

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(September 26, 2010)

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

The Fine Art of (people) Exegesis

(Acts 17)

Study #20

Introduction: Talking the talk...

Some years ago my son, Zach, walked into my office and was looking at the mess that I jokingly refer to as my “desk.”

He looked at one of the open books lying there, picked it up and said, “*Wow* (actually, I think actually he said, “Yucch!”), *can you read this?*” It was a Greek New Testament. And yes, I can read that.

I graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary with a major in New Testament exegesis. That major required taking a lot of courses in Greek. The result is that I can make use of the New Testament in the language in which it was written.

Those courses in Greek, along with the courses in Hebrew for the Old Testament and the theology courses were designed to equip me with the tools I needed to exegete the Scriptures.

When applied to Bible study, *exegesis* refers to the art of drawing the meaning out of the text.

Upon entering seminary, my dream had been to serve a church as its pastor. And since I knew that a church needed to be grounded in Scripture, I also knew that if I was going to be an effective pastor I needed to be able to dig into the Bible, understand it, and proclaim it.

So I worked hard to learn those original languages, and have been using those tools for the last three decades here with you.

Proper exegesis of the biblical text is crucial for accurate interpretation and for appropriate application. And for the next few minutes you will have the chance to judge whether my exegetical work over the past week has been accurate or not, as we turn to Acts, chapter 17.

But this morning I’m going to suggest that there are other things besides the Bible than must be exegeted. And today, we get an assignment in exegesis that does not require knowledge of either Greek or Hebrew.

By way of review...

Last week, we watched as Paul and Silas (along with Timothy and Luke) began the church’s Second-ever Missionary Journey.

They traveled to the city of Philippi where they enjoyed great success and encountered great adversity.

- Two of the missionaries (Paul and Silas) were beaten and thrown into prison.
- The Lord performed two miracles, as a slave girl was released from demonic oppression and an earthquake rattled prisoners’ shackles loose.
- And two whole households - Lydia’s and the jailer’s - came to faith in Jesus.

After all this, the city authorities (understandably) invited them all to leave Philippi as quickly as possible, which they gladly did.

Dusting themselves off after their night in jail, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke followed the coastline of Macedonia from Philippi, traveling south and west for about a hundred miles. The road brought them to the city of Thessalonica.¹

¹ How did Paul make ends meet? Philippians 4:15-16 tells us that the church in Philippi sent money to support him (and Silas) as they continued the Second Missionary Journey. Plus, we also know that Paul sometimes worked, supporting himself by making tents (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 3:7-10).

Exegeting Thessalonica (vv. 1-9)

Receptivity from the Synagogue! (vv. 1-4)

Arrival in Thessalonica (v. 1)

[1] Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

Unlike Philippi, Thessalonica had a population of Jews sufficient to support a synagogue.² And, given Paul's opportunistic practice of going to the people who already believed in the one true God first, Paul and his buddies made their way to that synagogue.

The message to the Jews (vv. 2-3)

[2] And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths³ reasoned with them from the Scriptures

During those synagogue services, Paul interacted with the folks who were there.

They talked together over an open scroll written in Hebrew, a language they could all understand. They talked the same language, which would have likely been Greek. Equally important, Paul and the Thessalonian Jews talked in the same cultural language: Scripture.

Paul pointed to texts that showed that when the Messiah came, He would ***[3]...“suffer and rise again from the dead.”***

This would have been a radical thought for the Jews, who had been taught that when Messiah came, He would conquer and rule, not suffer and die.

² That would be ten Jewish men. Philippi's Jewish population was so small that it did not have a synagogue.

³ This doesn't mean that Paul only stayed in Thessalonica for only three weeks. Only that he ministered specifically to the Jews for three weeks. He probably continued in the city, serving both Gentiles and Jews, for a somewhat longer time.

But there it was, plain as day, declared by the prophets Isaiah and Zechariah and others. It was right there in God's Word, prompting Paul to declare, ***[3b]... “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”***

Listen to the response of the Bible-believing Jews to this teaching.

The response of the Jews (v. 4)

[4] And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.

Paul spoke to these folks in language that they understood and the message clicked. He exegeted the Scriptures brilliantly. But Paul also exegeted his audience well. These were Bible-believing folks and he spoke to them from the Bible.

So, Gospel ministry got off to a very promising start in Thessalonica, just as it had in Philippi.

But, just as problems had arisen quickly in Philippi, so they arose here, as well.

