

SUNDAY SCHOOL NOURISHES THE HEART

Acts 17:11-12

INTRODUCTION:

Sunday School has its origins in Gloucester England in the year 1780. Robert Raikes became convinced by his work among prison inmates, that an early religious teaching for children would help keep them from a life of crime. By default, the schools he started were conducted on the one day of the week that children didn't work: Sunday. Raikes started his first school for the children of chimney sweeps in what was called, Sooty Alley, Gloucester (opposite the city prison) in 1780. Described as 'cheery, talkative, flamboyant and warm-hearted, Raikes was able to use his position as owner and editor of the *Gloucester Journal* to publicize the work. Almost from the start, adults attended Sunday School in the hopes of improving their reading and writing skills and increasing their knowledge of the Bible.

Sunday Schools were organized for the benefit of people of either sex and of any age who could not afford to educate themselves. In the beginning, Sunday Schools were run by paid teachers to instruct pupils in reading and copying from the Bible.

These schools had the additional purpose of controlling children's activities. Employment of children in industries had brought together youth of similar ages who worked together on weekdays and spent their Sundays playing in the alleys and on the wharves, to the great disturbance of the families in the vicinity of such places, and the profanation of the day. Sunday schools provided an alternative to Sunday rowdiness. The schools would also teach proper behavior, enforcing cleanliness, providing Sunday clothing, and reprimanding children for lying, swearing, talking in an indecent manner, or other misbehavior.

By the year 1791, the Sunday School movement had spread to the United States. At the time of Raikes' death, there were some 500,000 children enrolled in various Sunday Schools. That's half-a-million kids (plus adults)! Because of the idea of one man!

While Robert Raikes originated the idea of Sunday School, he did not create the concept of Christian education and Bible study. Notable in the history of those who were early students of the Word were the Christians in the town of Berea. Luke, the physician who wrote the book of Acts, says something grand about the Christians in Berea. Luke wrote, "*Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*"

There was a time when almost every church in our brotherhood had an adult Sunday School class named Bereans. It was believed that these Christians in Berea were worth emulating. I still believe they are. I want you to note how they responded to the message Paul brought them.

I. **THEY RECEIVED THE APOSTLE'S TEACHING**

Luke says of the Bereans that they were of noble character because "*they received the message.*"

Over the years of military conflict, communication has always been a critical need. Smoke signals from hilltops, semaphore flags from exposed ship decks, notes transported by carrier pigeons, radio transmissions from code-talkers and now sophisticated electronic data transmission have all been used to get messages from the commanders to the front lines and back again.

Experience has taught us that a message that is sent is not always a message that has been received and understood. A classic example is the story that is told of the Duke of Wellington's battle with Napoleon.

In 1808 the British and other Allies pinned their hopes on soldier-statesman Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, who was sent to lead Allied Troops into battle against Napoleon. The message that came through to them on June 18, 1815 was one of defeat. The flashing light from Winchester Cathedral sent out the code, "W-E-L-L-I-N-G-T-O-N D-E-F-E-A-T-E-D" and then the fog closed in and the message light couldn't be seen anymore. "WELLINGTON DEFEATED!"

It was a day of defeat in the minds of the Allied Troops. Wellington had often been criticized in Britain for partial victories and for retreats he had undertaken. So when the British heard that he and his troops had been defeated they were not greatly surprised, but you can imagine the despair that filled their hearts and minds. It would mean the French emperor would go on in his military conquests. It would mean that any hope of winning the Napoleonic wars was ended. These were moments of despair.

The British were astounded, dismayed and overwhelmed at the message "Wellington defeated!" But after awhile the fog lifted and the signal lights sent the message again: "W-E-L-L-I-N-G-T-O-N D-E-F-E-A-T-E-D T-H-E E-N-E-M-Y!" "WELLINGTON DEFEATED THE ENEMY!" What a different message! What a different outcome! Napoleon had literally met his waterloo!

As you can imagine, the British eagerly embraced the message of Wellington's victory over Napoleon. And the Bereans eagerly embraced

the message of Jesus' victory over Satan. In fact, the text specifically says they received the message with great eagerness.

How do you receive the message of the Word of God? Do you look forward to the sermon each week? Do you look forward to your own personal Bible study? If you are like the Bereans, you receive the message eagerly and that should draw you into our Sunday School classes. We have classes for all ages. And since most of the people in this room are adults, let me just tell you that we have three adult classes. Elinor Staser, Sandra Brandon and I all teach adult classes.

The first two are based on the lesson materials from Standard Publishing Company. Elinor's class is made up of women and Sandy's is both men and women. My class does not follow the Standard Publishing Company material. Currently we are studying the book, Cat and Dog Theology, which is the same book we are using here on Sunday evenings.

