

Man without Regeneration

Psalm 147, Acts 14:13–18

Paul and Barnabas had been run out of two cities—Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium—for preaching the gospel. Then, as now, people were offended by the gospel. Why is that? The gospel is the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. It is the best news anyone could ever hear. Every person the world over should have the opportunity to hear it. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” By his sinless life and sacrificial death he purchased our salvation—something that the richest person on earth could never afford. Christ saves all who come to him, giving them forgiveness of sins and eternal life as a free gift. Why do many people find that offensive? Because it involves a recognition that we are sinners, that we have offended a holy God, that we personally have fallen short of God’s standard of absolute perfection. We like to flatter ourselves and think that we are OK as we are, that we are basically good, that we *deserve* heaven. The gospel challenges these assumptions. We do not approach God as equals, but as beggars. We have no standing before a holy God except through Christ.

After getting tossed out of Iconium, Paul and Barnabas arrive in Lystra, which is not a big city but a small town. Apparently there was no synagogue where the missionary duo could begin their ministry, as had been the case in Antioch and Iconium. Paul was not preaching to people that had a background in the Bible. He begins to do open-air preaching, telling anyone who would listen. As he preaches, a lame man who had never walked in his whole life was captivated by his message, and the Holy Spirit revealed to Paul that this was a man that had faith to be *saved* (translated in our text as “healed,” v. 9). Paul commanded the man, “Stand up straight on your feet!” And the man didn’t just *stand* up; he *leaped* up and walked, instantly healed by the power of Christ! The townspeople mistakenly thought that Paul and Barnabas were pagan deities. Paul and Barnabas didn’t understand that right away because the people were speaking in the Lycaonian language—a foreign language to them. But when the priest of Zeus showed up, bringing oxen and garlands to sacrifice to his pagan god, they realized what was happening and tried to talk the people out of it. Out of a zeal for God’s glory they tore their clothes and ran in among the crowd, crying, “Men, why are you *doing* these things?”

Last week we looked at this text and pointed out that there are only two options: worshipping the true God or worshipping worthless idols. There is no third option: sitting on the fence, not worshipping God, but not worshipping idols either. If you worship idols—whether they be tangible images or the intangible idols of self-fulfillment and happiness—then you are an idolater, not a Christian. If you fail to worship Christ, you are an idolater. If your own will is more important to you than Christ’s, then you are an idolater. May God grant us all grace to submit to him.

This morning I want to look more deeply at Paul’s sermon. It is very brief—only 91 words in the New King James Version. It is perhaps only a summary of all that he said. But its contents are different from his sermons before Jewish audiences. John Stott observes that this is Paul’s “only recorded address to illiterate pagans.”¹ In Acts 17 Paul again speaks to pagans, the “men of Athens.” But in that sermon he quotes poets and makes allusions to literature; he is speaking to Epicurean and Stoic philosophers—men who obviously were literate. In our text this morning he addresses the men of Lystra—a small country town. These men have no background in the Bible. They were not men who were used to hearing the Law and the Prophets read in the synagogue every Sabbath. Paul could not reason with them from the Scriptures that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Paul adapted his message to his audience, not changing the content of his message—he still spoke the truth of God—but rather citing truths which are intuitively known by every person on the face of the earth. As we examine this message, let us consider three points, first: without regeneration, man

1. Is an incurable idolater

The men of Lystra were about to sacrifice oxen to a false god, known to the Greeks as Zeus and to the Romans as Jupiter. Zeus was regarded as the king of the gods of Mount Olympus—god of the sky, lightning, thunder, law, order and justice. But though many people at that time believed in him, he is a figment of human imagination. He existed only in the human mind. He is not real. Moreover, he was a morally flawed character, a despicable role model. Married to Hera, queen of the gods, he was nonetheless infamous for erotic escapades which resulted in the birth of other, lesser gods. The seventh commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” requires sexual purity. God requires purity because he himself is pure. Unlike human rulers, God would never have “rules for thee but not for me.” He requires faithfulness because he is faithful; he requires truth because he is truth; he requires contentment because he is content; he requires holiness because he himself is holy. God’s law is holy, just and good because God himself is holy, just and good.

God had healed a man who had been a cripple from his mother’s womb. This should have elicited praise and worship for the true God, but instead, the men of Lystra attributed the miracle to their heathen idols. The men of Lystra were worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever (Rom. 1:25). They had horribly misunderstood a miracle of God and were about to compound their error by sacrificing to Zeus, not to the true God, Yahweh. Paul and Barnabas, far from being flattered at being called gods by the men of Lystra, were horrified at the detestable idolatry that was taking place. They tore

¹ *Message of Acts*, 231, cited in *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software)

their clothes in a costly expression of pain and sorrow and revulsion. The duties required in the second commandment are, among other things, “disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship.”² Paul and Barnabas correctly identified what the men of Lystra were doing as false worship and rightly detested and opposed it.

