

## ***On Fire for Christ, Acts 16-18***

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Last week we heard about the Council in Jerusalem where the Gospel message came into question and, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was clarified and saved from legalism. And thus, so were we. Salvation comes only through Jesus, not through anything we can do. There is nothing we can add to his work on the cross. Everything else that happens in the book of Acts and in our lives arises from this truth. That means discipleship is what we do, not in order to *get* saved, but *because* we are saved. This distinction is critical; the sequence is crucial. Having been saved, we then follow him.

As we continue to read through the book of Acts, this distinction must remain clear in our minds. And I say this because the book of Acts is, well, about acts. It's about *doing*. So it would be easy to confuse what we do with what Jesus has already done for us. Think horse and cart. Salvation is the horse. Discipleship is the cart. And carts do not come before horses.

Today we have an example of what it looks like to live out a life of discipleship. That example is given to us by the Apostle Paul, who was clearly a man on fire for Christ. And as we have said all along, what is descriptive about Paul (and others) is prescriptive for you and me. So, what did it look like, as Paul made his second missionary journey, to be on fire for Christ?

Today I'll offer to you four dimensions, four ways to sort this out. Here they are: you *love* the people of God. You *follow* the Spirit of God. You *trust* the grace of God. And you *tell* the truth of God. Love, follow, trust and tell. When these dimensions frame your life, you will find that you, too, are on fire for Christ. Let's take a look.

First, *you love the people of God*. Paul's first instinct as he began his second missionary journey, was to go back to visit the disciples made on his first missionary journey. Then, after some two years making new disciples and founding new churches, he also stopped and visited the mother church in Jerusalem, before heading home to Antioch. And whenever he could, he would write letters to those churches – letters that were read, re-read, passed around. Paul *loved* these folks. As you share the Gospel with someone, you begin to love that person. And once you begin to serve them, staying in their homes, eating with them and working with them, that love just grows and deepens.

There is a very special bond between brothers and sisters in Christ. Have you ever noticed that? When you meet people who are Christians, an instant bond is formed. Or when you see Christians you haven't seen in a long time, that bond is immediately re-established. Every year Jim and I take time to visit friends wherever we are on vacation. We laugh, cry, eat together, pray together – such a delight. It's a taste of Heaven.

So how do you love the people of God? Oh, this is so easy. But it does take some intentionality. Hospitality. Kindness. Taking time to stop by; taking an interest in what they do; working side by side. It's really normal stuff. It's just being a little more intentional about the things you are

already doing. Do you know a few people at church? Invite them over. Figure out what you have in common and do it together. Widen your family circle a little. *Love the people of God.*

Second, *you follow the Spirit of God.* As Paul traveled he kept trying to move into new areas, both north and west. Like a pinball, he'd try one and be repelled back. "Nope, not here. Not there." Finally the vision came, of a man calling them from across the water to Macedonia. ("OH! Not Asia. Europe!") New ground all together. So off they went.

Notice that Paul was not just sitting still, waiting for God's direction. He was out there, actively trying this place and that. He was listening for the Spirit's direction, seeking it -- but not sitting at home. He was willing to be that pinball until a door opened. Knowing there were people out there who were like sheep without a shepherd, he just kept on trying. People were lost in spiritual darkness, and Paul held the lamp. He couldn't just sit still.

Did you know that David Livingstone was in the same boat? He wanted to go to China, but God sent him to Africa. Some other missionaries had the same experience: William Carey, for example. Maybe you've been there, too. You have a burning desire to go one place or do a certain thing, but God has different plans in mind for you, and keeps shutting the doors until finally, a new one opens.

And that's ok. Life often happens while we are on the way to someplace else. Follow the leading of the Spirit, keeping your ears and your mind open. God is faithful. He will show you the way. Isaiah says,

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." (Is 30:21)

Often it is when you start walking that doors will begin to open. Follow the Spirit of God.

*Love, follow and now, trust. You trust the grace of God.* When you are on fire for Christ, it is not your status that defines you. Think of the people Paul approached: an elegant merchant woman; a common jailer; refugees from Rome. Whatever your status, in Christ this no longer defines you. In Galatians Paul reaches the pinnacle of his social theology, saying:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:28,29)

Your status does not define you. Nor do your circumstances define you. When we read about Paul and Silas in jail this morning, did you wonder, *who are the captives here?* Paul and Silas had just one goal: to spread the Gospel. It didn't matter where they were, in jail or not. Their feet may have been shackled, but their voices sure weren't, so they praised God where they were. *They* had a captive audience! And their songs apparently struck home with their hearers, such that when an earthquake opened the prison doors and loosened their chains, the inmates did not run. The jailer's heart, like the prison doors, swung open to receive the Gospel. He asked only one thing: "What must I do to be saved?" On fire for Christ, Paul and Silas never lost freedom to preach the Word.

