

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Home Missions

Acts 16:6-15

Some of you may have seen the poster that's on a couple of our church bulletin boards announcing a missionary appointment service in late August at a church in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The service is part of the work of our denomination's International Mission Board. The IMB's mission statement is as follows: "Our mission is evangelizing, discipling and planting reproducing churches among all peoples in fulfillment of the Great Commission." Last Sunday, you heard Steve Norbrey preach about the centrality of the Great Commission in the life of the church and the life of each Christian. That text from Matthew 28, and its steady emphasis in the life of our congregation, are also reflected in the verse at the top of the poster I mentioned: "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples" (Ps. 96:3).

The vision statement of our IMB says: "Our vision is a multitude from every language, people, tribe and nation knowing and worshipping our Lord Jesus Christ." I believe that Paul and his missionary team would affirm that statement. They're certainly acting like it in this morning's text from the book of Acts. In this passage, the mission to Gentiles continues. Paul and his companions cover major chunks of territory, by land and by sea, in just a few verses. This is Luke's way of summarizing the beginnings of the spread of the gospel to non-Jews, which marks a crucial transition in the story.

And this story is being driven by the work of God through the Holy Spirit. It's not just Paul and his missionary coworkers who are bringing "light to the nations." It's the Spirit, working in them and through them, overcoming all sorts of barriers that get put in the way of the gospel. Sometimes the barrier is contempt and disdain from those who hear the message. Sometimes the barrier is hostility from other religious groups. Sometimes the barrier is weakness within the Christian fellowship. Sometimes the barrier is dissension among church leaders. The challenges are many. But in every case, the Spirit finds a way to prevail over these obstacles so that the good news of God's salvation in Christ can reach its various destinations.

Some of those destinations are mentioned in our text. Regions like Phrygia, Galatia, Mysia, and Bithynia. Taken together, they show us that the Holy Spirit is now turning the Christian mission primarily toward Europe. But not in a heavy-handed way. As one commentator has put it, the way Luke tells the story, the church isn't "an imperial juggernaut streaming its way to the ends of the earth."¹ No, in this case the Spirit points Paul and his companions in the direction of a receptive audience. Paul experiences a vision in which a man of Macedonia pleads for help, which Paul rightly interprets as God's call to go and preach the gospel in that region.

From there, the geography starts to get even more specific as Paul and his companions follow the Spirit's itinerary. Luke uses a Google Earth approach, zooming in from Macedonia in general to Philippi in particular. And then from Philippi in general to a river in particular. And from a river in general to a particular spot alongside the river. That's where we spot Paul and his team beginning to mix with a group of people who have assembled at a

makeshift synagogue, a place of prayer. It's an informal setting, which allows Paul to sit with others and engage them in conversation. One of those in the group is a Gentile woman named Lydia. We're told that she deals in purple cloth, which indicates that she's probably a successful business owner with social prominence. Though a Gentile, she has attached herself to the Jewish faith. And now, the God whom she has already been worshiping, the God of Israel, begins to work in her in a new way. Paul and his companions are certainly doing their part. They're bearing witness to the gospel. But Luke makes it clear that God is the primary actor in Lydia's conversion. According to the text, "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (v. 14b). Luke goes on to tell us that others in Lydia's household got baptized. She even invited them into her home, which became sort of a center of evangelistic activity.

This isn't the only time in the book of Acts where we see the household playing a key role in the spread of the gospel. Now when I say "household," I don't mean exactly what we often think of when we hear the term. Luke has more in mind than just a father, a mother, and, as the statistics sometimes say, 2.5 children, not to mention a couple of pets. In the ancient world, the household represented an extended family. In addition to members of the immediate family, there were usually slaves, as well as former slaves who have been awarded freedom, along with apprentices, trusted friends of the family, and perhaps even some clients who did business with the family. What's more, the household wasn't just a domestic arrangement. It was also the basic social and economic unit. It was where learning took place, where manufacturing happened, and where business was transacted.

So again, when I speak of Lydia's "household" becoming a focus of evangelistic activity, I'm talking about family in a much broader sense than we often conceive of it. It's no wonder, then, that early Christian missionaries like Paul and his coworkers focused on the household as a fruitful setting for evangelism, and an effective tool for the spread of the gospel in the cities to which the Holy Spirit led them.

