

July 31, 2016

Church Planting  
*Testing Your Spiritual Maturity*  
Acts 17:10-15

**Opening words:** If you were with me last week, then you will remember we are in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. The chapter began in controversy. Paul, Silas and Timothy were in the city of Thessalonica. Paul went to the synagogue on three consecutive Sabbaths and told the locals about Jesus. Some responded to the message in a positive way and accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Others responded to the message in a negative way and became jealous of their success. They created a controversy. That story ended when our missionaries fled to Berea. That is where we find them today.

This is sermon number thirty-nine in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. Do you remember my goal? I am preaching through the Book of Acts. I am doing this for one reason. I am hoping to reconnect with the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who created the church in the very beginning and it will be the Holy Spirit who revives the church again. Human effort and determination are not enough. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 17:10-15. Let me call this message *Testing Your Spiritual Maturity*.

**Acts 17:10-15** As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. <sup>11</sup> Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. <sup>12</sup> As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. <sup>13</sup> But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. <sup>14</sup> The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. <sup>15</sup> Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

On April the fourth of this year, Abington, Massachusetts was shocked by the news. Franklin and Manuela Teixeira were killed in their car. They were not killed due to reckless driving or alcohol. No one was to blame. They did nothing wrong. They were simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. They were killed when a rotten tree collapsed and hit their car during a wind storm. They never saw it coming. I hate stories like that one for many reasons.

One of the reasons is, I have thirty trees on my lot. I am relieved when every storm passes and all of the trees are standing. Every time I mow my lawn or rake my leaves I wonder about my trees. I am not an arborist. I know nothing about trees. For all I

know, all of my trees could be hollow and ready to fall at any moment. I pray I am wrong.

I know nothing about trees, but I do know a little about the church. I fear we have some hollow Christians. Let's not call them hollow. Let's call them spiritually immature? They look good on the outside, but know nothing about God. Do you know any spiritually immature Christians? It is possible to be a wonderful church member and still know nothing about God. Could it be you are a spiritually immature Christian? Could it be your spiritual maturity is a mystery even to you? If so, then this message is for you. If you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves this morning in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. This week's story begins where last week's story ended. Paul and Silas are fleeing from Thessalonica. To be more exact, they fled Thessalonica at night and headed for Berea. That means they traveled fifty miles to another province. They must have been hoping for a better outcome. The problem was, they didn't learn too much from their past mistakes. As soon as they arrive, they do the same exact thing. They headed to the synagogue and told everyone about Jesus. However, this time the plan worked. The Bereans were eager to hear about Jesus. They examined the scriptures and found Paul's words to be true. Verse twelve tells us, many were saved. In that group were both Jews and Greeks. Isn't it too bad the story doesn't end there. The problem is, our reading continues. When the Thessalonians heard about what was happening in Berea, they decided to come for a visit. They traveled the fifty miles and caused all kinds of problems. They agitated the crowd so much that Paul had to flee again. This time, he fled to Athens. Silas and Timothy caught up with him later. Can I be honest with you?

I read this story countless times this week. Each time, I saw something more clearly. There are many similarities between this week's story and last week's story. Both the Thessalonians and the Bereans heard the same message in the same exact place, the synagogue. Both the Thessalonians and the Bereans both heard that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. Both the Thessalonians and the Bereans heard how he was crucified at the hands of sinful men. Both the Thessalonians and the Bereans heard how he was raised from the dead. Both the Thessalonians and the Bereans heard how Jesus ascended into heaven. Both the Thessalonians and the Bereans heard that Jesus was their only hope of salvation. Both communities heard the same exact things, but both communities reacted to Paul's message in completely different ways. The Thessalonians reacted to Paul's message in a negative way; they formed an ugly mob. The Bereans accepted Paul's message and helped the ministry. So what made the Thessalonians' and the Bereans' reactions so different?

There is only one thing that separates the two, spiritual maturity. Verse eleven says the Bereans were of more noble character. Luke never described the Thessalonians using those terms. The Bereans were spiritually mature. The Thessalonians were spiritually immature. Why is that important to us? The reason is simple. Look at the story one

more time. The spiritually mature Bereans helped the ministry. They protected Paul and got him to Athens. The spiritually immature Thessalonians just came to agitate the group. In other words, they came to frustrate the ministry. Let me ask you this question. Should we send your mail to Berea, or should we send your mail to Thessalonica? In other words, is our ministry benefitting from your presence, or are you a hindrance? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Today, I want to help you discover your spiritual maturity by giving you a little test. I did not create the test myself. It came from the internet highway. I found it on *Crosswalk.com*. There are a variety of tests to measure your spiritual maturity, but I chose this one for a simple reason. It is just so practical. This test will not take long. There are only seven questions. It is important that you answer the questions for yourself, not the person sitting next to you. If you do that, then this exercise is pointless. Let me say one more thing before I begin. Tests are not given to take you down. Tests are given to build you up. Spiritual infants look a great deal like human infants. They are self-centered, crying, impatient, helpless, noisy and messy. If you are ready to begin your test, say, **"Amen!"**

