

"The Threatening Nature of the Gospel"
Sermon Series on the book of Acts – *The Way of the Spirit*
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
August 18, 2015
(Acts 21:17-36)

Introduction.

Last month Lorie and I joined with 20,000 other fans to hear North Carolina native James Taylor give a concert at the Greensboro Coliseum. It was a magical evening. The first time I ever heard Sweet Baby James live was in Atlanta way back when I was in high school. An unknown woman artist who sang and played the piano opened the concert for him, and it was the first time any of us had ever heard of Carole King. That was a pretty special evening too! But James Taylor sounded just as good if not better on the night he performed here back in July all these years later.

One of the highlights of the two-and-a-half hour concert was when he sang “Carolina in My Mind.” It brought the house down. But another favorite which many in the audience kept asking him to sing was “Copperline.” It’s a song about an area around Chapel Hill where James and his family grew up, and the song is a nostalgic look back at his childhood. Taylor visited Copperline before he wrote the song, and he discovered that pre-fabricated homes had popped up all over the area, destroying its charm. He sings about this in the lyrics, “I tried to go back, as if I could/all spec houses and plywood/tore up, tore up good, down on Copperline.”

The song talks about how it’s often very difficult to go back home. Things change, people move on, and the place isn’t what it used to be. And you change too.

The apostle Paul found this to be true when he returned to Jerusalem at the end of his 3rd missionary journey. Paul wasn't born and raised in Jerusalem, but he moved there when he was a young man. Soon it became his spiritual home. He studied theology under the famous rabbi Gamaliel, and he became a rising star in the Jewish establishment. He was zealous for his faith, and he served as a special envoy for the Sanhedrin.

Paul became a defender of Jewish orthodoxy, and he began to persecute Christians who said that they followed the Messiah Jesus and advocated for an understanding of salvation that was contrary to Jewish teaching. But then he encountered the risen Lord Jesus Christ himself on the road to Damascus. His world was turned upside down, and God sent him on a different path away from his home.

Still, Jerusalem was special to Paul, and he was grateful for all the ways it had been home to him many years before. However, his return to the holy city this time could not have ended more badly. It was a shock to see just how threatening he and the message he proclaimed had become to the people in the city that he loved and once had called his home.

I. The Background to the Story.

You’ll recall from our earlier study of the book of Acts that as Paul concluded his 3rd missionary journey, he left Miletus and said good-bye to the elders from the church in Ephesus and set sail for Palestine. Never one to shrink back from danger, Paul accepted the challenge to travel to Jerusalem and deliver the offering he collected even though everyone cautioned him along the way that hardship and prison awaited him if he went to the holy city. He was aware of the repeated warnings from the Holy Spirit, but he went there nevertheless.

Paul and representatives of the churches in Macedonia, which is modern day Greece, were traveling together to deliver an offering that had been collected to assist in the famine relief for their fellow

Christians in Jerusalem. Luke makes no mention of the financial gift here, but later on in Acts 24 he acknowledges it briefly as he records Paul's account of this incident.

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul met with the leaders of the church, and he found things much the same as they had been the last time he visited. James, the brother of Jesus, was still the leader of the church there, and all the people continued to be excited about the way so many Gentiles were turning to God and becoming followers of Christ. However, rumors had spread while Paul was gone that not only had he taken the gospel to the Gentiles, but also that he was telling them to reject Jewish religious customs such as circumcision. This wasn't true, but they were concerned that something needed to be done in order to correct this misconception.

Four men in the church were preparing to conclude a vow they had made to God which involved a purification rite that included offering a sacrifice and shaving their heads. Such rites were voluntarily observed by some Jewish Christians, but they were never required of believers, Jew or Gentile. The leaders of the church suggested that Paul financially sponsor these men in observing this rite. It also required that he go to the temple to notify the priest when the days of purification would be fulfilled so the priests could be prepared to offer the sacrifices.

Paul agreed to do this, even though he no longer believed rites like these were necessary because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross of Calvary once and for all for our sins. He was willing to do this, because, as he later wrote in 1 Corinthians 9: *"To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.... To those not under the law I became like one not having the law...so as to win those not having the law.... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some"* (9:19-22).

