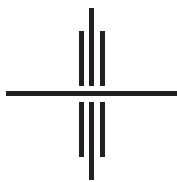


BOLD FOR THE CITIES



CITIES CHURCH

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OVERVIEW

Week 1—Mar 30	Reading	Questions	Acts 10
Day 1	Read Acts 1	Acts 10:1–16	Acts 10:15
Day 2	Read Acts 2	Acts 10:17–29	Acts 10:28
Day 3	Read Acts 3	Acts 10:30–48	Acts 10:42–43
Week 2—Apr 6	Reading	Questions	Acts 11
Day 1	Read Acts 4	Acts 11:1–18	Acts 11:17–18
Day 2	Read Acts 5	Acts 11:19–26	Acts 11:21
Day 3	Read Acts 6	Acts 11:27–30	Galatians 2:10
Week 3—Apr 13	Reading	Questions	Acts 12
Day 1	Read Acts 7	Acts 12:1–5	Ephesians 6:18
Day 2	Read Acts 8	Acts 12:6–19	Matthew 8:23–27
Day 3	Read Acts 9	Acts 12:20–25	Acts 12:24
Week 4—Apr 20	Reading	Questions	Acts 13
Day 1	Read Acts 10	Acts 13:1–12	Joel 2:12–13
Day 2	Read Acts 11	Acts 13:13–31	Acts 13:23
Day 3	Read Acts 12	Acts 13:32–52	Acts 13:48–52
Week 5—Apr 27	Reading	Questions	Acts 14
Day 1	Read Acts 13	Acts 14:1–7	2 Corinthians 12:10
Day 2	Read Acts 14	Acts 14:8–20	Philippians 3:7–8
Day 3	Read Acts 15	Acts 14:21–28	Acts 14:22
Week 6—May 4	Reading	Questions	Acts 15
Day 1	Read Acts 16	Acts 15:1–21	Acts 15:8–11
Day 2	Read Galatians 1	Acts 15:22–35	Acts 15:28–29
Day 3	Read Galatians 2	Acts 15:36–41	2 Timothy 4:9–13
Week 7—May 11	Reading	Questions	Acts 16
Day 1	Read Galatians 3	Acts 16:1–10	2 Timothy 1:3–7
Day 2	Read Galatians 4	Acts 16:11–24	Philippians 1:3–6
Day 3	Read Galatians 5	Acts 16:25–40	Acts 16:29–31
Week 8—May 18	Reading	Questions	Acts 17
Day 1	Read Acts 17	Acts 17:1–9	Acts 17:4–5
Day 2	Read Galatians 6	Acts 17:10–21	Acts 17:16–17
Day 3	Read Ephesians 1	Acts 17:22–34	Acts 17:24–25

Week 9—May 25	Reading	Questions	Acts 18
Day 1	Read Acts 18	Acts 18:1–17	1 Corinthians 1:4–9
Day 2	Read Ephesians 2	Acts 18:18–23	James 4:13–17
Day 3	Read Ephesians 3	Acts 18:24–28	Acts 18:25

Week 10—Jun 1	Reading	Questions	Acts 19
Day 1	Read Acts 19	Acts 19:1–10	Acts 19:8–9
Day 2	Read Ephesians 4	Acts 19:11–20	Acts 19:18–20
Day 3	Read Ephesians 5	Acts 19:21–41	Ephesians 2:8–10

Week 11—Jun 8	Reading	Questions	Acts 20
Day 1	Read Acts 20	Acts 20:1–6	Acts 20:1
Day 2	Read Ephesians 6	Acts 20:7–16	Acts 20:16
Day 3	Read Philippians 1	Acts 20:17–38	Acts 20:24

Week 12—Jun 15	Reading	Questions	Acts 21
Day 1	Read Acts 21	Acts 21:1–14	Acts 21:13–14
Day 2	Read Philippians 2	Acts 21:15–26	Acts 21:17–20
Day 3	Read Philippians 3	Acts 21:27–40	Acts 21:34–26

Week 13—Jun 22	Reading	Questions	Acts 22
Day 1	Read Acts 22	Acts 22:1–11	Acts 8:1–3
Day 2	Read Philippians 4	Acts 22:12–21	Acts 22:19–21
Day 3	Read Colossians 1	Acts 22:22–30	Acts 22:22

Preface

Michael Thiel

Dear Cities Church,

This is exciting. If you are reading this right now, it means we've pulled off two Bible study guides in a row. This workbook, like the first quarter workbook, accompanies our sermon series on Acts called "Bold for the Cities." The plan for this second quarter workbook is to take us from Acts 9 through Acts 22.

As we dreamt about the place and function of this workbook in the life of Cities Church, several things came up:

1) Sermon Series

The workbook is laid out as best as possible to accompany the sermon series. The length of the workbook follows a very simple quarterly schedule, which turns out to be three months at a time. So, when this workbook was written we did our best to plan out the sermon passages as well. The workbook and the sermons won't line up perfectly, but should be close.

The sermon series in the second quarter of 2015 is still Acts, and we plan to move through the workbook at a pace of one chapter per week. This should allow studying Acts to be similar from week to week. The sermons from week to week will vary from half a chapter to several chapters. The plan, God willing, is to finish Acts by the end of August, when we plan to start a new series for the fall.

2) Structure

This workbook has 13 weeks, which lines up with the second quarter, April through June. Each week is broken down in a nominal three-day layout. I say nominal because you can choose however you want to use this workbook. You could take parts of the weekly content and divide it up so that you have something to work on each day of the week.

There are three parts per day (we were really shooting for that magical number of three). The three parts cater to different ways of taking in the Bible. First, there is a chapter of the Bible to read. Second, there is a section of Scripture to study that accompanies the Acts sermon series; we've written questions for this section and also included relevant quotes from scholars. Third, we suggest a verse or two upon which to reflect. You can choose the way

you want to reflect and mediate on the verses. I have included an appendix that lays out one way to do the inductive Bible study method, as an option.

We've added an open page to take notes on the sermon each week. We think this will be a nice way to include the sermon notes into your study and have all your notes in one place.

Lastly, we've included an article each week. It will be short-form content that is relevant to the study, or is generally edifying to the life of Cities Church. The article for a given week also includes a few stories of people in our church who share about how the grace of the gospel has impacted their lives. We see this as another way of getting to know one another. It's also nice to have a real-life story from our community amidst the stories we're studying in the Bible.

3) Consistency

One of our aims with this workbook is to help provide a means of consistent Bible intake without being exclusively fed by someone else. This workbook is generic enough that you will have to put in work to mine the Bible for diamonds on your own. And we wouldn't want it any other way. We can't wait to hear what people find and how God moves their hearts as they dig into the Scriptures. This workbook can be viewed as a place for you to dig on a consistent basis, but you are putting the shovel in the ground.

4) Options

Lastly, this workbook isn't mandatory or even "strongly encouraged." It's one option among several others out there. We offer it in an open-handed manner simply to be a tool to help. We're here to serve, help, and guide. And if this workbook isn't helpful for you, then don't do it. Our suggestion to you is that you talk about your plans within your Life Group for how you aim to take in the Bible this spring.

May God bless your Bible study this spring, and build us up to, together, walk in newness of life.

Much love,
Pastor Michael
March 2015

Acts Up to Now

Jonathan Parnell

The major movements in Acts are summarized in Jesus's commission in Acts 1:8 — "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

As we've seen, the gospel has taken root in Jerusalem, and by the beginning of chapter 8, the church has been "scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1). The next frontier is "to the end of the earth"—and it's to this frontier that the narrative turns in the hinge-section of Acts 8-10.

We know as readers that, one way or another, the gospel must advance to the nations. The question, though, is how it all might work. This whole situation as a reader is sort of like how I felt when Eric Taylor became coach of the East Dillon Lions.

You may have seen, or at least heard, of the wildly successful television series *Friday Night Lights*. The last episode aired back in 2011, but all five seasons are on Netflix, and Melissa and I have just recently fallen in love with the story—the character development, the small-town feel of rural Texas—all that stuff.

[Spoiler alert: If you've not seen it but plan to watch it, skip the next paragraph.]

When we were in the second season of the show, during a conversation with a native Texan who claims to have watched all five seasons twice over, I found out that character Eric Taylor would, by the beginning of Season 4, be the new head coach of the East Dillon Lions. It didn't make any sense, though. I had no clue how this would happen. Coach Taylor had been doing great for the Dillon Panthers—the only high school in town. He was a state champion. He was loved by the fans. It didn't make any sense that he'd leave for another high school in town, but yet, I had this intel. I knew it would happen, one way or another. The question for me, throughout all of Season 3, was how the writers of the show would pull this off.

Our question in Acts is like that. We know the gospel is going to the nations. It is going to happen, one way or another. But how? How will the church, or really, how will Jesus pull this off?

His strategy couldn't be more amazing: Let's take the most zealous Pharisee and make him a servant of the Gentiles. Let's turn the gospel's most ardent opposition into the gospel's most devoted herald.

This is what we find in Acts 9.
Stay tuned.

WEEK 1

ACTS 10

Day 1

Read Acts 1. In verse 24, what are the implications that God knows your heart?

Questions: Acts 10:1–16

1. What do we know about Cornelius? What does God think of Cornelius and what does He have him do?
2. Prior to 10:9, what has Peter been up to?
3. Why doesn't Peter want to kill and eat the animals he saw in the vision?
4. Read Galatians 2:11–16. How does this passage help explain what is going on in 10:1–16?

Acts 10:15

Day 2

Read Acts 2. Note and list the various action verbs for which God is responsible.

Questions: Acts 10:17–29

1. 10:17–18. Why do you think Peter was perplexed about the vision? If you had the chance to interact with Peter at this point, how would you explain to Peter what his vision meant?
2. 10:17–23. Would you describe Peter as being obedient? How so? Did Peter have everything figured out at this point? Explain.
3. 10:24–27. Describe Peter's attitude and posture when Cornelius and Peter meet.
4. 10:28–29. What is significant about this event, that Peter is meeting with Cornelius?

Acts 10:28

Day 3

Read Acts 3. What does the lame beggar show us about the meaning of repentance?

Questions: Acts 10:30–48

1. What is Cornelius' attitude and posture towards Peter? What types of change do you think took place in the heart of the Roman centurion to act like this?
2. What is the heart of Peter's message to Cornelius? What is the good news?
 - a. What does James 2:1 teach us about "partiality"?
3. Acts 10:39–40 lays out a contrast with "but". Write it out. What does Peter teach us?
4. What was so amazing to the Jews (10:44–48) and why was this amazing? What does this say about the gospel?

Acts 10:42–43

Cross references: Psalm 130:4, Isaiah 55:6–7, 1 John 1:9

What God Has Cleansed Do Not Call Common

John Piper

Sermon on Acts 10:1–11:18

This story about Cornelius and Peter has a lot to say about the winds of racism that are blowing on the University campus these days. They have a lot to say about our natural tendency to think of other ethnic groups besides our own as unclean and common and corrupt. They have a lot to say about world missions and our commitment as evangelical Christians to take the gospel of Christ to every ethnic group in the world so that people may be saved from the coming wrath of God. So I hope you will listen carefully and help me unpack the powerful truth of this story for our lives.

The Story About Cornelius and Peter

Let me try to sum up the whole story for us. Cornelius is a Gentile, not a Jew. But he feared God as best he knew how and he prayed and he gave alms and walked in an upright way (10:2, 22). God sent an angel to him and told him to send for Peter to hear what he has to say.

Peter's Vision

At about the same time God gave Peter a vision of animals that the Jews regarded as unclean because of the ceremonial law of the Old Testament. The voice from heaven said, "Rise and eat." But Peter protested that they were unclean. And the voice came back with these decisive words in verse 15: "What God has cleansed you must not call common!"

In other words, with the coming of Jesus into the world and with the final cleansing sacrifice of Christ now offered and with the command to take the gospel to all ethnic groups in the world now given, the old ceremonial laws

about foods are lifted and that barrier to the Gentile world is removed.

And so Peter's vision has two points: the food laws are fulfilled and ended in Jesus (Mark 7:19), and the people they kept you separate from (the nations, the Gentiles) are not to be considered unclean or common.

Cornelius Sends for Peter

God makes this clear to Peter right away, because while he is still pondering the meaning of the vision on the roof in Joppa, three Gentiles from Cornelius knock at his door. The fact that verse 16 says the vision about unclean animals happened three times and verse 19 says that three men (Gentile men, ordinarily thought unclean) are at the door is no accident. Peter is supposed to get the message: people that you have formerly regarded as common and unclean and separated from your fellowship are not to be viewed that way. Go with these men.

So Peter goes with them to Caesarea. There he finds Cornelius ready with his whole household to hear the gospel. Peter preaches, they repent (11:18), and the Holy Spirit falls on them (11:14) and they are saved (11:14). After Missions Week I will give a whole message to what Peter preached and why it was that the Holy Spirit fell the way he did.

