

## Welcome

I heard a speaker named Patrick Lencioni share a really counterintuitive coaching strategy. He and another dad coached his son's soccer team, and this particular league did a big draft. On the day of the draft, all the players and coaches got together and ran drills, demonstrated skills and then had a big draft to pick teams.

I remember Lencioni sharing that he and his assistant coach made it a point to ignore the kids who were obviously the best players. The ones demonstrating crazy dribbling skills, killer corner kicks and probably even those sick bicycle kicks. No, he said they looked for kids who were really engaged with the other players. The kids who were really positive, excited to be out there. Not the kids who never made a mistake, but the kids who never made the same mistake twice. The ones who were coachable.

He said that a crazy thing happened - when it came time to draft teams, they got every single one of their picks.

And then an even crazier thing happened - they had an amazing season. I don't remember if they won first place or not, but Lencioni said that all the kids loved it. The parents did too - none of the drama that often comes with having all-star kids on a team. They learned a lot, they improved massively as a team and they had an incredible season.

Because Lencioni and his assistant coach realized there was something broken about the typical way sports drafts work - even at the level of kids' sports. That maybe skill with a ball isn't the only - or best - skill for a team. (Tell that to Jamie Tart, am I right, *Ted Lasso* fans?)

Lencioni's insight applies to our question for today: What makes a good disciple?

If you're going out to share the good news about Jesus, who are you going to talk to? If you were to imagine the ideal convert. Who is that? A business leader who can donate lots of money? Or maybe a celebrity - a rock star or movie star who can use their platform to tell more people? Or what about a politician - someone in office who could genuinely represent the way of Jesus at the highest levels of government (you know, instead of giving lip service then ignoring anything Jesus actually taught).

Fame. Power. Wealth. Are these the things that make someone an ideal follower of Jesus? You'd think so, to look at Evangelicalism today. We're obsessed with Kanye's Sunday Services, who Justin Bieber calls his pastor, and how much money various pastors' sneakers cost. But what if we're doing it wrong? What if God's not all that impressed with fame, wealth or power?

## Message

Welcome to Easter-tide! We're in the season of hope - the time between Easter and Pentecost, between resurrection and God's gift to us of the Holy Spirit. Our series is called RECONNECTED. We're asking what it looks like to be plugged in - both to God and to the world to which God calls us. What are the practices, attitudes and orientations God calls us to and gifts us with that enable us to be a church that engages and cares about the world around us?

For these questions, we're in the book of Acts, which recounts the beginnings of the church. How did we go from a group of scared people who fled from the authorities when Jesus was arrested to a group that faced down persecution and fearlessly spread the good news of Jesus' resurrection to the world around us?

We began by reflecting on the impossibility of our call - to embody Jesus in this broken and breaking world? How could we possibly accomplish all God call us to? We can't, which is why God gives us the Holy Spirit. Then we explored what it means to worship *together*, and to be together in a way that orients us not toward ourselves, but to the larger world, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Today, I want to look again at an important question Luke keeps asking in the book of Acts, one that Luke himself seems to wrestle with: What makes a good disciple? Is it wealth? Fame? Power? All of the above?

Turn with us to [Acts 17](#).

If you were here last week, you remember that the good news of Jesus' resurrection was particularly attractive to those on the margins, those already excluded from mainstream culture. We *also* saw that those we might call 'respectable' were afraid to be too closely associated with the Jesus people.

At this point in Acts, we've shifted from Peter and the church in Jerusalem to Paul and his missionary journeys to spread the good news of Jesus across the world. In Acts, Paul's typical pattern of mission work was to go first to the local synagogue. This was a gathering of men and women, both Jewish and Gentile, and they discussed faith. So it was a natural place for Paul, Jewish himself, to go. Outside of Judea, Judaism was a minority religion. Think of Buddhism here in the US - though it's predominantly an Eastern religion, there are a number of Americans who are interested in Buddhism - back in the 90s, it was even super trendy for celebrities to claim to be Buddhist.

That's something like what we're going to see in these two stories. There was a tension in the diaspora Jewish communities - some wanted to acclimate to the dominant Roman culture, while others were more open to the radical message of Jesus. And there were also a number of Gentiles - even some prominent city leaders - who were curious enough to check out this strange faith that only believed in one God.