While he was in the temple to help with the purification rite, Paul was spotted by some Jews from Asia, and they stirred up the crowd against him. They probably recognized Paul from his time in Ephesus, and since they had also seen Trophimus, who was a Gentile from Asia, accompanying Paul earlier in the city, they assumed the apostle had brought Trophimus into the temple where only Jews were allowed.

There was a stone wall for a partition that stood 4 ½ feet high to keep Gentiles out of the temple. It had a notice posted on it which was written in Greek and Latin that forbade any foreigner from coming into the temple under penalty of death. Paul hadn't done this, of course, and the people jumped to a false conclusion. It's ironic that this would be the charge against Paul at a time when he was going through a purification rite so he wouldn't defile the temple.

The Jews from Ephesus didn't have their facts straight, but it didn't matter. In their outrage, they rushed Paul and seized him. They were trying to kill him, when the Roman commander sent in his troops to stop the uproar. The apostle was arrested, and the commander ordered that he be taken to the Roman barracks for questioning. When they reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great that Paul had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd kept shouting, "Away with him! Away with him!" These were the same words that were shouted by the crowd which called for the crucifixion of Jesus. Paul may have wondered, "Will history repeat itself?"

II. The Threatening Nature of the Gospel.

It's frightening to see how a group of people can so easily be worked up into a frenzy, and an angry crowd will do things that individuals would never do by themselves. But that's what happens sometimes when people feel threatened.

Why was it that the gospel was so threatening to these people in Jerusalem? What was it about Paul and his message that caused them to rush the apostle and try to kill him? British author and theologian Christopher Wright says that the Good News of Jesus Christ is bad news for people whose vested interests are threatened by it.

The fact that the gospel is available to everyone and doesn't privilege one ethnic group over any other threatens those who stake their identity and their security on belonging to "the right group of people." The gospel is threatening to racism. The fact that the gospel is a gift of grace offends people who take pride in what they've accomplished and built for themselves. So the gospel is threatening to anyone who thinks they are self-made or self-sufficient. And the fact that the gospel calls people to repentance and to change their lives in radical ways is disturbing to folks who want the benefits of the gospel but resist its demands.¹

The ministry of Jesus and His message of salvation was threatening from the very beginning. Herod was so threatened by Christ when the Lord was first born that the king had all the male children under two years of age slaughtered in the town of Bethlehem. Jesus threatened the position of influence of the Pharisees when it came to determining what a righteous life looked like, and He was always in conflict with them.

Christ also threatened the economic system of the temple when he overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those who sold animals to be used for sacrifices. He threatened the power of the chief priest and the members of the Sanhedrin, and they were afraid that the people would follow this Messiah and upset the status quo. And Jesus threatened the *Pax Romana*, the Peace of Rome, so Pilate washed his hands of the whole matter and ordered that Christ be crucified. No wonder Paul's message about the gospel of Jesus Christ was threatening. It all started with Jesus Himself.

At its heart, the gospel is threatening. It threatens our self-centeredness, because Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow Him. The gospel threatens the idols of our lives, because the Lord says that if anyone or anything is more important to us than He is then we've got to put to death that idol in our hearts. We can have no other gods before Him. The gospel threatens our nicely constructed lives of safety and security with 2.2 children, a three-car garage, and a nice retirement portfolio, because the Lord calls us to an adventure of faith that is at times risky and can be dangerous. And the gospel threatens our personal autonomy, because it says that we must give over the reins of our lives to the Lord and allow Him to call the shots.

I remember this was one of the things that kept me from becoming a Christian for a long time. I wanted to be the one in charge, I wanted to call the shots in my life. And I knew that if I gave my life to Jesus I would lose control. I was afraid of all I would have to give up and what it would cost me, so I was reluctant to become a Christian. It was too threatening to me. But I also finally realized that I was making a mess of things on my own, and perhaps God could do a better job of running my life than I had been doing. So I gave the reins over to Him despite my fears.