Was Cornelius Already Saved?

But today I want to ask two questions that are really pressing in this story. One is this: Was Cornelius already saved before Peter preached Christ to him? The reason this is so pressing is that verses 34–35 have led many to say that he was. This would have a big impact on the way we think about world missions.

Peter begins his sermon to the Gentiles at Cornelius' house like this: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." You can see how readers would easily conclude: Well, then, Cornelius was already accepted by God since verse 2 said that he feared God and prayed and gave alms. So Peter's visit just informed him of the acceptance and salvation that he already had. And so the conclusion is further drawn out: many people in all the unreached peoples of the world are truly born again and accepted by

God and saved without hearing or believing in Christ.

So my first question is: Does verse 35 mean that Cornelius and people like him are already justified and reconciled to God and saved from the wrath of God? My second question assumes the answer to this first one and brings us to the very pointed applications of this story to racism and world missions. I save it and ask it after answering the first question.

Does verse 35 mean that Cornelius and those like him are already in God's family, justified, reconciled, saved? Is that Peter's point in saying this and Luke's point in writing it?

Four Reasons for Answering No

Let me give you four reasons from the text for answering NO.

1. Peter's Description in Acts 11:14

Acts 11:14 says that the message Peter brought was the way Cornelius was saved. Look at 11:13-14 where Peter tells the story of the angel's appearing to Cornelius: "He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, Send to Joppa and bring Simon called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household."

Notice two things. First, notice that the message is essential. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Then notice that the tense of the verb is future: "... a message by which you will be saved ..." "In other words, the message was not simply the informing of Cornelius that he already was saved—which is what some people say world evangelization is for. If he sends for Peter and hears the message and believes on the Christ of that message, then he WILL be saved. And if he does not, he won't be.

This surely is why the whole story is built around God's miraculously getting Cornelius and Peter together. There was a message that Cornelius needed to hear to be saved (vv. 22, 33).

So Acts 10:35 probably does not mean that Cornelius is already saved when it says that people in unreached ethnic groups who fear God and do right are acceptable to God.

Cornelius had to hear the gospel message to be saved.

2. Peter's Declaration in Acts 10:43

Peter makes this point at the end of his sermon in 10:43. He brings the message to a close with these words: "To him [i.e., to Christ] all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Forgiveness of sins is salvation. No one is saved whose sins against God are not forgiven by God. And Peter says that forgiveness comes through believing in Christ, and it comes through the name of Christ.

He does not say, "I am here to announce to you that those of you who fear God and do right are already forgiven." He says, "I am here so that you may hear the gospel and receive forgiveness in the name of Christ by believing in him." So again it is very unlikely that verse 35 means that Cornelius and his household were already forgiven for their sins before they heard the message of Christ.

3. What Devout Jews Need Elsewhere in Acts

Elsewhere in the book of Acts even those who are the most God-fearing and ethical, namely, the Jews, are told that they must repent and believe in order to be saved. The Jews at Pentecost were called "devout men" (2:5) like Cornelius was called a devout man (in 10:2). But Peter ended his message in Acts 2 by calling even devout Jews to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins (2:38). Same thing in 3:19 and 13:38–39.

So Luke is not trying to tell us in this book that devout, God-fearing people who practice what's right as best they know how are already saved and without any need of the gospel. The gospel got its start among the most devout people in the world, namely, the Jews. They had more advantages in knowing God than any of the other peoples of the earth. Yet they were told again and again: devoutness and works of righteousness and religious sincerity does not solve the problem of sin. The only hope is to believe on Jesus. It was true then, it is true today!

4. The Apostles' Reaction in Acts 11:18

The fourth reason for saying that verse 35 does not mean Cornelius and others like him are already saved is found in Acts 11:18. When the apostles hear Peter tell the story about Cornelius, their initial misgivings are silenced, Luke says, "And they glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life."

"Repentance unto life" means that their repentance led to eternal life. They did not already have eternal life. They received it when they heard the message about Christ and turned to believe and follow him.

So I conclude that Acts 10:35 does not mean that Cornelius was already saved because he was in some sense God-fearing and did many right and noble things. That's the answer to my first question.

What Is This "Acceptability" Before God?

The second is simply: What then does it mean when Peter says, "In every nation any one who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him"? And what does this have to do with our racist tendencies and our ethnocentrism and our commitment to world evangelization?

All People Are Acceptable Candidates for Salvation?

My first thought was that what Peter means in verse 35 is what God meant in the vision about the unclean animals, namely, the lesson of verse 15: "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." But something stopped me and made me think again.

Look at verse 28. Peter is explaining to the Gentiles why he was willing to come and says, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean."

What this means is that Christians should never look down on a person from any race or ethnic group and say: they are unfit to hear the gospel from me. Or they are too unclean for me to go into their house to share the gospel. Or they are not worth evangelizing. Or they have too many offensive habits to even get near them.

But the phrase that makes verse 28 so powerful is the phrase "any man" or "any one": "God has shown me that I should not call any human being common or unclean." In other words, Peter learned from his vision on the housetop in Joppa that God rules no one out of his favor on the basis of race or ethnic origin or mere cultural distinctives or physical distinctives. "Common and unclean" meant rejected, despised, taboo. It was like leprosy.

And Peter's point here in verse 28 is that there is not one human being on the face of the earth that we should think about in that way. Not one. That's the amazing thing in this verse. Not one. Our hearts should go out to every single person whatever the color, whatever the ethnic origin, whatever the physical traits, whatever the cultural distinctives. Don't write off anybody. Don't snub anybody. Don't check them out like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan and then pass by on the other side. "God has shown me that I should not call any one—not one—common or unclean."

Not Simply a Matter of Clean and Unclean

Now that is not what Peter says in verse 35. This is what kept me from assuming that verse 35 simply meant: all people are acceptable as candidates for salvation, no matter their ethnic background. In verse 35 Peter says, "In every nation [note those words!] any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to God." Here he is not talking about every person like he was in verse 28. Here he is talking about some IN every nation. IN every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to God.

So the acceptability Peter has in mind here is something more, it seems, than merely not being common or unclean. That's everybody. Peter said, "Call NO ONE common or unclean." Here he says that only some in every nation fear God and do right. And these are acceptable to God.

So now we know two things verse 35 does NOT mean. (1) It does not mean that these God-fearing doers of good are saved. We saw four reasons why it can't mean that. And (2) it does not mean merely that they are acceptable candidates for evangelism (not common or unclean, not taboo), because verse 28 already

said that's true of everybody, not just some. But verse 35 says that only some are God-fearing, doing what is right, and thus acceptable.

Somewhere in Between

So the meaning probably lies somewhere between these two: between being saved and being a touchable, lovable human candidate for evangelism.

Here's my suggestion. Cornelius represents a kind of unsaved person among an unreached people group who is seeking God in an extraordinary way. And Peter is saying that God accepts this search as genuine (hence "acceptable" in verse 35) and works wonders to bring that person the gospel.

I get this especially from verse 31 where Cornelius says that the angel said to him, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter." Notice: Your prayers have been heard . . . therefore send for Peter. This implies that the prayers were for God to send him what he needed in order to be saved.

So the fear of God that is acceptable to God in verse 35 is a true sense that there is a holy God, that we have to meet him some day as desperate sinners, that we cannot save ourselves and need to know God's way of salvation, and that we pray for it day and night and seek to act on the light we have. This is what Cornelius was doing. And God accepted his prayer and his groping for truth in his life (Acts 17:27), and worked wonders to bring the saving message of the gospel to him.

Two Lessons

So there are really two lessons in this text for today. One is that no human being is common or unclean. None is to be spurned, shunned, rejected, despised because of his ethnic origin or race or culture or physical traits. Christians should have no part in the kind of renewed racism that is cropping up around our land, for example, in the white supremacist groups on the university campus.

The second lesson from the text is that in every nation—that is, every ethnic people group around the world (v. 35)—there are people being prepared by God to seek him with

acceptable prayer. This means two things for us as we approach our annual Missions Fest.

One is that many of us should go. Cornelius would not have been saved if no one had taken him the gospel. And no one will be saved today without the gospel.

The other is that we should be full of hope and expectancy that this is the sort of wonder God is willing to work in making connections between the groping of unreached peoples and those willing to take the gospel to them.

So let us wash our minds and our mouths of all racial slurs and ethnic put-downs and be done with all alienating behaviors. And let's be the good Samaritan for some ethnic outcast, and let's be the Christ for some untouchable leper, and let's be the Peter for some waiting Cornelius.

April 5, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 2

ACTS 11

Day 1

Read Acts 4. Note the various times the word “name” is used. In what way may this be linked to the leaders being annoyed in 4:2?

Questions: Acts 11:1–18

1. What was the criticism Peter faced? How do you think Peter felt in the moment?
2. Who is Peter speaking to and why are they important? How did the hearers respond to Peter’s report?
3. What do we learn about the gift of the Holy Spirit in 11:18 and Ephesians 1:13-14?
4. What do we learn about repentance in 11:18?
 - a. 2 Corinthians 7:10.

Acts 11:17–18

Day 2

Read Acts 5. What does 5:29 teach us about the gospel and in what ways does 5:29 apply to your life?

What does 5:41-42 tell us about the early church believers?

Questions: Acts 11:19–26

1. Find a map (study Bible or Google) and make a few observations on who went where and did what. Where and how is the “word” spreading in the story of Acts? Compare with Acts 1:8.

2. Do we know who these “preachers” were? Who are the Hellenists and why do you think they are mentioned here?

3. Why did the church in Jerusalem send Barnabas to Antioch?

4. How would you describe the people that made up the group who were called “Christians”?

Acts 11:21

Day 3

Read Acts 6. In 6:12 we see this word “stir.” What does it mean? Stirring up people is real. God stirs people (see Ezra 1:1,5) and people stir people. Have you ever thought about what ways you “stir” up other people? Is it good stirring or bad stirring? Do you frustrate people or are you helpful? See Ephesians 4:29 for example. How would you like to “stir” up people?

Questions: Acts 11:27–30

1. What does it mean that people came “down” from Jerusalem? What does this say about culture in this space and time?
2. What do you think were some of the purposes of the famine? Why did God allow these famines and why did they end up in the story of Acts?
3. Describe the giving efforts in this Christian community. How did they go about doing it, what did it look like, was it successful, why did the people give money?
4. Do you think Galatians 2:1–10 coincides with this trip to Jerusalem?

Galatians 2:10

Being a Lifelong Learner

John Ed Robertson

Discipleship Journal, Volume 4 Number 5,
September 1, 1984, Issue 23

For some reason I find that I want to graduate from God's training program for me and get on with the process of living and teaching to others what I have learned. I want to arrive at a plateau of maturity and competence where I no longer need to learn and from which I can teach others who have not yet arrived – the poor creatures! But I never seem to get there.

In Philippians 3:12-16 the Apostle Paul describes a different attitude Christians ought to have:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Knowing Christ: Our Ultimate Goal

The goal for which Paul strives is to know Jesus Christ intimately. It is a goal that he has not yet attained, but for which he continues to strive. What is especially interesting is what he says in verse 15 "Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you."

What is the view of things the mature person should take? It is that one has not yet arrived at the desired level of knowledge of Jesus Christ. Spiritual maturity is realizing that one is not yet mature. It is a process in which one is engaged, not a level to which one attains.

Paul then adds what I think is a humorous point: "and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you." When we think we have attained to the required level of maturity in a given area, we are in for an embarrassing experience! We will be made painfully aware that we are not yet so mature as we thought. Elsewhere Paul says, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

These verses encourage me when I become discouraged with my apparent lack of maturity. Often, when I realize through an experience of failure that I need to learn a principle, I am tempted to think, "What's wrong with me? I should have learned this long ago!" But there is nothing wrong with needing to continue to learn. It is normal.

Perhaps this is why the Bible uses the Greek word for "learner" to describe the followers of Jesus. The word *mathetes* means "a learner... indicating thought accompanied by endeavor." Disciples of Jesus are lifelong learners. As Jesus said in Matthew 11:29 "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Learning is a fundamental part of the lifestyle of a Christian.

Attitudes of a Learner

Learning throughout our lives does not come naturally. It requires certain attitudes. Here are three I have found helpful:

1. Teachability. Learning presupposes that there are things we don't know and sources from which we can learn them. Unfortunately, sometimes our attitude is, "I love to learn but I hate to be taught!" Perhaps this is because we don't like to admit that someone else knows more than we do. Pride can keep us from being teachable; so can fear of admitting that we are wrong.

A few years ago, when I was responsible for the Navigators ministry at the U.S. Naval Academy, a friend shared with me his plan and program for helping young Christians grow. It wasn't the approach I was using. It threatened me to think I might be wrong and might have to change what I was doing. I fretted over this question for a few days and suddenly realized

my emotional reaction was keeping me from being teachable.