But still that question: do any of these people make good converts? Let's see what happens as Paul stops in two cities - first in Thessalonica and then in Berea:

Paul and Silas then traveled through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he used the Scriptures to reason with the people. He explained the prophecies and proved that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead. He said, "This Jesus I'm telling you about is the Messiah." Some of the Jews who listened were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with many God-fearing Greek men and quite a few prominent women. -- Acts 17:1-4 (NLT)

Paul goes to the synagogue and spends three weeks reinterpreting the Scriptures to illustrate that Jesus is God's Messiah, and that his resurrection is the revolutionary moment they've been waiting for. A few of the Jewish people were interested, and a surprising number of Greeks and, Luke notes, 'quite a few prominent women.'

This upsets the majority of the Jewish leaders in Thessalonica, so they go after Paul and Silas. Listen to what they do:

Not finding them there, they dragged out Jason and some of the other believers instead and took them before the city council. "Paul and Silas have caused trouble all over the world," they shouted, "and now they are here disturbing our city, too. And Jason has welcomed them into his home. They are all guilty of treason against Caesar, for they profess allegiance to another king, named Jesus." -- Acts 17:6-8 (NLT)

The people of the city, as well as the city council, were thrown into turmoil by these reports.

There's a deep irony here - the people who accused Paul and Silas of causing trouble were the ones causing trouble. They broke into a Greek man's home, dragged him and his friends before the city. They spread rumors and hearsay, stirring up the whole city against the Way.

This is a common experience in minority cultures - there is always a voice or two that wants to maintain the status quo. These voices are often prominent - they have access to governmental authorities or they are a celebrity of some kind. Majority culture elevates these voices specifically because they help to maintain the status quo.

You see this, for instance, any time Black Lives Matter protests take place. Suddenly Black Americans who criticize BLM protests get facetime on news media and their videos flood our social media feeds. Because they affirm the status quo - one from which they benefit. So even though their voices represent a vanishingly small percentage of the perspective of Black Americans, it's their voice that gets elevated.

The same thing is happening in Thessalonica. The minority folks who have found a way to make peace with the Roman status quo don't *want* Jesus to disrupt what they have, because what they have is pretty good. This is a similar, but stronger, reaction that we saw last week - people who liked Jesus' message but didn't want to be associated with him, for fear of disrupting their lives.

Are we willing to be disrupted?

## BREAK

Because of all the trouble, Paul and Silas have to leave Thessalonica. They head to a city called Berea next, and they have somewhat better results:

That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea. When they arrived there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men. -- Acts 17:10–12 (NLT)

So they do the same thing - go to the synagogue, dive into the Scriptures and they have better luck this time. "Many" of the Jews, as well as "many prominent Greeks."

Isn't it weird that Luke keeps emphasizing these prominent converts? In his commentary on Acts, Dr. Willie Jennings laments this unfortunate turn:

"[Luke] is deploying a dangerous optic — the perception of status and the status of perception... This way of perceiving status is being mixed with perceiving conversion. This has always been an intoxicating and horrific mixture of perception. The high and mighty become followers of Jesus -what disciple of Jesus would not want this and not become absolutely thrilled with this turn of events? The church is yet to comprehend fully the trouble with this mixture. Luke illumines a trajectory that will move toward the conversion of Emperor Constantine and that reaches to us today. This perception turns us away from the creature loved by God, from specific people known by name by God, and toward what they represent with their money, a/or their power and their status." — Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*

When the church becomes obsessed with status, we dehumanize both those with status, power or fame and those without it. When we imagine God is somehow impressed by our abilities, achievements or accomplishments, we create a caste system both within the body of Christ and in how we perceive the world.

We forget neither power, fame nor money makes a good disciple (in fact, those can distract as often as not). What makes the difference?

Well, as Jennings observes, it's the difference between the Thessalonians and the Bereans: "[The Bereans] want to listen to what God is saying."

What makes a good disciple? Someone who's interested. Someone who wants to listen.

I have to tell you, friends, in my experience this is rarely the comfortable and content. It's rarely those at the center of culture. And how often do we imagine just the opposite? Rarely do we dare to strike up a conversation with the atheist who's been burned by a Christian pastor or

parent. We avoid the immigrant with accented English. We prefer the middle class to the working class.

And yet, Acts has told us again and again that status, wealth, power or fame do not a good disciple make. Rather it is the one who is ready and willing, curious and inquisitive. The one who wants to listen to God.

How can we find those persons unless we are willing to share?

## Communion + Examen

The only thing required to sit at this table is a willingness to show up.

When in the last week have I been faithful to God's way in our world?

When in the last week have I ignored God's way?

When might I be tempted to ignore God's way this week?

How can I be faithful to God this week?

## Assignment + Blessing

James on hearing and doing? What *tangible* difference is the resurrection making?

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. -- [James 1:22-25](#) (NLT)