

The Power of Your Story
Don't Expect Everyone to be Thrilled with Your Story
Acts 17:32-34

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Text Introduction: In January, I announced to you that I wanted to focus this year on the theme of story—God's story with us. We spent the first months of the year tracing the story of God's redemptive plan for his most special creation—humanity. We called that journey, "Finding Your Story in HIStory." In more recent weeks, we have considered "The Power of Your Story." The goal has been to motivate you to tell your story. We see countless examples in the New Testament of the power of someone telling his/her story as a way to introduce the story of Jesus. In the meantime we have collected some of your stories. These stories have been compiled, and God willing, will be made available in book form for January 2013. Today, we bring our series to a close. So that you know that I have given you "the whole story," I need to conclude with this message, "Don't Expect Everyone to be Thrilled with Your Story." Most, if not all, do not need for me to tell you this, for you have already experienced that in your own life. But just to be assured that this is a common consequence of being a Christ follower who boldly professes that story to others, I want to share with you today the story of history's most famous evangelist, the Apostle Paul.

Text: ³² When they heard about resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him. But others said, "We'd like to hear from you again about this." ³³ Then Paul left their presence. ³⁴ However, some men joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Introduction: Thom Rainer, is the President of Lifeway Christian Resources. If you are not familiar with that name, Lifeway is the publishing entity of the Southern Baptist Convention. Lifeway provides our church with the vast majority of our educational and discipleship resources. If you have ever attended a Sunday School class in our church, you have used books published by Lifeway. Thom Rainer's background is in research. Kind of like Gallup on the national scene and Barna on the Christian scene, Rainer has researched all things Baptist. One of his most important research efforts resulted in the book, *The Unchurched Next Door*. Out of that research, Rainer identified 5 different categories of the unchurched—U1 which are highly receptive to U5, those who are antagonistic to the things of Christ. He then developed some characteristics of each group. His research highlights that not everyone who is lost is necessarily antagonistic. In fact, many are receptive to the Gospel. We see this same kind of thing in Acts 17.

Last week, we saw in Acts 16, Paul's ministry in the city of Philippi. In chapter 17, the scene shifts to first Thessalonica, then Berea, and finally to Athens. In each of these cities, Paul is preaching, reasoning, and sharing individually the good news of Jesus Christ. His sharing, as will always be the case, produced one of the three responses. In our text today, we see those three different kind of responses.

How Will Others Respond to Your Story?

1. Some will ridicule and reject your story.

Imagine the scene. Paul is speaking. You might even think in terms of preaching. But, then, something strange happens. They don't let Paul finish his sermon. (Now, don't get any ideas, please.) What set them off was the talk of Jesus' resurrection. Look at verse 22 and following. They stayed with Paul through his renunciation of their belief in multiple gods. They allowed him to speak about one God, who created the earth. They were silent through his development of repentance and the judgment to come, but at the resurrection, they stopped him. Not only did they stop him, but they ridiculed him. This is not the first time Paul had been ridiculed, and this is not the first time he had been ridiculed in Athens. In verse 18, we read, "Some said, 'What is this pseudo-intellectual trying to say?'" I've got a footnote in my Bible that says that this term literally means "seed-picker—or one who picks up scraps." Ridicule! Rejection! Some of you have been there? Listen to what Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is God's power to us who are being saved. ¹⁹ For it is written:

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and I will set aside the understanding of the experts.

²⁰ Where is the philosopher? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Hasn't God made the world's wisdom foolish? ²¹ For since, in God's wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of the message preached. ²² For the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. ²⁴ Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is God's power and God's wisdom, ²⁵ because God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

How do you respond when your story, your faith is ridiculed? You cannot let ridicule or even the potential of ridicule keep you from telling your story.

2. Some will be reluctant but respect your story.

The second response is wrapped up in the phrase, "We would like to hear you again about this." Whereas this is obviously not a faith statement, and therefore certainly not enough, this is a step. This is a positive step. I call this a win. If I earn the right to be heard again, often times that is great progress.

One of the great examples of this happens a little later in Paul's ministry. In Acts 24, we read that Paul has been arrested. Listen to this report regarding his relationship with the Governor named Felix.

²² Since Felix was accurately informed about the Way, he adjourned the hearing, saying, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case." ²³ He ordered that the centurion keep Paul under guard, though he could have some freedom, and that he should not prevent any of his friends from serving him.