Opposition from the Synagogue (vv. 5-9)

Another city, another mob scene! (v. 5)

Some members of the synagogue were so jealous of the following that Paul and Silas were winning, that they took ***[5a]...along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar.***

Opposition of any sort can be hard to take, but can you imagine how terrifying it would be to be the object of a mob's fury?!

The mob targeted a recent convert named Jason. We don't know anything about Jason, except that he had probably been providing lodging for Paul and Silas.

The stirred up crowds assumed that the apostles were there. So, they ended up ***[5b]...attacking the house of Jason, [and] they were seeking to bring them*** (the missionaries) ***out to the people.***

Now, unfortunately for the mob (and fortunately for Paul and Silas!), they didn't find Paul and Silas at Jason's home. But, not finding Paul and Silas there (and unfortunately for Jason), they turned their attention on Jason.

As Paul and Silas had been dragged before the city authorities in Philippi, Jason was dragged before the city officials in Thessalonica.

Complimentary accusations (vv. 6-7)

[6] When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities,⁴ shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; [7] and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."⁵

The accusation was true, but Paul probably took it as a compliment. (What we southpaws call a "left-handed" - an un-intended - compliment.)

The Christians are, indeed, turning the world on its ear by proclaiming forgiveness of sins by faith alone in Christ alone. And they are indeed, too, proclaiming that Jesus is a king who is, hands down, superior to Caesar in Rome!⁶

Sorry, Jason... (vv. 8-9)

[8] They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. [9] And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others,⁷ they released them.

⁴ Thessalonica was a "free city", which meant it was sovereign with respect to its local and internal affairs and not subject to provincial administration in such matters.

⁵ It may be tempting to think that the early disciples were not doing anything to bring this mistreatment upon themselves. They were. They were so boldly proclaiming Jesus that they were upsetting powerful people and challenging the status quo. They invited opposition.

⁶ The ironic thing, of course, is that a Jew wouldn't have given primary allegiance to Caesar, anyway. But these Jews were doing the same thing that those in Jerusalem had done during Jesus' trials.

⁷ This may explain why Paul was prohibited from returning to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:18)

Paul and Silas and Timothy rightly concluded that their time of productive ministry in Thessalonica was probably over.⁸ So, they left town (under cover of night) and traveled about fifty miles southwest and a little inland from the coast to the mountain city of Berea.⁹

As usual, they went to the Jewish synagogue first.

Exegeting Berea (vv. 10-15)

Receptivity from the Synagogue (again) (vv. 10-13)

GREAT response! (vv. 10-12)

[10] The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

Different city, same strategy. Wherever there was a Jewish synagogue, they went THERE first. And as wonderful as the initial reception was in Thessalonica, it was even more positive in Berea.

[11] Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

Having exegeted his audience, he saw that they were wholly convinced of the authority of Scripture. So, Paul went right to work, exegeting the Scriptures for the Bereans.

They wondered if it was possible that Jesus - a Man who suffered death on a Roman cross - could be the Messiah, and they exegeted the Bible on their own to see if Paul's exegesis was sound!

⁸ We gather from the Thessalonian epistles, though, that despite the troubles Paul and Silas had, the believers in that city continued to boldly proclaim the Gospel.

⁹ Berea was located in a province that corresponds to southern Greece today. We aren't told whether Timothy went with Paul and Silas, or joined them later at Berea.

If they could be convinced ON THE BASIS OF SCRIPTURE that the Messiah really was supposed to suffer and be raised from the dead, then they could be open to placing their trust in Jesus.

Well sure enough, they found that to be the case. And the result of their careful inquiry was that *[12]...many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.*

Great response - and then (again!) here comes trouble.

Earlier, trouble followed Paul and Barnabas on the First Missionary Journey when Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium came to stir up trouble in Lystra. The same things happen here.

Great opposition (v. 13)

[13] But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

The recent converts in Berea saw that Paul, in particular, was in grave danger. The last time an imported mob had opposed Paul (in the city of Lystra), he had been stoned nearly to death! Believing that one stoning was more than enough, they sent him packing to Athens.

Escape Under Cover of Night (vv. 14-15)

[14] Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. [15] Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible,¹⁰ they left.

Athens. For centuries, Athens' architecture, academics, politics and art had been a showcase for all that was glorious about everything Greek. By the first century, her glory a bit faded, Athens was still an influential hub of brainpower and humanistic energy.

Paul arrived alone, unaccompanied by Christian teammates. But we aren't surprised that, even without a support crew, once he hit town, he was an evangelistic force.

