

**Pastor Kyle Mercer**  
When God Says No

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Series: One  
Acts 16

**BIG IDEA – JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY, BUT THERE ARE MANY  
WAYS PEOPLE COME TO JESUS**

Did you hear that last line? "They won't know unless we go." That's why we go to the neighborhood or to the nations. That's why you go to the carpool line or the Congo. That's why, from day one here at Two Cities, we said (this was on all the stuff we handed out when we were starting this church), "We are in Winston, but we are for the world."

In fact, this is the type of church... I'm going to give you a new word today. We are a "glocal" church. We are reaching globally, but we are rooted locally. I know we talk about it a lot, but I want you to hear in that video the power of a short-term mission trip. It's a discipleship microwave for your faith.

Did you hear what Hailey said? These are my words, but she said, "I went on this trip, and it amplified and accelerated the work of God in me and through me." Guys, this is exciting. Since January, we've been able to send over 150 people on a plane somewhere in the world on one of our mission trips. Isn't that amazing? Yes, you can be excited about that.

That doesn't include the dozens and dozens (I think about 60) of people we've sent domestically on short-term mission trips, and that doesn't include the dozens we have set up for future mission trips. Listen. If you've been on a mission trip in the last year with us or are planning on going on a mission trip, stand up right now. We want to honor you. Come on. Look at that. We have some of our missionaries in the lobby. Good to see you guys.

This is all part of our ONE Initiative. Today, we're halfway through the ONE Initiative. Listen. Evangelism is a belief. Every church says, "I believe in evangelism." We're saying, "No, no. It's a value here. It's a big value." We're asking people to take one risk in one relationship to bring Christ to that relationship. Guys, it's a very exciting time because God is uniquely using this series, this initiative, and we're already beginning to hear some stories. I think today is going to help us even more as we turn to Acts 16. Before we do, let's pray.

Lord, we are grateful for a chance to see the apostle Paul. What an incredible Christian. I heard someone say recently that he may have lived the best Christian life of any human. He was faithful, and he was fruitful. His example, encapsulated in the book of Acts, has been a model, a challenge, and encouragement to Christians all over the world for 2,000 years.

So, today, as we begin to watch his second missionary journey, and we watch him grab some people to go with him, and we watch him head into Macedonia and meet three unique people who needed to hear the gospel in three unique ways, would you encourage us for that one person who's far from God and close to us? It might be our sister or our spouse. It might be our son. It might be a friend or a family member. Would you continue to do something in us as we gather so you can do something through us as we scatter? In Jesus' name, amen.

Guys, listen. Teams matter. Teammates matter. It has been said that a great player can win games, but it takes a great team to win championships. We all know the greatest basketball player of all time... Michael Jordan, of course, is who I'm talking about. He was great. He was with the Chicago Bulls. You guys all remember that.

He was winning games. The problem was he couldn't win championships until these other two guys came around. Remember them? Scotty Pippen and that guy who liked to dye his hair, Dennis Rodman. Together, the three of them were a team. Well, type to, turn to, swipe to, or scroll to Acts, chapter 16. Paul needs a new team. Paul needs some new teammates, and that's because...

Listen. This is okay. This happens between Christians. Sometimes Christians have disagreements. Sometimes Christians fight. Sometimes even the godliest people can't get along or agree. That's sad, but it's true. What happens is, at the end of chapter 15, Paul and Barnabas... Paul and Barney. Remember? They were best friends. They have this big fight. You can read about it later.

Basically, they fight about John Mark. John Mark was this young guy they brought around. Paul was like, "We have to go on a second missionary journey. It has been five years. This missionary journey, we're going to go farther. It's going to take

longer, so we're not bringing John Mark." Barnabas was like, "Come on, man. I think he has changed. I think God could use him."

See, Paul was thinking, "What can John Mark do for God's work?" and Barnabas was thinking, "Well, what could God's work do for John?" That's always the tension. Here's what happens. Barney takes John Mark, and they head somewhere else to reach another people. So, actually, God even uses people's disagreements and divisions to further the message. That's just how God can work.

Paul needs a new teammate, a guy named Silas. We'll meet him in a little bit. But Silas is more like a brother, and Paul liked to have brothers and sons in the faith. Silas kind of replaces Barnabas, but he's looking for someone to replace John Mark. Here. You'll meet him. You've heard of him before, if you know your Bible.

Chapter 16, verse 1: "**Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra.**" In chapter 14... (We didn't get to read that. Sorry. That's not how I normally like to do things. We had to skip over that.) Paul goes to Lystra, and first he's idolized, and then he's demonized. Everybody loves him, and then everybody hates him. That's how life works sometimes.

He starts this church, and you go, "I don't know how this church is going to go." He has to leave because there's such terrible persecution. It has been, we guess, about five years. So, he comes back. He's like, "What has happened to Lystra?" There were a couple of people, and look at what happened.

**"A disciple..."** Remember? They weren't really called *Christians*; they were called *disciples*. **"...was there, named Timothy..."** Then we get a brief description of him. **"...the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek."** So, basically, his mom is a messianic Jew. Actually, if you read 2 Timothy, you find out his grandmother also was a messianic Jew, a Jew who believed in Jesus, but his dad didn't believe.

