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Acts 14:8–20 NLT

⁸ While they were at Lystra, Paul and Barnabas came upon a man with crippled feet. He had been that way from birth, so he had never walked. He was sitting ⁹ and listening as Paul preached. Looking straight at him, Paul realized he had faith to be healed. ¹⁰ So Paul called to him in a loud voice, “Stand up!” And the man jumped to his feet and started walking.

¹¹ When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in their local dialect, “These men are gods in human form!” ¹² They decided that Barnabas was the Greek god Zeus and that Paul was Hermes, since he was the chief speaker. ¹³ Now the temple of Zeus was located just outside the town. So the priest of the temple and the crowd brought bulls and wreaths of flowers to the town gates, and they prepared to offer sacrifices to the apostles.

¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard what was happening, they tore their clothing in dismay and ran out among the people, shouting, ¹⁵ “Friends, why are you doing this? We are merely human beings—just like you! We have come to bring you the Good News that you should turn from these worthless things and turn to the living God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. ¹⁶ In the past he permitted all the nations to go their own ways, ¹⁷ but he never left them without evidence of himself and his goodness. For instance, he sends you rain and good crops and gives you food and joyful hearts.” ¹⁸ But even with these words, Paul and Barnabas could scarcely restrain the people from sacrificing to them.

¹⁹ Then some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowds to their side. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of town, thinking he was dead. ²⁰ But as the believers gathered around him, he got up and went back into the town. The next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe.

Luke 4:1–8 NLT

Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River. He was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where he was tempted by the devil for forty days. Jesus ate nothing all that time and became very hungry.

3 Then the devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become a loaf of bread."

4 But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone.'"

5 Then the devil took him up and revealed to him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. 6 "I will give you the glory of these kingdoms and authority over them," the devil said, "because they are mine to give to anyone I please. 7 I will give it all to you if you will worship me."

8 Jesus replied, "The Scriptures say, 'You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'"

Matthew 8:18–20 NLT

¹⁸ When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he instructed his disciples to cross to the other side of the lake.

¹⁹ Then one of the teachers of religious law said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."

²⁰ But Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head."

Worshipping humans.

Here is some historical background on today's first passage: Paul and Barnabas

are in a city called Lystra, and they are on Paul's first great mission trip (of three).

This is a pagan Roman city that prided itself on being very Roman, despite the fact

that it was near Greece, in what is today Turkey. Nonetheless, the people there

worshipped Greek gods, and there were many, many temples to the chief Greek

god Zeus throughout the region. There was a legend in the surrounding area that

told of a visit to earth by the gods Zeus and Hermes. They came in human form

and so they were not recognized. Hermes was a son of Zeus, by the way. In the story, only two people, a poor and elderly couple named Baucis and Philemon, treated Zeus and Hermes to any hospitality. The couple gave them the last of their food, in fact, but miraculously, the food kept multiplying. The couple was startled by this miracle. It was then that Zeus and Hermes identified themselves as gods. Since no one else had received them graciously, the rest of the population was wiped out in a flood. These folks who are observing Paul performing a miracle are afraid that once again, Zeus and Hermes have arrived in human form, and these people are not about to make the same mistake as their mythical ancestors. So, they are quick to identify Paul and Barnabas as these two gods. Note that at this time and place, people who seemed to perform miracles were often considered gods, not just agents of gods. The people there would not have been able to conceive of Paul and Barnabas as being empowered by God. Someone acting through a god just wasn't part of their worldview.

Also, Hermes was the messenger of the Olympian gods, and Hermes often spoke for the more dignified Zeus, who wasn't about to chit-chat with humans. Interestingly, the word hermeneutics, which refers to the interpretation of Scripture was deliberately derived from the word Hermes, as he, in a sense, interpreted the words of Zeus. Now, since Paul was doing all the talking, he was

presumably Hermes. It's also believed that Paul was no more than forty years-old at the time, and Barnabas might have been older. He would therefore more likely be Zeus. It's also true that since people in Lystra actively worshipped Zeus and Hermes, they regularly held festivals dedicated to these two gods. During these celebrations, people dressed up colorfully. They would sacrifice oxen and bulls, which were very expensive, and only sacrificed to the great god Zeus himself. Thus, we see why the people of the town wanted to throw an impromptu festival when they inferred that the two gods were present among them. They wanted to treat Zeus and Hermes the way they were normally treated.

There's a subtle point that has to do with the full significance of the miracle that Paul performed. The man that he cured was probably begging for money; throughout the larger region, people with disabilities were almost always reduced to living this way, as most people had to earn a living working with their hands, feet, and backs. When the crowd saw this man cured, they were seeing him healed physically. But they were also seeing him returned to full dignity as a human. This is a very major act, worthy of a god to perform. It adds to the impact of the scene to an early Christian reading Acts as Scripture.