This past week I learned in a fresh way just how threatening the gospel can be personally. Lorie and I had an argument which resulted in one of those knock-down-drag-out kind of fights that results in a long period of silence. You get hurt, you say mean things, and then you pull away and refuse to talk. I don't know about you, but that is often my pattern. After the argument I went for a long walk by myself, and I was steaming in my anger. I wouldn't talk to Lorie for the rest of the night.

The next day, the Holy Spirit began to work on me. And the Lord asked me when I was going to forgive her and say, "I'm sorry."

"But you don't know what she did and said!" I protested.

"Oh, yes I do. I was there, if you didn't notice!"

"But I am right, and she's wrong!"

"You're not as right as you think you are. Do you remember all those awful things you said to her? She's my daughter, and I don't want you treating her like that."

"But I don't *want* to forgive her."

“Didn’t I forgive you everything you’ve ever done wrong? What makes you think you’re so holy? Don’t you remember what I told My disciples? ‘Forgive, and you will be forgiven’ (Lk. 6:37).”

Do you know how hard it to write a sermon about how the gospel threatens our refusal to forgive when you harbor anger and resentment in your heart?! So I went home and asked Lorie to forgive me, and I said I was sorry. The gospel threatens our self-righteousness, and it calls us to a different way of living and loving. And it is so sweet when you are reconciled again.

Conclusion.

How do we deal with the threatening nature of the gospel? What are the keys to overcoming our fear and allowing the message of God’s grace to really take hold of our lives? In C.S. Lewis’ children’s book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, I think we are given an insight.

One of the main characters is a young boy named Eustace Scrubb, and in the book he learns just how threatening the gospel can be. Eustace clearly had a desire for power, but he expressed it in mean and petty ways that only a schoolboy could – in teasing other children, torturing animals, and tattletelling on others. One night Eustace found an enormous pile of treasure in a cave. He was thrilled and began to imagine the life of ease and power he would have now with it.

However, when he woke up, to his horror Eustace discovered that he had turned into a hideous dragon. As Lewis writes, “Sleeping on a dragon’s hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself.”² Eustace was now an enormously powerful being, far more powerful than he had ever dreamed before. But he was also hideous, and frightening, and desperately lonely. It caused him to wish he was a normal boy again. As his pride faded, the idolatry of his heart faded too.

One night Eustace the dragon met a mysterious lion named Aslan. The lion challenged him to try to take his dragon skin off. Eustace managed to peel off a layer, but he found that he was still a dragon underneath. Repeatedly he tried, but he could make no further progress. The lion finally said, “You will have to let me do it.” Listen to how Eustace tells the story.

I was afraid of his claw, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt... Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off just as I thought I’d done it myself the three other times, only they hadn’t hurt – and there it was lying on the grass: only so much thicker, and darker, and more knobby-looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been... I turned into a boy again.³

The lion of the fairy tale, Aslan, represents Christ, and the story bears witness to what all Christians have discovered, that pride leads to death and the loss of our humanity. And the gospel is threatening to all that. But if you let it humble you and turn to God instead of living for your own glory, then the death of your pride can actually lead to a resurrection. You can emerge, finally, fully human, with a tender heart instead of a hard one.

Tim Keller points out that this is the deep pattern of grace, which we see supremely in Jesus. Our hearts say, “I will ascend, I will be like God for my own sake.” But Jesus said, “I will descend, I will go down very low, for their sakes.” He became human and went to the Cross to die for our sins. Jesus lost all His power and served us to the end in order to save us. He died, but His death led to redemption and resurrection.⁴

So if like Eustace, we can push past the threatening nature of the gospel and allow the Lord to do the hard work of redemption, we can find new life in being who we were created to be in the first place – a child of God deeply loved by our heavenly Father. And when we come to realize that, then we will find

our way to our true home in the family of God where the threat of the gospel to our personal lives is just a distant memory. We come to see that the gospel really is the Best News we've ever heard. Amen.

¹ Taken from Christopher J.H. Wright in *The Mission of God's People*.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p. 91,

³ *Ibid*, pp. 108-110.

⁴ Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 124. Many of the ideas in this conclusion are drawn from his chapter on power.