Exegeting Athens (vv. 1-9)

A Two-Front Engagement (vv. 16-17)

[16] Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. [17] So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.

As Paul toured the city, he would have marveled at the art and the architecture, the statues and the sculptures. And he would have understood that the art reflected the city's worship and their misconceptions about God.

So, from the get-go, his ministry in Athens was directed to two separate arenas. He was both teaching and reasoning and arguing in the synagogue AND he was engaging with philosophically oriented Greeks in the marketplace.

In the synagogue, he used his normal approach, proving from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

But, when he went to the market place he encountered something else entirely, requiring exegesis of a different culture.

The "Gentile on the street" in Athens neither knew nor cared what the prophet Isaiah might have written. In the market place, Paul was not speaking to God-fearing, Bible believing Jews, but to intellectuals in love with abstract philosophy.

Among those with whom Paul was engaging were some from two distinct schools of first century philosophical thought.

¹⁰ It is clear from 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2 and 6 that Silas and Timothy did rejoin Paul at Athens.

Focus: Paul, to the Greeks (vv. 18-34)

Paul and the Athenian philosophers (vv. 18-21)

[18a] And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him.

The Epicureans¹¹

In our day, Epicureanism has gotten a bad rap. Today, an epicurean is a sensualist. But that is not who the original Epicureans were at all.

The first Epicureans did believe that the greatest good in life was pleasure. But they believed that pleasure was best arrived at by avoiding excesses. So, while the “epicurean” lifestyle of 2010 might imply drunkenness and carousing, in the first century it implied nothing of the kind.

In fact, the Epicurean of the first century was self-controlled, pursued a tranquil mind, and led a life with as little risk as possible.

He also believed (like the Deists of 18th century America) that if the gods exist - and he wasn't at all sure that they did - they do not become involved in human events, but were “hands-off” gods

In addition to talking with Epicureans, Paul also spoke with Stoics.

The Stoics

Stoics had been around for a couple of hundred years by the time Paul came to Athens. They were pantheistic, which is to say that they believed everything was god.

They also believed that a great PURPOSE was directing history and that people's main responsibility in life was to align themselves with this PURPOSE.

Stoics believed that they had successfully so aligned themselves, and were thus, pretty notorious for arrogant pride and self-sufficiency.

¹¹ They followed Epicurus, who lived from 341-270 BC.

And just how did these guys view Paul and his message?

Their “take” on Paul

[18b]...Some were saying, ‘What would this idle babbler wish to say?’ Others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,”-- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

Calling someone an “*idle babbler*” was no more a compliment in the first century than it would be in the twenty-first. They were not all that impressed with Paul or his ideas.

They also believed that he was polytheistic (“*a proclaimer of strange deities*”), which probably confused them because they knew he was a Jew and that the Jews - poor, limited, small-minded Jews - only believed in one God.

At the same time, Paul's talk about Jesus' resurrection would have resonated with well-known Greek myths about gods and goddesses who died and come back to life (Dionysus and Persephone, for example). But everybody knew that those myths were just stories. Paul and Silas seemed to be claiming that in Jesus the myth came true, really, historically.¹²

These philosophers and Paul were tossing ideas back and forth, not getting much of anywhere. But, as is the tendency with these discussions, they were having a very good time and getting more and more confused on higher and higher levels.¹³

The Athenians thought that Paul's ideas were a little nutty.

But they must have also thought them pretty interesting, because they invited him to speak at the Areopagus!

¹² This was a major thought of the great Christian thinker, C.S. Lewis. He saw the earlier mythic tales of gods and goddesses resurrecting as a foreshadowing of what God would actually do with His Son, Jesus.

¹³ I love this verse, [21] (*Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.*)

“Paul, come to Mars Hill!”

[19] And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus,¹⁴ saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? [20] “For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.”

What an open door! The Areopagus (otherwise known as Mars Hill) was the most prestigious platform the ancient world had to offer for anyone presenting a new philosophy for consideration.

Here, the platform is offered to the Apostle Paul. He’s going to get to present a case for Christianity in Athens, on Mars Hill.

So, what will he say?

We have seen him present Jesus before. He has gone to the Scriptures, argued from the prophets that the Messiah must suffer and die and rise again, and then concluded that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah.

That’s his presentation - when he is in the synagogue. What will he say on Mars Hill?

Well, as you might expect from a master exegete like Paul, his presentation to the most erudite philosophers of his day was dramatically different than the presentation he gave to biblically-centered, God-fearing Jews.

