

# Acts

*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. (Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)*

## **Gospel Sacrifices**

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**Acts 16:1-5**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning, Redeemer. It is great to be with all of you this morning and to have the opportunity to preach to you from the Word of God.

I want to invite you to turn your Bibles with me to Acts 16:1-5.

As you turn there, I want to ask you a question. To what lengths would you be willing to go to make the gospel known around the world? What sacrifices would you be willing to make?

Would you be willing to forego the air-conditioned luxuries of home? Would you put in the time and effort it takes to learn a foreign language? Would you be willing to eat strange foods and immerse yourself in a culture with a value system different than your own?

If we are to make the gospel known in all nations, then these are the type of sacrifices that we must be willing to make. Thanks be to God that the history of the church tells numerous stories of men and women who have deemed Christ worthy of costs like these.

Have you ever heard the story of Hudson Taylor?

Hudson Taylor was a missionary to China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In order to be as effective to the Chinese people as possible, he spent years learning the Mandarin language and even studied medicine before going.

Upon arriving in China, he found that his appearance and dress created barriers with the locals. He responded by dyeing his hair and adopting the traditional dress of the Chinese people. He famously said:

*“Let us in everything not sinful become like the Chinese, that by all means we may save some.”*

Hudson Taylor sacrificed his time, his comforts, and even his health for the sake of reaching lost people with the Gospel of Christ.

In this morning’s text we are going to read about another sacrifice that was made for this very same purpose. Let’s read that story now.

*“Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.” (Acts 16:1-5)*

This short story is relatively easy to understand, but it has some very big missiological implications. Because of that, we will spend a brief amount of time this morning explaining the passage, and a much larger amount of time considering how it should inform our missions strategy.

To understand what it is going on in this passage, we first need to consider the person of Timothy.

### **1. Who was Timothy?**

If you are a Bible reader, you should be very familiar with the person of Timothy. There are, after all, two books of the Bible titled 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy. These books were not written by Timothy, but they were written to him.

Timothy makes his first appearance in the Scriptures in the passage we just read.

In this passage we learn a few things about him.

We learn that he was from the city of Lystra, and that his mother was a Jewish believer, and his father was a Greek. We are also told that Timothy himself was a disciple of Christ, and that he was well spoken of by his fellow believers.

In 2 Timothy 1:5, the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy and says:

*“I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well.”*

Did you notice who was missing in that passage? Timothy’s father.

Timothy is an interesting character because not only is he ethnically both Jewish and Greek, but he also had one parent who believed in Jesus as Lord, and another who did not.

Timothy’s upbringing must have been quite difficult as he heard the gospel from his mother and grandmother, and yet his father rejected these things and even separated Timothy from his Jewish heritage by not having him circumcised as an infant.

Circumcision was of utmost importance to the Jewish people, for it was the physical identity marker that showed their fidelity to the covenant of God. Because Timothy was not circumcised, he would never receive a full welcome among God’s covenant people, despite being ethnically Jewish.

Circumcision was so important to the Jews that some Jewish believers in Christ even wanted it to be a requirement for Gentile believers. You heard about this a couple of weeks ago when Pastor Levi preached from Acts 15.

It is there written:

*“But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Law of Moses.’ The Apostles and elders were gathered together to consider this matter.” (Acts 15:5-6)*

Do you remember what the conclusion of that gathering was?

**Acts 15:28-29** provides a summary:

*“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from*

*what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourself from these, you will do well. Farewell."*

It was concluded that circumcision was NOT a necessary part of following Christ. It was this very decision that Paul was sharing with the churches when he encountered Timothy and chose to partner with him.

The next obvious question then, is:

## **2. Why Did Paul Circumcise Timothy?**

Doesn't it seem a little counter-intuitive to do the very thing that you are saying is not necessary?

Well, it is important to note that just because something is not necessary FOR SALVATION, it does not mean that thing cannot be helpful FOR MISSIONS.

A good missionary will do all sorts of things not REQUIRED of him. If you wanted to go and do missionary work in Quebec, it would be wise to learn some French. Knowing French will not save you from sin, but it will help your cause in reaching French speaking people. Or if you wanted to do mission work in an orthodox Jewish community, you would be wise to refrain from inviting them over for pulled pork sandwiches. It is certainly within your gospel granted freedom to eat pork, but you will find it less than helpful in winning the favor of the people you are wanting to reach.

