

Noble Character

Acts 17:10-15

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The Apostle Paul was on a missionary journey. He and his companions had made their way to Berea, a town in Macedonia. As was their custom, they began their mission in the Jewish synagogue. In that synagogue Paul shared the message, which we know is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Like in other places, he told about the salvation God provided through Jesus Christ. Though he demonstrated signs and wonders in his ministry, Jesus was rejected, arrested, crucified, dead, and buried. The ultimate sign of God's presence in the life of Jesus was the resurrection from the dead. On the third day Jesus rose again from the dead. Now this Jesus was making his home in the hearts of countless men and women and boys and girls. Paul and his companions were witnesses to the power of Jesus, and they were calling all people everywhere to believe in the name of Jesus.

From the response of the Bereans, we also know this about Paul and his message, about the good news of the gospel. We know the message and we know the good news is rooted in the promises of the Scriptures. We know that because after the Bereans heard the message Paul proclaimed, they decided to check it out and see if it was true. How do you do that? You search the Scriptures. You go back to the source and examine it. For doing this, for searching the Scriptures, the author of the Book of Acts tells us the Bereans were of a noble character.

In fact, the author of Acts tells us the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, where Paul had just been run out of town. It seems that it was a rather common occurrence for people to respond to the good news of the gospel by rejecting it. That certainly was a possibility for the Bereans. They could have simply said no. Instead they chose to examine the Scriptures. We are told they examined them thoroughly, they examined them every day to see if what Paul said was true. As they examined the Scriptures, many people believed. The ones who believed were Jews, as well as a number of Greek women and men.

What this passage is telling us that a group of people in a town in Macedonia, far removed from Palestine and the Middle East, far removed from the days when Abraham and Isaac and Jacob walked the land, even far removed from David the great king and the prophets like Elijah and Elisha and Isaiah and Jeremiah, that as far removed as these Bereans were, in searching the Scriptures they came to believe that this man named Jesus was the fulfillment of all God's promises. They believed in Jesus. They found salvation in his holy name.

Today we have placed in the hands of our children a precious and priceless gift. We have put the Scriptures in their hands. We put the Scriptures in their hands believing the promise God made more than 2,500 years ago through the prophet Isaiah. “The word that goes forth from my mouth will not return void, but will accomplish what I intend.” (Isaiah 55:11) We put the Scriptures in the hands of our children hoping and praying they will be like the Bereans, that they too will be of noble character, that they too will learn to search the Scriptures. We hope they will learn to search the Scriptures daily. In searching the Scriptures, our deepest desire and most fervent prayer is they will come to know Jesus Christ, to believe in him, to trust in him, and to find salvation in him.

Whenever we have Bible Sunday, I think back to the fall of 1969. I was in third grade at the time. I try to remember what I wanted to have as a third grader, now nearly 50 years ago. I know one thing I wanted. It was in the fall, and I know what Halloween costume I wanted, because every year until I was about 20, I wanted to wear a Superman costume. When I was in third grade I wanted a Superman costume. And I know I wanted cowboy boots. I still remember the grocery store that carried cowboy boots, right behind the ice cream counter. I looked longingly at those boots every time we went in State Market grocery store. And I wanted a football because I was just awakening to what a grand thing it would be to put on pads and a helmet. And I wanted a hot wheels car. And I wanted a sting ray bicycle, not the old fuddy-duddy kind of bicycle I had. And I wanted a baseball hat just like the one my favorite player wore. My favorite player was Willie Mays, the centerfielder for the San Francisco Giants. And I wanted...heck, I was eight years old. What didn't I want? I wanted so many things. But I can't really say I wanted a Bible. Not back then. Not when there were so many other things I wanted.

Well, it will come as no surprise that when Pastor McDowell called all the third grade students in the Sunday school class to come forward, my teachers did not have any of the things I wanted. Nope. Instead, Mrs. Frances Nicholas and Mrs. Rosemary Knudson had a Bible for me and the other kids in the class. I took that Bible home and probably put it on a shelf. I don't think I went home and started reading it. Not then. Not in third grade.

But time went by, and sometime in high school, I started to have questions about life, and meaning, and purpose. There was a lot of pressure to do drugs and alcohol. I was into sports, and I don't know why, but drugs and alcohol were not appealing to me. I wanted to keep a clear mind and a clean body. When I didn't choose to use drugs and alcohol, the other kids stopped calling and inviting me to go out. I spent a few years without having a peer group, other than when I was playing sports. A lot of

Friday and Saturday nights I was hanging out close to home. It was then that I opened my Bible and started reading. I read about people like Peter and Andrew and James and John who followed Jesus and trusted him. I read about women who followed him and were friends with him. I needed a friend during those long and lonely nights, and the Bible told me Jesus would be my friend.

