

Biggest Loser 8- Opposition

This is message 8 and the final message of this series called the Biggest Loser. It's all been about changing patterns of thinking and habit in order to be a healthier church. My hope and prayer is that you not only have learned and been stirred but that you have also been led to be a more faithful "doer of the word."

It's pretty easy, at first glance, to look at the early church and wish it could be that way now. The church was experiencing phenomenal growth. The believers were meeting every day worshipping, teaching, praying, and fellowshiping. The people were giving sacrificially. Large numbers were coming to Christ and people were being saved every day. On the other hand, probably not too many of us would like to experience the hardship that the church was also going through.

Much persecution of the church in Jerusalem by the Jewish hierarchy, Roman government, and even fellow Jews had led a good many Christians fleeing to safer places. A good many of those who fled Jerusalem had settled in Antioch of Syria. It was the church that quickly sprang up in Antioch that fasted, prayed, laid hands on, and sent out, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas to do the Lord's work.

On that first missionary, evangelizing, church planting journey, Paul and Barnabas traveled to many cities and towns, visiting the synagogues and other places where people gathered and proclaimed the gospel. When they arrived in Antioch of Pisidia, they went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. After the reading of the law and prophets, Paul was given the opportunity to speak. Being primarily a Jewish audience, he went into much detail of

the Old Testament history of the Jewish people with discussion regarding Messiah who would come. Then he, with thorough detail, presented the gospel of Jesus with much emphasis on His resurrection.

⁴² As they were leaving, they begged that these matters be presented to them the following Sabbath. ⁴³ After the synagogue had been dismissed, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who were speaking with them and persuading them to continue in the grace of God. ⁴⁴ The following Sabbath almost the whole town assembled to hear the message of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to oppose what Paul was saying by insulting him. ⁴⁶ Then Paul and Barnabas boldly said: "It was necessary that God's message be spoken to you first. But since you reject it, and consider yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles! ⁴⁷ For this is what the Lord has commanded us: **I have appointed you as a light for the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.**" ⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they rejoiced and glorified the message of the Lord, and all who had been appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ So the message of the Lord spread through the whole region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews incited the religious women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and expelled them from their district. ⁵¹ But shaking the dust off their feet against them, they

proceeded to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. Acts 13:42-52 (HCSB)

It started out being an evangelist/church planter's dream come true. They were given a place to meet, an audience, and an invitation to speak. They were even given the opportunity to return. Some were already being saved and others wanted to hear more! By the next Sabbath, nearly the whole town showed up, Jews and gentiles, to hear the message of Jesus. Without a doubt, something big was happening, the Spirit was moving, lives were being changed for the kingdom. Nothing could possibly get in the way and impede the momentum and power that was growing in Antioch of Pisidia.

Not so fast.....the Jewish leaders, who were initially open to Paul's message, developed a little jealousy issue. They had started out being open and friendly until they realized their control and influence over the people was being threatened. They knew who to go to in order to stir up opposition to the mission team and in short time created a big stink. What started like a wildfire for Jesus was quickly getting a lake of dirty water from hell dumped on it.

What did Paul and his team do? Did they have a pity party? Did they get mad and start a fight? No, they made an intentional appeal to the gentiles to receive Christ in spite of the brewing conflict. They changed their strategy a little bit but they continued doing what they came to do and many gentiles came to salvation. They continued to share the gospel until they were literally run out of town.

1 The same thing happened in Iconium; they entered the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. **2** But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against the brothers. **3** So they stayed there for some time and spoke boldly, in reliance on the Lord, who testified to the message of His grace by granting that signs and wonders be performed through them. **4** But the people of the city were divided, some siding with the Jews and some with the apostles. **5** When an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to assault and stone them, **6** they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian towns called Lystra and Derbe, and to the surrounding countryside. **7** And there they kept evangelizing. Acts 14:1-7 (HCSB)

After an initial great and mighty moving of the Spirit among the Jewish people in and around Jerusalem where many came to faith in Christ, a growing pattern of rejection of the gospel among the Jews began to emerge as the gospel spread to other regions. What happened? How did such a powerful moving of God get squelched so quickly among the Jewish people? The only clue we have that I know of is that which is revealed repeatedly in scripture, first toward Jesus Himslef, then toward the early followers of Christ. The Jewish leaders were so passionately and violently opposed to Jesus and His followers and so successful in stirring up opposition that they were able to almost completely stop the spread of Christianity among the Jewish people, especially in and around Jerusalem, the physical center of the Jewish faith.