The gospel requires that all men turn away from useless idols and put their trust in the living God. The word translated “useless” means *empty, fruitless, powerless, lacking truth*. One reason people worship idols is because their idols are flawed characters, just as we are. They make us look better. But when we compare ourselves with the true God, we, like Job of old, must abhor ourselves and repent in dust and ashes. We must say, “Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?” (Ex. 15:11). The God of Scripture, unlike Zeus, is “glorious in holiness.” He is impeccable, honorable, faithful, true. When we properly apprehend him, we must worship him, dedicate our whole lives to him. The God of Scripture is wholly other, not a part of this creation. On the other hand, we are mere humans. Paul addresses the idol worshippers of Lystra with the words, “*Men*, why are you doing these things? We also are *men* with the same nature as you.”

Paul uses two different words for “men.” The first is ἀνὴρ, ἀνδρός. This is the root of the word *android*. This word refers to man in contrast to *woman*, man in contrast to *boy*—*man*, with a special emphasis on manliness. When Paul cries out, “Men, why are you doing these things?” he is identifying with his audience—adult males who were responsible before God for their actions, adults who would one day stand before God to give account. God’s word declares, “to whom much is given, much shall be required” (Luke 12:48). Those who have been privileged to grow up to adulthood, who have had ample opportunity to contemplate the power of God in creation, who are of sound mind, who have been allowed to assume the responsibilities of adulthood, are the more responsible before God. Just as an adult male is more responsible before the law than a child, so an adult man, with responsibility to take dominion over creation as God’s vicegerent, is more responsible than a boy who has not attained the age of majority. An adult male or female is responsible to abide by the terms of a contract that has been voluntarily entered into. Paul was saying to his hearers, “You and I are all of us responsible before God.”

Later in the same verse Paul uses a different word for *man*. He says, “We also are *men* with the same nature as you.” Here he uses the more basic term for man (ἄνθρωπος, the root of *anthropology*): *human being*—man in contrast to plants and animals, man in contrast to God. Paul was challenging his audience to recognize

² Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 108 (*Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, p. 953)

that we are mere men—humans. We did not come into being on our own; we owe our very existence to the God of heaven. There is a contrast between men and God. Paul will later write, “For there is one God, and one mediator between *God and men* (ἄνθρωποι), the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). The one mediator, Jesus Christ, is himself both God and man—fully God, fully man, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, very God of very God, begotten, not made, of the same substance with the Father; who was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. The man Christ Jesus is absolutely unique—fully God, fully man, uniquely qualified by virtue of his Person to be our Savior. No one else has his unique qualifications, no one else can bring us into favor with God. Man without regeneration is an incurable idolater. The book of Revelation informs us that “*idolaters*, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Rev. 21:8). At the final day, those who are saved by Christ enter into the celestial city, but outside are the “sexually immoral and murderers and *idolaters*, and whoever loves and practices a lie” (Rev. 22:15). If you love any false idol—even your own happiness—more than Christ, you are excluded from heaven. May God grant us the grace to love him supremely and reject all false worship. Man without regeneration is an incurable idolater, secondly, man without regeneration

2. Turns his back on the God that he knows

With the pagans of Lystra Paul does not begin with the truth of God in *Scripture*, rather, he begins with the truth of God in *creation*. All people do not yet have the Bible in their own language, but all people have the witness of the orderly universe, the creation. Paul speaks of “the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them.” Here, Paul emphasizes God as *Creator*. This, of course, is where the Bible itself begins: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Here is a verse that our Sunday school children have memorized; here is a truth that every single human needs to fix firmly in mind: there is a Creator God to whom we are responsible.

Paul addresses people who have an entirely different background than his own, men who did not grow up learning the Hebrew Scriptures, who had no acquaintance with Judaism, who didn’t worship the God of Abraham. But he and his hearers had a common humanity; together they stood before “the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them.” Paul is not apologetic about his message. It is a matter of life or death. The gods of the heathen are idols—dead images, figments of the human imagination. To reject the living God who created the heavenly bodies, the earth, the sea and all living creatures in order to serve a false god like Zeus or Hermes, who is a figment of human imagination and doesn’t exist, is insanity—a rejection of the true God. Paul doesn’t try to convince his hearers of the existence of this God. As he will later

teach in Romans 1, men intuitively *know* God but “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” Men know that God is the Creator, they know his eternal power and divinity (θεϊότης).³ They are without excuse. They exchange the truth of God for a lie, and worship and serve “the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Rom. 1:25). They are guilty as sinful idolaters before a holy God. As we look at Paul’s sermon we see a description of man apart from the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration. This was the plight of all of us before we were converted, before the Spirit opened our hearts and minds and gave us understanding.

