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Working Hard to Make it Easier for Others Part 1

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Acts 16:1-5 (ESV)

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.

Matthew 23:1-2

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat,

I want to dive right into the text here today, into what we're talking about. We're not making things up when we come into the worship center here. We're trying to listen to what God has taught us in His word, and respond and obey to what He teaches us there.

And very clearly, the revelation of the Bible displays to us that when God looked over the world and He saw the brokenness and the hurt and the heartache, He did something. That was His answer for us, for the pain and the suffering in this world.

John says it this way: God, in His heart for the world and His love for the world, sent His one and only Son into the world. The answer that God gave to humanity for all of its pain, suffering, hurt, and heartache is Jesus. It's Jesus.

For God so loved the world that He sent His Son to be our Redeemer, to be the forgiveness of sins, to open up the doorway for eternal life for us, to give us birth into a living hope. That is not a hope that comes from this world, but a hope that comes from outside of this world—an unquenchable optimism—as we walk in the midst of this broken, sinful, pain-filled world.

God sent His Son to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. And Jesus Himself affirmed this when He started His ministry, and He went into His synagogue, and He opened a scroll, and He opened to the prophet Isaiah. And He said of Himself:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and He has anointed me to do a number of things.”

Jesus said: to preach good news to the poor, to bring this good news to the poor in spirit and the poor in the world, to bind up broken hearts, to heal the hurts and the pains and the soul wounds that people have, to set captives free from enslavement to sin and darkness and disbelief and doubt and worry and fear—to set captives free, to bind up broken hearts, to bring good news.

And then He summarized it in this way. He said: to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, the time of God's grace.

This all came to us through Jesus, full of grace and truth, full of hope and glory. And before He ascended, Jesus said to His disciples:

“I’m turning this over to you. My mission, I’m turning it over to you.”

And of course, His Great Commission was that they were to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded, baptizing them into this new life. And Jesus said He would be with them.

And then He said: “Go wait in Jerusalem, and the promise of the Father will come upon you. The gift of the Holy Spirit will come upon you.”

And literally, the anointing that Jesus had to do what He did would be put upon His followers. The power of the Spirit would come upon them, and they would now be His witnesses, bearing to His name the hope for all humankind.

And that's what we're looking at in here—the start of the Church of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit of Jesus, which will be unstoppable until the end of the age. And because we're still living in that age, we're still a part of this mission. Those of us who claim to be followers of His are under this call to bear witness to His name, to hold out His name to a lost and broken and sinful and hurting world so that they might find life.

And this is what had happened in Jerusalem in Acts. When we started in our text here, we saw that the church began in Jerusalem, and it expanded greatly there. Many came to faith in Jesus, but then persecution rose up against them, drove them out of Jerusalem, and the church has now spread much to the north.

And Paul has gone on his first missionary journey. We looked at that a couple of weeks ago. I have a map of it. From Jerusalem, the church grew north. It went south. Then Paul left from Antioch, made his

first missionary journey, came back to Antioch, and Mike talked last week about how a little dispute in the church broke out.

And this dispute in the church was about what we should require of all these people who God is drawing to Himself. And as this dispute ensued, those in Antioch decided to send a group of people back to Jerusalem, where the church started, so they could have a council meeting of sorts. And they could sort out about what should be required of people that God is drawing to Jesus.

And so here's the big idea of this morning: What should we do when God is bringing new people into His family? How should we handle it? How should we navigate? What should we require of them?

The issue at stake at this time was because of the Jewish tradition of circumcision that they had for many centuries. Should we require the boys to be circumcised? That's not a pleasant thing. The older you are, I'm sure, the less pleasant it is. It's not even pleasant in our time. I just was aware of this happening to a grandchild of mine.

But this is what they were arguing over. Should we require those that come to God to be circumcised? This debate was sent to Jerusalem. The council met, and they were discussing it, and many voices were heard.

And finally, James, who was a church leader in Jerusalem and a half-brother of Jesus, stood up at the council meeting. And I'm guessing he was a well-respected leader—maybe he had a certain position in Jerusalem, I don't know—but he stood up and he said this:

“It is my judgment, my decision, that we should not cause extra difficulty for those among the nations who are turning to God.”

And so they wrote a little letter that said: we should not cause difficulty for those coming to God.

As people come to God, we should talk to them about two things. They basically said we should talk to them about sexual morality because of the power of sex to pull people away from God—not that it's bad, but when it's misused, it becomes an idolatry in a person's heart. And we should talk to them about idolatry itself, worshiping other things. But we shouldn't put any other things in their way.

And so this is the letter that Paul and Barnabas are carrying, that Paul carries on his second missionary journey. This decision was made under the council of the early church in that meeting in Jerusalem. And it was very much in line with Jesus' teaching.