It is so true so much of the time. As the leaders go, so goes the country. The leaders of the Jewish nation were ultimately successful in stamping out the movement of Christianity through the Jewish nation. The impact of their negative influence is still being felt today among most, not all, but most Jewish people today.

6 They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia and were prevented by the Holy Spirit from speaking the message in the province of Asia. **7** When they came to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. **8** So, bypassing Mysia, they came down to Troas. **9** During the night a vision appeared to Paul: a Macedonian man was standing and pleading with him, "Cross over to Macedonia and help us!" **10** After he had seen the vision, we immediately made efforts to set out for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to evangelize them. **Acts 16:6-10 (HCSB)**

Why did the Holy Spirit keep Paul and his team from going to certain places at all? Why do the same messengers preaching the same message have great impact in one region and little to no impact on another region? Why do some churches prosper and others not? What if a missionary or pastor is called to place whether there is little receptivity to the gospel?

It could be that a missionary, pastor, church or even group of churches in an area are simply not preaching the message and not ministering and serving in the community like they should and as a result very few are every reached....Or, a missionary,

pastor, church or even association of churches can be a place where the people are just very hardened against the gospel.

There is a war waging in every community where the gospel is being accurately and passionately presented: The mighty working of the Holy Spirit of God to woo souls through conviction, repentance, faith and ultimately salvation and the other side- stubborn, self-centered, self-sufficient, unbelieving sinners who don't think they need God. Who wins? What determines whether a great moving of the Spirit sweeps through a community leading many to repentance and salvation or whether a cold, deadness dominates that same community?

It's more a who than a what. Obviously God moves at times and places that are not always predictable and explicable by our human ways and reasoning. And, there is definitely an element of necessary receptivity to what God would do among a group of people. Paul and Barnabas obviously encountered both types of situations many times on their journeys. In some cities they saw many repent and come to Christ and other cities they had little to no success and sometimes they were even forbidden to go to a city at all.

So what is the lesson? What can we learn from Paul and Barnabas' as well as our own experiences?

Healthy churches:

1. Persevere They stay true to their earthly mission regardless of the receptivity of the people in the community on a particular day or season. I know that you know this but I want to remind you that we are not

responsible for the harvest. We are responsible for the planting and watering..... Remember when the Jewish leaders stirred up people against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town?

⁵¹ But shaking the dust off their feet against them, they proceeded to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. Acts 13:51-52 (HCSB) What did they do in Iconium? Preached! They went on and kept on preaching.

What about us? We can't just move to another city? We keep on preaching and reaching. We don't give up! We don't quit!

⁵ When an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to assault and stone them, ⁶ they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian towns called Lystra and Derbe, and to the surrounding countryside.⁷ And there they kept evangelizing. Acts 14:5-7 (HCSB)

2. Pursue other options When faced with opposition or apparent "failure", like Paul and Barnabas, we must continually be trying new ways and areas to meet people where they are and make Christ known.

⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to oppose what Paul was saying by insulting him. ⁴⁶ Then Paul and Barnabas boldly said: "It was necessary that God's message be spoken to you first. But since you reject it, and consider yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles! Acts

13:45-46 (HCSB) **Note:** They quickly changed their ministry focus!

If something we're doing isn't working, we need to all be willing to change, not the message, but our forms, schedules, programs and activities in order to more effectively make Christ known to Cape Coral. (No sacred cows) This (willingness to change) is a crucial life or death point for most churches. So be sure and don't.....

3. Don't quench the Spirit. (like the Jewish leaders)

19 Don't stifle the Spirit. **1** Thess 5:19 (HCSB) How?

*Avoid conflict and complaining.

*Be open and flexible to what God may be doing in your life and in the church.

*Be receptive to change.

*Expect God to move, speak, and work in your and others' lives.

Remember, it was the established religious leaders and some of their allies who made a major effort and succeeded in squashing what God was doing among the Jewish people.

2 Cor 5:17 Are your old things passing away or are we holding on to them?

4. Receive the message. In the greatest and worst of times, there were always some who joyfully received the message of Christ and others who flat out rejected it often

in the same meeting or city. No matter what cultural trend our nation or your personal group of friends are following, you have the privilege and personal responsibility for your own spiritual welfare to say yes to Jesus.

13 Also, this is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the message about God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the message of God, which also works effectively in you believers. **1**Thess 2:13 (HCSB)