The Holy Spirit doesn't just operate within the walls of the church and within the network of relationships that we call a congregation. The Spirit also operates within the walls of your own home and the network of relationships that you call your family. Today's story about the effectiveness of the gospel in Macedonia can't be told without telling the story of the effectiveness of the gospel in Philippi. And the story of the effectiveness of the gospel in Philippi can't be told without telling the story of the effectiveness of the gospel in the household of Lydia.

So what about your own family as a setting for making disciples? In what ways is the Holy Spirit present and working in your own household to bring people to faith in Christ and into the life of his people? What is the level of receptivity to the word of God within the walls of your own residence?

I realize that promoting the gospel within your own network of family relationships can be a challenging, delicate, and complex thing. Sometimes we worry that family members and close friends will react negatively if we try to point them to Christ. Or we fear that we might put an unnecessary strain on the relationship, or perhaps even aggravate an already difficult relationship. In one edition of the *Peanuts* cartoon, Sally and Linus are leaving school when Sally informs him, "I would have made a good evangelist. You know that kid who sits behind me at school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion." "How'd you do that?" Linus asks. Sally answers, "I hit him with my lunch box." Though our own evangelistic techniques may be more gentle, we may still be too reluctant or cautious, thinking that others, especially family members, will think that we're trying to convert them by hitting them with a lunch box.

But my own experience as a follower of Jesus in my own family, and my experience as a pastor of a congregational family, tell me that most of the time, the Holy Spirit works in more subtle, more patient ways. The key is that you and I be open and responsive to the leadership and direction of the Spirit, trying to bear our witness in ways that are most appropriate for a particular person, at a particular time, in a particular situation. It's true, as Luke stresses, that only God can open someone's heart to respond to the message. But at the same time, Paul knew when he was in a setting where the gospel was more likely to get a hearing, and he took advantage of that opportunity. The activity of God, and the availability of God's people to be instruments of witness, came together to bear fruit for the kingdom. This is how the gospel often gets promoted and spread, in all kinds of contexts, including our families.

I look at our own congregation and see how, in many cases, people have come to faith in Christ, and have united themselves with the community of Christ's people, partly because of the influence of others in their family. As I've noted, speaking and living evangelistically within our families can be hard. Our commitment to Jesus can meet resistance within the household. And yet, at the same time, promoting the gospel within your family can be one of the most fruitful fields of labor, because you already have existing ties and relationships through which you can share the good news of the kingdom. When it comes to your household, you don't have to go out and create new connections in which you can live out your witness. The network of relationships, and hopefully healthy ones, are already there.

Of course, we can't speak of the gospel within the household without also stressing the crucial role that parents and grandparents, and other adults with influence, play in the lives of children. Though many people, for whatever reasons, aren't introduced to the word of God and the claims of Christ until they're adults, many of us can testify to the shaping and forming power of a Christian upbringing. We know firsthand that one of the most crucial spaces for making disciples is within the home, in partnership with the church.

Think, for instance, of the service we sometimes hold to give thanks for the birth of a child and to give the parents, and ourselves, an opportunity to dedicate ourselves to nurturing that child within the Christian community, praying that he/she will one day become a disciple of Jesus Christ. What if we conceived of that service not only as an act of dedication, but also as a form of commissioning. After all, aren't Christian parents, and other believing adults, the first "missionaries" in a child's life? Don't we who are in such roles of authority and influence need to be just as devoted to Jesus, just as grounded in Scripture, just as responsive to the direction of the Holy Spirit, as those whom the church would commission to serve in a strategic place somewhere in another continent or country?

It's one thing to hear a voice pleading, "Come over to (Insert the name of a country or people group) and help us." But what about similar voices that come from within our own families, from within the space of our own homes and households? What about when the Spirit says now is the time to speak a word of witness to your sibling, or to pray with your child? What about when God is opening your grandchild's heart to receive the Word and to welcome your guidance? What about when the Lord prompts you to share some Scripture with your in-laws, or to reach out in reconciliation to your parent? What about when the Spirit says show mercy to your cousin, or express your love in some concrete way to your spouse? In our denominational tradition and heritage, we pride ourselves on being mission-minded people. And that includes home missions, as close to home as you can get.

¹ F. S. Spencer, *Acts. Readings: A New Biblical Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 162.