

[Acts 17:10-15]

¹⁰ As soon as it was night, the brothers and sisters sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. Upon arrival, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. ¹¹ The people here were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, since they received the word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. ¹² Consequently, many of them believed, including a number of the prominent Greek women as well as men. ¹³ But when the Jews from Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul at Berea, they came there too, agitating and upsetting the crowds. ¹⁴ Then the brothers and sisters immediately sent Paul away to go to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed on there. ¹⁵ Those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving instructions for Silas and Timothy to come to him as quickly as possible, they departed.

Good morning everyone. So glad to be with you again. This morning I'm going to ask you to lock in to the material, pay close attention and put on your thinking caps. The world will disciple you to be shallow thinkers. But in here, the word will disciple us to think deeply and diligently about God's truth. Are we ready?

Opening story: I remember when I first came to faith as a teen it was like a switch just flipped in me. I wanted to be at every church service every time the doors opened. I was hungry and thirsty for righteousness. I would sit on the edge of my seat as our pastor preached bold, powerful, informed messages from God's word. I would think to myself "Someday, I'm going to know what Dr. Rhoden knows. Someday I'm going to be able to preach like that." I'm still trying to get there.

Berea: What I love about his story in vv 10-15 is the sympathetic resonance—it strikes a chord in me. I feel their eagerness to learn to verify the truth. I want to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection and the truth of his Word. This was a city just southwest of Thessalonica. The Apostle Paul and his crew waste no time—they go right to the Jewish synagogue, where again, there are sons and daughters of Abraham present and also Gentile converts to Judaism; God fearers also.

What does Luke tell us today about the keys to building a more noble society? His central point is all—important.

The first thing we see here is that...

1. Luke defines noble character as eager reception and diligent study of the Word.

Receiving God's Word with Eagerness. By contrast, the Jews of the Thessalonian synagogue rebuffed Paul and Silas. But here, the Bereans seem anxious to receive the word with eagerness.

Illus. As a seeker sensitive pastor for about 21 years. I had the privilege of serving with some excellent evangelists. But I had a different vision of doing church. But when I first came here, what attracted to this church was that this was place, like the Berean synagogue, that received God's Word with eagerness and enthusiasm. That has and will continue to be our appeal as a church.

They examined the Scriptures daily to prove what Paul was saying.

Paul and Silas proclaimed Christ from the Scriptures. What scriptures? The Hebrew Bible.

How did they examine the Scriptures?

Jewish interpretive methods ("Midrash" meaning "Exposition") were somewhat different than ours. Interpretive methods available to Jesus and the Apostles would have been the following:

- **Halakhic regulation: "teaching the law out of the law."**¹ Halakah refers to binding legal principles. You teach the law out of the law. **When you see Jesus in the Sermon on the mount** say "you have heard it said (read) but now I say to you..." Jesus presumes to be the one teacher of the law. **He returns them to the heart and content of the law and away from the endless speculation and additions to the law.**
- **Haggadic midrash: "expansive moralizing from character studies or narratives"** Moralizing from non-legal portions of Scripture by way of expansive description. **This involved the exhortational use of Scripture as an analogy of moral experience (thus, thoroughly legal but only as an illustration of the law).** When Jesus is confronted for picking heads of grain on the sabbath—he cites an OT story about David and his men doing the same.
- **Peshat and Peshet:** Peshat means "the flat" or "the literal/exact historical sense. Whereas Peshet refers to the "analogical" and thus "fuller" sense.² That is, the corresponding and fuller meaning of a historical text. Put the two of these together and you get what we call typology. Typology takes a historically situated event seeing corresponding application today **(1 Cor 10:1-6).** What's the difference between allegory and typology? Unlike allegory, typology does not evacuate the historical meaning of a text. In other words, the original person, event, or institution is being taken seriously and not dismissed. But, there are corresponding attributes.

¹ Gary G. Porton, "Haggadah," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 19.

² Peter W. Flint, "Habakkuk Commentary (1QpHab)," *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 437.

