

# Open or Closed?

June 4 – Acts 17:1-15

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Day 155 – 210 Days to Go

## Today in Your Reading

Paul and his teammates continued their journey through Macedonia. They passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to the capital city of Thessalonica (v.1). Notice the pronoun shifted from *we* to *they*, which probably meant that Luke stayed in Philippi. As usual, Paul started in the synagogue and convinced many Jews that Jesus was the Messiah (v.2, 3). Together, with many God-fearing Greeks, these new believers formed a church, possibly in the home of a man named Jason (v.5-7).

But, once again, Satan mobilized jealous Jews to stir up the crowd against Paul, Silas, and the new believers (v.6-9). The mob's charge was that they were committing treason against Rome by claiming allegiance to someone other than Caesar — Jesus (v.7). "These men are upsetting the world," they said (v.6), and the instigators forced Jason to vow that Paul and Silas wouldn't cause any more trouble (v.9). As a result, they were forced to send them on to Berea (about 50 miles away).

In Berea, we see the same pattern. Paul and Silas entered the synagogue there and shared Christ with the Jews (v.10). The Bereans listened carefully and many of them believed in Jesus (v.12). But when word got back to Thessalonica that Paul was preaching in Berea, the same mob set out to stop it (v.13). Satan did whatever he could to keep the gospel from spreading, but every time he rose to stamp out a flame, the brush fire of the gospel simply spread to another city. This time concerned Christians sent Paul as far as Athens (v.15).

This present world is under the influence of the devil who blinds the minds of men from seeing their need for Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). Anytime there is a threat to his kingdom, the enemy attempts to eliminate it immediately. The same is true today. Our modern cancel culture cannot handle the truth but moves to suppress and destroy it.

## Daily Reflection

I am always encouraged and challenged when I read about the Bereans. First, Luke described them as "more noble-minded than the Thessalonians," meaning that **they were generous to Paul and let him share his views** (v.11). Today, we would say that the Bereans were open-minded. "They received the word with great eagerness" instead of immediately dismissing it as error.

Second, the Bereans filtered what they heard through God's Word, "examining the Scriptures to see whether these things were so" (v.11). **While they allowed a person to share his view, they did not believe it until they compared it to what the Bible says.** Paul later described this process as "taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

Finally, **only after weighing this new information against the Scriptures, did they decide about what they heard.** When they found that Paul's words aligned with God's Word, they believed it to be true. "Therefore," Luke wrote, "many of them believed" in Jesus (v.12).

Do you follow the Berean's example, or do you believe what you hear without investigation? What is required of you to be like a Berean?

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**While it is okay to be open-minded, you must not leave it open.** If you leave your mind open too long, you might lose your brains. Your mind should close when it discovers truth, but where can you find truth? Ask a Berean.

# Mission to Mars

June 5 – Acts 17:16-34

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Day 156 – 209 Days to Go

## Today in Your Reading

After having been run out of Thessalonica and Berea, Paul fled to safety in Athens, a leading city in Greece. The Athenians were religiously polytheistic, meaning they worshiped multiple fictitious gods. They depicted those gods and goddesses with sculptures. Thus, Athens was full of statues and temples of what the Bible would call idols.

As usual, Paul visited the synagogue to meet with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (v.17). He then proceeded to the marketplace to talk to anyone who would listen, including Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (v.18). Epicurus (340-270 BC) was a naturalist or materialist (think secular humanism) who taught that life is about self-fulfillment and achieving gratification and inner peace. According to Epicurus, we only have one life, so enjoy it, and don't worry about any current or future judgment. Stoicism was taught by Zeno (300 BC), who was a rationalist and pantheist (all is God, and God is in all). Stoics emphasized meditation and aligning with nature (think New Age or new spirituality).

Having this context helps us understand Paul's message at the Areopagus (v.18-21), which means "Hill of Mars" (the god of war). **The Athenians regularly gathered at Mars Hill to discuss the latest philosophies or ideas. Since Paul was the latest thing to come to Athens, the philosophers invited him to speak to the Areopagite Council.** His message was spot on.

First, he pointed out their religious passion (v.23). All people are religious. All people worship something or someone, although it may not be the true God. Since the Athenians did not know the true God, Paul enlightened them.

Second, Paul started at creation (v.24, 25). He told them that all things were made by the Creator God. As Creator, He is above all things. He is not in or part of all things (pantheism). Creation depends on God. He does not depend

on creation. Since that is true, the Creator cannot be bound to a human temple. The Greeks were not thinking big enough. Their puny deities were worthless before our God.

Third, as Creator, God made man and is sovereign over him (v.26-29). He even determines where and when people live. Fourth, God is personable. He has made Himself known to us and desires a relationship with us (v.27).

