

"Mistaken for the Gods"
Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 14:1-28

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In Iconium

¹ At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. ² But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴ The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. ⁵ There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. ⁶ But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, ⁷ where they continued to preach the good news.

In Lystra and Derbe

⁸ In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰ and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

¹¹ When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵ "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. ¹⁶ In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷ Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." ¹⁸ Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

¹⁹ Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. ²⁰ But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

The Return to Antioch in Syria

²¹ They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. ²³ Paul and Barnabas appointed elders^[a] for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. ²⁴ After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, ²⁵ and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

²⁶ From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. ²⁷ On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all



that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.²⁸ And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 14:23](#) Or *Barnabas ordained elders*; or *Barnabas had elders elected*
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Introduction.

Have you ever thought about how often we put people on pedestals in our culture and almost begin to worship them? Whether it's movie stars, athletes, singers, politicians, business tycoons, or preachers, we have a tendency to give people celebrity status, and we put them on a pedestal. Think about all the media that is devoted to hero worship – *People magazine*, *Sports Illustrated*, *American Idol*, *Entertainment Tonight*.

But have you also ever noticed just how quickly people who are on the top of a pedestal can quickly fall? I think of Mel Gibson who just a few years ago was voted the sexiest man alive, and even Christians revered him for his making of the epic film *The Passion of the Christ*. But now, after some very poor decisions and a recurring battle with alcohol, he has fallen off the pedestal, and he's fallen from grace.

The tables can turn on you rather quickly in this world, whether you're a celebrity or not. Just ask Paul and Barnabas. One minute they are the toast of the town. The next minute people are ready to hurl rocks at them and try to kill them.

I. A Harmful Plot.

You will recall the last couple of weeks we learned how Paul and Barnabas were sent out from the church in Antioch in Syria to be the first missionaries ever. They traveled to the island of Cyprus, Barnabas' home country, and they also went another city named Antioch – Pisidian Antioch in what is now modern day Turkey. This week the story picks up with their travels once again.

There was a great Roman road from the city of Ephesus to the Euphrates River that was called the Via Sebaste. When it reached Pisidian Antioch, it became 2 roads. One went north through the mountains to the Roman colony of Comana about 120 miles away. The other moved southeast across rolling country, past the snow-capped peaks of Sultan Dag, and through the important Greek city of Iconium, about 80 miles away. Another 24 miles southeast the road terminated at the Roman colony of Lystra.

As Paul and Barnabas left Pisidian Antioch, they literally came to a fork in the road, and they were faced with a choice as to the future direction of their mission. They chose the southeastern route, and they headed off to what would become a ministry to people in three very different types of cities in the southern part of the Roman province of what was called Galatia.

Iconium was situated in the heart of the high plateau of south-central Asia Minor in what is modern day Turkey, and it was surrounded by fertile plains and green forests with mountains to its north and east. When Paul and Barnabas arrived in the city, as usual they went to the synagogue first and they shared the Good News with the people there. The text tells us that a large number of both Jews and Gentiles believed their message.



However, opposition soon arose, and it wasn't long before the city was divided regarding the apostles. Some sided with the Jews who rejected their message, and others with the apostles. While there may not have been any official action against them, there was a plot brewing among some of the people to mistreat Paul and Barnabas and even to try to kill them. The opposition must have been significant, because the apostles took the plot seriously enough to leave Iconium and head east to the cities of Lystra and Derbe.

The message of God's truth sometimes divides people. It did back then; it still does today. Paul would later write to the Christians in Corinth that what some people think is a message of foolishness and weakness is regarded by others as the truth and power of God. The Gospel has the capacity to divide people, and while some are attracted to the message of God's saving grace Christ, others are angered by it.

Jesus was a dividing line, and He split history into two – BC and AD. It's hard to remain neutral about Christ if you take His words seriously. Jesus said that opposition would come to His followers if they stood for Him, and He even predicted their persecution. But our Lord also encouraged them to remain faithful even when they were rejected – to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and not to return evil for evil but to return evil with good. Our Lord said, *"In this world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world"* (Jn. 16:33).