When I was nineteen I was at a summer camp and one of the leaders at the camp told me about how she read her Bible. She was really into the Psalms and Proverbs. She said if you read five Psalms every day and one Proverb, at the end of a month you will have read all 150 Psalms and all 31 Proverbs. I liked that, and so for the first time I had a little plan for reading my Bible. Later I started reading the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and that is a practice I continue to this day.

Back in the fall of 1969, I would rather have had a hot wheels car, a sting ray bike, a leather football, a San Francisco Giants baseball hat, some fancy cowboy boots, and especially a Superman costume. Instead, my church gave me a Bible. Boy, am I glad they gave me that Bible. I outgrew those other wants and desires. But this book, this Bible, it has fulfilled every promise made. Through the Scriptures, God has shaped and guided my life, brought me hope, brought healing, brought forgiveness, and most importantly, brought Jesus Christ into my life. Now, nearly 50 years later, this Bible occupies a central place in my office, and a central place in my life. Sometimes I open it up and look at those names, Mrs. Nicholas and Mrs. Knudson, and I think of my church, people who were so much wiser than me. If I had my way I would be standing before you in a Superman costume with cowboy boots. They had their way, and I am standing before you with the Word of God that is a light for my path and a lamp unto my feet.

I hope each and every one of our children will grow up to be like the Bereans. I hope they will be of noble character. And I hope we will model for them what it is like to be of noble character. I hope they will see us searching the Scriptures, searching daily, to find the treasures, to claim the promises and to discover the power, the presence, and the peace that comes through knowing Jesus Christ.

When we took a group of friends on a journey in the Footsteps of St. Paul, we traveled through Greece and Turkey. One of our stops was at Berea. We stood where Paul stood 2,000 years ago. We walked where a group of people walked who were of noble character, where a group of people known as the Bereans searched the Scriptures daily. We were right where those ones who searched the Scriptures found what they were looking for. They found salvation in Jesus Christ. When we were in Berea in 2013, something happened which was a testimony to the value of Scripture, and testimony to Jesus Christ, the one who is revealed in the Scriptures.

The story of what happened that day in Berea in 2013 began many years before. One Sunday I was performing a baptism for a family and their newborn child. All of the children at church gathered at the front to watch the baptism up close and personal. I talked with the children about baptism and how it is a sign and symbol of God's grace, and how even though this little tiny baby couldn't even talk yet, they had already been surrounded by God's love and they already belonged to God. I talked about how baptism is a symbol of our belonging, that we are all baptized into one family, and I encouraged the children to be a friend to this precious little one as they grew up in our church family. Then I stood and walked over to the mom and dad and they handed me their child. I noticed one of the children from church had decided to get up and walk over with me. She had decided she was going to help me with the baptism.

It happened to be a young girl in our church with special needs. She didn't understand that she was supposed to stay seated and that I would go over and perform the baptism. She had heard me ask the children to be a friend to this new baby, and so she decided what better time to begin a friendship than the present. So she walked up with me. It could have been awkward. But baptism is about belonging, about being a community, about every person having a place in the family. My friend Jordan stood with me and the family at the baptism that day, and afterward numerous people said it was the most meaningful baptism they had ever experienced. This girl with special needs knew she belonged in our church family.

If that is all that happened you might think the Bible is all about belonging and loving and community and being included. Well, the church is not perfect. Something happened a few years later and the mother of that special young woman with special needs stepped away from church. I never knew for sure what happened, but it is can be a challenge to be the parent of a child with special needs. Somehow something happened and feelings were hurt. But for whatever reason the mother stepped away. A relationship was broken. I hope you know that type of thing breaks a pastor's heart. We kept the door open, hoped for reconciliation, and confessed again and again that we are not perfect.

As I told you in the fall of 2013 Julie and I organized a trip to Greece and Turkey, The Footsteps of St. Paul. People signed up to go. One day I looked at the sign-up sheet and the young girl with special needs had her name on the list. Her dad signed up to go, signed up his daughter, the one with the special needs, signed up their son, and he signed up his wife, the mom, the one we had disappointed as a church. She was going on the trip with us.

