

The sermon

Intro

We've completed 1 Timothy. We're going back in time to Acts 18 and the earliest account of the Ephesian church. 1 Timothy was written around 62-65 AD. Acts 18 happened in 51 AD.

We're going back in time approximately 12 years. Kind of like a flashback in a movie that's prefaced by "10 years earlier."

Kind of like Star Wars starting with *A New Hope* and the rise of Luke Skywalker to the (temporary) fall of the Emperor. Then going back in time to *The Phantom Menace* and fall of the Jedi Order.

Some of you may be excited by Star Wars. And I would concede I am as well. But I would suggest we should be infinitely more excited about the story of Christ building his church. Star Wars is fiction. An interesting story and visual product that reflects the creative abilities God has imparted to his image bearers.

The Bible is truth, reality. The Bible is God's story of creation → fall → redemption → new creation (or consummation or restoration if you prefer). The Bible is God's story of the Father rescuing his bride through the death of his Son and the regenerating work of his Holy Spirit. The gospel is good news to people who find themselves broken, confused, disturbed by their own hearts, outraged by injustice around them, and worn out when people sin against us.

The story of the Ephesian church is our story. The story of Christ building his church. The triumphs, the pitfalls, the spiritual progress, the setbacks, the truths that stir our faith, the lies that call for our affections, and the victorious return of Christ that brings an end to the suffering of God's people.

Let's view our ongoing study of the Ephesian church in terms of God's big story: God is redeeming a people. We'll see how he does it. And let's view our ongoing study of the Ephesian church as our story: a people living by faith in the redeeming God as we navigate a broken world on the narrow road to the promised land.

That's a story better than Star Wars! (PAUSE)

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

The triumph of God's word in Acts is meant to encourage our faith. God worked then. God works today. The Scriptures were effective then. The Scriptures are effective today.

This morning I have seven things we can learn from the missionary dealings of the early church.

Point 1: Going where religious people are (18:19)

After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila.

"*After this*" = after an incident in Corinth. When Paul came to Corinth he met up with Priscilla and Aquila, a married couple (18:1-2). Paul lived with them and worked with them. The three were tentmakers (18:3).

Paul stayed at Corinth for "*a year and six months, teaching the word of God*" in Corinth (18:11). After this, an incident happened. Jews accused Paul of wrongdoing, but the judge refused to hear the case (18:1-16). So the Jews beat Sosthenes, the synagogue ruler who had converted to Christianity (18:17).

After this event, Paul departed for Syria. Priscilla and Aquila traveled with him.

At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.

Paul had voluntarily put himself under a Nazarite vow. Paul's reasons aren't provided.

And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.
– 18:19

This is the first record of Paul in Ephesus. When he arrived, he entered the synagogue.

My point is **Going where religious people are**. Paul intentionally pursued a group of people. These were people with whom he shared a common ethnic background. These were people whose beliefs he once embraced. These were people he understood. He knew their values. He knew what they thought. He knew why they believed what they believed. He knew where they were mistaken. He knew his audience.

Application

What does this look like for us? In case you're getting the wrong idea, it wouldn't mean skipping our Sunday morning services to attend a Kingdom Hall (JW's) or a Mormon service. Paul is a missionary in a place without a church. When there's an established Christian church in town, you don't neglect the public gathering of the church (1 Cor 16:2; Heb 10:24-25).

If you're an older folk, go where older people are. If you're a veteran, visit the American Legion. If you came from a Christian cult, mingle with people in town who grew up that way.

The point is going where people are. Not expecting people to come to us. We need to find places.

Point 2: Reasoning with religious people (18:19)

but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

What's a synagogue?

Synagogues arose after Jews were sent into exile. Jews in foreign lands maintained their Judaism through synagogue communities. When the synagogue met, they recited the Shema (includes Deut 6:4-9), prayed facing Jerusalem, read parts of the Old Testament, heard a sermon, and gave a benediction.

The synagogue served other functions like distribution of goods to the needy and administering justice, but the primary purpose of the synagogue was gathering together to read Scripture and sit under the exposition of Scripture (interpretation and application of a particular passage; see Luke 4:16-30).

The interesting thing about synagogues is that they were rather loose on who they let teach Scripture.

After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them [Paul and his Christian companions], saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." – Acts 13:15

The synagogue rulers allowed a stranger, an out of town, a man whose beliefs they didn't know teach whatever he wished to the people. It would be like us elders allowing a Jehovah's Witness to have free reign to teach whatever he wished to you.

The synagogue setting providentially allowed for churches to be formed. Paul could walk into town and have a hearing for the gospel rather immediately. Free reign to convince the Jews that Jesus was their promised Messiah. And they allowed him to do this!

Application

Paul didn't have to convince these Jews that the Old Testament was true. That's a win.

For us it would be reasoning with religious people who believe the Bible is true but don't understand the gospel. Who are these people? In my experience, Catholics generally believe the Bible is true but they're fuzzy on salvation. There's no assurance. There's uncertainty. This can work with JW's and Mormons. They may have translated away parts of the Bible, but there's another Bible they say they believe. There's room for reasoning with them.

It's easier to persuade when people already believe the Bible is true. We need to start the conversation. We need to reason with people.

Point 3: Declining good opportunities (18:20-21)

When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. ²¹ But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus. – 18:20-21

This is odd. The Jews want Paul to keep explaining the Scriptures to them. But he declines. I've got to go somewhere else. Sorry.