If we have not been born again, this will not make sense to us. Our minds and hearts are darkened. We do not yet realize how rejecting the true God and worshipping idols is an affront to the God of heaven. He is our Creator. He created us to be his worshippers. When we fail to worship him, he is offended, and he is angry. The wrath of God abides on us. At the final day we will be ejected from his presence forever.

The Lord’s supper is a picture of the true fellowship with God that is enjoyed by the saints. Those who are brought into fellowship with God by faith are invited to eat and drink before God at the Lord’s table. At the final day they will be invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb where they will enjoy fellowship with God eternally. If you turn your back on the true God in this life, he will turn his back on you for eternity.

Let’s consider a third point: without regeneration man

3. Misunderstands the witness of nature

Paul asserts that God “in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” What does he mean when he states that in bygone generations he allowed all nations to walk in their own ways? As stated in our Old Testament text, “He declares His word to Jacob, His statutes and His judgments to Israel. He has *not dealt thus with any nation*; and as for His judgments, they have not known them” (Ps. 147:19–20).

God had a unique relationship with Israel in Old Testament times. He chose to reveal himself to Israel so that Israel in turn could bring the light of the gospel to the nations. He chose Israel out of his pure grace, not because they deserved it. In the words of Moses, “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty

³ “Godhead,” NKJV (Rom. 1:20)

hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh” (Deut. 7:7–8). As the Psalmist observed, God declared his word to Jacob, his statutes and judgments to Israel. He never dealt that way with any other nation. In Old Testament times God allowed all the nations—people groups—to walk in their own ways. He did not prevent them from coming to him. They desired to walk in their own ways, just as they desire now. They love their culture and their traditions more than the pure worship of God, whether that be Shinto, Buddhist, Hindu, Islam, pagan, or one of the many unfaithful expressions of Christianity that worship with images or have prayers to Mary or the saints and have abandoned the gospel of God’s free grace. God allows people who are committed to their false religions to walk in their own ways. “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” All of us are duty-bound to give up our own ways that are contrary to the way of God and to commit ourselves to walk in his way, “the way of peace.” His way alone is good and brings eternal life.

But in spite of the fact that under the Old Testament God permitted the nations to walk in their own ways, Paul contends that “nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” Here, Paul refers to God’s witness to himself in the works of providence. Scripture teaches that God made “all things of nothing, by the word of his power, in the space of six days, and all very good.”⁴ On the seventh day God rested from his work of creation. The creation was complete, it was all “very good”—exactly the way God wanted it. But God didn’t stop working entirely. No! Jesus declared, “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work” (John 5:17). What has God been doing since the end of the creation week? He has undertaken the works of providence. These are defined in our Catechism as “his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.”⁵ It is to these works of providence that Paul refers in his message at Lystra: “He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” All through the many centuries that God was allowing the nations to walk in their own ways he continued to give rain and fruitful seasons. He sends his rain on the just and on the unjust and he blesses the earth with crops—“wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man’s heart.”⁶ God doesn’t have to do this. There is no superior power which could force him to do it, and our sinful race deserves his wrath, not his mercy. Why does he do it? Our text gives the answer: God is witnessing to

⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 9

⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 11

⁶ Matt. 5:45, Ps. 104:15

himself in his work of providence. This witness is visible to every single man, woman and child in the whole world. We intuitively see it, yet we take it for granted. We falsely conclude that God *owes* it to us. We grumble during times of drought but fail to give thanks when God gives sufficient rains. We grumble when food prices go up, but we waste food and fail to give thanks for it.

Brothers and sisters, there is a God in heaven who not only gave us an orderly creation where gravity and time and the seasons of the year are predictable, but where we cannot help but see the hand of God upholding all things by the word of his power. We are unthankful, and at the final day we will give account for that.

Here, then, is the hopeless estate of man without regeneration, without the supernatural reviving of God's Spirit. Without regeneration, man (1) is an incurable idolater, he (2) turns his back on the God that he knows, and he (3) misunderstands the witness of nature. Without regeneration man is spiritually dead and lost in sin, bound for a Christless eternity. Oh, how we need the Holy Spirit's regenerating work, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, renewing our wills, and persuading and enabling us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel. Let us call out to God for his mercy. He will save us. Amen.