A word of encouragement. You can come from a broken family, and God can still use you. This is only for some of you, but women especially, young moms, moms who find themselves as the only spiritual leader in the home through death or divorce or just the husband being distant and uninvolved, listen.

Timothy is one of the greatest and most godly men in the entire New Testament. He'll end up being the pastor of the church at Ephesus. He'll end up being Paul's son in the faith. He'll end up getting two letters written to him that you now have in your Bible, and he comes from a broken family.

Now, Paul grabs him, and later Paul will say, "I am a spiritual father to you, and you are a spiritual son." That's interesting, because Paul talks a lot about discipleship, but when he gets personal... Like, he'll say, "Hey, we made a lot of disciples" or "We were in this city, and they made a lot of disciples." But when he talks about his own process of discipling someone, he says something like, "I became like a father to him, and he became like a son to me."

The problem with discipleship for many of us, maybe most of us, is we tend to think of discipleship in terms of time and place, not relationship and responsibility. Think about your Community Group. I hope, if you're a part of our church, you're in one of those. The wrong way to think about Community Group is "Oh, yeah. My Community Group meets Tuesdays from 7:00 to 9:00." It's like, "Wrong." Maybe that's an initial way, a "101" way, to think about your group.

You're thinking in terms of time and place. "Oh, we meet for two hours three out of four weeks of the month," or something like that. The better way to say it is, actually, "I am in relationship with these people, and I am uniquely spiritually responsible for these people." It would be great if we could create a church here where everybody is walking around going, "Where are my spiritual sons, and where are my spiritual daughters?"

Okay. We get a little bit more about Timothy here. Look at verse 2. ***"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..."*** I think it's fair to say Timothy could have been on Launch Team 3.0. He's all in...time, talent, treasure, circumcision...all four. ***"...because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek."***

Imagine you're Timothy, and the great Paul comes to you and goes, "Hey, listen. I choose you." All right. That's pretty cool. "You have a great mom, and I've heard great things. We're going to travel the known world, and we're going to plant churches. We're going to meet new people." Timothy is like, "I love to travel. This is great. I'm a new Christian, but I'd love to learn from you."

"One other thing, Timothy. There's a little surgery we're going to have to perform." Now, this is important. You wonder, because circumcision comes up a lot. Obviously, it's a very sensitive subject to talk about, but it's a very important subject because, in Acts 15, they have this big meeting. It's called the *Jerusalem Council*.

The apostles come together, and they're like, "Listen, guys. According to the Holy Spirit, you do not need to be circumcised to be a Christian." You've never asked this question, but the question they asked back then was, "Does somebody need to

become a Jew to become a Christian?" They said, "No." Here's what they said: "Being circumcised has zero to do with your salvation."

So then why is Timothy circumcised? It's not for salvation; it's for more effective service. Here's a principle: God will often call you to sacrifice, give up, or do something uncomfortable in order to make the gospel go farther, faster. See, here's what Paul knew. We've said this from day one here. The gospel (that's the main message of Christianity) is offensive; therefore, nothing else should be.

Guys, the message is offensive enough. "You're a sinner justly condemned under the wrath of God. You are such a horrible sinner that the only thing God could do was send his only Son to die in your place for your sins. That's how horrible your sin is. And if you don't repent, you will spend eternity underneath the wrath of God in conscious eternal torment that is called *hell*." It's like, "Well, that was clear." That's a very offensive message.

So, Paul is like, "Look. The message is offensive enough. We don't need anything else to be offensive." See, what was going to happen with Timothy was they were going to go... Here's what Paul does everywhere he goes. Paul would be the easiest person to kidnap because he does the same thing everywhere he goes.

In every city Paul goes to, he first goes to the synagogue and looks for Jewish contacts. He preaches the gospel in the synagogue before he goes to the market square. What he knows is "If we go into all of these cities and Timothy isn't circumcised, it's going to be a distraction. It's going to be confusing. It's going to create barriers. There's going to be friction." Timothy is godly. He says, "Okay. Fine. I'll do it."

Verse 4: "***As they went on their way through the cities...***" Now the team is three. It's Silas, Timothy, and Paul. "***...they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.***" So, they tell all of the churches what was decided in Acts 15.

Here's the key. This is important. This is the type of church we aspire to be, and I think, by God's grace, we are. Verse 5: "***So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.***" "Strengthened in the faith" is depth; "increased in numbers daily" is width. We would like to be a deep and wide church.

We care about this so much we've named two different series at two different times in the life of our church *Deep and Wide*. Let me say it another way. We don't want to be an either/or church; we want to be a both/and church. We think you can reach a lot of new people for Jesus and still take deeper the people you already have here.

Sometimes you'll meet deep churches. "We will be in the book of Galatians for the next 17 years." Wide churches... "We will do the exact same four series...one on finances, one on family, one on habits, and one on new you. We will rinse, repeat, and reuse those four series, and we will see a lot of baptisms." But you meet the people in their church years from now, and they don't know much Bible, and they haven't repented of much sin. So, we want to be a deep and wide church, a both/and, not an either/or church.

