

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ²As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,” he said. ⁴Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

⁵But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, ⁷and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” ⁸When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. ⁹Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

¹⁰As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹Now 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 17:1-12)

Who’s Going to Win?

Who’s going to win? Arguing that question can occupy a great deal of time. It can divide friends and family members. If you follow politics, you know that almost every day, someone writes an article analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and John McCain trying to guess who’s going to win in November. All that intellectual analysis is driven by an emotional investment. Whether you’re Democrat or a Republican, you have reasons for wanting to know who’s going to win. Winning and losing happens in more arenas than politics. You and I are engaged in a great battle against the forces of evil. Day after day, the devil does all he can to drag us down to hell. He is committed to keeping the world in darkness for as long as he can. When it comes to this great battle for spiritual life and death, my friends, **who’s going to win?**

I.

This morning, God gives us a slice of the history of his church to help us see the answer. It’s clear that the devil’s tactics don’t change very much. Why does he keep doing the same things? Because they work.

Who’s going to win? The devil’s tactics work.

St. Paul’s primary work was to carry the gospel to the gentiles – to those who are not ethnic Jews. To accomplish that work, Paul traveled to foreign parts of the Roman Empire and shared the gospel. The events of Acts chapter 17 take place during the second of those trips. Paul was in the extreme northern part of Greece. He came to Thessalonica, the capital of the province of Macedonia. Paul began to preach there and he made some headway. But whenever and wherever the church works, the devil always attacks. In Thessalonica, we see a good example of the tactics he uses. It might not play out in exactly the same way today. But the essence is there.

Luke says, **“The Jews were jealous.”** The devil’s biggest ally in his war on Christianity is our sinful heart. In Thessalonica, Paul started, as he usually did, in the Jewish synagogue. Over three weeks, so many people believed the good news that he was preaching that the old guard was jealous. They felt like this stranger had taken over their church and they weren’t going to settle for that. Whether it’s jealousy or pettiness or pride, the devil is very good at getting people to pay less attention to the message and more attention to how they feel about the way things are being run. It’s amazing the amount of controversy he can stir up.

Notice what the Jews did: **“... they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city.”** Now, this is not something that we see a lot of in the Western world. But it does happen in other places. There are many documented cases of hostile mobs destroying Christian churches in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. We can thank God that here in the United States, we’re largely safe from that kind of physical mob violence.

But Satan has merely refined his efforts. The mob mentality exists here, too. The heart of a mob mentality is to impose the outlook of the unbelieving majority on individual Christians. It tries to muzzle our preaching. Here in the United States, that mob mentality finds its greatest expression in the media. The entertainment industry has very little good to say about Christians who believe what the Bible says. If we're going to insist that people who deny Christ go to hell, that Islam is a false religion, that homosexuality and abortion are sins, then the world around us has a problem with us. The entertainment media likes to portray conservative Christians as hypocrites, as nuts, as judgmental and controlling. The news media likes to label our beliefs as intolerant and divisive.

That mob mentality makes it easy for people to dismiss what we have to say. The devil uses those labels to keep the people he already has inside his kingdom. And those labels intimidate us. Think about how hard it is to talk about your faith. When was the last time you struck up a conversation just because you hoped to have the chance to talk about Jesus? It's hard. The devil knows that and he tries to push our buttons so that we're even less likely to share.

The devil's tactics always involve deception. Listen to what the mob shouted in Thessalonica: **“These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.”** Christian missionaries are trouble makers. They break the law. They'll cause the breakdown of society. The lies today are different. They focus more on being unloving and self-righteous – but still bad for our society. Whatever he says, the devil will not hesitate to distort all that we say and do. A pastor once said to me, “You'll almost never get in trouble for what you actually said. You'll get in trouble for what people think you said.” The devil distorts our message to halt the preaching of the gospel. And it doesn't even bother him that it's untrue!

Finally, when he can, he uses the government against us. God established government as a blessing to promote order in society so that we can proclaim the gospel. But in a sinful world, the government is always dominated by unbelievers. Don't think that just because we have a constitution that guarantees freedom of religion that we can never suffer government persecution here. It could happen. It does happen even in Europe.

The devil has been doing this since the Garden of Eden. He's had a lot of time and experience to refine his tactics. His goal is to disrupt our preaching. Sometimes he succeeds. He did in Thessalonica. That very night, the congregation sent Paul and Silas on to Berea because they feared for their safety. The devil still has success sometimes. In this sinful world, sometimes we have to retreat. Sometimes, it seems like we're losing.

II.

But don't count God out! There's a difference between success and winning. The devil's tactics do work. But they don't win. In spite of every setback, in spite of all the pain and sorrow the devil causes, when you ask the question **Who's going to win?** There is only one answer: **God's tactics win.**

God's tactics are quite simple. Luke tells us, **“As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,’ he said.”** Paul proclaimed the word of God – the Bible, which was only the Old Testament at this time. For that reason, he always began with the Jews. He hoped to find believers in the synagogues who knew the Old Testament Scriptures where God had promised a Savior. Paul wanted to announce to them that God had kept his promise.