"If I have to go through an emotional upheaval like this every time I have to learn something," I thought, "sooner or later I'll stop learning." I had to be secure in the Lord if I were not to be threatened by new ideas.

I tried my friend's ideas, but later concluded that my original approach worked better for me. Had I been more secure in the first place, I could probably have evaluated his ideas more objectively. My pride and insecurity kept me from being teachable.

Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice." This does not mean we automatically adopt every new idea we hear, but that we are open to new ideas from godly people and able to evaluate them objectively for possible application.

2. Initiative. To be real learners, we have to do more than just be open to others who take initiative to teach us. We also need to take initiative to learn when no one is teaching us.

A biblical illustration of this is found in 1 Kings 19:19-21, where Elijah selected Elisha to be his successor. When Elijah passed by and cast his mantle on Elisha, Elisha understood this to be an invitation to follow Elijah. His reaction was one of excitement, with a twinge of sadness at leaving his parents, "Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye," Elisha said, "and then I will come with you" (v.20).

Elijah immediately put Elisha in the position of having to take initiative to follow him: "Go back... What have I done to you?" In other words, "If you have more important things to do, forget it! I'm withdrawing the invitation." Elisha then killed the oxen with which he had been plowing, broke up the plow, and built a fire with it to sacrifice the oxen. That's what you call burning your bridges behind you! There was no way he could go back to plowing after that. "Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant" (v.21).

3. Application. The Greek word for "disciple" implies thought accompanied by endeavor. Jesus Christ wants us to learn with the idea of putting what we learn into practice. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and

to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). God has not revealed everything, but what He has revealed is to be put into practice.

Three of the four reasons given in 2 Tim. 3:16 for which God inspired the Scriptures have to do especially with application: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..." Rebuke reprimands us for leaving the path God wants us to follow. Correction tells us how to get back on the path. Training in righteousness tells us how to stay on it. Or, as James tells us: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." (James 1:22).

Avenues of Learning

In addition to reading books, which is discussed by other authors in this issue of the Journal, there are three main avenues of learning in the Christian life: the Word of God, other people, and experience.

A. The Word of God. This, of course, is the primary source for learning about Jesus and how to live the Christian life. In John 8:31 Jesus said "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples." Just prior to my final year of engineering school, I attended summer school, and seemed that all I did was study. I memorized Matthew 11:28 "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." But I kept thinking "I'm weary and burdened and I have to come to Him. Where is the rest?" I had the impression I should spend more time in Bible study and prayer, but could never seem to get on top of my studies enough to have the time.

Then one day I was reading Matthew 11 with a friend and was startled to find the verses that follow the promise of the verse: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (vv.29-30).

I was amazed. "The last thing anyone who is weary and burdened needs is another yoke," I thought. Yet that is the antidote Jesus prescribes.

What is the yoke of which He speaks? He says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from

me.” The application for me was clear: I needed to take the extra time and trouble, time I did not think I had, and learn from Jesus. I decided to make it a higher priority to pray and do Bible study. To my delight I learned that the work load was lighter once my priorities were right. We need to spend time in the Bible to learn of Him.

B. Other People. The second way to learn things in the Christian life is to learn them from other people. This can be directly from pastors, spiritual leaders, and other Christians around us, or indirectly through books and other published materials. We need to take the initiative to learn from others who are walking with God, and we need to be teachable when they take the initiative to teach us.

This can be a more painful and embarrassing way to learn than the Word of God. We don’t always like to have others discover areas of need in our lives. If my life doesn’t measure up to the Bible, that is to be expected. I can apply what it teaches and get on with life. But when another sinner like me can see areas in which my life does not measure up, I find that a bitter pill to swallow.

But we need this avenue of learning, because other people can be more objective than we can in evaluating our lives. We often have blind spots, areas of need that we cannot see. It is important to be open and transparent with at least one or two other Christians who love us enough to be honest with us about areas of our lives that do not comply with the Bible.

The Bible gives two classic models of this type of relationship: Paul with Timothy and David with Jonathan. A good friend of mine, Paul Stanley, my supervisor in The Navigators, observes that Navs tend to be stronger in the Paul/Timothy (father/son) relationships than in the David/Jonathan (friend/friend) relationships, but that we need both.

Perhaps this is true in a wider context. That pastor of a church of 300 people cannot possibly be intimately involved in the lives of all 300. But each person in the church can have several close friends with whom he or she can have this David/Jonathan relationship.

C. Experience. Experience can be the hard way to learn if we refuse to learn from the Word of God and other people. The history of Israel in

Judges is a repeated cycle of turning from the Word of God, experiencing the chastening of God, repentance leading to restoration and prosperity, and turning again from the Word of God.

But experience can be a positive avenue of learning. It is often through experience that we develop deep-seated convictions on the beliefs we hold, provided we interpret experience in the light of Scripture and not vice versa.

Don’t Get Mental Hardening of the Arteries

One of the great privileges we have as Christians is that of continuing to learn for the rest of our lives. We don’t have to give in to mental hardening of the arteries and become set in our ways. We can continue to plumb the depths of the Word of God and the Person of Jesus Christ. This requires teachable and open to learn from those who would teach us as well as taking the initiative to learn ourselves. God intends that we practice what we learn.

When we combine teachability, initiative, and application with attention to the lessons of Scripture, other Christians, and experience, we can find all of life an exciting growth in our knowledge and love of God, other people, and His creation.

April 12, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 3

ACTS 12

Day 1

Read Acts 7. Note the Trinity in 7:55. Who's doing what?

Questions: Acts 12:1–5

1. Who is Herod? What are the days of “Unleavened Bread”?
2. Who was martyred and what do we know about him?
3. Why do you think the Jews were pleased? What does it say about the culture at this point?
4. What do you think earnest prayer looked like for these believers? What prompted it?
 - a. 2 Corinthians 1:11.

Ephesians 6:18

Day 2

Read Acts 8. Why was Simon the Magician's heart not right before God?

Questions: Acts 12:6–19

1. What was Peter doing when the angel showed up? How was he able to do this given the circumstances?
 - a. What are the things that keep you up at night and what may that be showing you about your heart?
2. Why do you think Peter was rescued from prison rather than subjected to suffering at this point?
3. Why do you think the fact that Peter kept knocking (v.16) was added by Luke into the narrative?

Matthew 8:23–27

Day 3

Read Acts 9. Why do you think Christianity was referred to as “the Way”?

Questions: Acts 12:20–25

1. Why was Herod angry with the people?
2. Who is Blastus and what is a “chamberlain”?
3. What does it mean and what does it look like to give God the glory?
 - a. John 12:41–43
 - b. Romans 1:21–23; 3:23
 - c. 1 Corinthians 10:31
4. What is the significance of the contrast as signified with “but” in 12:23–24?

Acts 12:24

See also Acts 6:7

“The Necessity of Prayer”

Michael Thiel

For this section, I wanted to include a few excerpts from Chapter 1 of Tim Keller's book, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. There is a similarity between Acts 12:12 (the people praying) and what Kathy Keller, Tim's wife, says about the need to pray. Kathy said to Tim, "if we don't pray together to God, we're not going to make it because of all we are facing." And in Acts 12:12 the people were praying in response to James being killed and Peter being imprisoned. Persecution was at an all-time high. These were real people dying, and those remaining had immense grief. No doubt the people (many were gathered — imagine the emotions) could have easily said, and probably did, "if we don't pray together to God, we're not going to make it because of all we are facing."

Tim Keller:

In the second half of my adult life, I discovered prayer. I had to. In the fall of 1999, I taught a Bible study course on the Psalms. It became clear to me that I was barely scratching the surface of what the Bible commanded and promised regarding prayer. Then came the dark weeks in New York after 9/11, when our whole city sank into a kind of corporate clinical depression, even as it rallied. For my family that shadow was intensified as my wife, Kathy, struggled with the effects of Crohn's disease. Finally, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

At one point during all this, my wife urged me to do something with her we had never been able to muster the self-discipline to do regularly. She asked me to pray with her every night. Every night. She used an illustration that crystallized her feelings very well. As we remember it, she said something like this:

Imagine you were diagnosed with such a lethal condition that the doctor told you that you would die within hours unless you took a particular medicine — a pill every night before going to sleep. Imagine that you were told that you could never miss it or you would die. Would you forget? Would you not get around to it some nights? No — it would be so crucial that you wouldn't forget, you would never miss. Well, if we don't pray together to God, we're not going to make it because of all we are facing. I'm certainly not. We have to pray, we can't let it just slip our minds.

Maybe it was the power of the illustration, maybe it was just the right moment, maybe it was the Spirit of God. Or, most likely of all, it was the Spirit of God using the moment and the clarity of the metaphor. For both of us the penny dropped; we realized the seriousness of the issue, and we admitted that anything that was truly a nonnegotiable necessity was something we could do. That was more than twelve years ago, and Kathy and I can't remember missing a single evening of praying together, at least by phone, even when we've been apart in different hemispheres.

Kathy's jolting challenge, along with my own growing conviction that I just didn't get prayer, led me into a search. I wanted a far better personal prayer life. I began to read widely and experiment in prayer. As I looked around, I quickly came to see that I was not alone.

"Learning to Pray"

In the summer after I was treated successfully for thyroid cancer, I made four practical changes to my life of private devotion. First, I took several months to go through the Psalms, summarizing each one. That enabled me to begin praying through the Psalms regularly, getting through all of them several times a year. The second thing I did was always to put in a time of meditation as a transitional discipline between my Bible reading and my time of prayer. Third, I did all I could to pray morning and evening rather than only in the morning. Fourth, I began praying with greater expectation.

The changes took some time to bear fruit, but after sustaining these practices for about two years, I began to have some breakthroughs. Despite ups and downs since then, I have found new sweetness in Christ and new bitterness too, because I could now see my heart more clearly in the new light of vital prayer. In other words, there were more restful experiences of love as well as more wrestling to see God triumph over evil, both in my own heart and in the world.

April 19, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 4

ACTS 13

Day 1

Read Acts 10. Why do you think Peter went up on the housetop to pray?

Questions: Acts 13:1–12

1. Who made up this church at Antioch and what were some of the things they were doing?

a. What is “fasting” and why do people do it?

b. Matthew 6:16–18

2. What is the Holy Spirit up to? Use a map and take a look at where they are all going.

3. What is a proconsul? Who is the proconsul in this story? Describe the events surrounding the proconsul.

4. Describe the spiritual warfare taking place. How does Paul handle it?

a. What does Paul exhibit from Ephesians 6:10–20 in dealing with the magician?

b. What is supplication? What do we learn about prayer in Ephesians 6:10–20?

Joel 2:12–13

See Acts 2:38

Day 2

Read Acts 11. Why was this such a big deal that the Gentiles “received the word of God”? What did that mean?

Questions: Acts 13:13–31

1. Why do you think John went back to Jerusalem? Why do you think Paul ended up back at Antioch?
2. Who is Paul’s audience and what is Paul’s point by going through some Old Testament narratives?
3. Why does Paul insert John the Baptist into his teaching? What purpose does John’s role fill in explaining Jesus to these people?
 - a. Luke 3:1–22. Describe further John’s role in relation to Jesus.
4. What happened when the message of this salvation was sent to the people?
 - a. Have you sent the message of salvation to anyone this week? How did it go?

Acts 13:23

Day 3

Read Acts 12. What type of persecution have you experienced or what type of persecution do you think you will face someday?

Questions: Acts 13:32–52

1. How does Paul state/explain/describe “the good news”?
2. What Old Testament passages does Paul use and how does he use them?
3. 13:39. What is this freedom that Paul speaks of? Freedom implies bondage – what is it?
 - a. What type of bondage to sin do you feel traps you and how does the gospel apply?
 - b. Hebrews 7:18–19.
 - c. Ephesians 2:8–10.
 - d. Titus 3:4–7.
4. Describe the various responses from the people after Paul’s sermon.

Acts 13:48–52

(See also 2 Thess. 3:1)

Caitlin's Story

Caitlin: “I grew up in a Catholic family in a suburb of the Twin Cities. We went to church together most Sundays and listened to the priest read to us from the Bible, but I don’t remember ever hearing a distinct articulation of the gospel or any discussion of a personal relationship with the God of the universe.

In my understanding, Jesus was just one of many characters in the Bible. I didn’t factor his life, death, and resurrection into my chances of making it to heaven. I basically just relied upon my own performance— whether athletic or academic. If I could be good enough, then I could earn my way. In reality, I was desperately fighting to maintain my outward appearance of humility and perfection, when inwardly I was in denial about how broken and sinful I was.