So, this is the summary so far. Now it's time for Paul to go on mission. Look at verse 6. **"And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia..."** This is interesting. A good Bible reader should be a confused Bible reader. **"...having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia."**

By the way, Paul doesn't get a direct word this time. "Hey, I want you to go to these people." So, he's like, "Hey, listen. There are a lot of people who haven't heard about Jesus, so I'm going to just go. Here are my new teammates, and we're going to go on this new trip." He's trying to figure out where God is going to lead him.

That's what you're trying to do in *your* life. You're trying to figure out how God is going to lead you. In fact, the number-one question people ask is some version of "What's wrong with the world? Why am I suffering? Why did Grandma die? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there evil in the world?" That's all the same question. It's what's called *theodicy*. How do you defend God in the midst of a world with so much evil and suffering?

That's the number-one question people ask, but they normally only ask that when something bad is happening to them or someone they love. Fair enough. The most common daily asked question by people is "What does God want me to do?" Like, "Do I marry him or do I not? Do I take this job or do I not? Do we have another kid or do we not? Do we move? Do we buy the new home? Do we start the business?" You have all of these questions.

Here's what I'm encouraged by. The apostle Paul is led not in as clear-cut of a way as we might think an apostle would be led. Don't you think God would just be like, "Uh, go over here, exactly here"? No. That's not what happens. The first thing he says is God leads him through saying no. What happens to *you*, by the way, when God says no to you?

Here's what happens. God leads them and says, "No." Here's what's interesting about Paul. Paul was so eager to preach the gospel to every person that the Holy Spirit occasionally had to tell him, "No, not this person." We're the exact opposite. The Holy Spirit is like, "Could you share the gospel with one person this year? You choose."

Paul is like, "I'm so eager to share the gospel that I just go everywhere, and then God closes a door." We don't even know how the Holy Spirit forbade them, but it happens twice. Look here. You're like, "Okay. So, Paul takes a 'no,' and he goes in a different direction. That's fine."

***"And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them."*** God can often lead people by saying no. We're always looking, like, "Where is God saying yes?" First of all, where is God saying no? We all know this in our lives. We all can look back on our lives, and we can see areas where God told us no, and we're grateful now.

Do you remember that girl you thought you wanted to date in high school? Now you've seen her on Facebook, and you see how she's living, and you're like, "I think I dodged a bullet." If you married her, we're glad you're here. Welcome. Guys, we can never put together the math and the path of how we got to where we are. We would never have done it ourselves.

Guys, I am a pastor in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. If an angel would have appeared to me at 13 years old in the middle of the night and said, "You're going to be a pastor in Winston-Salem," I would have said, "First of all, I'm Catholic. Second of all, where's Winston-Salem?" I had no idea the math or the path God would lead me on. We can never see it through the windshield; we only see it through the rearview mirror.

Just to encourage you, we're all going to be... I don't know when this happens. Maybe it happens in your 20s or your 30s or your 40s or your 50s. I don't know. At some point (it's different for all of us), you end up realizing that you're not in control and you're not exactly where you thought you'd be. Sometimes you're surprised. You're like, "This is better than I thought." Other times you're disappointed.

Here's the encouraging thing. Whenever God says no, Paul is like, "All right. That's where the Lord doesn't want me to go." Sometimes you're not the right person and this isn't the right time for you to reach these people. By the way, they end up getting to all of these areas where they go around.

It says they didn't go to Asia. Don't think China. This is Asia Minor under the Roman understanding of Asia. Guess what? They get there. In fact, Timothy ends up being the pastor of the biggest city in that area, Ephesus. So, sometimes God just says, "No" or sometimes he says, "Not now."

Then he gets a vision. Look here. Verse 8: ***"So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas."*** Now, finally, he gets a little more clarity. God's guiding comes gradually. ***"And a vision appeared to Paul in the night..."*** We don't know exactly how this happened.

Is he sleeping? What is happening? **"...a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'"**

I don't know if you're going to get a vision, but hopefully, there will be a time in your life where you get... Maybe you don't get a vision like *this* or a vision in the middle of the night, but you get a vision of where God can use you, and it normally sounds something like this: "Come over here and help me."

One man said (and I think it's true) the call to help another person speaks to the deepest part of you. You can think about it. If somebody you really love, somebody you really care about, says "Dad" or "Friend..." They say, "Listen, man. I'm struggling with something. I need help. Would you help me?" Unless you have a massively hard heart, you're going to be like, "I want to do something."

By the way, notice what Paul says when he hears this vision. Verse 10: **"And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."** Paul understands how people need to be helped. They need the gospel.

He doesn't say, "Come over here and help us build houses for Habitat for Humanity." We're not against that. He doesn't say, "Come over here. There are a lot of poor people who need food." We're not against helping. Paul cared for the least and the last and the leftovers. But the greatest way you can help somebody is by bringing them the gospel.

Look at verse 10. Maybe this will happen in *your* life. I want to read it again. **"And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we..."** By the way, this is the first time we have a *we* in the book of Acts. Why do we have a *we*? Because Luke is now with them. Luke is the author of Acts and the author of Luke.