- **Apocalyptic: “God working in history and standing sovereignly over history—communicated in cryptic symbolic references.”** This approach toggles between a view of God over history and working in history. Which require cypher keys for you the reader to unlock. It’s revelation if you know the cypher keys. It’s cryptic and veiled (and intentionally so) if you don’t know the key codes. It’s intended to be cryptic to persecutors and unveiled to members and insiders. **When you look in Revelation for example, you will see this** alternating pattern between a heavenly scene and an earthly scene. The author is showing you God and his Lamb-king reigning sovereignly over human history. Next chapter, believers getting slaughtered by Rome and yet God is working in and through human history.
- **Wisdom exegesis: “sagacious instructions for life.”** Seeks the wise and prudent application of the principles of the law for moral and ethical growth.

When it says the Bereans were of nobler character because they eagerly received the Gospel message, diligently searching and studying the Scriptures to see if what Paul was teaching them added up—this is what they were doing.

Interpretive Principles Today: I’m going to give you interpretive principles so you can be good Bereans.

- **Contextual exegesis: “contextual” means to interpret the text in its own context** in order to establish authorial intent—the author’s intended meaning. Exegesis means “to export meaning” or “to draw out” meaning.
 - Historical context:** what was going on at the time that might have bearing on our understanding of this text?
 - Literary context:** what kind of literature am I reading? Is it a historical narrative, or a letter or an apocalyptic prophecy?
 - Immediate context:** what’s else is being said around this passage I’m reading?
- **Literal exegesis: literal texts explain metaphorical ones: various figures of speech, including metaphors, riddles, aphorisms, proverbs, parables, allegories—they have literal referents. Abstract figures of speech refer to concrete realities.** Unless you know that a church is **not** a lampstand you will never know **how** a church is **like** a lampstand. Literal meanings make metaphors possible. Be careful not to be overly literal (“yeast of the Pharisees”; “Born again”).
- **Correlating exegesis (Analogy of Scripture): Plain texts explain obscure ones. Fuller texts explain sparse ones.** 1 Cor 14 says **“women are to remain silent and learn at home.”** From our cultural perspective that sounds like chauvinism. But from theirs it’s anything but. Other than a few prominent wealthy women, most females were treated as property or slaves. They were not allowed education. The Christian faith repeatedly encourages the discipleship education of

women. Likewise, we see females serving at all levels of leadership in the early church (Apostles; deacons; evangelists but not local elders).

- **Canonical exegesis:** every text is interpreted in light of all the texts; the “Canon” meaning “fixed collection.” That is, *a closed collection*. The whole is brought to bear on a single passage, not the other way around. “Baptism for the dead” (1 Cor 15) we want to know what does the whole of Scripture have to say about that? The answer—nothing. Because we’re never encouraged or commanded to practice baptism for the dead. In context (contextual exegesis) we learn that Paul doesn’t (1) commend; (2) command or (3) censure the practice. He doesn’t even say Corinthian believers are doing it. We don’t want to build a doctrine or practice around one obscure and debatable passage. We don’t want to build doctrine or practice out of one obscure text that the rest of the Canon of Scripture does not speak to.
- **Christological exegesis:** Jesus is the consummative and integrating focus of all of Scripture. **What we don’t mean:** We don’t squeeze Jesus out of every story and every law or text. The Bible in its entirety is *centered on, and fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus*. We see the entirety of Scripture through the lenses of the cross.
- **Moralizing application:** drawing application from exemplars to present experience. This is the practice of going back to the life of Abraham, or the Patriarchs, or prophets and judges to draw out examples—lessons learned from the lives of God’s people. Sometimes the moral example is positive (yes, follow Abraham’s unflinching faith—be like David a man after God’s own heart); and sometimes their counter-examples (don’t be like the children in the wilderness who hardened their hearts; don’t be like the Jews who wound up in exile due to unfaithfulness and sin).

Luke firstly defines a noble culture as people who warmly and earnestly receive God’s Word and who diligently cross examine all truth claims against it.

The second thing seems clear to me...

2. A nobler culture chooses reasoned discourse. The word for “reason” is (*dialegomai; dialekton*) (διαλέγομαι) meaning “to instruct, discuss or argue one’s case— frequently resulting in the exchange of opinions.”³ The result of a nobler country where people cross examine every idea in light of the Scriptures. Where people pursue truth and the Gospel? It results in a more dignified society.

If the Bereans show us anything, it’s their willingness to check truth claims with God’s Word and to enter a spirited dialogue over these matters.