In college, a few of my teammates on the Rowing team at the U of M were involved in Campus Outreach. I studied the Bible with my friend Rachel a few times, but when she told me about God’s steadfast love for me, it fell on deaf

ears. I thought that if I had the approval of everyone around me, I had all the love I needed. It wasn't until I heard my friend Lindsey speak at an FCA meeting a few years later that I finally felt truly exposed. As she shared her own story I felt like a light was turned on for the first time. The façade of my perfection and humility was seen for what it was. I saw my own sin so clearly. She went on to read from Isaiah 43: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.' The entire chapter seemed to be directed like a laser right into my heart. God knew all of my sin, and he claimed me anyway. He didn't just see me as a nameless number among millions. He called me by name and offered me forgiveness and redemption. I read this passage over and over for a week and each time it chipped away at the walls I had built up. God broke me down and brought me low so that I could finally see my own desperation. I surrendered my life to Christ.

In the few years since trusting my life to Jesus, he has proven his faithfulness in the good times and in the bad. I have found that the gospel is sweeter to me every time I hear it articulated by someone else, or when I encounter it in his Word. The Lord has given me a heart for coach-

ing and mentoring young athletes, and in such a dynamic and unstable job arena, I have found comfort in verses like Psalm 138:8, ‘The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.’ He has provided for me, and he promises to be with me forever.”

April 26, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 5

ACTS 14

Day 1

Read Acts 13. In verse 44, what do you think it looked like for the whole city to gather and hear the word of the Lord? What would that look like at Cities Church?

Questions: Acts 14:1–7

1. What else can you learn about Iconium? How big? What type of people lived there?
2. What may it have looked like for the unbelieving Jews to stir up the Gentiles and poison their minds? How does that happen?
3. What emotions do you think Paul was feeling when he learned about the plot of the stoning?
4. What about the gospel incited so much rage that they wanted to stone Paul?

2 Corinthians 12:10

Day 2

Read Acts 14. Consult a map and follow along with the journeys of Paul.

Questions: Acts 14:8–20

1. What notable things happened in the event of the healing?
2. Compare Paul and Barnabas' response to the crowd with that of Herod's in 12:22–23.
 - a. In general, how did Paul see his role as an apostle? Look at the intro verses of his many NT letters. What does this tell us about "servant leadership"?
3. What Truth does Paul share about God with the people in 14:15b–17 and why?
4. What happens to Paul? Does this sort of thing happen in today's world?

Philippians 3:7–8

Day 3

Read Acts 15. What is this Jerusalem council all about and what happens at it?

Questions: Acts 14:21–28

1. What do you think it looked like for Paul to “make disciples”?

2. How do we see the office of “eldership” deployed here?

a. Titus 1:5–9.

3. What is Paul doing? What’s his purpose and mission?

4. What did the believers do when they gathered together?

a. How might this shape our community group meetings?

Acts 14:22

The Discipleship Process of Cities Church

Jonathan Parnell

There are at least two things we need to know about how processes go. First, a process can only make sense if you know what you are trying to produce, and second, it's only any good if it actually works.

In the case of Cities Church, by God's grace, our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ from all nations. That is what Jesus tells us to do in Matthew 28:18–20, and that is what we are about — but it's crucial that we're clear on exactly what we mean by “disciple.” If being a disciple of Jesus simply means repeating a prayer at the close of a church service, or becoming a regular church attender, or acquiring a breadth of theological knowledge, then our process will confirm to that goal. For example, I recently visited a thriving megachurch in the South whose stated mission is to “reach people who are far from God.” They want to redeem the church experience of those jaded by the nominal Christian malaise so rampant in their city, which means making their worship gatherings as palatable as possible, which then means, at least on the Sunday I attended, the service prelude is Tom Cochrane's “Life Is a Highway.” It was a concert — bright lights, high energy, and wildly entertaining, even for people who must think Jesus is a drag. While there's a lot we can (and should) learn from this church, our mission, based upon our doctrinal commitments and city context, tries to get more specific. Beyond just reaching people, or even just making disciples, we want to make glad disciples of Jesus. This means that, under his authority, and unto the glory of his grace, we are committed to becoming and producing disciples who bear the three-fold identity of worshiper, servant, and missionary at the affectional level. This is our goal because we think it's what Paul has in mind when he says his aim is that everyone become mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28).

When we are united to Jesus by faith, our identity is transformed: though once idolators consumed with vanity, Jesus makes us worshipers of the true God; though once self-absorbed and devoted to our own worlds, Jesus make us servants of one another; though once aimless, wasting our lives, Jesus calls us unto God's mission for the world. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus — we are worshipers of him, servants like him, and mission-

aries with him. This is what we want to make at a deep, heartfelt level.

The question then becomes how. If this is our mission — if glad disciples of Jesus are what we want to become and produce — how will we do that?

Cue our discipleship process: *Connection + Community + Covenant*. This process of three steps is designed as means through which God might use Cities Church to move our neighbors and ourselves toward becoming glad disciples of Jesus.

Implicit in this process is the fact that God doesn't do this work over night. He could have hardwired this thing to not require a process at all. He could have given us a magic word that would just zap people from their hatred toward him to holistic affection. He could have done that, but he didn't. He has designed this thing to take time — to go from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18). Remember this, please, as we get on with the work. We have to meet people where they are, and we must have space for this to be a long process. Most of our conversion stories didn't play out like the apostle Paul's — but they included people, several people, and conversations, several conversations. Conversations — okay, so that a good segue into Step #1, “Connection.”

Step #1: Connection

The first step of the discipleship process describes the posture of our church toward neighbors. We welcome people. As ambassadors of Christ, we are happily serious about welcoming others as Christ has welcomed us (Romans 15:7). The everyday ethos of this step is good old-fashioned hospitality. It means we wave to people. We smile at strangers. We say hello. We have conversations. We orient our lives with others in view.

I find it hard to overstate the profundity of this step. Not only is it countercultural in our city to be leaning forward in hospitality, but when we welcome people — when we are generous with our attention and time — we are walking in the footsteps of Jesus. When take an extra five minutes from our car to our front door to scan the neighborhood in hopes of saying hi, our hearts are beating in harmony with Jesus's that time he stopped because a woman touched the fringe of his garment. When we

stop to greet a stranger, or to develop a burgeoning relationship, we are reenacting that scene in our own day. On behalf of Jesus, we are, through our hospitality, opening the door that leads to him. If our unbelieving neighbors will ever be glad disciples of Jesus, it will start here.

In the most basic terms, this step of Connection means that we are a friendly people. It means we build relationships, that we hear others' stories, that we, as a fellow creatures in the image of God, sincerely want to know the neighbors God has put around us.

Step #2: Community

The second step of the discipleship process is when our friends and neighbors are drawn into other relationships. Community Groups are at the center of this strategy. As we connect with neighbors and co-workers, and begin building a relationship with them, we want to create as much overlap as possible within the relationships of our Community Group. This is where we Community Groups are really put to work as shared, focused ministry networks. It is our conviction that we are always missionaries in community, not lone evangelists sent into the world. The commission to make disciples is given to the church as a whole, not individual Christians in isolation or those who are exceptionally gifted. As Chester and Timmis explain, "At the center or hub of life is not me as an individual but us as members of the Christian community" (*Total Church*, 45) — and therefore, "Mission takes place though communities of light" (50).

This means that we introduce our neighbors to those in our respective Community Groups. We invite them to church services, or we host a barbecue at our house. It might mean we go out for lunch as a group of friends, or bowl a few games at Town Hall. It might also mean that your Community Group takes on a service project in your neighborhood that includes the help of unbelieving friends. As Community Groups, we want to create as many opportunities as possible for this kind of overlap — for ways that we can draw our neighbors in from Connection to Community. Eventually, we would like to create regular events that are intentional about doing this. A recent example

was when everyone converged upon Hiawatha School Park after a Sunday service.

This step of Community will take time. As we draw neighbors into these relationships, and speak the gospel to them, they will undoubtedly be confronted with the call to repent and embrace Jesus. As with many of our own stories, this is something that may take months, even years. But it does happen. God does work this miracle, and we are begging him to do it at Cities Church. Therefore, Community becomes the context of conversion. This step is set apart from the others because it is where people are saved — where the dead are brought to life, where the skeptics are awakened, and the cynics restored. And as people trust in Jesus, and are baptized, they are welcomed into deeper discipling relationships.

Step #3: Covenant

The third and final step in our discipleship process is when Christians, old and new, covenant together as members of Cities Church.

This step of covenant membership is when individuals submit themselves to the local church and are devoted to the gospel's advance in distance and depth. It is committing together at the affectional level — when we move from understanding and practice to a joyful, all-consuming embrace of our identity as worshipers of Jesus, servants like Jesus, and missionaries with Jesus. This is when we strive to become and live in community as glad disciples of Jesus who are ever-increasing in their gladness in him.

This third step is the final, ongoing step in the discipleship process. Covenant membership involves committing to a Community Group and joining a Life Group. It is these covenant members who make up the "flock" of Cities Church, and thus becomes the ones of whom the elders are responsible to God to care for and shepherd (Acts 20:28). There will still be varying degrees of spiritual maturity among our covenant membership, but this affectional level is the goal of our mission. Glad disciples of Jesus becomes synonymous to presenting everyone "mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28), and therefore, it is the ongoing work of our church corporately and our lives individually.

Connection + Community + Covenant — this

is the discipleship process of Cities Church to produce glad disciples of Jesus. And it's only any good if it works.

This is the point where we acknowledge that the "horse is made ready for battle" (Proverbs 21:31). Everything is set. The strategy is drawn. But will God give us the victory? Will God use this model to accomplish miracles? Our mission is to make disciples — will the process be effective?

We think it will be. We pray it will be. But we'll only know when we do it. We'll only experience the dream at the center of Cities Church as we walk by faith in this mission together. Let's go.

May 3, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 6

ACTS 15

Day 1

Read Acts 16. In what ways is the church spreading and increasing?

Questions: Acts 15:1–21

1. Review Acts 10, 11:18,20,23, 13:46, 14:1, 27. How have the Gentiles been included thus far? How has it gone?

- a. What does the gospel say about ethnicity (e.g. Gentiles) and salvation?

2. What was being taught that contradicted the gospel, and why was it contradictory? (see Galatians 5:2)

3. What did Paul do on the way to Jerusalem and how do you think that impacted his ability to debate the question? See also 15:12.

4. How do you reconcile the items in 15:19–21 with the gospel? What does the gospel say about these items?

Acts 15:8–11

Day 2

Read Galatians 1. List out all the things you learn about the gospel in this chapter.

Questions: Acts 15:22–35

1. Why do you think they thought it was good to send certain men with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch?
2. What was the result of the Jerusalem Council?
3. What grievance of the Gentiles do the leaders address in the letter?
4. How did the people receive the letter?

Acts 15:28–29

Day 3

Read Galatians 2, and also read Acts 11:27–30. What aspect of the gospel does Paul fight hard for and why?

Questions: Acts 15:36–41

1. Lay out and describe the conversation Paul and Barnabas had.
2. What do we know about John Mark and what's the issue?
3. What ends up happening?
4. Research what “sharp disagreement” means.
 - a. Acts 13:13.
 - b. What does the fact that Luke included this humbling story in the Bible say about people and the gospel?

2 Timothy 4:9–13

Hospitality As an Integral Strategy in Mission

David Mathis

In a progressively post-Christian society, the importance of hospitality as an evangelistic asset is growing rapidly. Increasingly, the most strategic turf on which to engage the unbelieving with the good news of Jesus may be the turf of our own homes.

When people don't gather in droves for stadium crusades, or tarry long enough on the sidewalk to hear your gospel spiel, what will you do? Where will you interact with the unbelieving about the things that matter most?

Invite them to dinner.

For several of us in Childers's class, the lights went on after his dramatic revelation. Biblical texts on hospitality were springing to mind. A theme we'd previously thought of as a secondary fellowship-type-thing was taking shape as a significant strategy for evangelism in a post-Christian milieu.

Love for Outsiders

The New Testament word for "hospitality" (Greek *philozenia*) comes from a compound of "love" and "stranger." Hospitality has its origin, literally, in love for outsiders.

One of the more memorable texts is Hebrews 13:1–2: "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware." Yes, love the brothers, says Hebrews, but make sure you don't forget this: Don't neglect to love strangers as well.

Love for fellow Christians is important, essential — some call it "the final apologetic," based on John 13:35 — but there's a way in which it may not be all that impressive. Loving those who love you — "Do not even unbelievers do the same?" asks Jesus (Matthew 5:47). But showing love to outsiders, now that rings of life-change. That has the fingerprints of your heavenly Father all over it.

Seeking to Show Hospitality

In Romans 12, as the apostle Paul points us to important flashpoints for how our lives should look when claimed by the gospel, he says, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality" (Romans 12:12–13).

It could be that this charge to hospitality is

another way of saying "contribute to the needs of the saints," but it seems more likely to be a summons to demonstrate kindness to outsiders — like the kind Publius showed Paul in Acts 28:7 on the island of Malta: "Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days."