Also, this issue of Paul and Barnabas ripping up their clothes needs some explanation. Tearing one's clothing was virtually required of a Jew if he heard

blasphemous talk. Remember that Jews were very strong monotheists, and this was the key way in which they differentiated themselves from their ignorant oppressors, the Romans, their colonial predecessor the Greeks, and other cultures that the Jews considered to be decadent and sinful. It was a great source of pride to believe that there was only a single God. Anyone who worshipped multiple gods was a sacrilegious pagan, and to be confused with these fake gods would have been horrendous. It was sacrilegious and so they tore their clothing.

Notice that Paul focuses on God being the creator of Heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. This would appeal to pagans who already had the concept of gods creating the things that people needed to survive. This was their notion of religion: various gods were responsible for maintaining different parts of nature that humans depended on for survival. So, Paul would have kept his preaching very rudimentary and would have avoided any abstract discussion about good and evil that might confuse simple-minded pagans who were not used to complex religious discussions. The whole monotheistic approach to faith was far less concrete and literal than what they were used to.

But Paul and Barnabas made a tough choice when they declared themselves to not be gods. They did this because they did not want to offend the one, true God. When Paul and Barnabas refused to be identified as Zeus and

Hermes, they must have known that they were doing much more than saying they were just humans. They were identifying themselves as the only other beings who could perform miracles. They were essentially declaring themselves as magicians, people who performed evil miracles. Thus, the people went from worshipping them to stoning them very quickly. And stoning was the punishment for blasphemy, in both Roman and Jewish cultures. Indeed stones, since they were readily available in the famous Roman roadways, were the most available weapon grabbed up by mobs.

What do we make of this story today? There is a strong parallel in our culture. Our society has a plethora of gods even greater than that worshipped by Greeks and Romans. We call them celebrities. Americans are obsessed with actors, singers, athletes, even just loud-mouthed people with no particular skills who happen to get the attention of the media. They take on super-human form. I truly think this detracts from our ability to praise God and the gifts that God has given even the most-humble among us. We degrade ourselves by valuing only people who have achieved fame or riches that we have not achieved. We idolize people who serve themselves, not humanity and not God.

Indeed, we know – as our second passage today tells us – that Jesus himself was not interested in being worshipped as a human who was the owner of vast

riches on earth. He told the Devil that we are to worship only God. Many, many Americans have forgotten this lesson from two thousand years ago.

I want to keep the sermon short today, so let me end by saying this: Paul and Barnabas did something truly heroic. They came close to sacrificing their lives to make sure that the lofty position of God was upheld and that they were not lifted to a position equal to God. And remember that these people didn't know about science and wouldn't have started wondering if perhaps the disabled man had been healed in some medically explainable way. Paul and Barnabas knew there was only one alternative to being gods who performed miracles – and that was being magicians who were evil and deserved to be stoned to death.

Paul and Barnabas knew that we should never worship humans. Even if people can do miracles, we don't worship them. We don't worship Paul and Barnabas for being heroic, either. We do honor them, though. That's the difference. *We worship God and we honor humans* - humans who deserve to be honored – and that often doesn't include celebrities. In fact, there are many ordinary, everyday people who are far more deserving of honor.

My parents loved me, but I wasn't the most supervised kid. When I was six years-old, I was out riding my bike alone in the evening. I was, however, riding legally. I was hit by a car. The driver was drunk. I landed on my head and was

knocked unconscious. When I woke up in the emergency room, I didn't know what had happened. I'd forgotten everything. But the very first thing I noticed was that I had wet myself. There was a team of people around me, working on me. I looked down – horrified and embarrassed. My pants were soaked.

But guess what? A nurse saw the expression on my face. She smiled down at me. Don't worry, she said to me. Everybody wets themselves when they pass out. That's just what happens. Why the other day, we had a big football player in here who was knocked out and he wet himself, too.

I vividly remember an extreme feeling of relief. I was rescued. There was nothing to be ashamed of. I remember thinking that everything would be okay. And, it was. I had a concussion, but quickly recovered. I will absolutely never forget the nurse who was so tuned to the needs of a little boy that she knew what I was thinking, and she intuitively knew exactly what to say to make that little boy feel better. She was my hero – and she always will be. I honor her.

So, we worship only God. We honor those who serve God and who serve us. And let's remember. Jesus himself was no celebrity. He did not own a string of mansions or a personal jet plane. Our third passage today is what he said of himself: *"Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head."* But we worship him.