

Ministry on the Fringes

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[0 : 00] Well, again, I'd say good morning to all of you. I am excited to look at the passage this morning, which is the passage in the book of Acts.

That's where we're going to be focusing. We've been in a series looking at this book, and we've been looking at the fact that the early Christians actually in the book of Acts are referred to as the people who are turning the world upside down.

And we've been asking why that is. What was it about the early Christians that made them so revolutionary? And one of the things that was so revolutionary about the early Christians and about Christianity in general is that at the very center of our faith, Christians are called, we are compelled to relentlessly pursue and love the other.

Now, what do I mean by the other? Well, it could mean a variety of things, people of different classes, different levels of education, different race or ethnicity, people who live different lifestyles, people who believe different things, people who hold to different politics.

The other. Chances are, if you have in your mind a picture of someone that you think of as the other, that probably fits what I'm talking about. And Willie James Jennings, in his commentary on the book of Acts, says this.

[1 : 22] The deepest reality of life in the spirit depicted in the book of Acts is that the disciples of Jesus rarely, if ever, go where they would want to go or to whom they would want to go.

In other words, most of the time in the book of Acts, we see the disciples going to the people they would most prefer to avoid. The very last people they would prefer to share a conversation with or a meal with or their home with.

Yet, he says, it is precisely this prodding to be boundary crossing and border transgressing that marks the presence of the spirit of God.

Right? So, this is why the early Christians had such a massive transformative impact on Roman society. For the first time ever, you see a community made up of uneducated people right alongside educated people.

Slaves right alongside masters. Jews right alongside Gentiles. Wealthy right alongside the poor. Outcasts. People who would have traditionally been considered outcasts.

[2 : 32] Right alongside the insiders. So, you have groups of people who had historically been divided against one another, worshiping together. Sharing their possessions with one another.

And, you know, I don't think I have to tell you, when we read that, when we think about that, that's what our world needs today. That's what our society needs today. And so, we've been asking, what would it take for a church like ours to become more and more and more a community like this in Washington, D.C.?

So, this is why we're looking at the book of Acts. And we're going to see two examples of this relentless pursuit of the other in Acts chapter 8, what Dan just read. The ministry of a wonderful man named Philip.

God sends Philip to two people who are on the fringes of Jewish society. These are people on the very outer edge of society by Jewish standards.

Two men, a Samaritan man named Simon, and then an Ethiopian finance minister. So, we're going to walk through this passage and draw out some implications. Let's pray. Lord, we are here for many different reasons.

[3 : 42] But whether we know it or not, our chief hope here is that we encounter you. That as we pray, as we sing, as we worship, as we sit under your word, as we share in the Lord's Supper, that in all of these ways, our real hope and actually our deepest need is to encounter you.

So, I pray that whatever we have on our minds right now, whatever we're hoping to hear, Lord, I pray that you would speak with your voice and that we would hear what you have for us this morning.

That you would do your work through your word, as you always do. In the power of your spirit, in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen. So, first of all, let's look at Simon the Samaritan.

Now, there were a thousand years of hostility between Jews and Samaritans. So, this is no small thing. They were deeply divided by race.

The Jews considered the Samaritans to be half-breeds. And they were deeply divided by religious conflict. The Samaritans had actually set up a rival temple. So, you had the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and you had the rival Samaritan temple.

[4 : 51] So, they were deeply divided. Philip is an ethnically Jewish Christian convert. And he heads right into the heart of Samaria. Probably to the capital city of Samaria.

And right there in the heart of this kind of hostile territory, he begins to heal people and care for people and preach the gospel. Right? So, this is a radical step.

And I just want you to imagine what would that be like for you. What would be the most extreme example of the people that you would be least likely to interact with? You go there.

And there's this local Samaritan man named Simon. He's described as a magician. Kids are like, there are sorcerers in the Bible. Yes. He's described as a practitioner of magic.