As we read in our gospel reading today, what Jesus said to the crowds and to the disciples, He said:

“The religious leaders that were currently there at that time, whom this debate actually came from—the teachers of the law and the Pharisees—they sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”

And here's what He said they do:

“They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads for other people in their spiritual journey and put that on them.”

Jesus was rebuking them for it. Jesus doesn't want it to be hard for people to come to Him.

Listen to His words. He's the author of life. He came that we might have life. And so Jesus said this:

“Come to me. Just come to me. Draw near to me. Get close to me. If you're weary and burdened, I'll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Learn from me. I'm gentle and humble of heart. You'll find rest for your souls.”

It shouldn't be burdensome or hard or labor. You should just freely come to me. Let the little children come to me. Children have a natural propensity to believe. God knows this. He says: don't get in the way of that. Don't snuff that out in any way. Don't hinder them. The kingdom of God comes to people who come with a childlike faith.

Jesus says in the Gospels 21 times simply this:

“Follow me. Follow me.”

No other rules. No other regulations. No other stipulations. Just draw near to me and see what begins to happen as you get near to the one who gives life. Learn from me. He's gentle and humble of heart.

We're in Acts chapter 16, in Acts chapter 17. And I can just tell you, I think one of the great lessons in Acts, through all this tension that they felt in the early church and all of this, one of the great lessons in there for us today on this same mission is that we should not make it hard for others to come to Jesus.

We shouldn't make it hard. But this is hard for some of us. We have personal preferences. We have traditions. We have long-standing things that have been our way, that have ministered to us. But there are some in the world, many in the world, who know nothing of those traditions, nothing of those ways. It was the same for these people. They had their traditions. They had their ways.

And yet now, God was bringing into their community people who didn't understand any of it, who were completely confused by all of this history. And the decision in the church was: let's not make it confusing for people. Let's not make it hard.

As a matter of fact, we should actually do just the opposite. When you study Acts, you'll see that the early adopters, like Paul, they knew what to do. They knew that the right thing to do was to work hard and make sacrifices, to not just not make it hard for other people, but to, in a sense, be chivalrous towards people coming to God and actually sacrifice to make it easier for them. Sacrifice time to make it easier for them. Resources. Energy.

So then Paul sets out on his second missionary journey. And nobody's perfect. He and Barnabas have a falling out. They're back up at Antioch. And now, as this decision has been made and the letter is sent with these individuals, as they're going back into the world and they're simplifying the way they share Jesus, Paul and Barnabas split apart. They have a sharp disagreement over whether Mark should go with them or not. He deserted them in the first journey. Paul didn't maybe trust him. We don't know exactly why Paul said he didn't want to go with John Mark. And so John Mark went with Barnabas, and Paul took Silas, and they started on the second missionary journey.

And I have a map of that. They went north up here through Antioch again, and then they went much farther—300 miles from Jerusalem to Antioch—but now they're going to travel, so maybe near 2400 miles on this missionary journey.

And if you can take time to read this this week, you'll see about Paul making sacrifices to make it easier for people to come to God.

The first one that stands out in my mind is right in our lesson from today. Paul gets through Antioch and he gets over towards Derbe and Lystra and Iconium, just north there of the little tip out of the island, and he meets a young man named Timothy. And Timothy, we read in our text, he's got a father who's Greek and a mother who's Jewish. So he has this sort of blended history. And because his father—mother is in charge in this culture—he's not circumcised as a Jew. And so there's this identity issue around Timothy, but he's become a follower of Jesus. Paul likes him and wants to take him on the missionary journey.

But Paul has this dilemma because they're ministering to a lot of Jewish people. And the Jewish people of the time didn't listen much to people who weren't a part of their network and their group. And Timothy, because he wasn't circumcised, created a dilemma. And so you have to decide: what are you going to do to make it easier for Jewish people to come to Jesus?

And I just want you to think about this conversation that the two must have had—Paul, this mentor, walking with Timothy, talking to him. He said:

“Timothy, you know, your mom's Jewish, but your dad's Greek. I'm assuming maybe you haven't been circumcised.”

“No, I haven't.”

Well, Paul says:

“You know, we're going to be speaking to a lot of Jewish people.”

He has a letter in his hand that says: this is not required by God. The church has decided this is not a stipulation for being right with God. But Paul wants Timothy to be effective. And he's walking with him, and he says:

“You know, we're going to be speaking to a lot of people who probably won't listen to you just because you're not really Jewish. So what do you say, Timothy? What do you say to make it easier for them? We have some temporary hardship on you.”

And then the Bible just simply says: Paul circumcised Timothy. Oh yeah. And they went on to make it easier for the Jewish people to hear.