
THE NEW “GOOD” IN THE MARKETPLACE

An Article From “The Study of Acts” Series

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

The introduction of the wonderful message of Jesus Christ into the midst of the world at this time called for a radical transformation in thinking; not only of the people of this society who would hear this message of life and would have to respond to this most wondrous of news, but it actually called for tremendous innovation on the part of those who were proclaiming this message. In any given situation or society (depending on to whom they were speaking or what their background was) they had to adapt the message in many marvelous ways so that the people listening would have a fair chance of hearing the message of the Kingdom in a language that made sense to them.

THE MESSAGE OF LIFE

We now, as the Church of Jesus Christ, some two thousand years later, are faced with exactly the same challenge. Our society, both in its philosophical orientation and experience, and its cultural backdrop, is a multi-dimensional society. There are so many sub-populations; different age groups, ethnic and gender cultures. There’s a lot going on. Unfortunately, the Church of Jesus Christ, which is supposed to be fairly conservative in that it wants to call everyone back to the way that God intended for things to be in the beginning—can become way too stuck in the past in terms of how it goes about presenting the message of the Kingdom for the sake of other people. We find time and time again in the Book of Acts, individuals who are

called by God, and at all costs they are going to present the message of life and love that God wants for every person to know, in a way that makes sense to people. We can sometimes mistake *the means for presenting the message, with the message itself.*

If your life is anything like mine is, there are a few brief moments where you feel as though God is really doing something through you and it's very, very exciting—punctuated by huge blocks of time where you feel you are just traveling *between one city and another city (as Paul experienced)*. In those moments when the boat is just rocking back and forth—you might be persecuted by something going on at work, or maybe there are people who are not so happy with what it is that you're sharing—it can be very easy to lose heart and feel as though God never does anything with you. “I'm a total failure as a believer.”

GOD IS FOR YOU AND WANTS YOU TO EFFECTIVELY MINISTER TO OTHERS

We must realize that in between these places we read about where Paul has such incredible ministry that there are a great many days and a lot of *other places*. We aren't always able to endure hardships, like Paul, who was willing to be *set upon by wild animals* or *endure a shipwreck happening*. When your ship starts going down, you can think, “Well, I guess God isn't with me.” Sure He is. He's with you whether the ship goes down or stays up. He's taking you and me on a journey and trying to get us to places where we can effectively minister to people. How sad it must be to Him that people who are on their way going somewhere conclude that because nothing spectacular happens in their life today, guess ministry is really over and there's nothing much left for them to do but back away.

“And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.’”

Acts 17:2-3

Speak a Language People Understand

When Paul arrived at this city of Thessalonica, his pattern was fairly similar to that which he had followed elsewhere. He went to the Jewish synagogue where he could relate to these people (himself having been born a Jew). He starts examining the Scriptures and sharing with the people the truth from the word of God. Ultimately, what he is doing is using the very religious mindset of this group to whom he is

speaking and capitalizing on what they already believe, but he posed questions and suggested things that got them to reconsider the conclusions they had come to believe about God.

Their image of Messiah is that He was going to be a political savior who would come in and throw off the yoke of the Roman soldiers so they could then be an independent nation and conduct their commerce and their government in exactly the way they wanted. You can find in the Scriptures reasons why they might imagine that this Messiah was going to be a political savior. Paul took their religious view and tweaked it, and shared things and asked questions in such a way that these people were willing to reconsider what they had thought was true.

I find in our culture today that we live in a society where people have a very mistaken impression of what is true of God. I’m very fond of saying to people, “I don’t believe in the God that you don’t believe in either!” People’s concept of God is nothing like the God of the Scriptures. They often have pulled out a few isolated passages; and you can see how many people back up a bit, imagining the Christian God to be a certain way. For example, you can find passages that talk about the *judgment of God*, and if you extract those passages out of context and only hold them up as your proof text, I think many normal people would say, “I don’t really know that I want to have much to do with a god like that!”

Truth Vs. Religious Vocabulary

We who are the Church of Jesus have been entrusted with this most marvelous privilege of sharing with other people what the Bible calls *the ministry of reconciliation*—getting people who are alienated from God back into relationship with God. We have very often unintentionally turned this ministry of truth into *the ministry of isolation*: “*We are the true ones and the rest of you people really need to get your act together.*”

Paul was so embracing! He took any means that he could to declare to people, “God loves you. He understands all the things that are going on in your life. He knows about the waywardness of their soul. That *waywardness* not only does not disqualify you from future relationship, but God has provision to eliminate all of those wrong things in your life. He wants to forgive you.”