Application

Sometimes there's multiple good options and we've got to choose one. We can't be in two places at the same time. We're finite, limited. We can only do some of the work. Someone else is going to have to contribute. We have to pick and choose what we'll give our time to. Someone expects me to be somewhere. We need to examine our motives, but it's okay to say no.

It's not that Paul didn't have a heart for Ephesus. He left trusted workers behind. He plans on coming back if God allows.

Point 4: Strengthening all the disciples (18:23)

When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. ²³ After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. – 18:22-23

Paul left Ephesus and traveled the Mediterranean Sea to Caesarea. He spends an unstated period of time there and arrives at Antioch, his sending church (Acts 13:1-3). Kind of like the Mackey's coming back to Maine for a few months to give a mission report. Arrival at Antioch marks the end of Paul's 2nd missionary journey.

Next he begins his 3rd missionary journey, traveling through Galatia and Phrygia, "*strengthening all the disciples*" (places where he's already established churches during his 1st missionary journey – Acts 13:4-14:28).

Application

To strengthen means to influence one to become stronger. More firm in their belief. More firm in their commitment to Christ in the face of opposition.

Strengthening indicates Christians and churches need to make progress. We're supposed to get better. We're supposed to improve.

For example, growing in ability to initiate gospel conversations and explain the gospel. Ability to answer the hard responses like, "but I'm a good person."

We shouldn't be content with the status quo. Improvement is good.

Where does Palermo Christian Church need to be strengthened? Let me know.

Point 5: The problem of partial accuracy (18:24-25)

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. – 18:24-25

Ephesus wasn't abandoned. Apollos carried on the work.

We don't know how long Apollos was saved, but he had a good understanding. Because someone had instructed him. He didn't figure it out on his own.

Apollos was well spoken (eloquent), had a good knowledge base, and was passionate ("*fervent in spirit*"). Marks of good preaching.

However, "*he knew only the baptism of John.*" He was ignorant of Christian baptism. This is a problem.

Application

A Christian teacher can be trained and know some things well. And at the same time be ignorant of other vital truths. This needs to be corrected. A well-rounded faith is critical.

Where do you need to know more accurately? Where are you lacking the wisdom to do the Christian life well? Let me know.

Point 6: Pointing out theological concerns well (18:26)

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. – 18:26

The synagogue folks weren't abandoned. Apollos resumed Paul's ministry. Priscilla and Aquila came out to hear him. They had concerns.

Application

Let's note what they didn't do. They didn't publicly question Apollos and embarrass him and kill his credibility among the Jews.

No, they discussed the matter privately so not to humiliate Apollos and create a public debate among Christians in the presence of unbelievers. This is wisdom.

They counseled him privately because baptism matters. Apparently, Apollos listened and humbled himself. It's good to be exposed to truths we're ignorant about.

Sunday school

I think we can learn from this in our own gatherings. For example, Sunday school. When should we challenge the teacher? When should we discuss the matter privately after class?

Two elders fighting before the people is a bad picture. One elder critiquing another elder kills an elder's public credibility. What if I disagree with a comment from the crowd?

Well, I don't think every disagreement needs to be handled publicly. Sometimes the disagreement involves a matter where each position falls within orthodox, acceptable belief. Sometimes the matter is a fine point of doctrine where there's significant agreement and little disagreement. In these cases, I might just respectfully state what the words say or let the matter go. And then talk to the individual in private.

If it's a major mistake, like advocating sin or misunderstanding the gospel that's going to confuse the whole group, something should be said. For example, "I think it's okay for Christians to get drunk... We're not called to speak the gospel, we're called to live the gospel." A brief, respectful correction saving the major discussion points for private conversation.

There's a time and place for correction. There's an ongoing need to humbly submit our thoughts to God's word.

Point 7: Helping the church by refuting error (18:27-28)

And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. – 18:27-28

The believers were helped by Apollos because he corrected the Jews in public.

Christians were helped (grew in confidence?) when they saw from Scripture the Jews were wrong about Jesus. We have good arguments! (PAUSE)

Apollos entered the discussion. He didn't back down from debate. A non-answer doesn't help God's people. For example, refusal to comment on the exclusivity of Christ (he's the only way to heaven). Refusal to call sin sin. God's people are helped when we provide direct answers from Scripture.

The debate was whether or not Jesus was the promised Messiah. Apollos argued yes, persuasively. What's the debate today? What questions are you facing when you engage non-Christians with the gospel? Bring me some questions. It might make for some good Sunday school classes.

One place Apollos would have argued from was Isaiah 53. Which Darryl read for us earlier.

"he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities... the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all...it was the will of the LORD to crush him...¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities... he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors" (Isa 53:5-6, 10-12).

We were created to know and love and serve God. But Adam disobeyed God's one command, resulting in his descendants after him (us) coming into the world with a sinful nature. So we fail to thank God and we chose to do life our own way. God holds us accountable for our rebellion.

Jesus died on the cross as a substitute. Such that whoever believes is counted righteous, despite their sin. If we believe, Jesus has forgiven every sin (past, present, future) we'll ever commit.

There's two ways to live. We can go on rejecting God and living our own way. Or we can repent and believe. Turning from rebellion by trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection.

This is the root of humanity's problems. We need a reconciled relationship with our Creator.