It's interesting. Tradition tells us that Paul met Luke at Troas. So now Paul is going to start to go, "Oh, that's interesting. Maybe the reason God had us *go here and here and here* is because we'd pick up Luke." What was Luke's job? A physician. Paul is going to get beat up a lot. He's going to get stoned. He's going to be in prison. He's going to get beaten with rods. God is like, "All right. You're going to need a personal physician."

The second thing is Luke writes more of the New Testament than anybody else in number of words. If you add Luke and Acts together, it's more than all of Paul's letters combined. We don't have the book of Luke and the book of Acts, humanly speaking, if Paul doesn't get a couple of "noes," go around, and pick up Luke, and Paul doesn't get a personal doctor.



This is why I want to show you the rest of this. Verse 10 again: **"...immediately we..."** Now it's a team of four. He has four. It's him, Silas, Timothy, and Luke. **"...we sought to go on into Macedonia..."** So, immediate obedience. **"...concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."**

*Concluding* is the Greek word that literally means putting the pieces of the puzzle together. Isn't that beautiful? "Oh, *that's* why you said no here, *that's* why you said no here, *that's* why we ended up in Troas, and *that's* why I got the vision." For some of you, what's going to happen in your life (and it doesn't just happen one time)...

You wake up one day and go, "I've got it. I put all of the pieces together. That's why I struggled with that sin for so long. That's why our marriage was in this condition. That's why I wanted a job in Charlotte, but instead I'm in Winston-Salem." You're able to put the pieces together.

Well, from here, they head to Macedonia, and for the rest of our time, they're going to meet three unique individuals. I'm going to tell you where we're going before we go there. They're going to meet Lydia, they're going to meet a slave girl, and they're going to meet a Philippian jailer. They could not be any more different. God is going to start this Philippian church with these three different people.

For the rest of our time together, here's the big idea: *Jesus is the only way, but there are many ways people come to Jesus.* Christians believe both of these. Jesus is the only way, but there are many ways people come to Jesus. What do we mean "Jesus is the only way"? It's the teaching of the exclusivity of Christ. The door to heaven is as narrow as the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

The exclusivity of Christ isn't popular today, particularly. Back in the day, every world religion on earth had made exclusive claims. Why is the exclusivity of Christ so difficult for people in modern America? Because we have so much choice and so many options. Just go to Walmart and try to buy toothpaste. You're like, "Okay. Colgate. What size? What flavor? What benefits will it have? Okay. Whiten and anti-cavity." We have so many options.

How many of you have sat down with your husband or wife at 8:00 and said, "Let's try to find a show to watch"? Two hours later, you're like, "That's it! We can't start a show at 10:00." There were ten thousand options for your shows. We live in a time where there is so much choice. When you tell people there's only one way to heaven, it's offensive...until you realize how big the problem is. The problem is I'm a sinner justly condemned before God, and I need someone's perfection (Jesus Christ), and I need someone to pay the punishment for me on the cross.

For me, I always viewed there being only one way to God the same way as if you're in a burning building. If you're in a burning building, and the whole building is collapsing, and you get to the bottom of the building and see one door, you don't stand there and go, "Why are there not three doors in this place?" Right? You go, "I'm so grateful there's one door."

Then this is really important. Jesus is the only way, but there are many ways people come to Jesus. I don't have time in this room, but if we said, "Okay. Now you. Now you. Now you," you'd be like, "Well, for me, it was through Christian college." Someone else would say, "Actually, I had a godly mom."

Someone else would say, "Personal evangelism of a friend." Someone else would say, "Someone gave me a book I was reading." Someone else would say, "I went to this retreat." Someone else would say, "My coworker." Okay. Jesus is the only way, but there are many ways to Jesus.

I want to give you the three main ways we see today. Lydia is going to be a wealthy woman who comes to Christ through biblical explanation. The slave girl is going to be enslaved and addicted. She's a young girl. She's oppressed. She's in bondage. She comes to Christ through a spiritual experience.

So, sometimes you need a biblical explanation. Sometimes you need a powerful spiritual experience. Then we're going to meet the Philippian jailer. He's just a blue-collar, hardworking guy. He doesn't have time to read a book. Are you kidding me? What does he need? He needs a godly example.

So, as we see these stories, I hope you'll be encouraged, because as you think about your one or you think about the people in your life who are far from God and close to you, some of them need an explanation, some of them need a powerful spiritual experience, and still others need to just see your godly example. Let's get started. I'll show you all of these.

## 01 REACHING THE LYDIAS

Verse 11: ***"So, setting sail from Troas..."*** There's a lot of geography going on here. ***"...we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi..."*** He's like, "All right. If you're calling me to Macedonia, I'm going to the heart of the city."

***"...which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer..."*** Just notice. It's

interesting, but I think helpful for us. Now we're trying to bring this down for all of us. The rest of this chapter is about how we reach our "ones," the people far from God and close to us.

The first thing is Paul knew where he was called, but he didn't know to whom he was called, when he was called, or how the call was going to work out. So, he gets to Macedonia, and if you're reading, you're like, "Well, Paul, you got the vision. Go. What do you mean you're hanging out in the city for some days? What do you mean you're walking around on the Sabbath, looking for a place to pray?"