Finally, Paul shared that God holds people accountable (v.30, 31). There will be a day of judgment when He will repay all men for their actions. This, of course, will happen in the next life, after the resurrection of the dead.

Everything Paul shared that day was purposeful, and the reactions were varied. Many sneered, others delayed, and some believed (v.32, 33). **His message is a great example of how to insert God into a conversation. Paul used what was familiar to Athenians and connected it to the gospel.** We can and should do the same today.

## Daily Reflection

"Paul's spirit was provoked within him as he was observing their city full of idols" (v.16). Though the Athenians had many gods, they were in a sense godless. **The sight of such an ignorant society burdened him enough to say something.** Could you say the same? Why or why not?

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**Your mission is to Mars, but are you provoked?**

# Worthy of Imitation

June 6 – Acts 18:1-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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Day 157 – 208 Days to Go

## Today in Your Reading

After spending time in Athens, Paul traveled south to Corinth (*Acts 18:1*). It was there that he met Priscilla and Aquila, fellow tentmakers. It was also in Corinth that Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy caught up with Paul and reported all that was happening in Thessalonica (*17:15; 18:5*). Once all three of them were together again, and he heard the news of the Thessalonian believers, Paul penned his second letter, which is our book of *1 Thessalonians*.

In his letter, Paul thanked God for the Thessalonians' response to the gospel, "their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope" (v.3). He also noted that they had become "imitators of [them] and of the Lord" (v.6). To imitate means to follow in manners, to copy in form, or to resemble. In other words, Paul encouraged them to live as he did. Why? It was not because he was a perfect man but because he endeavored to imitate Christ. **Only when we imitate Christ do we become most worthy of imitation.**

Next, Paul pointed out the specific way in which the Thessalonians imitated him – "having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (v.6). In other words, Paul spotlighted their perseverance amid persecution. Not only did they cling to the gospel under threats of an unruly mob, but they also viewed their suffering with joy, knowing that they were "sharing in the suffering of their Savior," for the glory of God. Enduring such difficult circumstances with joy is only possible through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The Thessalonians' example of faithfulness and joy caused a ripple effect throughout the region. They "became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia" (v.7). At that time, the Romans had organized Greece into two sections – Macedonia in the north (where Thessalonica was located) and Achaia in the south (where Corinth and Athens were located). In other

words, Paul said that their reputation preceded them, and that news of their faithfulness spread across the region (v.7). Paul even added that he didn't need to say anything because their walk did all the talk (v.8).

In the Greek, the word *example* refers to a mark or stamp. The incredible example of the Thessalonian church was making an impression, an impact, on those around them. We must always be aware, whether we believe it or not, that people are watching and listening to us. We have opportunities every day to influence others positively or negatively, to make a mark on them, to impress them for the glory of God. **Do our lives say it all, where no words are needed?**

True Christ-followers not only preach the gospel, but they also practice it. Often, we betray their gospel words with our worldly actions (v.5). It does not help the cause when we talk the talk but do not walk the walk. The best witness to those around us is a God-honoring life. **Are we a picture of the gospel, or does our lifestyle betray the gospel we are attempting to promote?**

## Daily Reflection

Is your life worthy of imitation? Why or why not? Do others know the Lord because of how you live?

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Of course, you are not the standard to which others should aspire. **But, because your life reflects the life of Christ, you are worthy of imitation. Share the gospel by your lifestyle.**

# The Character of the Gospel

June 7 – 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

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## Today in Your Reading

After his opening comments, in which Paul commended the Thessalonians for their example to others (1:1-10), he reminded them of the example that he and his teammates were for them. Even in the face of persecution, they had boldly shared the gospel (2:1, 2). The hope of the gospel and its effects is worth whatever suffering results. Then, **Paul gave them (and us) a perfect pattern to follow regarding the character in which they should couch and communicate the gospel to others.**

Paul defended the message that they shared and how they shared it (v.3). **Since they were “entrusted by God with the gospel,” they made sure that they represented Him well** (v.4). How did they do it?

First, they did not speak from “error, impurity, or by way of deceit,” meaning that they did not distort or compromise the truths of the gospel to gain followers, flattering men or saying only what they wanted to hear (v.4, 5). Second, they did not use the gospel for profit or glory (v.6).

Third, although Paul could’ve touted his special position or divine authority as an Apostle, he spoke with humility, integrity, and with pure motives, “pleasing God who examines the heart” (v.4). Fourth, they proved to be “gentle as a nursing mother” (v.7), not bullying or manipulating people in any way, but allowing the Holy Spirit to do His work.