The first several days were nice. We were so happy to have her with us. But there was still a distance. She was watching to see how people treated her daughter, the one with special needs. About the third or fourth day we had stopped as a group at one of the memorials. The memorial where we stopped was in Berea. The memorial is in the middle of a business district we had a worship service. I was leading the service, and people were sharing their favorite bible verses. The Bereans were noted for how they searched the Scriptures, and so I invited every person to stand up and share what Bible verse was meaningful to them. It was a really special time. While I was standing up leading the service, the young girl with special needs got up from her seat, walked up to the front, and stood right next to me. Just like the baptism years before, she knew she belonged and so she came up front to help me out. I wrapped my arm around her and the two of us led the service. Everyone shared their verses, we prayed, and then we sang a song.

But the mom of the girl had not shared. After we finished singing, we got ready to leave and travel to our next stop. At that moment the mom came forward and asked if she could say a few words. I was still standing next to her daughter. Her daughter was convinced she was in charge, so I turned to her daughter and asked if it was okay if her mom said a few words. She had a big smile and she shook her head yes. So the mom talked. She talked about the disappointment and about stepping away. But then she said there had been healing. She said she had seen once again on the trip how her daughter truly was loved and accepted by every single person. And she said she was ready for a new beginning. That was November. A month later, on Christmas Eve, that family stood up to light the candles on the Advent wreath. The dad was there. The brother was there. The girl with special needs was there. And the mom was there. Together they lit the candle in the center of the wreath. Together they lit the Christ candle.

The Bible is such an open and honest book. It talks about the goodness of creation, about love and joy, about Jesus reaching out to include the least, the last, and the lost. And the Bible talks about pain and suffering, about disappointment. The Bible talks about hurt feelings and broken relationships. The Bible talks about all of these real life joys and struggles. The Bible has a beginning. And the Bible has an ending. If you stick with it, if you search the Scriptures, you find that the Word of God becomes flesh and lives among us. You find out Jesus is God's living Word, the Word of God incarnate, in the flesh. Because of him by the time we get to the end of the book, to Revelation, there is an amazing and incredible ending, which is not really an ending, it is a new beginning. Search the Scriptures, from front to back, and one day you will find yourself at the ending which is the most beautiful beginning. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth..."

I'm not sure what we have done in the past for our kids on Bible Sunday, but this year we gave them an adult Bible. It is a gift Bible, but it is a Bible in every sense of the word. Some might question whether it would be better to give the kids a children's Bible. I don't have any problem with that. But I decided to give them a Bible that might be a little too big for them now because I believe one day they will grow into it. I want them to have a big Bible so that no matter where life takes them, they will know they have a big God, sufficient for all their needs.

I heard a preacher tell a story once about a California football team, the USC Trojans. The story concerned a little boy that had been a fan of USC football since he was knee-high to a grasshopper. He followed the team on television, in the newspapers, on the radio, and his big dream was to meet the football team in person. This was years ago when John Robinson was coaching the USC football team.

Word came to Coach Robinson about the little boy and his devotion to USC football, and so arrangements were made for the kid to attend a USC practice. You should have seen his eyes when he walked out on the practice field and saw these mammoth football players. He knew each one, the position they played, their strengths, their weaknesses, what they liked and disliked, what their dreams were. And that day the little boy's dream was fulfilled. He was in heaven.

At the end of practice Coach Robinson gathered the team together and introduced the boy. The little guy was beaming from ear to ear. Then, to top it off, Coach Robinson pulled something out of a bag. It was a USC jersey. It had number 1 on it. And on the back it had the little boy's name. Coach gave it to him and all the players cheered. But when the boy held the jersey up his face sunk. Coach Robinson could see the disappointment on his face and he could not figure it out. He asked the boy what was wrong. The boy held up the jersey. It was a jersey any college football player would have been proud to have. But with tears in his eyes the boy said, "Coach, it's too big for me." Coach didn't miss a beat. He put his arm around the little guy's shoulder and said, "Son, you will grow into it."

Today we put a big person's Bible in the hands of our children. Maybe when they look at it right now they will say, "It's too big for me." Maybe like me they will put it on a shelf. That might happen. But I hope someday, I believe some day, they will open that Bible and find out it is a big Bible about a big God whose love never ends. I hope and I pray that every one of our children grows into it. I hope we all grow into. We will always be the Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian. But wouldn't it be pretty nice if people knew us as a church that was like the Bereans, searching the Scriptures. When you search these Scriptures, you find the God who loves this world so much he sent his only Son, his Beloved Son, to bring healing, to bring hope, to bring forgiveness, to bring reconciliation, to bring peace, to bring love, to bring salvation, and to bring eternal life.