Most likely, a lot like today's magicians. He had a variety of illusions that he used to convince people that he had real magic power. He was obviously very convincing.

[5 : 55] His performance was top notch. Because he had drawn a massive following of people, it says, from the least to the greatest. They all listened to Simon. They thought he had divine power.

But after Philip arrives on the scene, all of Simon's followers begin to leave. You know, Simon shows up. It's half the normal audience size. He's like, where is everybody? And they're like, well, there's this guy down the road named Philip.

And the things he's doing and the things he's saying are very compelling. And a lot of people that would normally be here, they're actually at Philip's corner. And so they all begin to listen to Philip. And Philip is preaching the good news about the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ. And it says that many of Simon's followers actually end up believing what Philip is saying, the gospel. And they get baptized.

And then it says, Simon himself gets baptized. And then Simon starts to follow Philip around wherever he goes. And we look at this, and by all appearances, it seems as though Simon has had this miraculous conversion experience.

[6 : 55] He's become a Christian. This is amazing. But then look what happens. Peter and John come down from Jerusalem. They've heard what's happening. Philip's ministry success, they come down to verify what's happening and to lay hands on people as apostles and to pray that they would receive the Holy Spirit.

This is sort of like a confirmation. And so they come down here to do this. And then Simon sees them lay hands, sees the Holy Spirit fall on these new Samaritan converts.

So Simon comes up to him after and says, that's amazing. This is really great. I could really use this in my show. How much do you want for the secret? And they say, what are you talking about? He says, yeah, I'll pay you.

How did you do the thing that you did with your hands? How much is it going to cost for me to get your secret? Because that will sell out my show if I can figure out how to do that.

And what we begin to see is the truth about Simon's motives. Simon had said the right things. He'd said the formula. Yes, I believe in Jesus. Yes, I believe he died for my sin.

[7 : 56] Yes, I believe he rose. He'd said all the right words. He had even gotten baptized. But Peter says to him, but your heart is not right before God. His real aim wasn't God.

It was power. It was power. It was power. He'd said the right words, done the right things, but his ultimate focus was his own agenda.

And he saw Christianity as yet another way to promote himself. He saw God as a means to his own ends. And, you know, there are a lot of people, you know, where I grew up in the South, it may not be as true anymore, but where I grew up, there were a lot of social benefits to converting to Christianity.

You know, if you wanted to do business, if you wanted to know the people in the community, you know, you joined the local church. And the local church is sort of where it all kind of happens. It was one of the centers of the social fabric.

You know, there could be professional benefits to being a Christian. Right? You advertise that you're a Christian, and there are a lot of people who just want to come to you for your services because you're a Christian provider. Right?

[9 : 01] Not as true anymore, but when I was growing up in the South, it was definitely true. And I think that this is often how we approach our faith. I think that we sort of approach our faith as a means to an ends.

Right? As long as believing in this stuff and coming to church, as long as that benefits me, as long as it makes me feel better, as long as it's meeting my emotional needs, my social needs, as long as it's aligning with my purposes, yeah, I'll be a part of this.

But the minute your faith calls you to do something that goes against your agenda, you say, nah, I'm not so sure.

It's a deal breaker. And that's how you know. You say, how do I know I'm a genuine believer? Well, when your faith and what you would do anyway align, it's really hard to tell.

But when your faith calls you to go in a completely different direction than you would otherwise prefer to go, talk to the very person you would least prefer to talk to. Make a sacrifice that you would think unthinkable.

[10 : 05] Then you find out really quickly whether you're in it for your ends or for God himself. And the problem is, if you only ever see God as a means to your own ends, and if you've never had your heart broken over sin, if you've never really felt a desperate need for forgiveness specifically for you, you're really never going to know what real intimacy with God feels like.

So we need to come to that place where there's a fork in the road. Here's where I want to go, and here's where God's calling me. What am I going to choose? You'll find out really quickly how similar to Simon you actually are.

