

“WHEN GOD’S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Acts 16:1-10

Prayer: Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for this heavenly food, that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.

Introduction.

II Timothy 3:15-17 ... from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that applies to this passage of Scripture from Acts? Do you come to it expecting God to have something specific to say to you? Or do you wonder to yourself how does this have any bearing on my life right now?

I asked those questions of this text and I believe God has some good answers. The text divides into two parts and each part holds for us practical application.

Acts 16:1-5, Timothy and circumcision.

Timothy was probably one of Paul’s converts to the faith from his first missionary journey five years earlier. In his later letters Paul refers to Timothy as his spiritual son. Timothy was the son of a mixed marriage, his father was Greek, and his mother was Jewish, but also a convert to Christianity.

Timothy had made good progress in the Gospel and had gained a good reputation, being well-spoken of by the Christians in the churches. Character matters in leaders. Paul had just questioned John Mark’s character, now Timothy’s character is attested to by others.

Vss. 3-4 present us with what appears to be a serious problem, a major contradiction or compromise by Paul when he made Timothy be circumcised according to Jewish law and tradition. Verse 4 reminds us Paul had just fought a major battle in Jerusalem to declare circumcision no longer necessary for salvation and now he is traveling around to the churches telling everyone the decision the Jerusalem elders had made.

To make matters worse we read in Galatians 2 Paul fiercely stood against those wanting Titus to be circumcised and had opposed Peter to his face when he was flip flopping in the issue.

So what is going on here? There are at least three good reasons for what Paul does.

First, Timothy was a Jew, not a Gentile. Anyone with a Jewish mother is a Jew. Titus on the other hand was pure Greek, a Gentile. For Titus to be circumcised would have said he had to move from being Gentile to being Jewish, which was contrary to the Gospel they preached. But for Timothy a Jew to be circumcised would not have any implication of being Gentile and becoming Jewish.

Second, the people insisting on Titus being circumcised were false brothers, part of the circumcision party that Paul had opposed for adding unnecessary works to the Gospel of grace. But in Timothy's case the true brothers of the faith were not pressuring this on Timothy.

Third, the motivation for doing this was not to conform or become something he was not, the motivation was for the sake of the non-Christian Jews. As an uncircumcised Jew, Timothy would have no credibility or respect from the Jews he was trying to reach with the Gospel. This was part of Paul's missionary strategy. We hear that strategy in I Corinthians 9 when Paul says:

I Corinthians 9:20-23 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all ***for the sake of the gospel***, that I may share with them in its blessings.

The Gospel is the key, salvation is the goal. What Paul is doing is not compromised, it is liberty. For those under the law, Paul is willing to become like one under the law, in order to win them over. He limits his own liberty for the sake of love.

With regard to Titus the Gospel was at stake. If he circumcised Titus he would have been abandoning the pure teaching of the Gospel of grace alone through faith alone in Christ. With regard to Timothy the hearing of the Gospel by unbelieving Jews was at stake. Paul wanted to remove any unnecessary controversy and conflict among the Jews so they could focus on the Gospel since they knew his mother was Jewish and his father was Greek.

External things should not hinder the eternal things of the Gospel.

In the first case it is a matter of principle, of being faithful to the Gospel.

In the second case it is a matter of prudence, for the sake of others.

Once Paul had clearly established that circumcision was not necessary for acceptance with God, he was then free to make concessions for the sake of acceptance with men.

In all of this we see God's favor and blessing as the church was strengthened and grew. Paul's missions strategy is acceptable and working.

So what? What does this have to teach us? What is profitable for us from this text.

Is what I am doing helping or hindering the Gospel and my witness about it? Are my words and actions, my lifestyle choices, what I post or say on social media, how I interact with the world, helping or hindering the good news of the Gospel?

Make the Gospel and living in a manner that prompts the Gospel a priority. Don't do anything that would hinder the Gospel or your witness to Christ.

We need wisdom and discernment to know *what hills to die on*. That's what Paul is exercising. Some of us are dying on too many hills, and some of us are dying on the wrong hills. Paul will die on the hill Christ died on, on the hill of the glory of God, the truth of the Gospel of grace, on the Word of God. He will suffer for Christ and put Christ first, not himself.

Our lives as Christians and our work as a church will always have challenging issues. There will always be judgment calls. Not everything is black and white, there are those gray areas of human preference, discernment, judgment, and opinion.

We will have to discern what is a principle in Scripture and what is a freedom in Scripture. There are things that fall into the category of traditions or customs. There are judgments to be made about what hills to die on.

There are Christians who make everything a battle and Christians who won't die on any hill. Remove barriers to Gospel, avoid unnecessary, avoidable controversy. Don't major in minors. Speak and act in a manner that strengthens the faith of other and the church.

And yes, of course this relates to Covid, masks and vaccines. Are our attitudes and actions glorifying God, advancing the Gospel, representing Jesus, for the sake of ourselves or others?

II Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Acts 16:6-10, God closing and opening doors.

Paul and Silas are on the second missions trip. They are excited, enthusiastic, zealous to share the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ everywhere they can. They are traveling throughout Asia Minor which is Turkey. This is a good, God glorifying thing they are doing.

But something strange happens. They are being hindered from doing it. They started heading southwest but that didn't work, so undaunted they attempt to head north and east, but strangely that way is somehow blocked to them as well. So they start heading northwest to coast of Turkey and end up in Troas.

