

8 Ways To Strengthen Our Church (Part 1) – Acts 15:36-16:40

Acts 15.

This passage records the start of Paul's second missionary journey, and his effort to strengthen the churches he planted on the first. That was his purpose.

And while it's preserved for our amazement, that we would marvel at God's work and worship him all the more, it's also written for our example.

That we might *follow* in Paul's footsteps; and strengthen the church as well.

And not just *any* church, or *the* church – that nebulous entity that means little and requires nothing – but *our* church. Right here.

8 ways to strengthen *this* body of believers; *this* family of God.

To build up what he's already established, and continues to hold dear.

8 ways. 5 this week, and 3 next. Starting in Acts 15:36. (**Outline**)

➤ [36] *And after some days* [some days in Antioch of Syria, where we left off last week] *Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are* [referring to their first missionary journey]. " [37] *Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark* [his cousin, according to Col 4:10]. [38] *But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.*

(**Map, ESV Study Bible, 2110**) Mark started out with them, and made it through Cyprus; but when they arrived in Pamphylia, he left.

Why, we don't know. But it obviously wasn't okay with Paul.

[39] *And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, [40] but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord* [affirmed that the work he was doing was God's work]. [41] *And he went through Syria and Cilicia* [here it is], strengthening the churches. (**ESV Study Bible Map, 2118**)

So began Paul's second missionary journey. This time, going by way of land through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. In Derbe, and Lystra, and Iconium.

That's the point of the entire passage. To strengthen the church.

And the first way to do so in *our* church from these verses, is to . . .

Keep disagreements in perspective (15:36-41)

Like the *sharp disagreement* between Paul and Barnabas, v39.

If we're going to strengthen the church instead of weaken it, we have to keep things like that in perspective.

The sky is not falling, the world is not ending, and the church is not closing.

That's not to say there's any disagreement right *now*; but that when there is, when the pastors, or elders, or deacons disagree about something, all is not lost.

And thank God for that, because disagreements are going to happen.

Ministry is messy. Sheep stink. Leaders fail. Judgment calls abound. Perspectives are different. Convictions vary.

All of which makes all the *agreement* more surprising than the *disagreement*.

All the unity and *like-mindedness*, more surprising than the lack thereof.

So when there's a *difference*, when there's an offense, keep it in perspective.

It doesn't mean God is has left the building. It doesn't mean his work has stopped.

And it doesn't mean he can't or won't use the respective parties anymore.

He often will. Like he did Paul and Barnabas.

Nor does the occasional disagreement or offense mean you should *leave* the church; or that the *leaders* should leave. The *best* course is to stay together.

Because our love, and grace, and unity speaks a *far* better word than our division.

Far better to the church, and far better to the world.

But when that *doesn't* happen, all is not lost. God is still on the throne, and still at work.

That's the 1st way to strengthen our church. Keep disagreements in perspective. (**Summ**)

➤ The second, is found in 16:1-5.

[Acts 16:1] *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* [it was a mixed marriage; which meant the Jews would have looked down on Timothy. But . . .]. [2] *He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium* [the believers].

[3] *Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him* [seeing potential in him for ministry, no doubt], *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.*

Which meant that he and Timothy *both* were uncircumcised; a *stumbling* block to the Jews that made it difficult for them to hear and receive the Gospel.

So they removed it. Applying the very principle we saw last week in chapter 15.

That sometimes it's necessary to sacrifice our *freedom* in Christ for the sake of the *Gospel* of Christ.

They were doers of the word, and not just hearers only.

But the greater point is this, v4:

[4] *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. [5] So the churches were strengthened in the faith* [there it is again], *and they increased in numbers daily.*

The second way to strengthen our church is to . . .

Spread the word (16:1-5)

That's what Paul and Silas did. They delivered the decisions. They spread the word of truth. And the *Gospel* truth as we'll see in a minute.

And spoke about the work God was doing to save sinners and sanctify saints.

And we should too. On all fronts.

If we're going to *strengthen* our church, we have to spread the *word* about it. And the truth of *God's* Word. And the Gospel.

Fail to do *that*, and nothing gets strengthened.

One of the reasons *church* plants grow, is that everybody spreads the word.

But as time goes by, complacency sets in and we stop. Leaving the church *weaker*.

Better to treat the *ongoing* work of God like a *new* work of God, and talk about it.

After all, *any* work of God is a new work.

So how about it? When was the last time you spoke to somebody about our church?
When was the last time you invited somebody; encouraged someone to come and see?
When was the last time you spread the word, and strengthened the church? (**Summary**)

➤ The third way comes from v6-10.

[6] And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia (**Map, 2118**), having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. [7] And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus [same as the Holy Spirit] did not allow them. [8] So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas [on the coast]. [9] And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” [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.

Before we get to the point, did you catch the pronoun use in v10?

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. That’s a change. In fact, it’s the first time in the entire book of Acts, that Luke, the author, uses “we” instead of “they.” Indicating that he’s now *with* Paul and Silas on their journey. How that happened, we don’t know. We just know that he’s there, seeing things for himself.

But the point is this: if we’re going to strengthen the *church*, our church, we have to . . .
Heed the Spirit (v6-10)

As in listen to him, and do what he says. Both.

And not just at the *beginning* of a ministry or project or initiative; but in the middle, at the end, and everywhere in between. Heed the Spirit.

Which requires two main things: sensitivity and confirmation.

If we’re going to *heed* the Spirit, we have to be *sensitive* to the Spirit.

Which comes from living *right*, instead of living *wrong*.

Live sinfully, and you’ll *de-sensitize* your heart to the Spirit.

But live righteously, and you’ll increase it.

That’s the first prerequisite for heeding the Spirit – sensitivity.