Next, Paul not only shared the truths of the gospel, but he also shared his life with them (v.8). In other words, Paul was genuine, sincere, and transparent. He was not a phony or a pretender or a charlatan, but rather he was real, sensible, and straight-forward with people. They could see that he not only meant what he said, but he also lived what he said. As the saying goes, people will not care what we know until they know that we care.

Finally, Paul pointed out that he and Silas did not ask for money, food, lodging, or any special privileges. Rather, they “worked night and day, so as not to be a burden” to anyone (v.9). They didn’t want their message to be compromised by imposing on the people. They were not there to gain something from the people but to give something to them that would change their lives. In this aspect, Paul and Silas were above reproach, upright and blameless (v.10).

## Daily Reflection

Often parents undermine their credibility with their children by their misconduct. Their words are compromised by their actions. That’s why our conduct as Christians is so important, especially around non-Christians. Our lifestyle must not hinder our message in any way. Paul and Silas not only “exhorted and encouraged people as a father would his children” (v.11), but they also behaved in such a way that those who watched them would likewise “walk in a manner worthy of God” (v.12).

Paul provided a perfect example of how to share the Gospel, not to deceive or flatter, not for personal gain or glory, but with sincerity and gentleness, for the love of God and people. **The Gospel message alone is effective. We need not overstate it, and we must not undermine it. Just as important as what we share, regarding the gospel, is how we share it.**

Review Paul’s six characteristics for how to share the gospel effectively. How are you doing with following his example? Where do you need to improve?

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# Hindering the Gospel

June 8 – 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

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## Today in Your Reading

After Paul explained how he shared the Gospel with the Thessalonians (2:1-12), he turned his attention to the persecution that they faced as a result (v.13-20). Why does persecution always seem to follow the preaching of the gospel?

**Satan actively hinders those sharing and hearing the Gospel.**

From the beginning, mankind was hindered by his sin, and he has since been under the dominion of God’s adversary, Satan. However, by sending Jesus, God provided a way for man to be reconciled to Him, to be saved from his sins. This is the message of hope, that the gospel can and does set men free from the enemy (Col. 1:13).

However, **Satan has done and will do whatever he can to keep as many sinners as possible from turning to Jesus and escaping his dominion.** Thus, persecution is a major part of Satan’s strategy to disrupt, derail, or destroy the gospel’s effectiveness. Satan knows that the gospel changes lives. Paul wrote, “It performs its work in those who believe” (v.13). Once an individual is transformed internally by Christ, the indwelling Holy Spirit begins to change the individual externally (sanctification), conforming him to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).

But, like weeds that choke a good seed, so our adversary goes to work choking out the seeds of the gospel. As soon as the Thessalonians received the gospel and witnessed its transformative power, “they experienced sufferings from the hands of their own countrymen” (v.14). The Jews “hindered Paul and Silas from speaking to the Gentiles so that they might be saved” (v.15).

Not only was Satan persecuting the Thessalonians to squelch the gospel’s success, but he was also hindering Paul and Silas from returning to them so that they could continue their work (v.17, 18). The angry mob from

Thessalonica followed them to Berea and forced them out of town, so that “the brethren sent them as far as Athens” (Acts 17:13-15).

## Daily Reflection

Though it appeared that Satan had won this round — separating Paul and Silas from the Thessalonians — it was too late. The seed of the gospel had been planted in the good soil of their hearts, and it was bearing fruit, even amid persecution (a sign of true conversion). That’s why Paul was so ecstatic and complimentary in his letter. Despite the enemy’s attempts to stop God’s work, the message of hope in Christ, as well as the transformation of the Thessalonian believers (from idols to the true God), was spreading throughout Macedonia.

Thus, Paul ended this passage with exuberant words. “Who is our joy and crown of exultation” or reason to celebrate? Is it not you? You are our glory and joy” (v.19, 20). **Though Satan may hinder the gospel, he cannot stop it!**

How have you experienced the enemy setting up roadblocks in your life, not allowing the gospel to transform you the way it should?

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How has the enemy hindered you from sharing the gospel with others?

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# Test of Faith

June 9 – 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

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## Today in Your Reading

As Paul mentioned in the previous passage (2:13-20), Satan actively works to disrupt the Gospel's effectiveness. An angry mob of Jews not only ran Paul and his teammates out of Thessalonica, but it also made life difficult for the believers there (Acts 17:1-8). As a mother worries about her children when they are away from her, so Paul was concerned for the faith of these new converts amid such difficult circumstances. Therefore, when they "could endure it no longer," they sent Timothy back to check on them, to strengthen and encourage their faith (1 Thess. 3:1, 2).

Paul didn't want the Thessalonians to "be disturbed by their afflictions" (v.3), as something that was out of the ordinary, to scare them into recanting their newfound faith. He reminded them that "we were destined for this." In other words, **persecution of faithful Christ-followers is to be expected.** In fact, Paul had warned them that they were going to "suffer affliction, and so it came to pass" (v.4). Since Christ was persecuted, they too would suffer persecution. It is inevitable.