So this is Simon. Now let's change gears. Right? They have this encounter with Simon. By the way, it ends, I think, well with Simon. Simon hears all this.

He doesn't deny it. He says, can you please just pray for me? And if you're in that place, I think that's a great response. I know my heart's not right before God. I know that I have my own agenda going on.

That doesn't mean that God necessarily rejects you. And I think Philip's heart is in the, I mean, Simon's heart is moving in the right direction. He says, you're right. I'm all about power. I'm all about my own name. I want to sell out my show.

[11 : 14] Please pray for me. Great response. Now let's look at the Ethiopian official. The spirit whisks Philip away.

Not sure exactly what that means. It could just mean that the spirit says, it's time to go this way. And Philip responds immediately. In ancient literature, broadly speaking, Ethiopia was considered the ends of the earth.

So if you go back to Acts chapter 1 verse 8 and Jesus says, I want the gospel to go through, you know, Jerusalem and Judea, Samaria to the ends of the earth. Well, we've arrived. If you're talking to somebody from Ethiopia, they're from the ends of the earth in the Jewish imagination.

They're on the fringe of the known world. And we don't know this man's name. I really wish we did. But here's what we know about this man. We know that he is very successful in his career, like many of you.

Very successful in his career. We know that he's a high-ranking official, probably a minister of finance. I don't know if any of you are ministers of finance. But this is basically where he is.

[12 : 19] The fact that he has a chariot means he's very wealthy, very high status. And we're also told that this man is a eunuch. And when you hear the word eunuch, you should think, that's the price he paid for success.

If you were a male commoner, one of the only ways that you could ever hope to serve in such a high-level job was to allow yourself to be castrated.

It's very important because the royal men of the court needed to know that there was nothing to worry about between you and the royal women of the court. And the best way to ensure that was to make sure that any high-level official that was serving around the women of the royal court were

castrated.

It's very common. So let's put all together what we know about this Ethiopian man. He's a man who we would today refer to as gender non-conforming.

He sexually altered his body. And he sacrificed everything for the sake of his career. Meaning he has given up the possibility of family, of children.

[13:32] Right? And yet, despite all of that sacrifice, despite him saying, probably at a very early age, I am single-mindedly focused on climbing as high as I can on this ladder. And I'll sacrifice everything to do it.

And by the way, anybody who is at this level of success, you have made massive sacrifices to get there. You don't get that high in any career, then or now, without making extraordinary sacrifices. And yet, despite that, his career has not satisfied him. Probably the religion in his own country was a religion of sun worship.

Obviously, he's not going to the temples in his own country, worshiping the sun. None of that has satisfied him. But he's heard about a god who supposedly created the sun.

And that's the god he's interested in. And he's heard enough to know that the god of the Bible is unlike any of the other gods of Ethiopia or any other nation.

[14:34] And he wants to learn more about this god. So he has gone to great lengths to obtain a personal copy of the scroll of Isaiah the prophet.

Very rare, very valuable. Again, we see how high status he is. And he has now come to the point where in his seeking, he has actually decided to risk it all on the possibility that this god, the one who made the sun, might actually be worth knowing.

And the answer to his longings. So he's decided to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which from where he was coming from was about a 500-mile journey.

It was incredibly expensive. It was incredibly dangerous. There's a good chance he wouldn't survive. This means he would have had to leave his job. He would have to leave his entire community.

Can you even imagine what his friends would say? Right? What his co-workers would say. You're going to do what? What? You're leaving everything and risking death to travel 500 miles to some other land?

[15:40] A god that we've never even heard of? You're crazy. Right? Is this a midlife crisis? What's happening here? But he's risking it all for a chance to finally meet this god.

So he travels the 500 miles. Miraculously, he makes it. He shows up. He gets out of his chariot. He's finally at the temple. Right? He sees the gate right there. All of his longings coming to the surface.