What were the hinderances? We aren't told. God could have used any number of means to close doors and block paths. A strong inward prompting of the Spirit, or some outward circumstance, weather, illness, persecution, local authorities, a prophetic word.

Why would the Spirit of God hinder or forbid the proclamation of the Gospel about Jesus? Why wouldn't the Spirit pour gas on that fire? Paul is an apostle; he has been called and sent by God to do this very thing. What gives?

Certainly, they must have been confused and perplexed at what is going on. They have walked hundreds of miles, they no doubt are weary, especially without the encouragement of fruitful work along the way. Twice they tried to fulfill their plans and twice they were hindered.

What is God's plan and purpose in all of this? So far all they had heard was God's no, where was the yes?

In Troas Paul receives a vision of a man from Macedonia (northern Greece) calling him to come over there. So Paul and his companions discuss this and conclude this is God calling them to preach the gospel there. Finally God makes His will known.

God is a God who opens and closes doors. What do you do when God closes some doors, what do you do when God doesn't do what you want or expect?

Does God have a specific will and plan for our lives? Yes. Does He show us ahead of time? Not usually.

Psalm 32:8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

Proverbs 16:9 The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

James 4:13-15 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— 14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. 15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

Yes, we are to make plans. It is wise to plan ahead, develop strategies, prepare for contingencies. Have visions, dream dreams. But we must be submitted visionaries and dreamers. When we make our plans, God gives us a pencil and He keeps the eraser.

What is profitable here for us? *Notice four simple methods* on how to discern God's will and guidance in our lives.

First, seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Set yourself to doing what you know God has created and called you to do. Seek and do His will. That is what Paul was doing.

Life is a journey to an eternal destiny. Make sure the path you seek and are on is a path that glorifies God. This is our chief end and purpose. Follow His Word. God's best and clearest wisdom and will is found in His Word, know His Word. Be about doing God's Word.

Second, pay attention to God's purposeful providences, both the negative factors and positive factors, closed doors in Asia and Bithynia, and an open door in Macedonia.

The history of world missions is full of stories like this.

- Paul wanted to go to Spain, but never made it.
- William Carey, one of the earliest English missionaries, planned to go to Polynesia in the South Seas, but God guided him to India in 1793.
- Adoniram Judson, one of the earliest American missionaries, wanted to go to India, but was driven on to Burma in 1812.
- Dr. David Livingstone tried to go to China in 1839 but circumstances hindered him so he went to Africa instead and labored there some 30 years.

We need to see God's hand in both closed and open doors and gratefully receive both as from His good and purposeful providence. Look for God's providence, look for the hand of God, the ways in which God shows Himself. Pay attention to divine interventions.

Notice those strange coincidences, those "it just so happened" moments. There is no such thing as chance, fate, luck, coincidence, those are words used by people who don't believe in God.

I stressed this at Gussie Berendsen's funeral Friday. That family experienced a profound example of God's divine intervention and it is cause to wake up and take notice.

Gussie died on the morning of her 89th birthday eight years after her husband Hank died on the morning of his 89th birthday. God showed His hand. There really is a God and He has a claim on our lives. Pay attention. God is actively involved in all our lives.

Related to this is what I call "a call away and a call to." I have used this in counsel to other considering a major change or relocation. Do you sense both a call away and a call to? We can often feel one or the other, but not both.

Third, there is the not just circumstantial factors but rational considerations, thinking the situation through, pondering, praying.

Does this make sense? Use your head, God gave you the ability to think and reason. Seeking God's divine guidance in your life is more about thinking than feelings. Don't trust feelings,

they are fickle. Don't rely on visions or promptings. Don't just go with your gut, use your head.

Fourth, discerning God's will is not just personal and private, but corporate, seeking other wise counsel, including family, friends, elders, spiritual mentors, to share with, mull over together, and reach a common conclusion.

They didn't just go along with whatever Paul said, they deliberated over it, and no doubt prayed. They discussed its meaning and implications. They reasoned together, and decided by the Holy Spirit this was from God and ought to be eagerly obeyed.

Proverbs says this over and over, that wisdom is found in seeking and receiving advice from wise, godly, spiritual mature counselors. A wise man has many counselors.

Trust God with your good desires, to be married, to have kids, to have a satisfying job, to fix a problem, to be free from sickness or pain, to see God work in some situation.

And trust God when He has other plans, purposes, when His ways are not our ways.

Trust His will is better than our best plans.

God always has something better planned for us than we would have planned for ourselves.

God is the sovereign providential God. He is sovereign over sin, over bad decisions, and good decisions. Don't wallow in "what ifs" or "if onlys." The Lord is our Shepherd, He always leads us and guides us. Let His purposeful providence be your cause to trust and have faith and never give up.

Trust God to be God.

Trust God when He is slow to answer, slow to show His will.

Trust God when He waits to show us the next step at the end and not at the beginning.

Trust God when He takes us west, when we wanted to go east.

"It is better to go to Troas with God, than anywhere else without Him" (G. Campbell Morgan).

Rest in the sovereignty of God. God has got this. God has this covered.

Our souls truly worship God when we are most pleased with who God is and what He does and what He wills.

Proverbs 3:5-6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.