

Sermon 57, New Progress for the Kingdom, Acts 18:1-17

Proposition: Paul's ministry in Corinth builds on familiar patterns but is longer, more successful, and more politically favored than his previous ventures in ministry.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come today to look once again at Luke's account of the certainty of the Kingdom. How can we be certain about the truth we have been taught regarding the Kingdom of God? Well, we can gain that certainty by looking at the content of God's word and in particular at the spread of God's Kingdom to the ends of the earth here in the book of Acts. What we'll see today is that Paul's ministry model is shifting from "arrive, proclaim, see immediate conversions, and then get driven out by an angry mob" to "arrive, proclaim, see conversions, and stay right through the mob's attack because the civic authorities rebuke the mob." In other words, the tide is definitely turning a bit. Always the message has provoked a divided response in Acts, from ch. 2 onwards. That's not changing. But the favorable side is getting perceptibly stronger — particularly as we see the local Roman authorities coming down more strongly on the side of permitting the church. Now, that has not always been the case, and the state has intervened against the church any number of times. But the typical attitude of most states at most times in history has been that at least some version of Christian proclamation is allowed, or at least not banned.

Anyhow, that's getting ahead of ourselves. What Luke shows us in this passage is that Paul's ministry is expanding, not only in a new place (something we've gotten quite used to by this point) but also with new friends, new ministry patterns, new encouragement from the Lord, and a new judgment by the local proconsul in the church's favor — or at least, not in opposition

to it. The Kingdom is continuing to rescue people from Satan's dominion, and it's consolidating its strength in so doing.

I. New Place of Ministry: Corinth, v. 1

Well, Paul saw converts in Athens, but he did not intend to spend a long time there. Instead, he travels on to Corinth, a much bigger city (one commentator called it twenty times larger than Athens) and one where instead of staying a few weeks, he will stay for at least 18 months. So far, so good—and so familiar.

II. New Friends: Aquila and Priscilla, v. 2-3

But in Corinth, we don't read that the first thing he did was go into the synagogue. We read instead that he made a new friend — Aquila, a Jewish man from Pontus, a province in Asia Minor not too far from Paul's own birthplace in Cilicia. This man was an immigrant and a refugee. He, along with all the other Jews living there, had been expelled from Rome — likely, based on a deduction we can make from Seutonius, because the Jews there kept rioting about "Chrestus," i.e., Jesus Christ.

Aquila was also, as the rest of the chapter will make clear, a kingdom worker. In partnership with his wife, they made it their business to teach others the gospel. Clearly, they were (or became) quite learned in it, because they were later able to instruct Apollos, even though he was already "mighty in the scriptures" before he met them. But we'll talk more about that next week. Luke's point in this section of the narrative is to remind us that Paul is not working alone. Even though Silas and Timothy did not accompany him from Athens, he is willing to find and make new fellow-workers who will assist him in ministry.

Luke is telling us that the church is flourishing apart from Paul. Already the gospel has reached Rome and made strong believers there. Already Jewish people from around the Mediterranean are familiar with the word of God and making disciples in church, even apart from the direct presence of the apostles. This, of course, is what is continuing to happen in the church today. You and I are not like Paul, in terms of seeing the Lord and hearing His calling — but we are like Priscilla and Aquila, because we are ordinary Christians working for the Lord according to our place and calling.

III. New Ministry Patterns

Paul also engages in new ministry patterns here.

A. Tentmaking, v. 3

Obviously, the first of these is not really new. Paul didn't learn to make tents after he came to Corinth. This is a trade he had worked in previously. So why hasn't Luke mentioned it before? The answer is that here in Corinth Luke is showing us new facets of Paul's work, progress in the kingdom's advance that wasn't there before. First and Second Thessalonians both recount that Paul worked with his own hands to support himself while he was there. We all know that travel is expensive. Tickets to ride on board ships are expensive. Hotels are expensive. A night in my home, with the mortgage and utilities I'm paying, costs \$32. A night in a hotel here in Gillette will probably cost about three times that. Where do you think Paul got the money to travel all

over the Roman world? Well, the church supported him at times, but at other times, and certainly in Thessalonica and Corinth, the money he spent was earned by the sweat of his brow.

