

The Noble Bereans

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ACTS 17:11

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.

When Christian ministers and believers mention the Bereans, they usually have in mind a group of individuals who had discernment, and who were not easily fooled by just any new message that came along, because they were careful to check up on everything that a preacher said with Scripture. These were not gullible people, and they were not about to accept anything someone taught unless it came right out of Scripture. And since Scripture calls these people "noble," it is appropriate to imitate their example.

This in itself is a sound biblical teaching, and other parts of Scripture also confirm it. For example, 1 Thessalonians 5:21 says, "Test everything. Hold on to the good," and 1 John 4:1 warns, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

However, in directing most of their attention to the latter portion of Acts 17:11, which says that the Bereans "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true," many people have failed to recognize the main thrust of the verse, and one of the main points of the first half of Acts 17.

The real virtue of the Bereans is asserted by the main emphasis of the verse, and not in the explanation or qualification to the main emphasis of the verse. Since the Bereans are so often presented as models worthy of our imitation, a distorted or partial view of their virtue would result in a distorted or partial imitation, and thus a flawed character in precisely the area in which we wish to learn from them.

The main emphasis of verse 11 is easy to grasp if we will just read the whole verse, and then the verse in the context of the first half of Acts 17.

The word translated "noble" can refer to either noble birth or noble character. It is clearly used in the latter sense in our verse. As for in what way the Bereans were noble, the verse applies the word to them *in contrast* with the character of "the Thessalonians." Therefore, to understand the Bereans' noble character, we should first return to the beginning of Acts 17 and read about the Thessalonians:

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were

persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. (v. 1-4)

Whenever Paul arrived at a new location in his missionary journeys, it was his custom to first visit the local synagogues so that he could preach to the Jews (see v. 10, 17).¹ The Jews professed faith in the Scripture, and it should have been natural for them to eagerly embrace a message declaring the perfect fulfillment of scriptural promises. Thus Paul "reasoned with them *from the Scriptures*," and it was on the basis of Scripture that he preached the gospel, and this means "explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead."

As a result, a number of people (both Jews and Greeks) believed and were saved. But these were not "the Thessalonians" that verse 11 is talking about. Rather, the problems appear starting from verse 5:

But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. (v. 5-9)

Out of a jealous resistance to the gospel message, these Jews incited a riot in the city against the apostles. They manipulated the situation against these preachers of the gospel by leveling misleading accusations against them. Verse 10 shows how the Christians helped Paul and Silas escape to Berea.

Religious politics is a hideous evil, and it is rampant in our day. Even in the best Christian circles, theological conflicts are often not carried out by only rational discourse, but also by inciting the crowd, and by applying social and political pressure. One side of the issue is often preferred by the crowd and by the institutions, and thus biblical arguments and reasoned appeals are often suppressed and drowned out.

Sometimes a semblance of a refutation might appear, but even then, the often unbiblical and irrational position is still supported more by its popularity with the people and the institutions than by biblical revelation. But those who stand firm on Scripture and

¹ For a detailed exposition on the second half of Acts 17, in which Paul deals with a non-Jewish audience, including some Greek philosophers, please see my *Presuppositional Confrontations*, chapter 2.

Reason² have nothing to fear, that is, except for the very souls of those who persecute them.

In any case, it is in contrast with *these* Thessalonians that verse 11 praises the noble character of the Bereans. Accordingly, we should expect the virtue of the Bereans to be the opposite of the vice of the Thessalonians. Right away, we realize that this virtue cannot be that they checked up on the preaching of the apostles; otherwise, it would imply that the vice of the Thessalonians was that they were *too quick* to believe the gospel, but verses 5-9 tell us the opposite.

The virtue of the Bereans was the opposite of the vice of the Thessalonians in that the Bereans "received the message with great eagerness." Unlike some of the Jews at Thessalonica, the Bereans did not doubt or resist the gospel message, and they did not persecute the preachers or give them a hard time. This is Scripture's main emphasis in verse 11, and when seeking to imitate the Bereans, it is this characteristic that we must first recognize and consider.

Many commentaries fail to acknowledge this primary emphasis or to give it the proper place in their expositions, and at this moment I cannot recall hearing even one minister who made this the main point in his sermon when he preached on verse 11. I do not doubt that some ministers have recognized the primary thrust of the verse and have preached accordingly, but these instances seem to be too few. Instead, the verse is most often used to teach discernment, and in a way that obscures the positive characteristic of the eager acceptance of God's word.

