

Part 34: The Hope of Gospel Ministry

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I grew up in an era of movies that played off a similar plot. I can think "Rookie of the Year," where a young boy named Henry injures his arm—but as it heals he develops a unique ability to throw MLB level fastballs. Or "Space Jam," where the Looney Tune's get some of Michael Jordan's "secret stuff" that makes them NBA superstars. Or even, the later film, "Like Mike," where Lil' Bow Wow gets supernatural basketball skill through a pair of discarded shoes.

But at some point all those movies hit a snag--Henry's arm goes back to normal, the secret stuff runs out, the shoes wear out. This left each character thinking that the magic was gone—they didn't have the skill needed to continue. But if you've seen these films, they all are resolved when after a cinematic montage, or the encouragement of others, the heroes realize they had the secret stuff in them the whole time.

Despite our love for these films—zeal alone doesn't allow you throw 100 mph fastballs. Despite how encouraged you might make me feel—I still can't dunk. Reality can be a cold bucket of water on our hopes and dreams.

Maybe you felt that way when you first believed in Jesus—you imagined yourself sharing the gospel with everyone you know and progressing in holiness as easily as you took a breath. But before you know it—you find the work harder than you imagined and you wonder if you're able to do any of it at all?

There may even be some of us who are investigating the claims of Christianity because life is hard—and you wonder if this Jesus guy might help you navigate this world. But after hearing, dabbling, and maybe even experimenting you find yourself saying, "Yeah, I'm not sure about this—I don't think it works for me."

I can't promise you that you won't feel that way--but I can tell you that the Bible includes examples of Christians and non-Christians who probably felt some of those same things you've felt before. We can see a lot of those emotions in our passage in Acts today: there's a group of disciples who feel ill-equipped as their superstar leader leaves, there's a young-gun preacher who quickly realized what he didn't know, and there's a group of people who thought they were in the right—but proved to be short of what they hoped for, and a guy who despite his faithfulness keeps finding more and more opponents.

But despite these moments of tension—they found what they needed. Not by turning inward and looking at themselves—but by trusting the power of Jesus in their life and ministry efforts. When ordinary people trust God's extraordinary grace in the gospel—we are never without help or hope.

Our main idea this morning is just that: **The gospel makes us helpful, humble and hopeful.** Even when life seems hard the same gospel which helps us makes us helpful to others as well.

That's what we will spend time looking at today: A gospel that **makes us helpful, humble, and hopeful.**

If you're just joining us we've been following the travels of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts—and today our passage includes the conclusion of Paul's second missionary journey and the beginning of his third.

Today, Luke gives us a unique snapshot in to what life was like for Christians when Paul leaves. Here we see not only what ministry looks like for Paul—but what ministry looks like for the rest of us! And what we see is that as the gospel multiplies it also multiplies ministers.

Last week Luke introduced us to Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth, and now Paul and his new friends begin another journey. **Acts 18:18-23**, "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. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. 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."

Here we see our first point this morning: **The Gospel makes us helpful.**

Now, if we know anything about Paul right now—it's that he was the helpful guy. Even before Paul was a Christian, he was probably voted "Most Likely to Succeed" at his graduation. He attended the finest schools, he was trained in rhetoric, and had a knack for leveraging his influence. When Jesus radically converted Paul he weaponized all those talents for the sake of ministry. Paul was chosen by Jesus to bring the gospel to the far reaches of the Gentile world.

So far in the book of Acts we've seen him do just that through persuasion, logic, reason, passion and persecution. But Paul, as the youths say, was one of one.

We aren't quite sure of anyone else at this point. He's had some helpers—but so far we haven't heard much of them. And now Paul brings two ordinary church members with him to Ephesus—Priscilla and Aquila.

They just witnessed Paul do ministry in Corinth for almost two years, and when they get to Ephesus Paul goes to his synagogue and begins his work. They are ready to sit back and let Paul cook just like he did in Corinth. But to their surprise, Paul preaches once—and then he's ready to leave. But he turns to both of them and says, "But you guys will stay here."