Paul at the Areopagus (vv. 22-31)

Introduction (vv. 22-23)

He began as winsomely as possible, complimenting them (sort of).

[22] So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.

¹⁴ Areopagus = Hill of Ares/Mars. The Areopagus was also the place where the supreme body for judicial and legislative matters in Athens met.

He recognized that they were very sincere in their reverence of their deities. Sincerity is healthy and should be commended.

But Paul used an interesting word for “religious.” It is literally the word “*to fear/reverence*” coupled with the word for “*demons*.” Paul subtly implies that the Athenians deities were demons and not gods at all.¹⁵

He tells them how he knew that they were religious. ***[23a] “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’***

The Athenians so feared that they would overlook some important god that they built and dedicated an altar “To an Unknown God,” (“*to the One we might have missed!*”)

That altar provided the open door he needed - ***[23b] “Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”***

Content of message (vv. 24-29)

As he speaks, he is aiming to “connect” with the major philosophies of the day, specifically Epicureanism and Stoicism.

He mentions the transcendence of God, which would have prompted a chorus of “AMENs” from the Epicureans.

[24] “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; [25] nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things...

Remember that the Epicureans believed that whatever God or gods existed were high above human life.

Whatever God might be, He could not be the kind of Being portrayed by Greek mythology, always getting himself or herself into embarrassing situations. God, if He existed, HAD to be better than that.

¹⁵ In other places in ancient Greek literature the word clearly means “superstitious.”

Paul says that the only God who really IS is wholly different from what the pagans call “gods.” He is sovereign. He can not be contained in a temple. Images and sculptures made by human hands don’t do Him justice.¹⁶

His next words would have spoken to the Stoics’ belief in an orderly system.

Paul affirmed that God, *[26]...made from one man* (that would be Adam) *every nation of mankind¹⁷ to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, [27] that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us...*

God is self-sufficient. He would exist if everything else was destroyed. And, He has made a world with PURPOSE - the main tenet of Stoic philosophy. So, all of the Stoics were applauding.

Note that Paul began at the point of his audience’s worldview. Of course he is hoping to lead them from the way they view life to belief in Jesus, who is the truth. But he sensitively starts where they are AT.

To make them feel even more at home, Paul quoted some of their fellow philosophers to make his point.

The words of verse 28, *“for in Him we live and move and exist”* are direct quotes from the Cretan poet Epimenides.¹⁸

And the next phrase, *[28b]...“as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’”* is from Aratus, a poet/philosopher from Cilicia (the area where Paul grew up).

And what do these quotes tell us but that Paul was fluent in the culture of his day?

Drawing on a vast store of learning from Greek poets, he was able to insert their words into a message he was delivering to high-brow intellectuals on Mars Hill.

Those quotes showed a respect for their culture and built a bridge from their world to his, making it easier for them to accept what he will eventually have to say about Jesus.

- If you are trying to convince someone of an investment strategy they aren’t buying, you might say, *“Well, it’s what Warren Buffett does.”*
- Or if you are trying to impress upon a friend the importance of a healthy diet, you might try, *“This is what Olympic athletes eat.”*
- Billy Graham has always done this. When Billy has gone to a city to present the Gospel, he references local heroes and tells stories with a local flair to make the same connection Paul was making in Athens.

But he’s not so concerned to “connect” that he compromises the message. He goes on to say, *[29] “Being then the children of God,¹⁹ we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.*

Since God made people, it is nutty to think that people could make a god (i.e. - an idol)! And he said this in Athens, a city chock full of idols!

Here is the punch line to Paul’s message.

Listen carefully and you’ll hear a marked difference between how he ends this message and how he has ended other messages in Acts.

Calling to conviction (vv. 30-31)

[30] “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent,

¹⁶ Stephen’s speech to the Jews in Acts 7 made virtually the same point. As highly as you may think of your building, it can’t house God.

¹⁷ This would have been a blow to Athenian pride. They thought they were a uniquely privileged people, but Paul says that they were sourced in the same original Creation as everyone else.

¹⁸ Paul also quoted him in Titus 1:12.

¹⁹ Athenians and Americans and Iranians are all God’s offspring. Not in the sense that all are His redeemed children (and certainly not in the sense that we all are little divinities!), but in the sense that all are created by God and receive their life from Him.

[31] because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”²⁰

Now, did you notice what Paul does NOT say in this closing invitation? He doesn't say anything about the **cross**. He doesn't mention the **Name of Jesus**. He doesn't use the words “**trust**” or “**believe**” and he doesn't urge his audience to “**have faith**” or “**rely**” on Jesus.