Along with several others, Matthew Henry is one notable exception to this neglect. For a commentary that has to cover much ground, he nevertheless devotes a significant section to how the Bereans were eager to receive the gospel. The section that immediately follows on discernment is only slightly longer. He writes:

They neither prejudged the cause, nor were moved with envy at the managers of it, as the Jews at Thessalonica were, but very generously gave both it and them a fair hearing...They did not pick quarrels with the word, nor find fault, nor seek occasion against the preachers of it; but bade it welcome, and put a candid construction upon everything that was said. Herein they were more noble than the Jews in Thessalonica...³

It is only with this in mind that we can properly understand verse 11, and to understand with what attitude the Bereans "examined the Scriptures." The Bereans were noble in character not because they were suspicious or hard to convince, but because they were teachable and receptive to the gospel. For this reason, some translations and

² Scripture is a revelation of Christ the Reason, or *Logos*, and only what is scriptural is rational. In this sense, I equate the two.

³ *Matthew Henry's Commentary, Vol. 6: Acts to Revelation* (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 179.

commentaries suggest translating "noble" as "liberal," "generous," "fair-minded," or "open-minded."⁴

However, this "open-mindedness" is at the same time specific and restricted. It is at this point that we should proceed to the latter part of the verse, which tells us that, although the Bereans were eager to hear from God, they were not at all foolish or gullible people. And because we have already considered the main point of the verse, which is to say that they were teachable and receptive to the gospel, we are now ready to consider how this openness is qualified.

They were nothing like the people of Athens, who "spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (v. 21). They were not eager to hear the apostles out of mere curiosity or for intellectual stimulation and entertainment, and they were not open to just any new theory or doctrine that sought their attention. Rather, they were interested in learning the truth, in whether "those things were so" (KJV), and not just in hearing something that sounds interesting or unusual. And to determine whether "those things were so" that Paul preached, they "examined the Scriptures."

Thus they showed that they were "open-minded" not in the sense that they were foolish or gullible, and still less were they relativistic or pluralistic. They were not open to just anything or anyone. But by striving for truth, they showed that their openness was rational, and by searching the Scripture, they showed that their openness was biblical, such that all non-biblical theories and doctrines were *excluded from the start*. This is also part of their noble character, and this is also what believers today must emulate.

Moreover, since it is in this manner and on this basis that "many of them believed," it also showed that theirs "was no mere emotional response to the gospel, but one based on intellectual conviction."⁵ Theirs was a genuine faith, an intellectual conviction about revealed truth, and a spiritual life founded on this biblical and rational conviction can survive the tests of persecution and temptation.

Just as we should follow their example as hearers, we should not be satisfied with anything less from our audience as preachers. And this means that Christian ministers must strive to be the same kind of preachers that the Bereans heard, so that like Paul, we should preach and reason "from the Scriptures, explaining and proving" Christ to our hearers.

Still, because of the imbalanced way that many people have applied our verse, we must again remind ourselves of its main point, and the main reason why the Bereans were called noble. They were not commended because they were suspicious and hostile, but because they were eager to hear the gospel.

⁴ Although these translations are consistent with the intended meaning of the verse, it is better to retain "noble," since the original word refers to something of high quality, whether in terms of birth or character. The context suffices in telling us in what sense and in what way the Bereans were noble, and something like "open-minded" seems too interpretive, losing some of the verse's original meaning.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), p. 280.

Their attitude was, "You have brought us a good message from God, let us also see it from the Scriptures," rather than, "Don't take us for stupid and gullible people. We are not going to let you get away with anything, and we won't believe anything that you say unless you prove it to us from the Scriptures." Now, the first attitude does not reflect any gullibility either, but it is characterized by a noble character, an openness to God's revelation.

God is not pleased when discernment becomes resistance and hard-heartedness in disguise. As Scripture says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Hebrews 4:7). Christians of "noble" character are not maliciously suspicious, but they are intelligently teachable. They respect God's messengers; they are eager to hear God's word; and they are quick to believe and quick to obey.

So if we are going to emulate the noble Bereans, then we will readily receive God's word from faithful ministers, and we will be so eager to affirm and practice the truth they proclaim that we will examine the Scripture "every day" (v. 11), so that we will construct our right belief and worship on the sure rock of revelation also.

Let us continue to teach believers to "test everything," but when we speak about the Bereans, let us also accurately relate the nature of their noble character, that they were eager to hear and receive the word of God. And we must not lose this simple devotion to the word of God even if we think that we have gained much knowledge and discernment; rather, let us stay humble, teachable – and noble.