The simple point is that just because you are free to do or not do something, does not mean that there is nothing else for you to consider. If you care about the Great Commission, then you are also going to consider whether doing or not doing a certain thing will help you to reach more people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the situation we find in Acts 16, Paul was not just visiting established churches in order to share with them the decision reached at the Jerusalem counsel. He was also engaged in sharing the Good News with unbelievers, and it was his custom to begin this mission work in the synagogue of each new city he visited.

If Timothy was going to join him in this work, a lot more doors for ministry would be opened if Timothy fully embraced his Jewish heritage and underwent circumcision.

One commentator helpfully puts it like this:

*“Timothy was both Jew and Greek. And because rabbinic law taught that a child born of a Jewish mother and a Greek father was considered to be Jewish, Paul knew Timothy would have constantly offended the Jews if he didn’t get circumcised. So as a matter of missionary strategy, as a sign of respect to Jewish heritage, and as an attempt to maintain Jew-Gentile unity, Timothy undergoes the painful surgery.”<sup>1</sup>*

Timothy most certainly weighed his options. He knew he was under no obligation to get circumcised, but he also knew that sharing the gospel to the Jews would be a lot harder if he were not. He ultimately concluded that an open door to effective ministry was worth the cost, and he underwent the surgery.

As previously mentioned, this story provides us with a lot of lessons for how we should approach the work of missions. Let’s consider a few of these now.

### **Gospel-Centered Mission Will Require Us To:**

#### **1. Consider the Needs of Others**

If ever there was a lesson that we need to learn as 21<sup>st</sup> century, North American Christians, it is this one. And it is a lesson that we need to learn not only as it relates to mission work, but it is equally applicable for all of life.

We are regularly bombarded with the message that we need to look out for ourselves first and foremost, and that the needs and interests of others are second, third, or even fourth priority. Now this advice might seem good on the surface. It is true that we need to take care of ourselves in order to be in a place to overflow and help others, but it is not true that we get to a place of health by being proud and selfish. Many people would be surprised to learn that their self-obsession is actually what is crippling them and preventing them from having energy to focus on others.

The Bible presents us with a much better way.

Jesus was once asked what the greatest commandment is. He responded in this way:

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Merida, *Acts*, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2017), 2019-220.

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39).*

This means that when we make decisions we should not just be looking at the outcome through the lens of “how will this affect me”, but rather we should be considering how it will affect our relationship with God, and with those around me.

If I had to guess, I would imagine that not many of us would make the same decision Timothy did if we were in his shoes. Our inner dialogue would probably go something like this:

‘No way! I shouldn’t have to get circumcised! That would not only be horribly painful, but it also is not necessary for me to be a Christian! Why would I do something just to win the favor of a bunch of old-fashioned legalists? They can either accept me as I am, or they can miss out on what I have to share.’

Doesn’t that sound much more like the decision we would likely make? Not only does it allow us to sidestep the sacrifice, but it is also rooted in our gospel freedoms. I can only imagine that Timothy must have had these very same thoughts in his mind. But astonishingly, it is not the decision that he makes.

Timothy knew that he would have no witness among the Jews if he remained uncircumcised. They simply would not listen to a single word this uncircumcised Jew had to say. Now he could have shrugged his shoulders and allowed them to face the consequences of their hardness of heart, but he instead put the spiritual needs of the Jews above his own physical comfort, and he went through with the operation.

THAT is what it means to be considerate of the needs of others.

If we want to reach people with the gospel, we will sometimes need to enter in on their own terms. Now please hear me clearly on this point. THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT WE SHOULD INVOLVE OURSELVES IN SINFUL ACTION IN ORDER TO REACH THE LOST. We shouldn’t start doing drugs in an effort to be more relatable to drug addicts. Nor should we participate in the crude joking around the lunch table at work in order to win the favor

of our coworkers. Doing these things would be to participate in the sin of those you are trying to save.

Timothy getting circumcised was not a sin. Nor was it something he was REQUIRED to do. It was a morally neutral option. But he did it anyways because he knew that circumcision was a cultural custom that would open the doors for effective ministry among the Jewish people.

In the same way, we should be considerate to the cultural customs of those around us.