I think the principle is a lot of times in your life, you're going to realize, "Okay. God put me in this neighborhood, and I know God would like me to reach my neighbors," but then you go, "But I don't know how this unfolds. I don't know which neighbors are going to respond. I don't know when.

Is this going to happen tomorrow? Am I going to meet my neighbor and we're going to have a great conversation? How long of a game are we playing here? Is this going to take weeks or months or years? I don't know who. I don't know when. I don't know how. I just know where God has called me."

It says they went to the place of prayer. Now, that's interesting. It tells us something about the city of Philippi. It tells us there are very few Jews here. How do we know that? Well, because, like I told you, Paul always went to the synagogue. Here, there's not a synagogue. How do we know that? Because there's a place of prayer. They put places of prayer places where there were no synagogues.

What did you need to start a synagogue? Just 10 Jewish men who came together and said, "We want a rabbi." So, it partly tells you the spiritual condition of the city of Philippi that they couldn't find 10 godly Jewish men who came together and said, "We want to start a synagogue here."

So, they go down to the riverside to the place of prayer, because everything starts with prayer. **"...and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together."** I wonder if Paul is a little confused. "All right, Lord. You gave me a vision of a Macedonian man, and all I see are women. Where am I? What's going on here?"

But God is gracious. Verse 14: **"One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods..."** She owned "Purplegoods.com." She was a very successful woman. **"...who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul."**

The first lady we meet is Lydia. She is wealthy. How do we know she's wealthy? Well, she's a seller of purple goods from Thyatira. Back then, like today... Part of the way

we nod our status is how we dress. Today, it's a little more sophisticated. It's the logos. It's the branding. Back then, it was the colors. To wear purple was... I mean, that's the color of royalty.

You had to be royal or you had to be rich to afford that color. So, if you're selling that color to other people, you are very wealthy. Lydia is also into fashion. You're like, "Explain this to me, Kyle." Okay. If this was today, she'd be wearing lululemon and bringing her Stanley cup to the prayer meeting. You're like, "I get it. I get it." Yeah, that's who she is.

In verse 13, it says Paul and Silas and the other men spoke the word of God to them. That's very interesting, because it's not the word to *preach*, which is what I'm doing right now. It's not the word to *get up and herald a message*. It's the language of conversation. This is interesting. I think this is really helpful for us.

The way most people are going to come to Christ is like Lydia. They're going to come to Christ through spiritual conversations with others. But here's what I bet is true for you, because I've heard enough of your stories for the last month now about trying to reach your one. Here's what I hear a lot of people say. They say something like this. In fact, this happened last week.

A lady said, "My son lives out of town. He called me. It's kind of crazy. I see God working. He came into town for just a couple of days. I hadn't seen him in months. He's my one." I was like, "Well, how did it go?" She went, "Not good." Isn't that so honest? She said, "He was here for several days. We just never really had any good conversations." That's how it is.

Here's the problem. We are trying to go from casual conversations to spiritual conversations, and sometimes it's too big of a jump. Here's the conversation we have. We like to talk about sports. Right? "Oh, how's Wake Forest doing?" That's easy. You could talk to anybody about that. Or we love to talk about the weather. How many of you have had conversations recently about the weather? "Oh, I love this time in North Carolina."

You've even made the joke. "You don't like the weather in North Carolina? Just wait five minutes." Right? It's changing all the time. You just love it. You wouldn't want to be anywhere else. You're telling people how you wear a sweatshirt in the morning and a tee shirt in the afternoon and a coat at night, and you love it.

It's very hard, though, to go from sports to Scripture, from weather to the Word of God. We're missing a step. Let me give you the step. Someone else taught me this, and it's not easy. You have to go from casual to meaningful to spiritual. It's very hard to have meaningful conversations, if we could just be honest, because we're kind of

shallow. You can't get to Christ from talking about *The Office*. You're like, "Well, Michael Scott is kind of like the Holy Spirit." You're like, "It's not going to work."

But if you can start talking to somebody about marriage and what it's really like, if you can start talking about things that men especially don't know how to talk about...your feelings, your fears, your genuine opinions, how your kids are doing, a health crisis... I genuinely believe that if we can figure out how to have more meaningful conversations, from meaningful to spiritual is just a short step.

The second thing I'll say about conversations that I think is very helpful is you could argue that what Paul is doing right now is having a one-to-one Bible-reading discussion with Lydia. I mean, this would be an investigative Bible study. So, here's what's happening. Paul is going to an environment where there's spiritual interest (that's Lydia), and he's having a conversation with her...I'm guessing probably about Jesus from the Old Testament.

I think there's nothing more powerful than saying to somebody... And this isn't for everybody. I'm just trying to give us proverbial tools in our tool belt. Some of you may be in a relationship with somebody who's far from God and close to you, and this may be the right next question: "Would you read the Bible with me?"

Now, at my time at Duke (I did college ministry there for four years), I found that the most helpful way to see the gospel go forward in another person's life was not to continually try to have spiritual conversations with them. What normally happens is the first conversation goes well, and I'm like, "All right. That's it. Let's get coffee again." Like, "All right. Evolution versus creation."

"Eh, I don't really want to talk about that."