In verse 20 they say, "Wait a minute! You can't leave! You're like Michael Jordan and we are just Pippen. We're Julian Edelman and you're Brady. We're the other guys in N'SYNC and you're Justin Timberlake."

But Paul says, "You've got this."

We might question Paul's logic here—but Paul isn't trusting Priscilla and Aquila as much as he's trusting Jesus. Jesus appointed the Apostles to establish his church. But Paul knew that Jesus appointed Apostles to be the foundation of the church—not the future of the church.

As the Apostles die off in Acts, they aren't replaced. They were just the scaffolding establishing the doctrine that the church itself would be built out of. The church was God's vehicle for missions—the Apostles were just the spark plug.

That's why Paul tells Titus to "put what remains in order and appoint elders," in Crete. And it's why he writes later to the Ephesians to remind them what his ministry was for: **Ephesians 4:11-12**, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ"

The reason why Paul is able to say this is because of what he said a little earlier in **Ephesians 4:8**, that when Jesus ascended on high, he freed those in slavery to sin and gave gifts to men. Jesus not only saved the church—but he gave the Christians in the church the skills and gifts they needed for ministry.

When you believe in Jesus—you are given a job description and you're given gifts to help you do it. There are different ways we minister—but all Christians are Christian ministers.

You can be too young to drive, you can be too ignorant to be a surgeon, you can be too short to ride on that rollercoaster, but if you are in Christ you have been given everything you need to be an effective ministry.

Those gifts can be trained and developed—but I don't give them to you. Jesus does. And ordinary Christians like Priscilla and Aquila have faithfully and powerfully used their gifts for Jesus ever since.

Consider a few examples: Some four hundred years ago, two Christian women were talking outside a café about the joys of heaven. Unknown to them there was a young man who heard them and was captivated by the joy they spoke of. He was converted to Jesus and went on to write one of the most famous Christian works of all time—Pilgrim's Progress. The man was John Bunyan. Or consider one young preacher who had to fill the pulpit after the superstar preacher wasn't able to make it that night. Everyone in the audience came to hear the other guy—and he knew he'd disappoint all of them. But as he preached, one young man heard the simplicity of the gospel and was converted. That man, who himself was disappointed to not hear the main pastor, was John Owen—who went on to be one of the most influential theologians in the English speaking church.

Ordinary Christians did ordinary ministry and God did extraordinary work.

The budget we will vote to approve next week is not a budget where paid people do the ministry. It's a budget where paid people train people for ministry and minister alongside every church member. This doesn't mean we all do it the same way—but we are all doing ministry.

Priscilla and Aquila's ministry didn't look like Paul's and we see this in **Acts 18:24-26**, "Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. 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. 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."

Ministry pushes us—but ministry doesn't flatten us. Priscilla and Aquila didn't have the public teaching chops that Paul did—but here they model how God gifts some for private ministry of counsel and encouragement.

We will discuss Apollos more in a moment—but first notice the charity and kindness they show him. Apollos preached powerfully and publically—but it was an incomplete message at best. In today's world we would often do one of two things: we'd find a different church, or we would bring down the hammer on the heretic. But Priscilla and Aquila don't see a heretic, they see a young believer who needs a little bit of help. So, instead, they do the harder thing of privately and kindly taking him into their home and instructing him more accurately concerning the way of God.

It's no wonder that Priscilla and Aquila will go on to be such beloved leaders in the Ephesian church. They understood the secret of gracious interpersonal ministry. They were willing to lovingly point out weaknesses in the life and ministry of Apollos and correct him in truth and love.

I wonder where that kind of ministry might show up in your own life. It's all too easy to see people with weaknesses in their faith and to gossip and grumble about them. But if we are the family of God—then we can't take the easy way out. We are to joyfully seek to correct and strengthen them in the same way we would want to be treated.

But notice how their helpfulness also led to openhandedness. In Apollos, they finally had their new Paul! Jordan left, but LeBron was in their midst. They got their superstar back, but then they gave him away! **Acts 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."