Outsiders from Around Town

Keep thinking through the New Testament mentions of hospitality, and see that it's no peripheral theme. Hospitality even finds its way into such a prominent place as both lists of elder qualifications.

An elder "must be . . . hospitable." (1 Timothy 3:2)

An elder, "as God's steward, must be . . . hospitable." (Titus 1:8)

Are we listening? When was the last time we turned down a man from joining the council because he wasn't hospitable? It's important enough in Paul's mind to mention it to both Timothy and Titus for their elder selection.

It matters tremendously how the elders orient toward "outsiders." The elders set the tone for how the church will engage with nonbelievers. The church of yore may be taken aback to read that an elder "must be well thought of by outsiders" (1 Timothy 3:7), but as Christendom crumbles, we begin to see this value in new light. If the elders who are to be "examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3) don't themselves show up on the front lines to engage with the city's unbelieving, it's unlikely the flock will embrace the mission the shepherds are avoiding.

Inviting in the Believing As Well

Lest we swing the pendulum and think the charge to "hospitality" no longer enjoins us to care for fellow believers, 1 Peter 4:9 and 3 John 5–8 stand ready to balance things out. See 1 Peter 4:9 in context with verses 8–10:

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show

hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace . . .

So full Christian hospitality includes inviting in other believers as well, caring for each other, "washing the feet of the saints," "contributing to the needs of the saints," and so on. Not just for making converts, but for the Great Commission task of making disciples as well. And there's more.

Strategic Hospitality

Christian hospitality serves Jesus's global mission by inviting in traveling missionaries. John's third epistle commends this kind of care.

Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. (3 John 5–8)

So let your hospitality include not only unbelieving neighbors and co-workers, but also furloughing missionaries sent out for global gospel propagation. John Piper calls it "strategic hospitality."¹

Strategic hospitality . . . asks: How can I draw the most people into a deep experience of God's hospitality by the use of my home . . . ? Who are the people who could be brought together in my home most strategically for the sake of the kingdom? . . .

Strategic hospitality is not content to just have the old clan over for dinner again and again. It strategizes how to make the hospitality of God known and felt all over the world, from the lonely church member right here, to the Gola farmers in Tahn, Liberia. Don't ever underestimate the power of your living room as a launching pad for new life and hope and ministry and mission!

Why We Love Strangers

So Christian hospitality makes room for fellow believers and global gospel carriers, but the note we're striking here is the evangelistic one — inviting in the outsider, welcoming unbelievers into our space, in hopes of bringing Jesus into theirs.

The reason this is no minor biblical theme is because the streams of hospitality flow deeply from the well of God. Christians love the stranger, because we have been loved by the Father when we ourselves were strangers. Hospitality rises in its purest form when we heed Paul's counsel, "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12).

In Jesus, we find ourselves now to be the enemy who has been loved, the sinner who is saved, the stranger who is welcomed. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). And welcomed strangers should be quick to learn to welcome other strangers.

Our love for outsiders runs deep as it flows from remembering ourselves to be outsiders who have been dearly loved by a lavishly hospitable God.

¹See John Piper's sermon, "Strategic Hospitality," (August 25, 1985) <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/strategic-hospitality>

May 10, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 7

ACTS 16

Day 1

Read Galatians 3. In what ways do you functionally try to perfect your salvation with works (3:3)? How is this a curse (3:10)? What's the answer (3:25–26)?

Questions: Acts 16:1–10

1. What do we know about Timothy?

a. Philippians 2:19–24.

2. Why do you think Timothy was circumcised even though Paul had just made a huge issue out of circumcision?

3. Why did Paul want to take a younger person with him to do this difficult work of missions?

4. What does 16:6–10 explicitly tell us the Holy Spirit did?

2 Timothy 1:3–7

Day 2

Read Galatians 4. What does the example of Hagar and Sarah mean, and why does Paul use this?

Questions: Acts 16:11–24

1. Map out Paul's travels. Where is Samothrace? What do we know about the city of Philippi?
2. How did Paul share the gospel with Lydia? How was God involved? How might this encourage you today in the Twin Cities?
3. Verse 18 – Describe Paul's attitude with this evangelistic encounter.
4. 16:20–21. In what ways was the gospel disturbing the city?

Philippians 1:3–6

Day 3

Read Galatians 5. How does Galatians 5:1–6 fit with what we’ve been learning in Acts thus far?

Questions: Acts 16:25–40

1. Review 16:19–24 and note the pain and sufferings that Paul and Silas experienced. What was their response? (see 16:25)
2. Why do you think the prisoners were listening to them?
3. What did Paul say to the jailer?

Acts 16:29–31

Two Big Reasons Evangelism Isn't Working

Jonathan Dodson

One in five Americans don't believe in a deity. Less than half of the population attends religious services on a regular basis.

People simply find our evangelism unbelievable.

Why?

While a person's response to Christ is ultimately a matter that rests in God's sovereign hands — something we have no control over — a person's hearing of the gospel is a matter we do have control over and responsibility for.

"Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season" (2 Timothy 4:2). "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (Colossians 4:5–6). "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

The First Reason Our Evangelism isn't Believable is Because it isn't Done in Grace For Each Person.

Paul isn't just saying evangelism is our responsibility; he's telling us to do it "in person." Unfortunately, a lot of evangelism is an out-of-body experience, as if there aren't two persons in a conversation. It's excarnate, out of the flesh, not incarnate — in the flesh.

I'm reminded of the more passive Christian who looks to get Jesus off his chest at work and into a conversation. "Check!" Or the time in college when I pretended to share the gospel with a friend in Barnes & Noble so others would overhear it! Alternatively, an active evangelist might troll blogs and start conversations to defeat arguments, while losing people in the process. "Aha!" The comment section on a blog is the new street corner.

These approaches are foolish because they treat people like projects to be completed, not

persons to be loved. Have you ever been on the other end of an evangelistic project? Perhaps from a Jehovah's Witness or Mormon at your door. Or a pushy pluralist at work? You don't feel loved; you feel used, like a pressure sale.

Paul says "know how you ought to answer each person." This means that most of your gospel explanations will be different, not canned. It also implies a listening evangelism. How can we know how to respond to each person, if we don't know each person?

When Francis Schaeffer was asked how he would spend an hour with a non-Christian, he said: "I would listen for fifty-five minutes, and then, in the last five minutes I would have something to say."

A Second Reason People Find Our Evangelism Unbelievable is Because it is Foolish.

Paul isn't just telling us evangelism is personal; he's telling us to do it with wisdom. Wisdom possesses more than knowledge; it expresses knowledge through understanding. It considers life circumstances and applies knowledge with skill. Another word for this is love.

Love is inefficient. It slows down long enough to understand people and their objections to the gospel. Love recognizes people are complex, and meets them in their need: suffering, despair, indifference, cynicism, confusion. We should look to surface these objections in people's lives. I was recently having lunch with an educated professional who had a lot of questions. After about thirty minutes he said, "Enough about me. You're asking me questions. I should ask you questions." I responded by saying, "I want to hear your questions, but I also want to know you so that I can respond to your questions with wisdom." He told me some very personal things after that, and it shed a lot of light on his objections to Christianity. It made my comments much more informed, and he felt much more loved, declaring at the end, "I wish every lunch was like this. Let's keep doing this. I have a lot more questions."

Rehearsing a memorized fact, "Jesus died on the cross for your sins," isn't walking in wisdom. Many people don't know what we mean when we say "Jesus," "sin," or "cross." While much of America still has cultural memory of these things, they are often misunderstood and confused with "moral teacher," "be good," and

“irrelevant suffering.” We have to slow down long enough to explore what they mean, and why they have trouble with these words and concepts. Often they are tied to some kind of pain.

We need to explain these important truths (and more), not simply assert them. When we discerningly separate cultural misunderstanding from a true understanding of the gospel, we move forward in wisdom. But getting to that point typically doesn’t happen overnight.

We need to see evangelism as a long-term endeavor. Stop checking the list and defeating others. Be incarnate, not excarnate, in your evangelism. Slow down and practice listening and love. Most conversions are not the result of a single, point-in-time conversation, but the culmination of a personal process that includes doubt, reflection, gospel witness, love, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

And remember, don’t put pressure on yourself; conversion is in God’s hands. We just get to share the incomparable news of Jesus.

In sum, how you communicate the gospel matters.

This article was originally published at desiringGod.org

May 17, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 8

ACTS 17

Day 1

Read Acts 17. What was Paul's custom when he entered into a new city? What is it significant?

Questions: Acts 17:1–9

1. What was the source of Paul's authority when he taught in the synagogues?
 - a. Acts 18:4, 19;
 - b. Acts 19:8–9;
 - c. Acts 20:7, 9;
 - d. Acts 24:12, 25.
3. What was the charge brought against Jason when he was dragged before the city authorities? Why was the gospel a point of controversy?

Acts 17:4–5

Day 2

Read Galatians 6. What is the relationship between “bearing one another’s burdens” and “fulfilling the law of Christ”? What is another way to say what Paul is intending to get across?

Questions: Acts 17:10–21

1. What is commendable about the Bereans?
2. What does the Bereans’ examination suggest about the apostolic preaching?
3. Why was Paul considered a “preacher of foreign divinities”? (see 17:18) Why was that foreign to Greek philosophers?
4. Luke tells us that the Athenians would “spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” How might this look in our society today?

Acts 17:16–17

Day 3

Read Ephesians 1. What is the purpose of God in “predestining us for adoption through Jesus Christ”?

Questions: Acts 17:22–34

1. What is so revolutionary in what Paul says about God in verse 25? How is that so contrary to how the Athenians operated?
2. What does this passage teach us about God’s general benevolence toward mankind? (also called, “common grace”)?
3. What is the relevance of Paul’s sermon to the Athenians? How must they respond?
4. How has God given assurance that he will judge the world? How is that assurance for judgment?

Acts 17:24–25

You Can't Arrest the Gospel

David Mathis

It was a lesson in the school of hard knocks for a promising young leader.

A crowd had gathered in an urban center, ready to hear him speak. He rose to the occasion, feeling a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit. He spoke with conviction and clarity, and found remarkable reception among the people.

But word of his explicitness about Jesus quickly made its way to the powers-that-be and ruffled their feathers. Soon they descended upon the young firebrand, and he and his ministry partner spent the night in custody before facing interrogation the following day.

Still his courage had not been in vain. They may have arrested Peter and his companion John (Acts 4:3), but “many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand” (Acts 4:4).

Arrest didn’t sink the advance of the gospel. The two went hand in hand.

The American Anomaly

The days of gospel persecution in the United States no longer just hang on the distant horizon; they are already here, at least for some. It’s beginning with the bakers, florists, and photographers. Before long, the consensus may be that faithful biblical exposition is “hate speech.”

For 350 years, the church on American soil has enjoyed relatively little affliction for her fidelity to the Scriptures. This nation, though, is an anomaly in church history. And those days are passing, more quickly than many of us expected.

Once the most basic beliefs and morals of Christianity were taken for granted not only in the church, but in society at large. Now many of our most deeply held, once uncontroversial, claims are under full assault, within and without. Barring some change in trajectory, it will only be a matter of time before some of our leaders will find themselves in custody.

Think It Not Strange

Do not panic. For two thousand years, this has been what it has meant to identify with Christ in the world — the normal experience of those who follow a man who was crucified. Suffering for the gospel was not just tolerated in the early church; it was expected. Peter learned

the lesson in Acts 4, and again in Acts 5. Then Stephen was stoned in Acts 7. After Acts 3, only three of the book’s remaining 25 chapters have no mention of persecution.

The storyline of the early church turns on opposition and oppression. This same Peter writes, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).

For now, deluded by American history, we’re prone to think it strange. We are surprised. “Give us our country back!” Our angry, desperate reactions only show how out of step we are with the tenor of the New Testament. Our entitlement and resentment reveal a heart foreign to the reality of “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:16).

Soon enough, though, our expectations will necessarily adjust to what is normal for the true church in other times and places. We will increasingly realize that when we proclaim a gospel like ours, and make the sort of claims we do, the world won’t receive it well. For Christians, it really is strange not to be persecuted.

Through Many Tribulations

Jesus said as much. “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Paul picks up the refrain. “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). The Scriptures seem to suggest we should be more concerned if we’re not being persecuted, than if we are.

Embracing persecution for the sake of the gospel is Christianity 101. How did Paul and Barnabas minister to fledgling churches? “They returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21–22). It is a sobering word, but not a cause for despair.

Arrest and Advance, Together

To say we will suffer opposition is not to say that the spread of the gospel will be stymied. In fact, what we learn from Peter and John in Acts 4:3–4, and from the life of the apostle Paul, and

from Jesus himself, is that arrest and advance go together in God's invincible story.