I love the way Tony Merida puts it in his commentary:

*“So if people reject your ministry, make sure it’s the gospel- and not your cultural biases and practices- that’s the stumbling block to effectiveness. If you need to wear a yarmulke when speaking to Jews, then do it. If you need to sit on the floor with Muslims in order to converse, sit on the floor. If you need to wear a particular type of robe in a village in order to address the unreached, then put on the robe. If you need to abstain from certain foods, do it. Put no stumbling block in the way of the gospel.”<sup>2</sup>*

The Apostle Paul said something very similar when discussing his own strategy for mission work. In **1 Corinthians 9:19-23** he writes:

*“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 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. 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. 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. I do it for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”*

Let’s take a minute and think about how this might apply to us here in Orillia.

Are there any stumbling blocks that we unnecessarily put in the way of the gospel?

Maybe one of those things that we are FREE to do, but do not HAVE to do, is constantly sharing our opinion on any and every subject. We live in an increasingly divided world, and on many

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<sup>2</sup> Merida, *Acts*, 220.

issues a clear line has been drawn in the sand. You are welcome to have an opinion on any topic you want, but you do not HAVE to always express this opinion. Take politics, for example. Do you have a favorite party? Great! So do I. BUT, that doesn't mean I need to go out of my way to always express my political thoughts. Were I to do that, I would be putting up an unnecessary wall of division between myself and half my neighborhood. It is hard enough to win an audience without putting up barriers on issues that are not directly gospel related. Because of that, maybe we should choose to refrain from posting about our every opinion on Facebook.

Similarly, maybe we would be wise to abstain from excessive boasting in our Christian freedoms. There is an almost comical movement within the young, reformed world where people go out of their way to display those liberties which other Christians might find uncomfortable. These are the people who proudly post on Instagram every time they buy a new bottle of whiskey. Or who love nothing more than lighting up a cigar in the company of those who might be a little unsettled about such things. Again, there is nothing sinful about drinking in moderation and enjoying a cigar to celebrate an occasion, but going out of your way to shove the fact you enjoy these freedoms down the throats of others... what is the point? What are you accomplishing? Doing such things is the exact opposite of what the Apostle Paul modeled in 1 Corinthians 8. In **1 Corinthians 8:13** Paul says:

*“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”*

We all have countless freedoms that we are welcome to enjoy, but if ever these freedoms make our brothers stumble, or create barriers with unbelievers, we would be wise to forego them.

I would like to now return to a point that was previously made, but one that I want to give more attention to. I want us to stop and consider that Gospel centered mission will require us to:

## **2. Guard the Gospel**

It is very possible that as we elevate the need to be considerate of others, that we could fall into the trap of losing the gospel itself.

There is always a danger that we could land so hard on a principle being made in one text, that we fail to remember to bring it into balance with principles made in other texts. For example, we



could land pretty hard on some of the passages that speak about God's sovereignty in our salvation. If we only read those texts, we might mistakenly think that the gospel demands nothing from us, and that at the end of the day we are not morally responsible people. However, in other passages of Scripture we read more about human responsibility for sin and the need of repentance. Good theology will look at all the Scripture on any given topic before coming to any conclusions.

This is what we must do this morning. Acts 16 presents to us the need to make morally neutral compromises to maximise the reach of the gospel. However, it is also true that we must be careful to not OBSCURE the Gospel by means of compromise. To balance this truth, I want you to look with me at **Galatians 2:3-5**.

In this passage we are going to meet Titus, another missionary partner of Paul who was forced to consider whether or not to be circumcised. In this passage we are going to see that the decision was made for Titus to NOT be circumcised. Let's read together and see why.

We read about that in **Galatians 2:3-5**.

*"But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in- who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery- to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you."*

The situation of Titus differed from Timothy in two regards.

First, Titus had no Jewish heritage. This means that his circumcision would not have opened the same doors among the Jews as Timothy's did.

Second, and more importantly, false brothers were seeking to coerce Titus into being circumcised as a NECESSARY SALVIFIC ACT.

Had Titus chosen to give in to this pressure, the advancement of the gospel would have been hindered and not helped. The Apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear why Titus was not circumcised: *"so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you."*

The Good News of the gospel is that we are saved by grace through faith, and not a result of works. There is no action that we can take to save ourselves, and this includes circumcision.