So what is Paul doing in this message? He is whetting his audience's appetite. He isn't trying to “close the sale.” He is hoping for another shot. He's tilling the soil, planting seeds. He knows it isn't time for a harvest yet.

His audience doesn't have enough content to decide for or against Jesus yet. He is not evangelizing. He is pre-evangelizing.

That is Gospel smart. The first time this group of intellectuals hears about Christianity is not the time to press for a decision. Better to wait for another hearing, allow them time and space to think things through. No need to rush. Let the Holy Spirit convince them of their need.

And what was the response of Paul's audience on Mars Hill?

Response to Paul's message

- In Philippi, two households believed “just like that.”
- In Thessalonica “*some [Jews] and a great multitude of God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women*” believed.
- In Berea, “*many of [the Jews] believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.*”

On Mars Hill in Athens, the responses were mixed, to say the least.

There were those who, *[32a]...when they heard of the resurrection of the dead...began to sneer.*

²⁰ In this last section of the sermon, Paul touches on the three-fold themes of **sin** (the Athenians have committed sin), **righteousness** (the Athenians' lack of it) and **judgment** (the Athenians will face it!) - the three areas of conviction upon which the Holy Spirit concentrates. (See John 14)

Others were more open. Even on Mars Hill, there were those who invited Paul back, *[32b]...“We shall hear you again concerning this.”*

And some were so intrigued that they followed, learned more, and placed their trust in Jesus for salvation! “*[34] But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite²¹ and a woman named Damaris and others with them.*”²²

Conclusion:

Clearly, the apostle Paul was a master at exegeting the Scriptures. When speaking to the Jews, he could point to any of a dozen passages from the Major and Minor Prophets that affirmed that the Messiah would need to suffer and die and be raised again.

But, it is my contention that there are other subjects for exegesis besides the biblical text.

People can be exegeted and Paul was a master at the fine art of people exegesis. He knew what his audience in the synagogue was ready to hear - reasoned dialogue about the Scriptures - and he gave it to them.

Then, when he stood before the Epicureans and the Stoics on Mars Hill, he was well aware that they were at a different place. They had the same need for Jesus, and would only be saved by the same message. But, they required a slightly different approach - so he gave that to them.

He skillfully and lovingly culture-ized the Gospel to meet people where they were while never compromising it.

And if we wish to be effective in bringing the Gospel to our friends, we need to *exegete* our friends.

²¹ By referring to him as an Areopagite, Luke is likely telling us that Dionysius was a highly regarded member of Athenian society.

²² Was Paul's ministry in Athens a failure? Some think so, but this is difficult to assess. There is no record of a church being founded in Athens. But I believe that if there was a failure to begin a church, that failure lay in the Athenian's hard hearts, not in Paul's methods and certainly not in his message.

So here is an exegetical assignment for you:

Think about a friend, someone you know with whom you would most love to share Jesus. Now, ask yourself -

- Does he/she share my belief in the authority of the Bible?
- Does he/she belong to a religious group that teaches something other than the Bible?
- Does he/she know the essentials of Jesus' story?

Ask yourself if your friend has a fundamentally biblical worldview. Does he/she believe in right and wrong? Are they Epicureans? Stoics? Humanists? Pantheists? Wiccans?

Do they belong to what we might call a Christian splinter group? Are they adherents of a different religion - Hinduism? Islam? Judaism?

OK. Now, having *exegeted* your friend, ask yourself,

“Is he/she ready to receive a clear Gospel presentation? Would an invitation to trust Jesus for salvation from sin make sense to him/her? Or, given my friend’s lack of information, is his/her current need to have seed-planting, thoughtful, loving talks?”

“Should I adopt a ‘synagogue’ or a ‘Mars Hill’ approach with this friend?”

(My exegesis of the people I speak with, the people I listen to, and the people I read, tells me that the culture in which we find ourselves is filled with people who have much more in common with the philosophers on Mars Hill than with the orthodox Jews in the synagogue. And if my people exegesis is accurate, then what many, many people need are Christian friends who are eager to engage in spiritually sensitive conversations about life and God.)

And now comes the application. Will you *pray* that God would:

- open doors so that you could have a talk with your friend that might draw them to your Jesus?;
- give you the boldness to walk through that open door and speak lovingly about Jesus?

[5] Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.

[6] Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person. [Colossians 4:5-6]