The second, is *confirmation*. Confirmation that it’s *him* you’re hearing, and not your imagination. Or your desires. Or somebody *else’s* words.

The question is, how do you know? How do you *know* it’s the Spirit?

How do you know it’s *him* you’re hearing?

4 ways. #1, it’s . . .

1. **Confirmed by others.** You know it’s the Holy Spirit, if what you’re hearing is confirmed by those around you. Those who hear and heed the Spirit themselves.
2. **Supported by the Word.** You know it’s the Spirit, if what you’re hearing is biblical; as in good, helpful, and God-glorifying.
3. **Aided by events.** You know it’s the Spirit, if what he says is aided by events. Open doors and unexpected blessings when he says go, and a lack of fruit or significant barriers when he says stop. Because God never leads where he doesn’t provide.
4. **Accompanied by peace.** You know it’s the Spirit, if what you’re hearing brings peace to your heart instead of anxiety. Unless you’re resisting him. Then you’ll be miserable.

4 ways to confirm that what you’re hearing is from the Holy Spirit.

So that, along with sensitivity, you *heed* the Spirit and *strengthen* the church, instead of dragging it down or getting in the way. (**Summary**)

➤ 4th, comes from v11-16.

[11] So [having been invited to Macedonia in a dream], *setting sail from Troas* [**Map, 2118**], we made a direct voyage to Samothrace [an island] and the following day to Neapolis [on the coast], [12] and from there to Philippi [8 miles inland], which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony [a favored status label that probably indicated some affluence; and influence]. *We remained in this city some days.*

[13] And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. [14] One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira [back in the district of Asia], a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God [not yet saved, but seeking].

[14b] The Lord opened her heart to pay *attention* to what was said by Paul. [15] And after she was baptized, and her household as well [implying that they too believed], she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us [convinced us].

The 4th way to strengthen the church is to . . .

Step out and trust God to work (v11-15)

That’s what Paul and Silas did over and over again.

When they went to Philippi in the *first* place, they stepped out. Something they *never* would have done if they didn’t trust God was in it.

And then remained there *some days* it says in v12. They hung around. Why? Because they were trusting God to work.

And then went to a *place of prayer*, trusting him to work. (13)

And *sat down*, trusting he would work. And *spoke to the women*, trusting God to work.

Over and over again they stepped out in faith and trusted God to work.

And he did. Using them to *start* the church in Philippi, and *strengthen* the church in

Philippi. Not to mention all the churches that *followed*.

Including ours as we read about it.

➤ You never know *who* God has prepared to receive the Gospel.

You never know *who* he’s prepared to receive an invitation to our church.

You never *know*, and you never will, if you don’t step out and trust him.

Like so many *families* in our church did this summer, by hosting Backyard Bible Clubs; seeing God work firsthand.

Or how about the young people in our church considering missions? Or the empty-nesters considering ministry?

Or those serving our children or youth for the first time?

If we’re going to strengthen the church like Paul and Silas, *our* church, we have to step out and trust him to work. (**Summary**)

➤ And then last, we have to lean in; from v16-18.

[16] *As we were going to the place of prayer [not the first time, but over the course of time], we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination [a demonic spirit; literally, a spirit of Python; a mythical snake that guarded the Temple of Apollo; in other words, she was possessed by a demon] and [she] brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling [the demon knew things about people].*

[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.” [18] And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, 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.*

If we’re going to strengthen our church, we need to . . .

Lean into opposition (v16-18)

Whether it’s the opposition of sinful people, the powers of darkness, or a combination – we need to lean in.

Not that what the slave girl said was false there in v17, but that it was annoying; and distracting; and confusing.

Because the Greeks referred to *Zeus* as the Most High God. And salvation to *them* meant release from the mythical powers of *fate*.

It was confusing. Which is probably why the demonic spirit was saying it.

So Paul leaned in and exercised the demon. Commanding it *in the name of Jesus*, as in, based on *his* power and *his* authority, to come out. And it did.

Just like the demons did when Jesus *himself* leaned in; and the 12 Apostles; and the 70 disciples he sent out, who *weren’t* Apostles; and Philip, who wasn’t either.

Implying, that we can do the same. That dispersing the powers of darkness is not just for apostles.

➤ When we see or sense or suspect an evil presence, whether in a person or a place, it’s entirely within our ability as followers of Jesus Christ, to command it to leave. “In the name of Jesus Christ, be gone. Get out.” It’s that simple. Because there’s *power* in the blood. Wonder-working power. In the precious blood of the Lamb. When Jesus died and rose again, his victory was secured.

Which means, when we confront the powers of darkness, we don’t have to be all dramatic about it; with candles and crosses and mantras.

Nor do we have to obsess on it, seeing everyone and everything through a *lens* of darkness.

Or worry that there’s a devil behind every bush. There’s not. Their numbers are limited. And we certainly don’t need to fear. Because greater is he who is in us [the Holy Spirit], than he who is in the world [the devil]. (1 Jn 4:4)

We do, however, have to be prayerful. In fact, sometimes I just pray out *loud*.

“Lord Jesus, reign supreme. Dispel the powers of darkness. Fill this place with *your* presence. Flood these people with *your light*.”

We don’t need to obsess, we don’t need to worry, and we don’t need to fear. The battle is the Lord’s.

But we do have to pray. And we do have to be sober-minded.

And we do have to lean into it. Not just to protect our church, but strengthen it. By removing what’s bad, and embracing what’s good. (**Summary**)

5 ways to strengthen our church.

Pray – God, give us a heart for the church, your heart; and a desire to strengthen it; and the courage to do it. Give us the faith and conviction to step out, lean in, listen up, and spread the word.