- 1. Are you self-centered?** Spiritual infants are self-centered. They want to know what they are going to get out of church and they evaluate their church experience based on their expectations. Their happiness is the primary goal. They seem to have forgotten that church is not about their comfort, needs and wants. Church is about God. Spiritual infants are self-centered. Aren't you glad we don't have any of those people here? This is the question: Are you self-centered? If you have answered that question for yourself, say, **"Amen!"**
- 2. Are you noisy?** Spiritual infants are noisy. In other words, they cry a lot when things don't go their way. They cry when the energy of the church doesn't benefit them. They cry when money is being spent on other generations. They cry when money isn't spent on their ministry or interests. They cry when other groups, not theirs, gets praised. They cry at the mention of any mission project because they won't benefit. If you have ever heard someone say, "Why do we help those other people? We have problems right here"? Then, you are listening to a spiritually immature person. The church is the only organization that exists for the benefits of her non-members. Aren't you glad we don't have any of those people here? This is the question: Are you noisy? If you have an answer to that question, say, **"Amen!"**
- 3. Are you messy?** Spiritual infants are messy. Infants never clean up after themselves. This church is a busy place. We have no shortage of activities. That has been one of my goals from the very beginning. That is a good thing, but it generates a certain amount of tension. When I walk through this building on Sunday evenings, I am amazed at the mess people leave. No, I am shocked at the mess that people leave. Generally, we tell people to leave the room the way

you found it. It doesn't happen. Part of the problem is laziness. Part of the problem is selfishness. This is my opinion. It isn't good enough to find the room the way you found it. It would be nice if you left the room in a condition to help the next group. Spiritual infants never clean up after themselves. Aren't you glad we don't have any of those people here? This is the question: Are you messy? If you have an answer to that question, say, "**Amen!**"

4. **Are you impatient?** Spiritual infants are impatient. The one thing infants can't do is wait. Can I state the obvious? Our society is built on speed. Do you need an example? Fast food is a big hit in America for one reason, it is fast. That is good enough. It isn't even good food, but it is fast. There came a point when fast food wasn't fast enough, so someone created the first drive-through window. There is nothing really wrong with fast, but there is one problem. God does things in his time. It may not be fast. Have you ever wished God would move faster? That is why so many struggle with the church. Everything seems to move at a snail's pace. Group dynamics tells us we can only go as fast as our slowest member. That is real slow! That frustrates many. This is the question: Are you impatient? Aren't you glad we don't have any of those people here? If you have an answer to that question, say, "**Amen!**"
5. **Are you defined by what you can't do?** Spiritual infants are defined by what they can't do. Spiritual infants can't cooperate. Spiritual infants can't get along. Spiritual infants can't apologize and mean it. Spiritual infants can't trust others. Spiritual infants can't support other groups. Spiritual infants can't even talk to others outside of their group. However, they can criticize just about everything and everyone. Aren't you glad we don't have any of those people here? This is the question: Are you defined by what you can't do? If you have an answer to that question, then say, "**Amen!**"
6. **Are you explosive?** Spiritual infants are explosive. In other words, they are always mad. Does anyone here know of someone who is mad at a church? Recently, I received some hate mail. The woman wrote it to me to explain why she was leaving. It was well outlined and written. Someone accused her of stealing a pie at a church dinner. I'm sure it was a misunderstanding. Today, she is sitting at home alone, teaching us a lesson. What she taught was that she was spiritually immature. Spiritual infants are explosive. Do you know of anyone who is mad at church? Are you glad we don't have any of those people here? This is the question: Are you explosive? If you have an answer to that question, say, "**Amen!**" Here is the last question:
7. **Are you irresponsible?** Spiritual infants are irresponsible. They are great at expecting a lot out of others, but expect nothing from themselves. There is a rule called the 80/20 rule. It says that 80% of the church work is done by 20% of the people. It crosses over into finances. 80% of the money is given by 20%

of the people. On bad days, I think it should be the 90/10 rule. I have asked you this question many times. If everyone did as much as you; if everyone gave as much as you, would this ministry expand or contract? Spiritual infants are irresponsible. Aren't you glad we don't have any of those people here? This is the question: Are you irresponsible? If you have an answer to that question, then say, "**Amen!**" So how did you do on your test? Are you a spiritually mature person, like the Bereans, who helped the ministry? Are you a spiritually immature person, like the Thessalonians, who frustrated the ministry?

My grandparents lived in Brooklyn, New York. When I was young they came twice a year, during the summer and during the holidays. When I was real young they traveled by bus. We would pick them up at the Greyhound bus station in Warren. After my grandfather died, my grandmother flew into the area. We would pick her up at the airport that now connects us to the world, the Youngstown-Warren Regional Airport. It really didn't matter how she arrived, the scene was always the same. The reunion was always genuine. I would run up to her and give her a hug. Grandma would say, "Russell, let me look at you!" She would pull me back, square my shoulders and pat me on my backside. Then, she would say, "You have gotten so big. You are maturing and becoming a man." My dad, who despised my grandmother and hated her visits, would always respond sarcastically, "What is the big deal? If the boy wasn't growing, then there would be a problem." He was right, yet he was so wrong. Can I ask you a question?

Are you growing? I don't mean, are you taller. I don't mean, are you heavier. I mean, are you maturing? Are you growing in the faith? If your answer is "no" or "I'm not sure", then there is a problem. Today is a good day to test your spiritual maturity and start working on that person God intended you to be from the very beginning.

Will you pray with me?