So, if status and circumstance do not define you, then what does? The answer's simple. It's God's grace. Not your sin. Not the worst mistake you ever made. All that is gone – the shackles have fallen away and the prison doors released. You are freed from your sin, because in Christ you are forgiven. Sin no longer defines you. Grace defines you.

Paul called himself the worst sinner of all, because he had once persecuted the church. He never forgot that. But once he encountered Jesus on the Damascus Road, he let all that go, not allowing his former sins define him. My friends, whatever your former condition, your former destructive passions, your former rebellion – in Christ you are no longer defined by those things. As forgiven sinners you are defined only by what Jesus has done for you. That's grace.

On the cross, Luther explains, there was this Great Exchange. When Jesus died for you, he gave you what was his: sinlessness. And he took on what was yours: sinfulness. You exchanged your ragged, soiled clothing for his pure, spotless robe. You have been clothed in Christ – Paul says -- and *that* is what now defines you.

My friends, all you need to do is to trust that this is true. It *is* true. It is truth written on nearly every page of God's Word. If God said it, it has to be true, right? Trust it. And then live out your new identity – it is the inheritance that is given to all God's children. Trust the grace of God.

*Love, follow, trust* and fourth, *tell*. You now *tell the truth of God*. I hope you have kept up on your reading, because the parts we don't have time to read in church are often the best parts. It's quite a story. Everywhere they go, Paul and the others have been telling people the truth of God's grace. First, they go to the synagogues to tell the sons and daughters of Abraham how God has kept his promises, sending the Messiah, fulfilling Scripture. In Philippi, which (apparently) did not have the requisite ten Jewish males to start a synagogue, Paul went down to the river where believers had gathered to pray. Sometimes the apostles found themselves in a very secular or idolatrous city (like Athens or Corinth) and went to the marketplace -- or wherever people gathered -- and spoke there. If invited to speak to a crowd, they did so. If not, they shared the truth with whomever they found.

Sometimes they got a good hearing and people received the Word and believed. Sometimes the people rejected their message. But wherever they went, the people would say, "These men are turning the world upside down." Maybe it was a compliment; more often it was a complaint. And sometimes it turned violent, as we heard today in the case of the slave girl. My friends, it is not Paul that turned the world upside down. It was the truth he told about God's grace.

I've said this before but I think it's important and it bears repeating. Our job is not primarily to prove or to persuade. Our job is simply to tell the truth – that's what a witness does. The results are in God's hands. Maybe people will reject the message we bring. Some may be offended; the Bible tells us that the message of the cross is offensive to some. Some will misunderstand and unfairly brand us as intolerant or hateful. That's not the truth. That's *not* who we are. Our message is anything but hateful. Remember the parable of the sower and the seed? There are four kinds of soil. Three out of the four represent those unable to hear the truth or retain it. But some will receive the truth with joy; some will believe and we will rejoice. And my friends,

there is nothing like the joy of watching someone hear the good news, receive it and believe it. Their lives get turned around – and you have had a part in that!

You see, God does not *need* us to spread his truth; he has *chosen* us to do so. He could have done it all, himself. (In fact, he does do it all – in the sense that the Holy Spirit does all the heavy lifting.) But he chooses to involve us in the process; he chooses to share his joy with us. That also means sometimes we share in the suffering, as Paul did. And yet, even after all he had been through Paul said,

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18).

The joy of handing over keys for a new house to a grateful family in Mexico far outweighs a week's sweat and toil. The labor of childbearing is nothing compared to the joy of that child's birth.

So, what does it look like to be on fire for Christ? In short, it means all your thoughts and all your desires are focused on one thing. Luther, speaking about prayer, once watched a dog looking intently at his master, hoping for a piece of meat. Luther said, "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches his master! All his thoughts are concentrated on one piece of meat. He has no other thought, wish or hope." That's a good description of a person on fire for Christ. Bobby Richardson, a committed Christian who played for the NY Yankees, put it more succinctly. Once, when asked to pray at a meeting of Christian Athletes, he offered this simple prayer: "Dear God: Your will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Amen."

That's what it means to be on fire for Christ: focused on Him, wanting nothing more nor less than his will to be done in your life. Loving the people of God. Following the Spirit of God. Trusting the grace of God. And telling the truth of God. Love, follow, trust and tell. That's the life of a disciple, of one on fire for Christ.