So Luke tells us that Paul, both to set a good example and to get the food he needed, traveled at his own expense. He paid ministry expenses out of his own pocket rather than burdening the churches. He taught that preachers have a right to be paid for the labor in ministry, but he himself often voluntarily abstained from that right in order to receive a better reception. Also, he did not seek the high status of leisure. He was willing to work a blue-collar job.

There are at least three bivocational pastors in Gillette. Ron Merritt at Cornerstone Church of God works as an electrician during the week; previously he was a sheriff's deputy and a clown. Doug Baker of Jericho Baptist Church works at one of the coal mines 40 hours each week. Darrell Ray of Calvary Missionary Baptist Church works 36 hours each week driving a van for BNSF Railroad. I think all of these men get something from the church as well, but they have trades and income outside the church as well. I personally teach English online on Mondays and make about \$13k per year from it. It's not a full salary, but it is a form of tentmaking that allows me to spend most of my time preaching to you all.

I have the highest respect for the tentmaking brothers whose names I just mentioned, and I like having skill in the trade of teaching English so that I too am able to preach God's word free of charge if necessary. I will say that I much prefer laboring in the church to teaching English; working with all of you is my favorite part of my job.

B. Devoting himself completely to the word, v. 5

And indeed, I'm sure Paul enjoyed preaching the gospel and seeing his own countrymen and Gentile neighbors come to Christ far more than he enjoyed sewing tents. And so, when Silas and Timothy finally caught up with him, he devoted himself entirely to the word. Most likely the Philippian church had sent him a gift that enabled him to spend all his time teaching the word. And he gave himself over to it. He was not a half-hearted worker, either in tentmaking or in gospel proclamation.

Notice the progress, though. Luke has not told us before that Paul was devoting himself to the word. We definitely assumed that, but now we have it spelled out for us.

C. A Successful Turn to the Gentiles, vv. 6-8, 11

Maybe the biggest new thing in Corinth, though, is that the turn to the Gentiles is actually successful, and that in two senses. First, it doesn't result in Paul getting chased out of town by a Jewish mob; second, the ruler of the synagogue gets converted even after the turn to the Gentiles.

Now, those two things are quite impressive developments. Paul offends the Jews and survives the experience; he is able to still live and teach in Corinth, and in a house next door to the synagogue, no less. But I find it fascinating that, as before, Luke narratively undercuts the turn to the Gentiles. Paul is done with Corinthian Jews in v. 6; in v. 8, another Corinthian Jew, and a very important one at that, is believing and getting baptized. The turn to the Gentiles is never final; God has never cast off His chosen people, whom He foreknew. Ministry to and conversion of Jews is taking place to this day and will until the end of the world. The gospel is

and always will be for the Jew first, even though so far Jewish people in general have not accepted or believed it.

So brothers and sisters, be delighted that the turn to the Gentiles worked. It didn't always work for Paul, but it did this time.

IV. New Encouragement, vv. 9-10

And the Lord also sends Paul encouragement. Some months, perhaps a year or so previously, Paul had seen the Macedonian in a vision. Now, the Lord speaks to him in another nocturnal vision. In this vision, Jesus communicates three major points to Paul. These points are particularly relevant to Paul and to the spread of the Kingdom of God in Corinth. But they are relevant to us as well, with the necessary changes. We will apply them to us in a moment. But first, let's look at their significance for Paul.

A. No Fear

The first point is that the apostle need have no fear. Now, we think of Paul as utterly bold and fearless, as the one who was happy to take on anyone and witness to any crowd or official, no matter how hostile. Why do we think that? Probably because Paul did a lot of heroic and courageous things in his life. But he tells us that he was no Alex Honnold, a rock climber whose brain is defective and lacks the modules to assess risk and feel fear. Paul was not like that. He knew the risks of his profession. He felt tons of fear. Indeed, he mentions it to the church in Corinth in his first letter to them: "And when I came to you, brethren . . . I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling" (1Co 2:1-3 NAS). Paul was physically shaking as he thought about going on from Athens to Corinth. Now, whether the rumors of Corinth's immorality are true or not, we can understand this fear. One commentator compared it to Las Vegas, but another said that rumors of Corinth's immorality were mostly Athenian propaganda designed to make its rival look bad. We should not believe that ordinary people in Corinth were having orgies on a weekly basis, or anything like that. But nonetheless, the pagan immorality of the city was real enough. Something about it got to Paul.