I’m sad to say that the cultural “religious” Christians have communicated to the world that something as simple as “goodness” was this place to “arrive at”—this thing to attain, and *we have* arrived. That is the *spirit of the Pharisees*, which is *not* the same as an individual who has had a personal experience where they realize that

they’re forgiven and now they want to adhere and follow the teachings of the One who has totally changed their life because they are so grateful for the transformation He has brought into their life.

What Paul did was to reach into even the very confused mindset that these people had. This synagogue could have very easily been people like the very ones who had crucified Jesus—very much like Paul himself had been at one time. Rather than avoiding the synagogue of the Jews because of how wrong they were in their thinking, he goes right to these people and uses their religious belief system to change their thinking about the God that they supposedly believed in.

One of the themes that we see emerging again and again is that the people we read about in the Book of Acts are anything but a segregated group of people who are huddling off in the corner, hoping that they’re not going to be polluted and distorted by the big, bad world out there. But rather, we see people who don’t know any better than to go and to talk to people. They basically say, “Yeah, I used to think like that too, but can I just explain to you what the Lord did for me?” You don’t see them writing off people before they are believers.

DEFINITION OF GOOD

We can come to have what I would call a moralistic orientation about the kingdom of God rather than a righteous orientation. I speak this as a kind of confession and something I know that God is really registering deeply in my own soul. When we think primarily in terms of moralistic kinds of things, many of the great truths of the Kingdom get subtly shifted and even the definition of words get perverted to be something that excludes people, rather than something that wants to embrace them.

For instance, let’s take the definition of “good.” I know that our responsibility as a church is to try somewhat to help people “be good.” But when we think of “good,” many of us can think we’re now a good person because we’re no longer doing the bad things that we used to do. The definition of “good” has become very self-centered. It is about what I have accomplished—what I am no longer doing now that I am a “good” person. Notice that we forget, conveniently, all the other things we haven’t yet stopped doing. I don’t know when you ultimately decide, *I’m a “good” person* because I’ve now nailed one thousand of the seven million, four hundred and forty things that I was doing wrong. When is the bar high enough in your moral life—not only in what you do, but also in what you think—that you can actually call yourself a “good” person?

Goodness for us is about a standard—what I am doing and what I am not doing. That isn't the biblical concept of goodness, whatsoever. Surely God is good, meaning that He isn't doing anything wrong. But way more than just being an isolated definition of proper behavior—the goodness of the Kingdom, the goodness of God—is that He wants to do good to other people regardless of the condition they may be in.

It's like the difference between being right and being righteous. If I'm right, then I'm done. I can wipe my hands and say, “I'm right and you're wrong.” I know what to think about you because I'm right and you're wrong. Isn't that convenient. When I'm good, you're not. When I'm good, I can look down my religious nose and say, “If you get a little bit better, perhaps I can deal with you” or, “Let me feel so sorry for you for how bad you are.” It categorizes people, “Look at us, we're in the club.” We identify ourselves as *good and those other bad people are on the outside*. That's the spirit of the Pharisees. That's not the Spirit of Jesus.

The thing that religious people couldn't understand about Jesus is that He kept relating to people regardless of their moral condition. That is the definition of “good”—wanting to bless, secure, love, people regardless of what it is that they're doing, right or wrong.

Aren't you glad that He is more than just a self-contained “good” and His goodness propels Him to do good to people who are absolutely not living the way that they are supposed to be living? You see, when I am righteous, I not only am right, but I am so filled with love for you, and so concerned about your ultimate condition that I will do whatever I have to do in order to woo you and to draw you into a place of rightness. The goodness of God, the rightness of God, is an indiscriminant love and affection, embrace and welcome for everyone.

Paul started with the religious understanding these people had and changed and challenged their thinking so that many, many people came to believe in the Lord. You'll notice what happens among those Jewish people who believed. They in turn were able to reach out to their neighbors and a great many of the Greeks were also saved. “*Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women*” (Acts 17:4).