of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you (Rev. 3:9).*

- II. He indicates their allegiance, motivation, and work as being in accord with Satan!

III. They have God on their lips and the devil in their hearts!

3. Modern Examples

- A. What is the primary way they can be identified? Are they lazy, inactive, unmotivated?
- B. On the contrary: they are often very busy and highly motivated: “haven’t we done THIS and THAT and the OTHER in Your name?”
- C. The key factor: *lawlessness* — they throw off the teachings of God even as they claim to follow God.
- D. What laws of God are professing Christians breaking today?
 - I. Not sins of ignorance.
 - II. Not occasional sin where conviction follows.
 - III. Active, willful disobedience to clearly stated injunctions in Scripture.
- E. Examples
 - I. Professing Christians who condone abortion — contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.⁵
 - II. Professing Christians who support the practice of homosexuality marriage and ordination as pastors — contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.⁶
 - III. Professing Christians who remain sexually active outside of the bonds of marriage — contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.⁷
 - IV. Professing Christians who endorse women as pastors — contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.⁸
 - V. Actively opposing God’s work in history through his chosen people: Israel — contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.⁹
- F. All of these activities oppose God’s will as communicated in Scripture.
 - I. Are *all* professing Christians who condone these practices nonbelievers?
 - II. Can there be any doubt that some are true believers?
 - III. But, in the practice of their professed Christianity, they are aiding and abetting the enemies of God.
 - IV. How sure can such professing Christians be that they won’t hear their professed Lord eventually say, *depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!* (Mat. 7:23)?

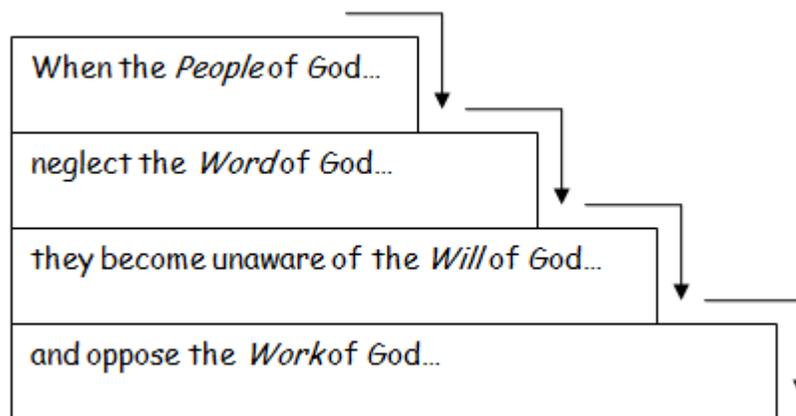
G. The ones who remain unrepentant are like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, to whom Jesus responded:

I. *Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with [their] lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching [as] doctrines the commandments of men' (Mat. 15:7-9).*

Summary

1. **When the people of God neglect the **WORD** of God they remain unaware of the **WILL** of God and oppose the **WORK** of God.**

A. WORD → WILL → WORK



2. **Let the synagogue of Thessalonica, and their zeal to disrupt the true gospel, serve as a warning to all who claim to follow God.**

3. **Lest we be like the wicked servant's of Jesus' parable:**

A. *if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat [his] fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for [him] and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint [him] his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mat. 24:48-51).*

4. **Instead, may we emulate the fair-minded Jews of Berea!**

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Endnotes:

1. (Acts 17:5-15), NKJV
2. Ref-0380, 62
3. Ref-0617, #2302
4. Ref-0380, 178
5. Ex. 21:22-23; Jdg. 13:5; Job 3:16; 10:11; 31:15; Ps. 22:9-10; 119:73; 139:13; Ecc. 11:5; Isa. 44:2,24; 49:5; Jer. 1:5; 20:17; Luke 1:15,41-45; 1Pe. 4:14-15
6. Gen. 19:5; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Jdg. 19:22; 20:13; 2K. 23:7; Mat. 5:17; 19:4-5; Mark 10:6-8; Rom. 1:26; 1Cor. 6:9; 1Ti. 1:10; Jude 7
7. Gen. 38:24; Deu. 22:13-29; Ex. 22:16; John 4:18; 8:41; 1Cor. 7:1-8; 1Ti. 1:10; Heb. 13:4
8. 1Ti. 2:12.
9. Ex. 3:7,15,18; 6:6; 19:5-6; 34:10; Lev. 20:26; [Deu. 4:7-8]; [Deu. 4:34]; [Deu. 4:37]; Deu. 7:6-8; 10:15; 14:2; 26:18-19; 28:10; 32:8-9; 2S. 7:23-24; 1K. 3:8; 8:53; 1Chr. 16:13; 17:21; Ps. 47:3-4; 105:6,43; 106:5-7; 135:4; 147:19-20; Isa. 41:8-9; 43:1-4,10,15,20-22; 44:1-2,21; 45:4; 48:12; Jer. 10:16; Zec. 8:23; Mat. 24:22; Acts 13:17; Rom. 9:4; 11:5,28

Sources:

- (Acts 17:5-15)** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0380** Friberg, T., Friberg, B., & Miller, N. F. *Vol. 4: Analytical lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Baker's Greek New Testament library. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).
- Ref-0617** James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/58_Acts_17_5-15/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.