Now, in our own experience, we are not likely to meet too many people requiring circumcision as a necessary part of salvation, but WE DO encounter people who have other requirements for belonging to the family of God.

Some people would have you believe that true Christians will always adhere to a certain dress code. To be a Christian is to wear a collared shirt for men, and a dress for women. A God-fearing man would certainly never enter into church with a ballcap on their head. To do so would be a clear indication of your failing spiritual health.

But is that true? Are ballcaps inherently evil, or are they part of a fading cultural custom that have nothing to do with whether a person loves the Lord or not?

Others might suggest that you are not a true worshipping church if you are playing your music on an electric guitar or with a drum set.

Both of these are examples of adding requirements that we do not find in the Scriptures, and this is a danger we must avoid doing at EVERY cost!

Why? Because when we turn cultural issues into an aspect of the Gospel, we risk obscuring the true Gospel. When this happens, we need to push back in order to guard that which is true.

That is why the decision was made to not circumcise Titus. The false brothers were insisting that he could not belong to the family of God if he was uncircumcised, and this teaching was in clear contradiction to the decision made in Acts 15. In order to correct this false teaching and guard the gospel, the decision was made to allow Titus to remain as he was.

Now, before we move on from here, I believe that it is worth mentioning that we not only need to guard the gospel from things being added to it, but we should always be aware of the other ditch which seeks to subtract things from it.

Have you heard a gospel presentation that has a lot to say about the assurance of forgiveness and nothing to say about a life of discipleship? This is the gospel message that encourages everyone to say the sinner's prayer and mentions nothing of daily repentance and holy living.

The true gospel not only offers the forgiveness of sins, but it also offers a transformed heart and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, there are many people who want the forgiveness and not the transformation. And equally unfortunately, there are many people who offer this sort of gospel.

Why is that?

It is because it is a gospel that does not require sacrifice. Sharing this gospel will not put any of your relationship at risk. It won't offend anyone or invite hard questions. It is nothing more than the tickling of ears that so many people desire, but that does no one any good.

It is a false gospel that must be rejected if the truth of God is to be preserved.

The obvious challenge from all of this is that we must know the TRUE gospel. We must read about it daily in the Scriptures. We must gather weekly to sing about it and hear it preached. We must allow it to saturate our conversations with one another.

With so many false gospels floating around that seek to both add and subtract from God's Word, we cannot afford to lose sight of the true gospel. We need it, and the world needs it. So, let's set our eyes upon it and boldly preach it without compromise.

The third and final thing that Gospel centered mission will require us to do is:

### **3. Make Personal Sacrifices**

At the introduction of this sermon, we heard about the sacrifices of Hudson Taylor.

Do you remember what he said about his mission's strategy to the Chinese?

*"Let us in everything not sinful become like the Chinese, that by all means we may save some."*

Hudson Taylor sacrificed his time to learn their language. He sacrificed his comfort and adopted their dress. He took seriously Paul's example of becoming all things to all people.

This is the same thing we saw Timothy doing in Acts 16. Timothy made no little sacrifice for the sake of reaching the Jewish people with the gospel.

Now let me ask you this, what sacrifices are you willing to make for the sake of gospel work around this world?

Are you prepared to spend years learning a foreign language so you could speak directly with the local people and not need a translator by your side?

Would you be willing to learn a trade or a business that would grant you access to an otherwise closed part of the world?

Would you wear long, sweaty pants on a mission trip, even though you found the idea of women not being able to wear shorts oppressive and outdated? Is this a cultural adaptation that you would be willing to make for the sake of the gospel?

Or, let's think about some of those sacrifices we could make closer to home.

Are you willing to sing worship songs in musical styles that you hate in order to see more people walk through these doors and hear the gospel?

Would you be willing to sacrifice one evening a week to help at the Lighthouse if you knew it would put you into contact with lost people whom you would never otherwise have any interaction with?

These are the kinds of sacrifices that this morning's text is calling us to.

We **MUST** be willing to do things that we have every right not to do.

And we **MUST** be willing to **NOT** do things that we have every right to do!

Why?

Because the world needs Jesus!

And as His followers we are to die to self in order to make HIS name known!

This is no easy task, and it will require His help. So let us close by seeking that help in prayer.