When was the last time you were shaking with fear? Most of us try really hard to avoid situations where we will be shaking with fear. But though Paul was in such a situation at his arrival, Jesus came and spoke to him telling him not to be afraid. That is amazing.

Does Jesus tell us not to be afraid? You bet He does. It is the most frequent command in Scripture. You and I don't have to be shaking with fear. When the situation is dire, God is still our God. He can and will still save us — maybe not from physical harm, but certainly from eternal disaster.

B. No Silence

But the second thing the Lord told the apostle was "no silence." Don't stop speaking, Paul! Don't give up preaching in Titius Justus' house.

If Paul had just kept his mouth shut, he would have been welcome in Corinth. Tentmakers were useful and helpful members of society. Apostles who caused religious disturbances and riots? Not so much. But God will not let Paul off the hook.

What about us? Are we allowed to be silent about our faith? Once again, I think we all know the answer. No, we are not allowed to be silent about our faith! To deny Jesus, whether directly or simply by concealment, is not allowed for Christians. We are not all called to be full-time evangelists. But I can guarantee you that if your coworkers and other regular associates don't know you're a Christian, you are being unduly silent. It is not our job to convert people. But it is our job to declare our allegiance and, if we have the opportunity, to explain why we believe and even to explain why our interlocutors ought to believe.

C. No Harm

The third thing Jesus promised to Paul was no harm. No attack would be successful. Now, in the very next verses Paul is attacked — but he is not harmed, just as the Lord promised. Is this promise for us? Only when we think of spiritual harm inflicted on us as adults without our consent. Christians can be attacked and physically harmed. Young Christians, especially babies and children, can be spiritually harmed, “caused to sin” as Jesus puts it, by poor parenting and active sin against them. So no, we have to limit the definition of “harm” so much in order to claim this promise that we just about neuter it. Yes, Satan will never be able to destroy your faith if you're an adult Christian. That is one harm that he cannot do you. But I think we have to admit that ultimately, this promise is for Paul in this particular situation.

D. No Lack of Elect Corinthians

The next promise, however, is true everywhere. Christ had many people in Corinth. Though it was famed for immorality, there were lots of people there that He was going to save. And indeed, the church in Corinth endures to this day.

Jesus wouldn't let them hurt Paul because Jesus had a lot of people in that city that He wanted to save through Paul's ministry. Wow. Know, then, brothers and sisters, that you too are invincible until your work is done. And Jesus has people here in Gillette that He's going to save. He has people in every city on this planet. There is no lack of elect; what is lacking is workers to go out and plant, water, and harvest them!

V. New Judgment in the Church's Favor, vv. 12-17

A. A Old Complaint, v. 13

Finally, the story ends with a new judgment in the church's favor. The same old thing happens: the Jews riot against Paul and accuse him of changing Judaism beyond recognition into an illegal religion.

B. A Settled Decision: Jews and their Problems Don't Matter, vv. 15-17

Gallio asserts that this is not his remit, that he only deals with flagrant wrongdoing and vicious crime. Then he dismisses the case. When flagrant wrongdoing — assault and battery on a Jew — breaks out in front of him, he ignores it. Why? Because he has already decided that Jews and their problems don't matter. This is a victory for the church, at least in a negative sense. The precedent set is that the Roman state won't persecute Christians. Yes! We as Christians rejoice to find out that our beliefs are permitted within imperial territory. What a blessing, even if it is given by a Roman administrator who is not exactly the paragon of justice or conscientiousness.

Paul's ministry is growing; the Kingdom is expanding. You can be certain of that. Jesus is on the move, in Corinth too. Amen.