"All right. I want to hear all about Christians in politics."

"Eh, I don't really want to talk about that."

But when I said, "Hey, what if we got together just once a week and read one chapter of Mark..." I would joke with them. "I'm not going to prepare beforehand. I'm going to have zero agenda when I come to this." Actually, what we're going to do when we get together is what's called the *Swedish method*. This girl made this up on a college campus in Sweden. It's just *light bulb, question mark, arrow*.

I like that because it doesn't sound academic. It doesn't sound religious. It doesn't sound intimidating. You could do this with your son. "Hey, son, I know you live across the country. What if we met on the phone once a month or once a week and read

Mark?" *Light bulb* is just "What jumps out at you?" *Question mark* is "What questions do you have?" *Arrow* is "Do you think you should do anything about this?"

What I found is when you try to have all of these spiritual conversations, it goes in every direction, but when you put the Word at the center, especially if you can look at the Gospels and the person and work of Jesus Christ, it can begin to go somewhere. So, the first thing we see is Lydia comes to Christ through a rational explanation of the Scriptures because she's already spiritually interested.

What I believe is going to happen in our new building is a lot of people will show up, but the most likely person to show up is going to be Lydia. It's the Lydias in our city who have some spiritual sensitivity. Maybe they're spiritually seeking, and they need somebody to have a genuine gospel conversation with them.

## 02 REACHING THE SLAVE GIRL

Okay. So, the first person is Lydia. The second person is the slave girl, but let's see how it ends first with Lydia. Here we go. ***"And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.'"*** She was a good businesswoman. ***"And she prevailed upon us."*** In other words, she wouldn't take no for an answer.

By the way, this is interesting. Her open heart led her to being a Christian. Her open home led there to being a church. Tradition tells us the church at Philippi met in Lydia's home. So, that's great. They're very excited. She gives them a Stanley cup as they leave.

Verse 16: ***"As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination..."*** She's influenced or demon-possessed or something. ***"...and brought her owners..."*** Okay. She's a slave. ***"...much gain by fortune-telling."*** She is the exact opposite of Lydia. I mean, they're both women, but that's about it.

Lydia is wealthy, successful, older, and has a family. The slave girl is single, young, demon-possessed, not spiritually interested, and literally enslaved to men. I'm oversimplifying and over-stereotyping, I know, but Lydia would represent most people in Winston-Salem who are over 50.

They've been to church. They've been churched. They might show up in a church. They may know some Bible. They need some help. The slave girl represents anybody under 50. What does the slave girl represent? All of the people (and there are many of them today, especially young people) who are completely addicted.

The biblical word for *addiction* is to be enslaved. They're addicted to pornography. They're addicted to drugs and alcohol. They're addicted to the approval of other people. They're anxious, stressed, depressed, and need to be set free. I'll show you what happens here.

Imagine this. Paul is trying to do ministry. Verse 17: ***"She followed Paul and us, crying out, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.'"*** Now, is she saying anything wrong? No. Why? Because she's possessed by a demon, and the demons are always the only people who know who Jesus is.

Do you remember this? In the Gospels, his family thinks he's crazy, and the disciples don't know who he is. Then the demons show up and are like, "You're the Son of God!" They're the only ones who know who he is. I love this. This will hopefully encourage a few of you. Look at verse 18. ***"And this she kept doing for many days."***

I guess at first Paul kind of put up with it, but then... I love this. ***"Paul, having become greatly annoyed..."*** You can be annoyed for Jesus. Amen. You're like, "Yes!" You can be annoyed or bothered for Jesus. Here's what that means. On a serious note, it means we need to be more bothered and more annoyed by the spiritual condition of the people around us. We really do. We need to be bothered.

It's like, "Okay. What you do every night is watch Netflix and drink until you fall asleep." That sounds like bondage. "You are anxious. You are stressed. You are depressed. You're enslaved not to owners; you're enslaved to the American dream, and you're looking forward to your extra week of vacation." That's bondage.

What's interesting is Paul, if you watch carefully, doesn't even get mad at her. That's not the enemy. The enemy is Satan, the satanic influences. So, Paul gets greatly annoyed for Jesus. Look at what he does. ***"...turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour."***

Now, we're not explicitly told that she became a Christian, but tradition tells us that she did. These are three stories in a row of people coming to Christ. With the other two it says it explicitly, so we believe this young lady comes to Christ and joins the church as well, but she does not come to Christ (I said this earlier, but just to make it super clear) through an explanation. In fact, she already had all of the right answers. She needed a powerful experience with the presence of God.

For some of you, this is where your one is. For some of you, this is where *you* are. You know all of the answers. You went to VBS. You went to student ministry. You did your college ministry thing. You know all of the right answers. You know how to say your

little prayer at dinner. You know how to show up at church and go to group, but you've never had a powerful experience with God.

I knew a guy. He's a pastor now. He said he had a really rebellious season in his life, but he knew all of the answers. His dad was a really godly man. He said, "My dad told me this later." He said, "I didn't know this." He said, "When I'd go to school, my dad would go into my room and pray over my bed. He would say, 'God, haunt John in his dreams.'" He said, "I had no idea."