Our Sunday School begins at 9 A.M. on Sundays and all three adult classes are in the New Life Center. Coffee and donuts are provided. And I promise you that you will be welcomed and we will not do anything to embarrass you. Please come and study with us. We'd love to have you. Let's all be like the Bereans who received the message eagerly.

II. **THEY EXAMINED THE APOSTLE'S TEACHING**

The Bereans also examined the apostle's teaching. It is to their credit that they had open hearts and open minds to receive the Word as it was taught to them. But of even more note is the fact that they examined what they heard to see if it was true.

"Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

Too many people are so open-minded that their brains have fallen out. They seem to accept any old thing they are told. The Internet is a wonderful tool but it sure has spread a lot of lies, hasn't it. Almost every day, I get email messages that tell me that if I send this on to a dozen other people, some amazing and wonderful something will pop up on my computer screen. I have yet to ever meet anyone who got the free laptop they were promised, the free trip to Spain or the free gift certificate they thought they would get for having sent that spam to me.

It is a little funny what people will believe just because they saw it on the Internet or in an email. But it is not at all funny what people believe because they heard it from a television preacher or read it in one of his or her books.

We should all be like the Bereans. Listen to what is taught but then check it out. Check it against the Bible and see if it is true. When I, or anyone else for that matter, quotes some verse, look it up and see if I have not only quoted it accurately but see if I have understood it in its context. Someone has said that any text without a context is just a proof-text.

Have you heard about the preacher who picked his texts from various places throughout the Bible and didn't bother to fit them in proper context? His sermon went something like this:

“And lo the Queen of Sheba went down into Jerusalem sitting on a mule. And she fell among thieves, but they passed her by on the other side. And she got again on that mules back and she seen them a coming from afar off and five of them were wise and five of them were foolish. And they came to meet her with palm leaf fans crying lo Susana of the Ephesians. And they wagged them palm leaf fans in that mule's face. As she rode down the street she looked up in the second story window, and cried out fling down Jezebel, and she said unto them the second time fling down Jezebel. The answer came back we ain't a going to fling down Jezebel. And she said unto them the third time fling down Jezebel and they changed their minds. And they flung her down seventy times seven she busted into pieces, which could not be numbered from the multitude thereof. And there was a great weeping and a wailing and a snatching up of her teeth. And they picked up of her fragments twelve basket full, five loaves and two small fishes. And I say unto you brothers in the day of judgment whose wife is Jezebel going to be.”

The Bereans would never have put up with that kind of preaching because they received the apostle's teaching and they examined the Scriptures every day to make sure Paul was telling them the truth.

You don't have much of a chance to ask questions for clarification during a sermon but you certainly can do that during a Sunday School lesson and you are encouraged to do so.

III. THEY BELIEVED THE APOSTLE'S TEACHING

The Bereans received the word that Paul taught them. They examined the Scriptures to make sure it was true. And when they had verified the truth of what they were taught, they believed it. They accepted it. And they acted upon it.

How do I know that? The very next verse, Acts 17:12, says, *“Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.”*

Having listened to what they were taught, having cross-referenced it to the Scriptures and having confirmed that it was true, they accepted it; they believed it. Many Jews became disciples of Jesus. A number of prominent Greek women became believers. Many Greek men became Christians. The gospel was crossing traditional barriers of race and culture and people were coming to Jesus for salvation.

How do you respond when you hear something that is new? When you are taught something that challenges your assumptions and tests your traditions? Because it is not what they have always believed, some people simply refuse to think about what they have read or what they have heard. But some people are humble enough to admit they have room to grow and that there is more they can learn so they think about it, test it by the Bible and then, if it proves to be true, they alter their thinking and adjust their lives to incorporate the additional truth that they have learned.

Here's my appeal: I want to ask you to be humble enough to admit that you do not know everything about the Bible. I want you to be selfless enough to make the time to share with the rest of us what you have already learned. And I want you to be disciplined enough to get up earlier on Sunday and join us at 9 A.M. for Sunday School. While my personal appeal may not carry much weight with you, the sterling example of the Bereans should so let's emulate them.

CONCLUSION:

The city of Berea was only about 50 miles from Thessalonica in linear measurement. But spiritually, they were leagues apart.

Before Paul went to Berea, he had preached the Gospel in Thessalonica. Many in Thessalonica were challenged by what Paul said, became offended by it and formed a mob. They started a riot and attempted to attack Paul and Silas because they did not like what these two men had taught them about Jesus. They didn't care if it was true, they just knew they didn't like it.

In contrast, the Bereans eagerly received the truth, carefully examined it and then enthusiastically embraced it.

We invite you to join the 21st Century Bereans who meet here at 9 a.m. every Sunday for the expressed purpose of studying God's Word. Why not join us next week? We'll save you a cup of coffee, a donut and a place to study...more about Jesus.

INVITATION: #560 *"More About Jesus"*