At Sovereign Hope we often talk about our threefold goal of being a healthy church, a Missoula church, and a sending church. And here we see that a healthy church must be committed of sending out our best.

As we minister to one another and develop one another—we can't be selfish with one another. They encouraged Apollos to go to Corinth, and wrote him a letter of recommendation because they trusted Jesus.

As we talk about church planting, mission, and revitalization we need to be mindful that we are called to be stewards of God's people not stingy with them. As a church with a young campus ministry may we often have the bittersweet joy of this as we see young people come to faith, be nurtured in faith, and then sent out to other churches, other mission fields and other places.

The gospel makes us helpful to our own church and enables us to be helpful to others as well.

But second, let's focus more on Apollos. Here we see how **The Gospel Makes us Humble**.

There are some oddities about Apollos, but let's start with what's clear from **Acts 18:24-25**.

He was a Jew from Alexandria which was a city in Northern Africa rich with Jewish influence and an intellectual hotbed. That's likely why Apollos described as eloquent in speech and powerful in his use of

the Old Testament scriptures. He had been taught how to accurately preach Jesus from the Old Testament. Just as we had seen Paul doing so often, Apollos himself was able to do.

But unlike Paul, that's where Apollos' understanding stopped. Apollo's understanding included Jesus as the Jewish messiah—but his understanding of Christian living stopped with the baptism of John. He knew the work of Jesus—but the application of that work was limited. So much so that this weakness was picked up right away by Priscilla and Aquila.

And notice how humble Apollos was to accept correction from them! Remember, Priscilla and Aquila are nobodies right now in Ephesus—they are newbies to ministry and to this part of town. But Apollos was already a somebody!

Remember all those words Luke highlighted earlier. But despite his public gifting and effectiveness—here come Earl and Ethel from the back row and they invite him to their home and begin to point out the incomplete understanding he has of Jesus' work.

Sovereign Hope—might we be challenged to give such humble correction. And might we also, especially those aspiring to ministry, model the receipt of humble correction.

As a guy who was called as a young pastor—I've been dumb and wrong many times. And I've had small points of correction come to me in ways that were harsh and arrogant that really messed me up. But I've also had time where big points of correction were pointed out lovingly, seriously and caringly and I cherished them.

If we want to be a sending church—we must learn to apply correction humbly. I've heard it said that it is the duty of a missional church to listen to bad preaching! And if you want to be one who is raised up, you must learn to humbly accept the care and counsel of others. As **Proverbs 9:9** says, "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning."

But what, you might ask, was the correction?

What we do know is that it had to do with the distinction the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus. Apollos knew what it meant to belong to Jesus ideologically. But it seems he didn't know what it meant to belong to Jesus intimately. The baptism of Jesus is not only a profession of what you believe—but it's the doorway to a new way of life.

It says, "I belong to Jesus and to his people, and my life is shaped by that." That's why the content of their correction was "the way of God." It's very easy to know about Jesus without knowing Jesus. The truth of what God has done is exciting and wonderful truth—but the application of that truth is that we have an intimate and personal relationship with Jesus.

Following Jesus requires a humble submission of both the head and the heart. This means that as we are committed to raising up leaders here at church we want leaders of Christlike character more than contagious charisma. To those who aspire to ministry—notice the humble secret of success. You must help people follow Jesus in all of life, not just their minds. And if you aren't following Jesus well privately—then you'll never help people do it well publically.

A humble life of pursuing Jesus privately and receiving correction willingly is the key to a life that is worthy, honorable and effective in ministry. Dear Christian, don't overlook or rush past the simple truth of that. But believe it and with the help of the church, be mastered by Christ.

The gospel made a bunch of nobodies capable to correct the ministry of a great somebody. But what we see next is how true ministry points everyone to the only one who really matters.

This is how **The Gospel makes us hopeful.**

As Paul returns, despite the work of Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos and the rest of the church—he still finds people who are wrong about the gospel—and others who are resistant to it. But in the face of these obstacles—Paul is not hopeless—he knows that the solution is more clarity on the gospel.