The same is true today, and will be tomorrow. We will find that our newfound opposition and affliction, while being difficult and painful, is a good and fruitful phenomena. It will be more and more like the first century, when the gospel was attacked on every side, and spread like wildfire.

Paul describes this powerfully from a prison cell in Rome. Look for the irony.

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. (Philippians 1:12–14)

You can't arrest the gospel. In fact, when you imprison one whose words and life boldly declare the good news of Jesus, you only help it grow and spread. You may shackle the feet of the messenger, but his message will run. "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!" (2 Timothy 2:8–9).

Affliction Joyfully Accepted

But our message will not run if we go kicking and screaming. It is not the grumblers and complainers who shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (Philippians 2:14–15). Rather, it is those who embrace suffering for the name of Jesus with joy.

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. (1 Peter 4:13–14)

Christians are not a dour people, even in the darkness of a dungeon. We don't whine and bellyache as our society lines up against us and our convictions. We plead. We grieve. But be-

neath it all we have untouchable strongholds of joy. Even in the worst, most inconvenient, most lonely days, we rejoice. The suffering days are good days for gospel advance. We have great cause to be optimistic about our good news, to "joyfully accept" prison and the plundering of our possessions and even our freedoms.

After all, they can take our civil liberties, garnish our wages, and smear our names, but they cannot take our Treasure, who is "a better possession and abiding one."

So we are not surprised. We do not retreat. Instead, grounded in God's eternal promises, armed with joy in him, and assured of victory in the end, we ready ourselves for whatever opposition comes. Perhaps one day it will be said of us,

You endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. (Hebrews 10:32–34)

May 24, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 9

ACTS 18

Day 1

Read Acts 18. What is Paul occupied in doing when Silas and Timothy arrive in Corinth?

Questions: Acts 18:1–17

1. What is the manner of Paul's ministry in the synagogues?
2. Consider Luke's wording in verse 5. What does that wording suggest?
3. When Luke refers to the "Lord" in verse 9, to which person of the Trinity is he referring? (see Acts 1:6).
4. What does the Lord tell Paul about Corinth in verse 10? How is this to be encouraging to us today?

1 Corinthians 1:4–9

Day 2

Read Ephesians 2. What does this passage teach us about human effort?

Questions: Acts 18:18–23

1. What is the significance of Aquila and Priscilla's partnership with Paul? (Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19).
2. Why did Paul decline the invitation to stay in Ephesus?
3. What does Luke tell us that Paul did throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia? What might that look like for us today?

James 4:13–17

Day 3

Read Ephesians 3. How do we perceive Paul's "insight into the mystery of Christ"?

Questions: Acts 18:24–28

1. What type of role did Priscilla and Aquila take in Apollos's life?
2. What does Luke mean when he says that Apollos was only instructed in the baptism of John?
3. What did Apollos do to help "those who through grace had believed"?
4. What role did the Scriptures have in Apollos's ministry?

Acts 18:25

Let's Bring Conversation Back

Jonathan Parnell

Conversation has fallen on hard times.

Let's face it, most of us find talking to strangers to be a rarity. This is our new societal reality. The in-between moments of life — running errands and picking up carry-out — are now filled with checking our mobile devices. We'd rather scroll through our Twitter feed than venture out with the risky words of a bygone era, "Hi, what's your name?" But more than that, when we actually make plans for conversation apart from business, it can sound more like a threat than an invitation.

Catherine Blyth picks up on this in her book *The Art of Conversation*. She explains that even the phrase "we need to talk" is heard negatively. For thousands of years, Blyth explains, the core of human interaction was the good, old-fashioned, face-to-face conversation, but today we are increasingly pushing that aside — and we're all missing out for it.

The problem, contrary to popular belief, isn't personality differences. The Western hemisphere isn't suddenly inhabited by mainly quiet, reflective types. The real problem, or perhaps the splintered problem of our epidemic distractedness, is the plain truth that we have forgotten how to talk to one another. In large part, we don't know how to have conversations anymore.

Blyth's book is a practical guide to help us figure it out, including some basic maxims like "think before you speak" and "take turns," and formerly intuitive rules such as "start with a greeting." It doesn't take long to sense the value in this education, even just to be a decent citizen. But for Christians, the seriousness is amplified — even vital to our calling in this world.

Jesus Tells Us to Love

First, there is Jesus's command to love our neighbor. Specifically, he tells us, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 19:19). It's important that we see this as he said it. He does not say, as my college professor on comparative religion once pointed out, "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you." That negative frame of mind would create a wholly passive enterprise — which pretty much describes the Minnesota in which I live. Good neighboring means not being a nuisance to the folks next door. And that's all.

In a real-life cautionary tale, one of my neighbors, a friend who has lived in our neighborhood for 40 years, told me about the first time he got to know our late neighbor across the street, who had also spent decades in our community. It was at his funeral. He had regular duties at the mass, and ironically, was moved by his amazing eulogy — only to discover that it was the man he'd seen mow the lawn in front of him for years. My friend admitted, regrettably, that he just tried not to ruffle feathers, that he kept the music down and trash picked up. The two men ate dinner, and slept, and raised their families 100 feet from one another for years, and never enjoyed a conversation with one another.

Call that a tragedy, or call that culture, but most certainly, you can't call that Christian. Jesus isn't telling us not to bother people; he is telling us to love them. And loving them, among other things, means we talk.

The World Is Saved by Words

So there is the neighboring part, but then there is the fact that salvation — the rescue of souls from the wrath they deserve — comes by hearing the audible gospel. The apostle Paul writes that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

If the word of Christ, the gospel, isn't spoken, then it's not heard. And if it's not heard, nobody is saved. Track with me here: If we don't know how to have conversations with people, how will we know how to tell them the good news?

The answer is that we won't — at least not in a way that makes sense.

In fact, you might even say that our evangelism has been on the rocks lately because we've memorized canned presentations of the gospel that we just drop in conversation-less contexts. We tend to make evangelism into simply "getting Jesus off our chest," as Jonathan Dodson puts it, rather than getting to know people, learning their longings and desires, and showing them how the gospel is good news for them. In Dodson's book, *The Unbelievable Gospel*, he casts a vision of the relevance of everyday conversation for the sake of gospel witness.

In a recent interview, Dodson lays out three levels of conversation that are catego-

rized by the types of questions we ask. Our questions are the gateway to our listening, and therefore, they are the building blocks of good interaction.

Level One is your common chit-chat. It's the simple "hello" and "how are you?" Level Two steps down into personal history. It includes questions like "what was it like when . . .?" But then Level Three, as Dodson explains, gets down to the values of the heart. This is where we ask, "How did that make you feel?" or "What are you most excited about right now?" This is the deeper level of questions that moves us into getting to know someone. It's where conversation truly happens — and who knows, possibly even friendship. Dodson summarizes these three levels in the words of David Powilson, "Listen to their story; empathize with their story; redemptively retell their story."

As cumbersome as conversation might feel today, it's time to bring it back.

Call it a missional strategy if you want, but it feels much too basic for that. We're just talking about conversation, and Christians, of all people, introverts and extraverts, should lead its recovery — for the glory of God and for the good of our neighbors.

May 31, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 10

ACTS 19

Day 1

Read Acts 19. What did Paul's ministry involve in Ephesus over the course of two years?

Questions: Acts 19:1–10

1. What does it mean to be baptized in “the name of the Lord Jesus”?
2. What was Paul's practice when he entered the synagogue?
3. Based upon what we've already seen in Acts, what does it mean that Paul “spoke boldly”?

Acts 19:8–9

Day 2

Read Ephesians 4. What is the corporate goal of the church? (see verses 15–16)

Questions: Acts 19:11–20

1. What effect did Sceva's sons' encounter with the evil spirit have on the residents of Ephesus?
2. What does it mean to extol the name of Jesus?
3. What is the significance of the believer's behavior in verses 18–19? How might this correlate to repentance today in the Twin Cities?

Acts 19:18–20

Day 3

Read Ephesians 5. What is a repeated theme in this chapter, and in the greater message of Ephesians? (see 1:4–5; 3:17; 4:2; 5:2)

Questions: Acts 19:21–41

1. Why did the silversmith oppose the advance of the gospel in Ephesus?
2. Of what was Paul charged with persuading “a great many people” in all of Asia?
3. How is the riot discouraged in Ephesus?

Ephesians 2:8–10

Have You Heard the Church's Story?

Jonathan Parnell

The local church is a community of Christians who live as the on-the-ground expression of the supremacy of Jesus by advancing his gospel in distance and depth.

This is a basic definition for what the local church is. Both the beginnings and the ongoing life of the local church are an extension of Jesus's supremacy. We only exist because of who he is, and we only persevere because he is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Everything that we are — our foundation, center, and goal — is focused on Jesus. He is God's revelatory word, making the Father known to unworthy sinners (John 1:18) — this is how we got here. He is God's redemptive word, transforming enemies into sons and daughters (Romans 5:10) — this is what's happening now. He is God's restorative word, creating the new world for which we wait, the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13) — this is what's to come.

We are his people — a people so outside of him we're called his creatures, and yet a people so intimately connected to him we're called his masterpiece, stretching from eternity to eternity, growing out of the flourishing fellowship that existed in the Trinity before the ages began. The church is the real deal, and it matters that we sense her seriousness — that we understand the centrality of her role in the reality of Jesus and in what it means to follow him.

Because, to be sure, when we see that the church is not a mere footnote in history, we won't be able to quarantine her off as an extracurricular activity in our lives. She is really important. There's even a whole story to prove the point — a story that expands the claim that the church is intrinsically about the advance of the gospel. It starts in a Garden.

The Story of the Church

There in the Garden are Adam and Eve, created in the image and likeness of God, which means they are reflecting and enjoying the radiance of God's glory, and they are given a commission: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28). This commission is another way of saying *advance what you have here, extend this, reproduce it*. So we ask, what would have

happened had not sin ruined things, and our first parents actually completed this mission?

If Adam and Eve, who are in the image and likeness of God, are fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, it means we have a whole world full of God's image-bearers, people who reflect and enjoy the glory of God. Basically, you have what God himself first mentions in Numbers 14:21: "all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord."

But sin does come, remember, and it trashes everything, but God promises that the seed of a woman will crush the serpent (Genesis 3:15). Adam failed to complete the mission, but by God's grace, there will come another. Here begins in the biblical storyline what we might call "the drama of the Son."

The Drama of the Son

We see it in the birth of Noah, which was a huge event in those days (Genesis 5:29). Then there's Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Then God sets apart Shem's line, including this pagan named Abram in the Ur of the Chaldeans whom God takes and to whom makes the most fascinating promise: You are going to have a son through whom all the nations of the world will be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

Then the drama intensifies because Abraham and Sarah can't have children, but then God works a miracle and gives us Isaac (Genesis 21:1–6). The drama intensifies once again when God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, which of course God eventually intervenes to stop (Genesis 22:11–14). Then, if this promise is going to be fulfilled, Isaac needs a wife, which becomes its own amazing mini-drama when Isaac meets Rebekah (Genesis 24:12–14). That leads us to Jacob and Esau. God chooses Jacob. Jacob has twelve sons. Those sons become twelve tribes of Israel. And then, the commission given to Adam first is now given to Israel as a nation (Genesis 35:11–12). Of those twelve sons, God chooses Judah, and from Judah there comes a line and a prophecy (Genesis 49:8–12). But high drama resurfaces — once again related to "the son" — when Israel is captive in Egypt and Pharaoh wants to kill all their male children (Exodus 1:16). But then comes Moses, who survives and God raises up to set Israel free (Exodus 2:10).

And then from Judah's line there comes

Boaz, an old man who providentially meets this beautiful girl named Ruth whom he marries and impregnates, which gives us Obed, and from him comes Jesse and his strapping sons. Then one day the prophet Samuel comes to his house looking for the next king of Israel, passing over seven of Jesse's sons until he asks if that's all there is. Jesse says Yeah, except for "the youngest" (1 Samuel 16:11) — which is the Hebrew word *eton*, a word we might translate "the little runt," or literally "the insignificant one." But when Samuel sees this little guy, God says that's him, and the little guy becomes King David. And it is to King David that God later makes the most astounding promise: One of your sons will be king forever (2 Samuel 7:16). But that son isn't Solomon, nor his son nor his son's son, and for a good stretch of time all we see is one king after another not living up to David, all of them dying as the kingdom is divided and foreign powers demolish Jerusalem and take the people back into captivity. At this point, the prophets come onto the scene to call the people to repentance and envision a future day — a day of peace that will come through the stump of Jesse, a day when kids will play with cobras, because

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;

for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:8–9)

Or as Habakkuk puts it,

The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Habakkuk 2:14)

And that's where history seems stuck, waiting for this day, looking for this promise to become reality. There is a return to Jerusalem, for sure, with Nehemiah and Ezra, but the exile remains in some sense and darkness pervades until we come to a little town of Bethlehem and see this son named Jesus, the son who comes, as Matthew tells us, as the great light, as God with us come to save us from our sins (Matthew 1:21–23; 4:16; Isaiah 9:2).