²⁴ After some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and listened to him on the subject of faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ Now as he spoke about

righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix became afraid and replied, “Leave for now, but when I find time I’ll call for you.”²⁶ At the same time he was also hoping that money would be given to him by Paul. For this reason he sent for him quite often and conversed with him.

Who is the Felix in your life? Who listens? The truth is that sometimes we do not always recognize the Felix in our lives, but he/she is there. Ask God to help you to continue to build that relationship with a Felix. Ask God to help the Felix in your life make another step toward Him. Ask God to help you to be sensitive to speak in such a way as to leave that door open for the next time or the next person.

3. Some will receive your story and respond to Jesus.

Then, some will receive your story and respond to Jesus. Our text gives us the names of two of these people—Dionysius and Damaris. The title, Areopagite, implies that Dionysius was a high ranking member—perhaps one of the twelve leading men who made up the court system. One preacher suggested that Dionysius’ decision to become a follower of Christ is like one of the members of our Supreme Court walking forward at a Billy Graham Crusade. One ancient church historian indicated that Dionysius became the bishop of the church at Athens.

Rainer said these last two groups are the largest groups. Satan wants us to believe that those in the first category—those who will reject—will be the largest group. Actually, the research of Thom Rainer suggests that those in the last two groups (of the Acts 17 text) are by far the largest groups.

How do you respond knowing that some will believe? That ought to be easy, don’t you think? We must tell our story; we must tell God’s story. We may be telling our story to the next Dionysius.

How Are We Going to Respond to the Response?

- **With Concern**—We must respond with concern—with burden. Verse 16 tells us that Paul’s spirit was troubled when he saw the city full of idols. Our spirits ought to be troubled. If we truly believe that heaven and hell are at stake for the souls of our city, nation, and world, we must be concerned.
- **With Confidence**—We must respond with confidence. In light of the potential of ridicule, we must still be bold. Paul declared the whole counsel of God with boldness. Whether with simple townspeople or the Governors, he spoke of sin, the judgment to come, and the call for repentance. Scholar John Stott said, “We cannot preach Jesus without the doctrine of God, the cross without creation, or salvation without judgment.” Paul did all of this.
- **Which Comes from Conviction**—This concern and confidence both come from a conviction. That conviction must be personal. Here is Paul’ conviction as he gave it to the Philippians as recorded in Philippians 3:7-14.

After reading Thom Rainer's book, a man wrote him. Here is his letter. I read it because it is surely instructional for us.

Hey Tom,

I just finished reading the material on the U4's. Boy, could I identify with those people. I was a U4 just about five years ago. I never was antagonistic toward the Church and Christians, but I was resistant to anyone trying to convert me.

I look back on those years and the best way I can describe it was that it was a time of fog. I didn't think or see much clearly in those days. Most of the time, religious matters were not at the top of my agenda, but they were kind of hanging in my conscience. I guess the Holy Spirit was trying to get my attention.

The most amazing thing about that period is that I can't recall one person over several years who ever said anything to me about Jesus or even the Church. I had Christian neighbors who never opened their mouths. I had Christian co-workers just two offices down from mine; never a word from them.

Looking back now, I think I would have welcomed a word from a Christian. I didn't know it at the time, but I was hurting deep inside and I probably would have put on some act of bravado to let people know I didn't need God as a crutch, but I still would have loved to have heard something from a Christian.

I guess I moved to a more neutral position (what you call a U3) after watching a Billy Graham Crusade on television. I bet if someone invited me to church then, I would have gone. You know the rest of my story. I finally visited a dynamic church in town and became even more receptive to the Gospel. Finally, someone from the church asked me to lunch. Mike, who is now my best friend, shared with me how to accept Christ. A few months later I did pray to receive Christ. Do hear what I am saying. I had to go to church before someone talked to me one-on-one. For the first forty-two years of my life, no one witnessed to me or invited me to church. I pray that I will never make that mistake. You know, the mistake of keeping my mouth shut. No, it is more than a mistake. It is a sin.

Tom, I pray...that God will open some mouths that are sinfully shut. If I had to depend on most Christians in America for hearing the Good News, I guess I would still be Hell bound. Please let your readers know that most of the unchurched people out there would welcome a word from a Christian. Please tell them before it is too late for some.