On a wintry Tuesday morning in December, 1170 AD, four knights landed on the southern coast of England and traveled to the cathedral in Canterbury undetected. They arrived around noon and found tools that had been left by some workmen, and with these tools they broke into the cathedral in search of Thomas a Becket, a man for all seasons.

You see, Thomas was the Archbishop of Canterbury, and he had been appointed to the post by Henry II. The two men had grown up together, and Thomas had served Henry in many government offices, including as chancellor. Thomas had a love for the finer things in life, and together Henry and Thomas used to party together. But when Thomas was appointed Archbishop, he experienced a sincere conversion to Christ, and he could no longer go on living as he had before. He abandoned his expensive habits, began to live a life of holiness, and he sought to honor Christ in every way. This led to a defiance of Henry's abusive authority, and after a long and bitter conflict, Henry gave the orders for the four knights to murder Becket. As Thomas was at vespers celebrating communion at the altar of the Canterbury Cathedral, they assassinated him.

People have always plotted against the work of God in the world. They did with Thomas a Becket, they did with Paul and Barnabas, and they may with you and me.

II. A Mistaken Identity.

No mention is made of a synagogue in Lystra, which suggests it was predominantly Gentile in its population. So Paul spoke to a crowd of people that gathered in the marketplace. One of them was a crippled man who had never walked before, but Paul saw he had the faith to be healed and he told the man to stand up. The man jumped to his feet and began to walk, and everyone was amazed. This miracle was very similar to the one Peter performed back in Acts 3, and the parallel was not lost on Luke the physician.



The healing amazed the crowd, and they shouted in their Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas was identified as Zeus, and Paul was identified as Hermes, Zeus' son who was the spokesperson for the gods.

About 50 years earlier, the Latin poet Ovid wrote in his *Metamorphoses* about an ancient local legend. According to the legend, Zeus and Hermes once came to the Phrygian hill country disguised as mortals looking for lodging. Although they asked at a thousand homes, no one took them in. Finally, an elderly couple, who lived in a humble cottage of straw and reeds, welcomed them with a meal that put a strain on the couple's meager resources. In appreciation, the gods transformed the cottage into a temple with a golden roof and marble columns. The couple was appointed priest and priestess of the temple, and instead of dying, they became an oak and linden tree respectively. The gods then destroyed by a flood the houses of the people who had been so inhospitable.

The Lystran people knew this story, and assuming that the gods had revisited the earth again, they were eager not to suffer the same fate as did their unfriendly neighbors. The people shouted in their language a belief that the gods had visited them once again, but Paul and Barnabas were slow to figure out what was going on because they didn't speak the native language. It dawned on them, however, what was taking place when the priest of Zeus brought bulls and wreaths, intending to offer sacrifices to them. That is when the apostles rushed into the crowd and protested their intentions. Paul and Barnabas insisted they weren't gods, only human beings just like everyone else in Lystra.

The impromptu sermon Paul delivered there on the spot had to do with the futility of idolatry and the need for belief in the one true God. He talked about the goodness of the Lord as demonstrated in nature, and he said that in the past God let all people go their own way, but now He had sent Paul and Barnabas, mere men, to bring them the Good News of Jesus Christ. With some difficulty the apostles persuaded the people not to offer sacrifices to them.

Later on, however, some Jewish people from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium traveled to Lystra, and they stirred up the people against the apostles. The stoning which they had planned for in Iconium now took place in Lystra. It was not a judicial execution; rather it was a lynching. But they weren't successful in killing Paul, and the apostle revived and went back into the town. The next morning the apostles left for Derbe, a city about 60 miles way.

How quickly the people turned on Paul and Barnabas. One day they are ready to worship them as gods, and the next they try to kill them. How fickle people can be sometimes.