He said, "Then what he would do... He was a little charismatic. He would take some oil and throw oil on my clothes and say, 'Lord, clothe him in the righteousness of Christ. Take off the old man and put on the new man.'" Here's the thing. Some people just need a powerful experience with God, and we need to pray for it.

I'm not going to make you do this right now, but if I asked, "So, how many of you came to Christ at a retreat? How many of you came to Christ at a camp or a conference...?" God uses different things through different seasons. The Jesus Movement... Do you know at the height of the Jesus Movement they were baptizing 1,000 people a month? All of these hippies out in California.

They had this powerful experience with the gospel through Chuck Smith and the Calvary Chapel movement. We're not saying we're the greatest thing ever. What we're trying to do here on the weekends... When we get to that new building... Why are we building that building? Because we actually believe there is something powerful that happens when the church gathers.

It's not just about getting everyone to church, but when the people of God gather on purpose for a purpose, when they worship, when there are baptisms, when there are testimonies, when there's preaching, when there's celebration, when there's confession, God uniquely moves.

Fortunately, this is good for the slave girl. It's not good for her owners. They get mad. This isn't going to go well for Paul.

***"But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, 'These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.'"***

So, a couple of people get mad, and then look at what happens here. This is what always happens. This is what happens today. ***"The crowd joined in attacking***



**them...**" Do you know the Greek word for *crowd*? *Twitter*. It's exactly what happens today. This is the mob mentality. This is the cancel culture. It's very old.

### 03 REACHING THE PHILIPPIAN JAILER

**"...and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods."** So, Paul is glad he has Luke with him. **"And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison..."** Then we meet the third guy who's going to come to Christ. **"...ordering the jailer to keep them safely."** So, they give them over to the jailer. **"Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks."**

Now, there were three levels to a prison back then. There was the outer prison. You did something little... You know, "Stay on the outside. It's a form of house arrest. Get your sun. Walk around. You're fine, but you're in prison." Then there was the normal prison. Like, "You're in prison. You did something pretty bad, and we're going to lock you up. You're behind bars."

Then there was the inner prison. The inner prison was under the regular prison, and it's where all the sewage and waste went. Yikes. And it was pitch black. The jailer is the one who decides to put them in the worst prison. It's going to be very interesting because Paul is going to lead this guy to Christ. Paul is the kind of guy who could even lead his enemies to Christ.

He fastens them in stocks. What is that? It's these chains they would put around your feet and ankles, and they would tie you to the wall. They'd get you in a really awkward, uncomfortable position to sit in, and then they would chain you there tightly. So, if I, and I think if you, were in this situation, we would be like, "God, I get the whole leading me to Lydia thing. That was great.

That was really cool because she has a big house and she's very generous, and that was really fun. And I understand the slave girl thing, because I love when people are delivered, set free, and healed. Thank God for that. But, like, are you sure you led us to...? I haven't even seen a man yet in Macedonia who's coming to Christ. Are you sure this is where you want to lead me?"

But look at what they're doing. Verse 25: **"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them..."** I know, if you and I were in prison, the kinds of prayers we'd be praying. Let's just be honest. You know, all of the psalms from the Old Testament that say, "God, destroy

our enemies and break all of their teeth," and all that kind of stuff... That's your memory verse in prison.

We don't get to know what Paul is praying, but he's singing something, and that's very interesting. Maybe a principle is... *What do you do when you suffer?* There are a lot of things you do when you suffer, but one of the things you do when you suffer is sing. The reason we sing each week... I mean, sometimes you come in here and sing the songs, and when you sing all of the songs, you go, "I believe this. I feel this. I love this. I know this. I live this."

A lot of times, you're going to come in and go, "I'm singing these songs because this is what I say I believe, but I don't really believe this right now. I need to sing it with melody to remind myself this is what I believe." This is one of the reasons, by the way (Pastor Donovan is great with this), we always try to sing a lot of different songs, and not just happy songs but songs that sad Christians can sing.

This is why. In a church our size, somebody this week lost their job, and somebody this week got promoted. Somebody got engaged, and someone got cancer. That's every week. So, when we gather together, we need songs that everyone can sing. Well, they start singing. It says the prisoners are watching. You never know who's watching you worship. You never know how powerful your praise is. Their praise is powerful. Look at what happens. Verse 26:

***"...and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped."***

Had the prisoners escaped, Rome was going to kill him, so in a time of absolute despair, this man considers and almost takes his own life. This is a suicide attempt. Do you know the number-one cause of death among 20-year-olds to 45-year-olds, especially men? Suicide.

Do you know that in the last seven years...? We're still a young church. We're 7 years old as a church. We have had two people take their own lives in our church, one man and one woman, both very young with very bright futures ahead. None of us saw either of them going in this direction.

We see this man about to commit suicide. I want you to see what Paul says, because this is what the church should say to somebody who's about to commit suicide. ***"But Paul cried with a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.'"*** If you are

here today (in a room this size, there has to be some of you), and you're struggling with some suicidal thoughts...

Here's how you know you're there. If you've thought about taking your own life, and you've not only thought about taking your own life but you've thought about how you would do it, that's the definition of someone who's suicidal. Here's what we want to say. Do you see what he said there? Here's what we want to say to you: "Do not harm yourself. We're here."