If the gospel is, as Paul says, the very power of God then we as Christians can always find hope in ministry.

Read again with me an odd encounter when Paul returns to Ephesus, sometime after Apollos left for Corinth: **Acts 19:1-7**, "And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all."

Now here's the short of what seems confusing at first glance. These men weren't Christians. Paul, just like Priscilla and Aquila with Apollos, noticed something off about these "disciples." So he asks them a question that only a Christian would know how to answer, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed."

This is like asking someone who claims to be a Griz fan to spell "Griz." If they spell it with two "z's" we know they don't know what they're talking about. And when these guys says, "We didn't even know there was a Holy Spirit, we only know John's baptism" everything clicked for Paul.

You see these men were waiting on God's promise and were attempting to be faithful according to the Old Testament. That's why they took the Baptism of John. Unlike Apollos, they hadn't heard at all about Jesus. These were guys waiting at the engagement party—unaware that the wedding had started. Whereas Apollos struggled to apply the completed work of Jesus—these men had no knowledge of Jesus' work at all!

These odd moments in the book of Acts remind us that if we want the hope of God's blessing—you can't find it anywhere. It's not bathed in a general awareness of God, or in religious intent. God has revealed the promise of salvation in one place now—Jesus Christ.

That's why Paul says, "Guys! It's here! John told you to be baptized to prepare yourself for the one who came after him—and that guy came!"

And when they heard this, they believed it, were baptized, and were filled with the Holy Spirit in a unique and vindicating way. But let this be a reminder for those who might feel frustrated and stuck that the way into God's blessing is faith in Jesus and that alone.

It might seem to you that the promise of God is like a time change in our modern world. Without us knowing, twice a year our cell phones automatically adjust the time to a new reality. But that's not what salvation is. Salvation is not automatically applied to those who at one point went to church, or who like God, or even who have heard about Jesus. To align our lives with the gospel means we must actively get up and change the clock. That action is what the Bible calls faith—and baptism symbolizes faith and repentance in the name of Jesus.

If you have seemed frustrated as if God is not able to give you his blessing of salvation—I'd want you to consider if you have believed in Jesus and repented of your sins. This isn't meant to cause you to doubt your conversion—instead Paul is making clear the certain hope of conversion. If you believe in Jesus, then you are converted, you are filled with the promise of God and you know get to live every day in the promise and power of that new life. But to do that, you must come and find your hope in him by faith and faith alone.

Faith in the gospel always gives us hope. But the gospel also gives us hope even when it seems to be rejected. That's what we see in **Acts 19:8-10**, "And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

Notice how in the face of non-believers Paul was hopeful that the gospel would help them. And now, even though the Jews are resistant and stubborn to the gospel—Paul knows that the Christians still need the gospel.

Again, forced out of the synagogue, he begins meeting in what is probably the school of a guy named Tyrannus. From what we know about culture during this time, schools and workplaces often shut down between the hours of 11 am and 4 pm to miss the hottest part of the day. But instead of taking naps, Paul taught the gospel daily, probably during the five hours no one was in the hall—and people came.

Christians came because they knew that even though they heard the gospel—they were hopeful that knowledge of God was of greater value and worth than physical rest. Dear Christian, there is always meat on the bone in God's word. Might we be as submitted to finding more hope and more help here even as we grow in the faith.

And notice how the church that feasted and fellowshiped on the gospel was lead into fruitful ministry: **Acts 19:10**, "This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

Here's our model for hopeful missions in a hopeless world. We want to gather Christians, we want to preach Christ, and we want to watch God do the work. It was through the ordinary work of the church growing and gathering together that the gospel reached all of Asia. That's why we want to send out missionaries who have a model of mission that matches biblical priorities!

That's why we as a church want to submit our lives to this helpful, humbling and hope providing gospel. Ministry is hard, but when we submit ourselves to knowing Jesus personally we find everything we need for ministry in the church and outside the church. Gospel ministry is a hopeful ministry. And we pray that our church might live in light of that.

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