Several years ago, a new coach was selected to lead the UCLA Bruins basketball program, and he sought out the legendary former coach John Wooden for advice. He asked Coach Wooden if there was anything he should keep in mind as he began the job at UCLA. Wooden, who won 10 national championships while he coached at UCLA, thought for a moment and then said, "Just remember, son, you're never as good as they say you are, and you're never as bad as they say you are." What great advice to remember.

It is dangerous to assign god-like qualities to any person. We tend to hold in too high a regard our leaders, especially our spiritual leaders, and when they disappoint us we are ready to crucify them. The fall from a pedestal is a great distance, and any time we put someone up on one they are bound to disappoint us.



In my own life I've experienced the pain of these things myself. Some people put their pastor on a pedestal only to discover later on they are a sinner just like everyone else. I know I'll disappoint some of you at some point in the future. It's bound to happen. I'm not perfect, and I make mistakes. And when that happens, I hope you won't take up rocks to stone me. We should learn from this lesson in Lystra. It is a dangerous things to assign god-like qualities to anyone.

III. The Return Home.

The only thing Luke tells us about the mission in Derbe is that Paul and Barnabas preached the Good News there, and a large number of people became disciples. After this they retraced their steps, and in spite of the danger they revisited the same 3 cities in Galatia they had been to earlier on their journey - Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. Along the way, they encouraged the new Christians, and they organized the young churches and appointed elders in each city. Paul cautioned these new believers to remember that Christians will go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God, and he told them not to be surprised when opposition came their way as followers of Jesus Christ.

After their return through Galatia, Paul and Barnabas headed home. On their arrival back at Syrian Antioch, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done during their adventure. Can you imagine hearing these stories for the first time? In particular, they told how God had opened the door of faith to more and more Gentiles. And having been away on this journey for the better part of 2 years, they stayed in Antioch for a long time with the disciples. Whenever you have been on the road working hard for the Lord, you need encouragement and rest when you get home. It was probably during this time Paul wrote his Letter to the Galatians which we have in the NT today.

Conclusion/Application.

As we close this morning, I would like to ask you a question. In what ways are you fickle in your commitment to Christ? Are you committed to Jesus, living for Him one day, but then the next it is very hard to discern that you are even a believer? Where do we need to grow in our consistency of being a follower of Jesus every day?

In verse 22 the passage says that when Paul and Barnabas were making their return trip, they strengthened *"the disciples and [encouraged] them to remain true to the faith."* Another way to translate this verse is "they encouraged them to continue in the faith." Paul and Barnabas urged these new believers to remember that, as Eugene Peterson puts it, the Christian life is a long obedience in the same direction. It will require persistence to stay in the faith, and continuance is the test of reality in the Christian life. If it's real, you will continue in it.

Many people start out well in the Christian life. They say, "Yes, I believe." But somewhere along the way they drop out and give up. God calls us to persevere. How we live says a lot about Who we follow.

There was a man who was running late to work, so he drove a bit more aggressively than usual. Someone cut him off in traffic, and it really ticked him off. So he laid on the horn and flipped the guy off and began to cuss him out. He cut around the car next to him and raced



through a yellow light just as it was turning red. It was then he saw the flashing lights of a police car behind him, and they pulled him over.

But this wasn't just a routine stop. The police ordered him out the car with his hands on his head, and they had their guns pointed at him. The man stumbled out of the car bewildered and scared, and he couldn't figure out what all this was about. After they checked his driver's license and the plates on the car, everything calmed down and they just wrote him a ticket.

The man asked the police why they had used such a show of force. The police replied, "Well when we saw you honk your horn so loudly and flip the guy off and yell at him and run the red light, we figured you had stolen the car, because the bumper sticker on the back of your car says "Jesus is my Co-pilot." We figured you couldn't be a Christian and drive that way!

Will someone mistake your identity as a follower of Christ this week? Let's do all we can in the power of God's Spirit to live for Him in such a way that people will see that our identity is in Christ. Amen.