Next, Paul wrote that he was afraid that "the tempter may have tempted" the Thessalonians and that his "labor might have been in vain" (v.5). **Keeping the faith (or being faithful to God) is relatively easy when life is good, but when life becomes difficult, particularly when it is our faith that is causing the difficulty, we often doubt or second-guess our faith. We stray away from the faith and instead of being faithful, we become faithless.** There is no such thing as neutral in the Christian life. Like a car in neutral goes downhill, we have a natural tendency to drift away from God. If we simply coast through life without disciplining ourselves, we will fall away from the things of God.

When Timothy returned from the Thessalonians and brought news of their faithfulness, Paul was delighted and relieved. "We were comforted

through your faith; for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord" (v.6-9). **Our faithfulness encourages others in their faith. Likewise, our faith is encouraged by the faith of others.** Here is a reminder of the importance of community in the church. Our attendance and participation in the gathering of believers encourage others' faith. We need the church, and the church needs us.

Finally, though he had just expressed his joy after hearing of their faith, Paul shared his desire to see the Thessalonians again, "to make complete what was lacking in their faith" (v.10). At first, this might seem like a contradiction. Was their faith commendable or lacking? Both. Though Paul was encouraged by their devotion amid difficulty, his time with them was brief. He perhaps didn't get to share all that he wanted. He will eventually get his wish and return (Acts 20:1). In the meantime, Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to demonstrate love for all people, even those who persecuted them, so that they would be without blame when Christ returned (1 Thess. 3:12, 13; 5:23).

## Daily Reflection

"Follow Jesus and you will have a wonderful life." Have you ever heard that message? It is unfaithful to the true Gospel. **In most cases, following Christ will lead us into difficulty, not out of it.** Christ never promised an easy life but to be with us through difficulties. Our message to the lost must be true to His message.

Has your faith in Christ made life easier or more difficult? Explain.

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# Excel Still More

June 10 – 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

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Day 161 – 204 Days to Go

## Today in Your Reading

Paul moved from praising the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1-3) to giving practical instruction. While he was with them, Paul taught them “how they ought to walk (live) and please God” (v.2). Though the Thessalonians were doing well, **Paul challenged them to do better than well and to “excel still more”** (v.1). For this was the will of God – their sanctification (v.3).

Sanctification is the process of making us holy or setting us apart for the Lord’s work. This process has three phases. Phase one is called *positional* sanctification which occurs at salvation. We are instantly made right with God. Our position is changed from that of a sinner deserving God’s wrath to a saint who, because of Christ, is made flawless in God’s eyes (Rom. 5:1; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:5; Col. 1:13). God is the sole initiator of this first phase.

In today’s passage, Paul referred to the second phase which is called *progressive* sanctification. Though we are sanctified internally by God, our new nature is trapped in our sinful flesh. While the two battle each other (Rom. 7:1-7), Christ-followers will gradually become more like Him, walking in His steps, adhering to His values, and obeying His words. Christians will more fully cooperate with the indwelling Holy Spirit, yield to His control, and bear fruit that resembles Christ (Gal. 5:22, 23).

**Since our flesh is flawed and our goal is to be conformed to the image of Christ, then there will always be more sanctifying to do.** In other words, our pursuit of holiness will not be complete until we are finally with the Lord. When our holiness is complete, that is phase three — *permanent* sanctification (Phil. 1:6).

Regarding their sanctification, Paul challenged the Thessalonians in two areas — sexual immorality (v.3-8) and love for others (v.9-12). In our culture, sexual purity is unthinkable, but it is honoring to God. Just as our values in this

area should stand out from the world, so also should our love for others be different. Love is a distinctive of our faith. It is reflective of our God and Savior, and it is love that attracts people to Christ. It is love that opens the door to sharing the gospel with the lost. Therefore, Paul taught the Thessalonians to love others by being good neighbors (v.11, 12).

## Daily Reflection

**As followers of Christ, we must never become complacent with where we are in the Christian life. We must always press on and pursue holiness.** There is no time to coast or to be satisfied with mediocrity. Our war against the flesh, against sin, against temptation, is ongoing. **We must excel still more.** At first, obvious sins must be removed. Like removing weeds from a garden, once the obvious sins are removed, the less obvious ones become more apparent. We must always be pulling weeds.

Though Christ has made you positionally right and holy in God’s eyes, you have a long way to go to be holy in your flesh. Evaluate your sanctification. Where are you in the process? What “big weeds” have you removed?

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**Don’t become complacent but excel still more!** What “little weeds” should you target next?

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