Then Jesus chooses twelve apostles, like the twelve tribes of Israel, and establishes a

new people of God. Adam and Israel had both failed in their mission to multiply image-bearers who reflect and enjoy the glory of God, but now there is Jesus, the Last Adam, the true Israel, and he has come not just to set things right, but make them better than ever before, which he does by creating a new humanity (Ephesians 2:15) — a people for God's possession to proclaim the excellencies of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9) — a people called the church.

When We See Her Beauty

And Jesus speaks to his church this grand commission: Go, and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18–20). Or, another way we might say it: Advance what we have here, extend this, reproduce it.

In all our little, local manifestations spread out across the world, this is what we do. This is who we are. We are the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27), his bride (Ephesians 5:25–27) — his flock, vine, temple, building, exiles, priesthood, salt, the elect lady — and we are given a commission that will not fail. We will be fruitful and multiply. We will make disciples until the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, until, actually, we find ourselves in another Garden, an eternal garden-city (Revelation 22:1–5).

When we see this — when we understand that the church is how God demonstrates his power to a watching world — we'll no longer make her just an accessory to what our lives are "really about." She won't be something to just tack on or fit in when it works, but instead, because we see her true beauty, and her centrality in God's universal plan, we'll begin to realize that our incorporation in her just might be the most important thing about us.

June 7, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 11

ACTS 20

Day 1

Read Acts 20. What do you think made Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders especially difficult?

Questions: Acts 20:1–6

1. What is Paul said to do twice in verses 1–2?
2. What is one impetus among many to Paul's missionary travels? (see verse 3)
3. Why do you think Luke intends to catalog the various travels of Paul?

Acts 20:1

Day 2

Read Ephesians 6. What is Paul's concluding prayer request to the Ephesians, and how does that relate to what we've seen in Acts?

Questions: Acts 20:7–16

1. What is the miracle performed in this passage?
2. In sum, Paul talked so long that a young man fell asleep, and subsequently fell from a window to his death, but then Paul brought him back to life. Is there any significance to this wild series of events?
3. Why was Paul hastening to be in Jerusalem?

Acts 20:16

Day 3

Read Philippians 1. What does Paul pray for the Philippians? How does this relate to the theme in Ephesians?

Questions: Acts 20:17–38

1. How does Paul describe his ministry to the Ephesians?
2. What does Paul say about his life and ministry? What can we learn from Paul for our own lives?
3. What is the charge that Paul gives to the Ephesian elders? What do you think this looks like practically?

Acts 20:24

The Sin of Cynicism

Jonathan Parnell

Cynicism is a problem.

Maybe it's not explicitly on your radar, but you're sure to have felt its force. Cynicism is that sneering bitterness toward all things true and deep. It's the subtle contempt trying to contaminate the cheeriest of moments — that slow, thick smoke of pessimism toxifying the oxygen in the lungs of our hope, suffocating any glad-hearted embrace that God did something meaningful in our lives and strangling our childlike faith to opt for "another angle" on why things happen the way they do.

It's nasty, and it's everywhere, especially today. Paul Miller explains: "Cynicism is, increasingly, the dominant spirit of our age. . . . It is an influence, a tone that permeates our culture [It] is so pervasive that, at times, it feels like a presence" (*A Praying Life*).

Miller's timing and assessment is right. The question, though, is why. If we're going to overcome this influence, we'll need to know where it is coming from. This new cynical spirit, so common to our generation, didn't appear in a vacuum. What winds have brought it here? And how might we stand against it?

Emblem of an Epidemic

If we're going to wrap our heads around cynicism (or loose its fangs from our heart), we need to start by understanding it's a symptom of a greater disease. Cynicism, problematic as it is, presents itself more as the emblem of a wider epidemic — one that has grown over Western civilization for more than 500 years. I say "epidemic" not to be negative, but because it is relatively new and momentous for our Christian witness in the modern world. A better name for it, as coined by Charles Taylor, and mediated by James K. A. Smith, is "the secular age."

Smith's book *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* is a helpful summary and interaction with Taylor's larger philosophical work, so large that it might deter most of us from a profitable reading. The main question at hand, for Taylor via Smith, is how in the world our society went from majority Christian in 1500 to largely secular and post-Christian today.

Without too much summary (of a summary), the axis of this shift has to do with the tension between transcendence and imma-

nence. As long as the world is old, especially since the early Christian West, the relationship between that which is deep and that which is near has been on the forefront of the human mind. On one hand, the world is profound and mysterious, pointing to a greater reality beyond itself. On the other hand, cows must be milked, diapers must be changed, and if dad doesn't get a paycheck we're going to go hungry. In other words, there is the great and glorious out there, and there is the menial and necessary right here — and how these two relate has been kicked around for centuries.

The Reformation Resolution

The project of the Reformation, according to Taylor, was to swiftly resolve this tension by raising the bar of immanence. That is to say, everything matters because God cares about everything. The little stuff has significance; the physical world is good; vocation is important, and on and on. There aren't two levels of Christians, the regular folks and the truly spiritual, but all of us, if we're in Christ, are truly spiritual.

This approach to the tension is, biblically speaking, the right one. It is the necessary implication of the gospel — the one that makes the most sense, and could only make sense at all because God himself solved the tension by becoming man like us. This God-entranced take on the world is reality as God shows us in Scripture. It is the real world as he has made it, and when the church recovers this vision, it produces revival — it means Jonathan Edwards and Awakenings and frontier missions and churches planted all across North America.

That all happened for a good while, recognized as a positive thing by society as a whole. But throw in a few centuries, the Enlightenment, Darwin, two World Wars, and the 1960s, and things changed.

Digging in the Dust

Taylor (via Smith) says that a new resolution was popularized in the mid-twentieth century. Another way to get past the tension of transcendence and immanence, if not raising the bar of immanence, is to just get rid of transcendence altogether. Tension — what tension? Here and now became all there is. A brand of

life was put forward that coopts depth and meaning — divine things — to be things we can find in the dust of this earth. On a societal level, we've settled for a simple world that answers the way Forrest Gump did when Lieutenant Dan asked if he found Jesus — "I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir."

This is the secular age in which we live. It is a world that increasingly claims to "know better" than faith and enchanted reality. It is seeing the world, as many would say, as grown-ups. "Ain't it fun, ain't it fun, living in the real world?" And if this is the case, if this vision of the world has found footing in our day and time, how might it be expressed in the popular conscience? That's right: cynicism.

Cynicism Head-On

A take on the world like Taylor describes also comes with an accompanying attitude. And as Smith explains, whether we like it or not, this stuff seeps into our being. Cynicism is the prevailing posture of a post-Christian world, and sadly, it's a posture in which many Christians too often find themselves. But it doesn't have to be this way — it shouldn't be this way.

In the beauty of Christian paradox, maybe the best way that we might overcome cynicism is not to evade it, but to face it head on. Rather than dodge cynicism, what if we go right after it, look it straight in the eyes, and "out-cynicize" cynicism itself?

This means, first, that we admit cynicism is a bad thing. Cynicism is a problem, fundamentally, because cynicism is sin. Whatever doesn't proceed from faith is sin (Romans 14:23), and cynicism is that demeanor where faith can't exist. Its foundation is unbelief — and its message is unbelief, however tacitly it might flow from our hearts. We only feel cynical when we've sold out to something anti-gospel, and we only speak cynically when we've been hoodwinked by the enemy to propagate his venom. That's no way for a Christian to live, and perhaps in our society, one of the clearest marks of our holiness is a refusal to do so.

Seeing for Real

And that refusal means, on the positive end, that we remythologize our God-entranced world. It means that we start seeing things

as they really are, as God has told us in his word. It means that instead of telling my kids that their bedtime fears are all in their heads, I teach them to call on him who put to shame the rulers and authorities of this present darkness (Colossians 2:14; Ephesians 6:11–12).

It means that we turn the tables, that rather than doubt God's active work in the world, we doubt every thought that doesn't account for God's active work in the world.

It means that we're cynical about cynicism, that we are determined to always assume more is happening than meets the eye, that God hears every prayer, that Jesus is truly reigning and coming again, and that, if we're serious, we're not idiots for thinking so —the idiots are those who don't (Psalm 14:1).

June 14, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 12

ACTS 21

Day 1

Read Acts 21. What did the Jews from Asia charge Paul as doing? Is that a fair assessment of Paul's ministry? (see Matthew 5:17)

Questions: Acts 21:1–14

1. Why did the church want Paul to go to Jerusalem?
2. Do you think the church was right in trying to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem?
3. What do we learn from the dialogue in verses 13–14?

Acts 21:13–14

Day 2

Read Philippians 2. What does Paul say will “complete” his joy?

Questions: Acts 21:15–26

1. How did James and all the Jerusalem elders respond after Paul told them about his ministry to the Gentiles?
2. Why do the Jerusalem elders want Paul to act as if he lived in observance to the Law of Moses? What should we make of this?
3. What event is referred to in verse 25 that we have already seen in Acts?

Acts 21:17–20

Day 3

Read Philippians 3. How does Paul describe the identity of a Christian in verse 3?

Questions: Acts 21:27–40

1. Why were the Jewish inhabitants enraged with Paul?
2. What is one of the glaring dissimilarities between the Judaism of Paul's day and the burgeoning church?
3. What controversial fact of the church should still characterize us today?

Acts 21:34–36

David and Melissa's Story

David: "Growing up, I always thought I was perfect. I excelled in school and sports, went to church every Sunday with my mom, and was super polite and charming to all the adults I knew. In turn, I received a lot of affirmation from these adults, confirming the fact that I was a great kid. Whenever something did slip, or there was a conflict in my life, I found a way to convince everyone around me that it was something or someone else's fault. After all, I was perfect.

I built my identity around the mindset that I was perfect and could do no wrong. This eventually found its way into my identity as a Christian. It was a heavy chain that I wore with the biggest smile on my face. I would go to a party with friends, but graciously decline any alcoholic beverages, because I was a Christian. On the flip side, I would sit in youth group and judge all the kids around me from my high horse, thinking that I was the only one living the perfect balance of real life and the Christian life.

As I prepared for college, my youth pas-

tor strongly encouraged me to find a college ministry that was connected to a church, recommending the college ministry of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Campus Outreach. I put the note in my back pocket and went off to college. As God would have it, Campus Outreach found me before I found it.

Within my first few weeks at college, I became friends with one of the pastor's sons. While having lunch at his parents' house after church one Sunday, I was introduced to a guy who said he was on staff with Campus Outreach. He asked if I wanted to grab lunch on campus, and following our second meeting, he got me connected with one of his friends, Eric Lonergan. Though I didn't know it at the time, it was the beginning of my first discipleship relationship. Eric was eager to hang out with me a few times a week, and eventually asked me to join a Bible study with him and a few other freshman guys. My plan was to show him how perfect I was, and eventually finagle my way out of the Bible study.

Eric saw right through me, and refused to abandon the Pharisee that I was. He started to ask me the hard questions. He challenged me to think through all of my thoughts and actions. What was my motive behind them? What was I

trying to convey to those around me? How did I think God perceived these thoughts and actions? Every time he asked a question, I found myself getting frustrated, rather than actually wanting to think through the questions he was asking me. Why was he being so harsh and naggy? Why couldn't he mind his own business? In reality, God was using Eric's questions to reveal my sin to me, slowly, but surely. A breaking point came when Eric asked me what the gospel was. I sat silent and confounded. I tried to piece together the best Sunday school response I could, but could not get out a single word.

Over the next year, I spiraled downward, as God slowly revealed to me the fact that I was not perfect. I felt convicted of sin in everything that I did. I saw my pride, and how much I fought to protect it. I saw my judgment on others. I saw how much I cared about what others thought of me. The gospel became more real than ever. 1 Timothy 1:15 tells us, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." This is why Jesus died for me. This is why I could call myself a Christian. Not because I was perfect, but because Jesus was perfect in my place. The bur-

den that I had experienced from all of my sin was finally lifted, as I began to find my identity in being a sinner saved by Christ!

I still struggle, daily, to see my own sin, quickly justifying mistakes or conflicts as the fault of another. But thanks to my gracious wife and friends, God continues to show me that I am not perfect, and that I need him more than ever. The cross that Jesus died on becomes bigger everyday, and for that, I am extremely grateful.”

Melissa: “Growing up, I attended a Catholic school for the first eight years of my education, went to church each week, and I felt comfortable and in control. The first real shock to my comfort was right before high school when I was diagnosed with a condition that took away my ability to control my health and how well my body functioned. Facing a situation that I couldn’t fix on my own, I began to battle for control over my life. This battle carried over into all aspects of my life: academics, appearances, and friends. I wanted to control what others thought of me by being who I thought they wanted me to be. I felt completely self-reliant, so when something didn’t go my way I took it out on myself, causing great anxiety and unrest.