That's what the church says. "Hey, don't harm yourself. I know you're depressed." Listen. If you don't know what it feels like to be depressed, here's what it feels like to be depressed. Some of you have never felt depressed. When you feel depressed, it feels like everybody in your family died yesterday, and you feel like that every day. It's very, very painful.

So, other people need to come around and say, "Listen. Do not harm yourself. We're here." If that's where you are, we can handle the fine china of your life. If you'd give us the fine china of your life, we're going to walk with you and get you the help, hope, and healing you need.

Paul, with a loud voice, screams out, "Don't harm yourself! We're here!" Look at the response. Verse 29: **"And the jailer called for lights..."** Because they were in the inner prison. It was super dark. **"...and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'"**

Now, if God is going to use you in the life of other people, you don't need to know apologetics (that's defending the faith); you don't need to be caught up in news and events and cultural analysis, although that can all be helpful; and you don't need to know every obscure passage in the Bible and what it means, but you have to be able to answer this question.

It's the same question of, "How do I become a Christian?" "How do I be saved? How do I be saved from the wrath of God to come?" Paul, thankfully, has an answer. Look. He's very clear. Remember, he asked, "How do I be saved?" "And they said, 'Go to church.'" It doesn't say that. I was just checking. It doesn't say that.

**"And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.'" Belief is active trust in the accomplished work of Christ. You look at what Jesus did in his sinless life, in his substitutionary death, and his victorious resurrection over Satan, sin, and death, and you say, "I believe."**

By the way, you don't try to believe. Some of you are trying to believe. You just believe. I transfer trust from myself to Jesus, and I believe that, somehow, what Jesus did 2,000 years ago on the cross counted for me. Now, is there repentance? Yes. We see that in him. The very fact that he's turning and saying, "What do I need to do? I'm in the wrong." Look at how this ends. This is beautiful.

Verse 32: ***"And they spoke the word of the Lord to him..."*** So they taught him more. ***"...and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God."***

How does the blue-collar jailer come to Christ? Not through a deep explanation, though he'll get an explanation. Not even through an experience, although the earthquake was an experience. What led him to Christ was the godly example of these men. Think about it.

"Well, man, I put you in chains, and you sing hymns and pray to God. In the darkest hour of my life, you cried out and helped me, and when you could have left..." Let's all admit it. If the earthquake happened and all of the chains went off of us and the doors opened, we're out. What kept Paul in prison was not the chains but his love for the jailer. He has this powerful experience.

Let me encourage you. You have no idea how powerful your godly example is in another person's life. The darker the world gets, the brighter the light shines. You have no idea what a powerful example a godly marriage or a good family is. Let me just tell you, because I know how this works. You don't know how much your godly example is meaning or mattering until someone's life falls apart, because they don't tell you until then.

They come to you when their marriage is in shambles, and they say, "I never told you this, but I've really admired you and your husband's marriage. We're not doing well right now. Could you help us?" It's like, "Great. My example has led to an opportunity for me to explain."

Guys, we said at the beginning that Jesus is the only way, but there are many ways to Jesus. Maybe another way to say this... Why do we gather, and why are we doing a whole initiative as a church? Because it takes all types of Christians to reach all types of people. As you think about your one, we're going to end by praying that God would do those three things.

The truth is God does all three of those things in people's lives to bring them to Christ. For some people, I'm going to pray that God would give you the courage this

week to have a spiritual conversation and that God would give you the wisdom to know how to take conversation from being casual to meaningful to spiritual.

For others, at the end we're going to pray for whoever your one is, that one person who's far from God and close to you... We're going to pray for a powerful spiritual experience in their life, that the power and presence of God moves in their life in a mighty way. For others of us, we're going to pray that God would help us, in the midst of raising our own families, in the midst of all of our own sin and suffering, to be a godly example for others. Let's pray.

Lord, we want to take a moment right now. We know, Jesus, you are the only way. That's the confession of the church. Jesus, you said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." The apostles said in Acts 4:12, "There is only one name under heaven by which a person can be saved," and that's the name of Jesus Christ.

We also know there are many ways, Lord, and we're really asking. A lot of parents feel like, "Well, I've done my part," and they're still trying, Lord. They're like, "Would you bring another person into my son or daughter's life?" Lord, I pray all three of those things, that you would help us to be able to really explain the gospel to people. Would you give us a gospel fluency, the ability to talk about Jesus and the cross and his life, death, and teaching in a normal, natural way?

Would you teach us how not to just have casual conversations but to have meaningful and spiritual conversations? Would you teach us how to do that on a Zoom call or on a phone call or over coffee or over dinner, Lord? Would it start in our homes? Lord, we pray for powerful spiritual experiences where people go from death to life, where people say, "Truly God is in this place," where addictions are broken and marriages are reconciled and people are set free.

Lord, would you let us be godly examples? We have no idea who's watching us, and it's often not until their life falls apart that we understand how powerful of an example we are. We thank you, Jesus, that you are the Word of God who came and explained to us. Lord, we thank you that you moved in power with miracles and healings that changed people's lives, and we thank you for your godly example. We pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.