- **Reasoned discourse is to be our normal convention of proclamation:** Acts 17:2 “As usual, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days reasoned (*dialegomai*) with them from the Scriptures.” This is to be our custom folks. To regularly, routinely engage in reasoned, principled discourse over the truth of God’s word. **Some of you have shared wonderful stories with me.** I cherish every one of them. To see you taking these principles to heart. To engage with your neighbors to bring loving, redemptive correction of the word.
- **Reasoned discourse takes place in the church and the marketplace:** 17:17 “So he reasoned (*dialegomai*) in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.” We are to practice among those who worship God and among those who don’t. This is to be our pattern whether we’re with believers or non-believers.
- **Reasoned discourse is how we persuade people to believe:** 18:4 “He reasoned (*dialegomai*) in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade both Jews and Greeks.” You say “wait, I thought the Spirit had to do the work of convincing people of the truth.” Of course, that’s true—Jesus literally called him “The Spirit of Truth.” The Holy Spirit is the agent of enlightenment—he alone can turn on the lamp of the darkened mind. But our role in his work is to practice reasoned discourse to help persuade people of the truth of the Gospel. **God uses gracious truth-telling.**

If the Bereans teach us anything, they show us the importance of warmly receiving God’s Message about Christ, and diligently studying it. Paul shows us that we must engage in a reasonable argumentation for the Gospel seeking to persuade people that the Gospel is true.

³ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 232.

3. A nobler culture chooses moral excellence. Moral excellence is quite simply the quality of choosing the right and avoiding what is wrong. Isaiah, looking at the spiritually desolate condition in Judah saw where all this was heading, Isa 5:12-13 “They do not perceive the Lord’s actions, and they do not see the work of his hands (they’ve failed to acknowledge God).¹³ Therefore my people will go into exile because **they lack knowledge** (exile is the consequence of ignorance); **her dignitaries are starving, and her masses are parched with thirst.**”

- **Moral excellence begins with acknowledging what the Lord has done not what I have done.** His mighty deeds; his Sovereign care; his provision. Judah failed to acknowledge God and thus they forgot him. This is what Paul is referring to in Rom 1:28 “And since they did not see fit to **acknowledge God**, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.” This is what happens when we fail to acknowledge God—we spiral into moral depravity.
- **Moral excellence is possible through divine resources.** God says “therefore my people go into exile—they perish for lack of knowledge.” *When a culture forgets God and abandons his precepts it becomes morally depraved. Why did God say Judah’s dignitaries and the masses are parched with thirst?* The nation starved for the knowledge of a holy God and his ways.

Here’s how Peter put it in 2 Peter 1:3 “His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”

Everything we need for a morally praiseworthy life is supplied by God’s divine power which comes through the knowledge of him.

Apart from the work of Jesus in grace by faith enabled by the Spirit of God we have no power that is required for life and godliness. *Our message to our dying culture—our dying world is “Listen, our culture is headed into moral oblivion; our society is like a freight train on fire headed off a cliff of immorality. We appeal to you as ambassadors of Christ “Be reconciled to God! Escape the coming wrath! Receive Jesus and sonship.”* And we appeal to our religious or non-religious friends who share our concerns about the depravity and moral decline of our country. And we appeal to you, “Apart from God’s transforming, empowering presence in grace the best you’ll ever produce is a morality cult.”

Closing: The Bereans have everything they need—they’re principled conversationalists who are committed to examining the Scriptures to see if the Gospel Paul is preaching lines up with the Word. This value has produced in them a hunger and thirst for righteousness, a seeking heart, awakened and enabled by the power of the Spirit of God. This power is present as they examine the Scriptures, grow in their knowledge and come to believe the truth about God and his Messiah.

Recap:

1. Luke defines noble character as eager reception and diligent study of the word.

Those who study it contextually, literally, canonically, Christologically and morally.

2. A nobler culture chooses reasoned discourse.

As our culture becomes more vulgar, coarse, shrill and divided—it is all the more vital for Christians to embrace reasoned discourse as the norm; taking place in the church and in the market; as the method by which God persuades the unbeliever.

3. A nobler culture chooses moral excellence.

Moral excellence begins with acknowledging who God is and what he's done.

It's made possible through his divine power which is available to every believer.

Let's be the church, like the Bereans, who start the noble character revolution.