My idea of God aligned with these ideas, living as if God had a giant balance scale weighing my good deeds against the bad. If the scale tilted towards the good deeds, I was content. This scale seemed to work well for me since I did well in school, didn't party, and hung around other 'good' kids.

However, my senior year, the "good" kids I once hung with started to participate in activities that I saw as 'bad.' Wanting to control their image of me, I started to do the same. My balance scale was completely tilted in the wrong direction and seemed to be impossible to keep up, so I let it go. This was the first time that I saw myself as a sinner.

My first year of college, God placed a girl in my life who attended a Christian ministry. We quickly became friends and she started inviting me to some of the ministry's weekly meetings. Feeling the meetings were too weird for me, I just hung out with her and her friends at other events, like bonfires and bowling. I became friends with the other students who were in the ministry and stopped partying, but only because I thought this was the image they would want. So, when I went home that summer, I returned to my previous ways. Upon returning to college

that fall, I thought that my friends involved in the ministry would not want to hang out with me, knowing how sinful I was during my summer at home. The same friend, who first initiated towards me the previous year, kept inviting me to activities and after many rejections said she would never ask again if I just attended a fall retreat with the ministry. So I gave in, fully expecting to be shunned because they all knew how much of a sinner I was. However, when I arrived at the retreat they welcomed me and loved me. They didn't treat me like a 'bad' person, but didn't ignore the sin at the same time. Through their actions God made the gospel clear to me. That while I am still a sinner, God shows his love for me by sending his only son to give his life for me, fully acknowledging that I am a sinner and simultaneously justified at the same time (Romans 5:8). Remaining in control and saving myself was never going to work. I needed the free gift that God offered through Jesus.

The gospel shows me that I am not in control of my life, so I don't have to worry about the balance and that I have always been a sinner and can't ever be good enough; Jesus frees me from these things. Jesus changes everything.

While control is still a struggle, God re-

minds me that he is in control and I can say, ‘... you are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.’ (Psalm 16:2) Knowing that God is in control as he works in and through me to reveal his glory, gives me a peace that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7) and allows me to rest more than I ever could on my own.”

June 21, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

WEEK 13

ACTS 22

Day 1

Read Acts 22. How does Paul organize his defense to the Jews? What implications does this have for us?

Questions: Acts 22:1–11

1. Why is Paul's history as a zealous Pharisee so relevant to his story?
2. Of all the things Paul could have said, he chose to describe his conversion. What does this suggest about his conversion?
3. What does this event imply about our own conversions and their relevance for our witness to Jesus?

Acts 8:1–3

Day 2

Read Philippians 4. How does Paul's exhortation in verse 2 connect with a theme we've seen in Philippians?

Questions: Acts 22:12–21

1. What does Paul say about his involvement in the martyrdom of Stephen?
2. Why is Paul told to make haste to get out of Jerusalem?
3. Why do you think the Jewish listeners ceased hearing Paul? What did he say that was so controversial?

Acts 22:19–21

Day 3

Read Colossians 1. What does Paul say that he has heard about the church in Colossae?

Questions: Acts 22:22–30

1. How does Paul get out of the flogging?
2. How did Paul acquire his Roman citizenship? How is that unique?
3. How is Paul's trial an allusion to the trial of Jesus? What are some similarities? What is a source of hope for Paul in these situations?

Acts 22:22

Are We Too “Christian” for Non- Christians?

Rick Segal

Google the expression “know your number” and you’ll find screen after screen of reportedly essential life metrics ranging from prostate-specific antigens (PSA), to cholesterol, the amount of money you will need in savings to retire, and your enneagram — which is a quantification of personality which, depending on whom you believe, was either the brainchild of a 4th-century Christian mystic or a 20th-century Bolivian spiritualist, give or take 1,600 years, but who’s counting?

Well, it seems everyone is counting. With each passing day some new app, gadget or wearable technology, or fill-in-the-blank-o-meter emerges to help us capture, measure, and analyze the big data we generate while simply going about living our lives, all holding out the promise of living life better, longer, and more fruitfully — some of these meters serious and helpful, some of them silly and distracting.

It is written, Why even the hairs of your head are all numbered. (Luke 12:7)

A Personal Great Commission Number

As I listened to Jason Meyer preach recently from 2 Corinthians 6:14–7: comparing and contrasting separation from and engagement with the world, I thought, “Wouldn’t it be great if we had an app that measured our engagement with unbelievers?”—something that ran a running total of:

Amount of Time x Depth of Relationship x Unbelievers

Sadly, for many, the product would be small, low single digits. It is so easy to fill our time with the activity and fellowship of Christian life. Block out time for prayer, quiet time, worship, Sunday school, small group, committee meetings, accountability partners, Christian entertainment, political action, and socializing with your best friends with whom you just so happen to also attend church and, well, there really isn’t much margin left for, let’s say, evangelism.

Separation from the world isn’t really so hard. One could suggest it is a preferred and more comfortable course than engagement with it, especially if your love of God is strong. It is easier in many ways to be not in the world than it is to be in it and not of it.

The Two-Block Mission Field

Last year, our pastor in suburban Cincinnati challenged us at the holidays to pray for our neighbors by name, take them some baked goods, and then seek opportunities to invite them into our home. I confess that, first, we had to figure out most of their names in order to pray for them. When we did visit them with our jars of holiday snack mix, all of the neighbors were delighted that someone had finally instigated “neighborhood.” Most notably, when they started visiting our home and sharing our dining room table, it became quickly apparent to us, “We’ve been spending way too much time with fellow Christians.”

We were confronted with the mainstream culture head on, not in a cable TV show way, but just as people talking about things that people talk about. We heard with fresh ears just how easily unbelievers embrace things that we church folk won’t even go near, and how delicate is the task of discussing such things with people who don’t sing from the same hymnal as we do, indeed, who don’t sing from a hymnal at all. Our neighbors left our home knowing that we were Christian people, that we respect the authority of the Bible and, most of all, that we love our neighbors. Within a couple weeks, one of them was serving in a local Christian ministry with us.

Such engagement is not easy, not at all. It requires higher degrees of attentiveness and calculation than do conversations with our brother and sister Evangelicals whose sentences we can all too easily finish. It requires an ability to apply rightly the Scripture to the circumstances and conversations in which we are engaged, a capability for which we are supposedly being equipped during the times we are together as Christians “loving and exhorting one another to good works.” And it requires a great patience with the blindness, deafness, and death that Jesus asks us to speak in to. Actually, it requires us to be disciplined and mature enough in our faith to see with his eyes.

Seven Simple Steps to Boost Evangelism

Develop your “personal Great Commission number” as if it were something as routine to your daily life as church, work, fitness, and carting your kids around. How much time do

you spend with unbelieving individuals, and what is the quality of your social relationships with them? You can boost your number substantially by exercising these seven disciplines.

1. Pray for the unbelievers in your life by name.

Margaret Thatcher once famously said, “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families...” Her point being that we must regard each other at human scale, not as mere components of larger social institutions. The same can be said of the way we use the term “the lost.” Of course our hearts grieve for the millions who do not know Jesus, but we don’t know the millions personally. Most of us do know personally at least dozens, some of us hundreds, and rather than lump these precious individuals into one big prayer cohort, we could begin to take their given names before the Lord in prayer. Start writing their names down and praying over them at least once a week.

2. Be intentional in pursuing relationships and scheduling time with unbelievers.

If you don’t make engagement with unbelieving people a priority, your life will gravitate automatically toward the pleasures and comforts of the church community cul-de-sac. Identify two people outside of your Christian circle with whom you think you would enjoy spending more time. Look for two more who appear to need someone to come alongside of them as they struggle with burdens in their lives. Target one other with whom you seem to have the least in common, but enough of a relationship that you could see it becoming, with a little work, a friendship. You needn’t feel that you need to sacrifice any of your principles or values to love someone else. It’s what we’re commanded to do. Love God. Love our neighbors.

3. Don’t withdraw from unbelieving family members. Lean in.

Family members are people with whom, like it or not, you are already in relationship. You already love them, and they already love you, despite theological differences. Don’t make them a project, just love them as members of

your family. Be sincerely interested in what they’re interested in, even if you find it hard to be interested. Know their struggles. Encourage them. Affirm them. Don’t be estranged. Lean in and never give up on any of them. Above all else, pray for them.

4. Love your neighbors.

Know your neighbors. Help your neighbors. Enjoy your neighbors. Be the epoxy that glues your neighbors into a neighborhood. Practice hospitality. Make your home a place that your neighbors associate with their love for each other.

5. Appreciate your workplace as the best place.

For most Christians, the workplace is the place where we will spend the most time with unbelieving people. Work requires us to collaborate with others to see it to completion. Relationships in the workplace are sometimes even easier to develop than with family members. You share more time and, in time, more in common. Don’t allow your Christianity to be a wedge that separates you from co-workers. You needn’t compromise your values, nor engage in any unbiblical activities to secure a co-worker’s esteem or affection, but you do need to take an active interest in your coworkers as fellow human beings, not just the other spokes in a wheel you happen to share. Appreciate that people in the workplace are not the means of getting your work done, they are the objects of your work as an ambassador for Christ.

6. Harvest relationships from your children’s activities.

Children are now involved in lots of activities, year round. If you have several children, the breadth of your relationship universe is substantial across the expanse of all the other coaches, parents, and teammates. So, go deep. Work these crowds. Befriend people in these communities. Do things with them. Bring them together in your home with family members, co-workers and neighbors. A word of warning: don’t permit all of your kids’ activities to take place in Christian-only programs.

7. Take up a new hobby, especially one shared in groups.

Diversions from responsibilities can be personally renewing and restorative, and great venues for evangelism. Find something fun or interesting to do or learn in which you are not fulfilling a specific responsibility or obligation to anyone — just taking your mind off of things for awhile. But, find something that requires you to do it with other people. Here you'll likely meet people of all different walks, the bond being the shared interest in the hobby. It will help to find something in which someone else, perhaps an unbeliever, will have to be invested in you to help you along. This can be the leaven of really great relationships.

The truth is the product of this hypothetical formula is not a score, it is joy. There are few greater joys in life than sharing the gospel with another person, even fewer greater joys than knowing you have been used as means, immediately or eventually, in another's conversion to Christ. Yes, we rejoice in corporate worship, in Christian fellowship, and in private devotion, and also in the essential work of sharing Christ with those who do not yet know him.

This article was originally published at desiringGod.org.

June 28, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

APPENDIX A:

METHOD FOR REFLECTION (RE:)

Observation:

1. CONTEXT – Make observations about where the passage falls in the flow of the text
2. Biblical definitions, and Dictionary definitions of key words
3. Linking words (because, if, since, then, therefore, but, and)
4. Who's writing? To whom? Who else is involved?
5. Culture/Personalities/Locations of people involved
6. Language, repeated words, emphasis
7. Purpose of verse (admonition, exhortation, rebuke, command); what is the passage about?
8. Metaphor, simile, cause/effect, comparison
9. Ask yourself basic questions about things in the verse and answer them. What is this? What is that? When does this take place?
10. Why does the writer use certain words to convey his point?
11. Make some objective conclusions (observations) on the text
12. When with respect to Jesus (before? after? during?)
13. Time of day? Or year? Verse surrounded by any major events?
14. Attitudes of people involved

Interpretation:

1. Content
 - a. Look at observations and start to dig into what they mean.
2. CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT!
 - a. Read verse before
 - b. Read paragraph it is in
 - c. Read chapter it is in
 - d. Read book it is in (if not too big)
3. Comparison
 - a. Read other versions
 - b. Use cross reference verses and a concordance
4. Culture
 - a. Use “Content” and use observations of culture to interpret how the writer uses words in light of the culture
 - b. What was the original meaning of the author?
5. Consultation
 - a. Commentaries
 - b. Study bible
 - c. Godly people

Application:

S.P.E.C.K.

1. SIN to confess
 - a. Look inward for a moment of self-inspection (only for a little while)
2. PROMISE to claim
 - a. What do the verses say that is a promise from God?
 - b. How will this promise change you?
3. EXAMPLE to follow
 - a. How do you want to model your life after the verses you studied?
 - b. How do you NOT want your life to be modeled after reading the verses?
4. COMMAND to obey
 - a. What do the verses command you to do?
 - b. How will you start to obey in your beginning steps of faith to accomplish the command?
5. KNOWLEDGE to gain
 - a. What important doctrinal truths must be memorized and taken away from the verses?

NOTE: Scripture cannot mean now, what it couldn't mean when it was written. Remember to use lots of other verses... let Scripture interpret Scripture.