So for three Saturdays in a row, Paul preached from the Old Testament Scriptures. But he was preaching about Christ. Sometimes, people think that the New Testament is about Jesus. The New Testament is about the gospel and love. But the Old Testament is about the law and about a vengeful God who only punishes and destroys. I can understand why someone might think that way, but that point of view is totally wrong. The heart of Old Testament is Jesus, just as certainly as he is the heart of the New Testament. The Old Testament is riddled with prophecies about the coming Christ. Again and again, God showed his people the Savior they were waiting for. Now, those prophecies come in many different ways. Some of them are simple statements, “This is what the Messiah will do.” Some of them are poems with lofty language that need to be carefully studied. Some of them are rituals and institutions that God established to show his people what Jesus would do. Every time they offered a sacrifice, God was teaching his people the Christ would have to die to pay for their sins. But the Old Testament is God preparing his people to recognize Jesus when he came.

So the first thing Paul did was help these Jewish people understand what their own Scriptures said – what kind of Savior God had promised to send them. At this time, many Jewish people thought that the Messiah would be a king of this world. They wanted a return to the days of King David when their army was invincible. They wanted to throw off the Romans and some of them even believed that Israel would conquer the world. Paul had to help them get rid of false ideas about Jesus. So he showed them that what God had really promised was a Savior who would die and then rise for them.

Today, we need to do what Paul did. In America today, you would be hard pressed to find a person who's never heard of Jesus. But there are vast numbers of people who have no idea what Jesus came here to do. They imagine him to be a good example of what love is supposed to be like. They imagine him to be a lawgiver who commands us to stop being so selfish and to love one another. While it is true that Jesus is the best example we could ever have and he does command us to love each other, that is not his principal work.

Jesus came here to die for us. We needed that because we're all born sinners. The sin we were born with makes it easy for us to convert Jesus into a lawgiver or an example. If a church is teaching our kids to stay away from drugs and premarital sex, they must be doing what they're supposed to. But that shows how far our hearts are away from God by nature. Jesus had a much greater purpose: he came because our sinful hearts deserve hell. Jesus came because the devil is the prince of this world and all people are born as his slaves and unless God did something, every single one of us was going to spend eternity with the devil in hell. So God always planned to nail Jesus to a cross in our place. God always planned that Jesus would suffer hell itself on that cross and die. God always planned that Jesus would suffer everything that your sin and my sin deserves. And God always planned that on Easter Sunday morning, Jesus would rise and set us free. God erased our sin and our guilt. He destroyed the devil's work and the devil's plans. He defeated Satan and he set us free from death and hell. When we die, we will live. When Jesus returns, he will wipe away all trace of sin in this world and we will live with him forever.

The Jews needed to understand that's the kind of Savior God was sending. Then Paul said to them: "Jesus is that Savior!" That proclamation of the gospel was successful. In Thessalonica and in Berea, large numbers of Jews and gentiles heard the word and believed. That is God's plan for us. The only tactic that we have is proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, some people have misunderstood what happened in Berea after Paul left Thessalonica. Luke says, **"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."** Some people think that the Bereans were less sinful than the Thessalonians. That's not what Luke is saying. The Bereans did do what we should always do when someone claims to have God's message: they searched the Scriptures to see if what Paul was saying was true. But why? It was a response of faith. God gave them faith through the gospel and that faith made them more noble in character. That faith made them examine his word to learn that truth ever more clearly and deeply.

God is always looking for that response of faith from us. Our job is to proclaim the law – to convict sinners before God. And then to offer the sweet promise of forgiveness in Christ. You know what God promises when we do that? The gospel will always work. It will always bring some people to faith. Whenever we do the work God sends us to do, we will always have success. Now, God's definition of success may puzzle us. Our plans might fail. Success might not translate into numerical growth. It might rather be a case of deepening the trust of the community that is already here. But God will work and we will reap the benefits.

In the end, God will always win. For two thousand years, the devil had been trying to wipe out the Christian Church. He has succeeded in driving it out of some places for a time. He has led whole church bodies astray and robbed them of the gospel. But you know what? He has never won. The gospel continues. People still hear it and believe it. Even if he were to wipe out the whole Christian Church on earth, the devil couldn't win. Because Jesus is coming back and he is going to give us eternal life with him in a perfect world. My friends, Jesus is going to win because the truth is, the war is already over. Jesus won two thousand years ago when he died and rose. The devil knows it. He knows that when Jesus returns, our Lord will send the old, evil foe to hell forever and he will bless you and me and all believers for all eternity. The devil knows that even the victories he wins here are temporary. He only gets to do what God permits him to do. And God only allows things that in the end work for our eternal good. God is in control. And his tactics will win. Amen.