All of the questions. All of the unfulfillments. It's all right there. He's wearing it on his sleeve. Right? He's coming up, hoping and praying that behind this door, finally he will find some answers.

Finally it'll all start to make sense. He gets up to the gate. Guess what happens? He's not allowed to come in. Deuteronomy very clearly states in chapter 23 verse 1 that no eunuchs are allowed in the temple.

He's not considered whole. Right? Because he's sexually altered, he's considered unclean. So they don't let him in. Now you can imagine what that would have been like.

[16:50] Right? Can you imagine what that man would have been feeling at that very moment? Right? They say, well because you're a eunuch you can't come in. He's thinking, well that's irreversible. That's a decision that I made a long time ago and there's nothing I can do about it now.

There's no way I can change my body back. But you're telling me that because of this I'm not allowed in. And there's nothing I can do to change that fact. Right?

And I don't know about you but you know I look back and I have examples in my life of mistakes that I've made that I can't undo. Right? Regrets.

Right? Regrets. The kind of regrets that haunt you at three o'clock in the morning when you inexplicably wake up and you're just laying there in agony. And you're just going back to that thing that you did or that thing that you said.

And you can't unsay it. You can't undo it. You can't unmake those choices. And for this man who had devoted himself to God, who had made this pilgrimage to Jerusalem, none of it made any difference.

[17 : 52] None of his devotion mattered. Maybe he sat there and said, do you know how much I've put into this? Doesn't matter. You're not allowed in. He couldn't change who he was.

And what that meant, because he couldn't change his body, because he couldn't change his identity, it looked as though he would always remain an outsider, rejected by God.

This is why, guys, this is why he's reading Isaiah. Because he is looking for anything. He's on his way back. And he's looking for anything that might offer any scrap of hope.

And he comes to this passage in Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 56. Let not the eunuch say, he's like, wait, what?

Right, he comes back. Yeah, it says eunuch. Let not the eunuch say, behold, I'm a dry tree.

Meaning, I won't ever have offspring. There's no hope for my family line to continue.

[18 : 53] Let not the eunuch say, behold, I'm a dry tree. For thus says the Lord, to the eunuchs who hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.

Right, I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. Right, he had gone to the temple. He had had the door slammed in his face. But here is God saying very clearly that one day eunuchs, outcasts, people exactly like him, are not only going to be welcomed into God's family.

Not only is the door going to be thrown wide open. But once they join that family, they can never be cut off. And they're going to be given something better than sons and daughters.

Eternal inclusion in the household of God. You want a couple of sons, a couple of daughters? No, how about millions? How about a vast family, as numerous as the stars, as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore?

How about more brothers and sisters than you could ever possibly count? More moms and dads and sons and daughters and aunts and uncles than you could ever even imagine? That's what you'll receive.

[20 : 05] You can imagine the tears streaming down his face. He says, how is this possible? It's a scroll, so he has to scroll back. Right, how is this possible? Well, I've got to figure it out. He rolls it back.

Right, and he would come back to what we call Isaiah 53. There's no numbers or anything in this scroll. It's just to go back to approximately Isaiah 53. And this is the passage that he's reading when the Spirit says, hey, see that guy on a chariot?

Catch him. That's exactly what it says. It says, see that guy? So Philip's like, okay. So he starts running, right? And it says he joined himself to the eunuch like glue. That's what the word means. He joined with the eunuch.

So right when this is happening, Philip comes up alongside the chariot. Hey! And here's what he's reading at that moment. Isaiah 53 verse 4. Surely he...

Eunuch's like, who? Surely he has borne our griefs. Who is this? Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

[21 : 03] Wait, what? He was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment that brought us peace.

And by his wounds, we're healed. You know, all we, like sheep, have gone astray. We've made decisions that are irreparable. Now, we've turned every one of us to his own way.

He says, yeah, that's me. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. And you can imagine him reading this and saying, it's because of this that it then says, let not the eunuch say, I am a dry tree.

And he says, well, who in the world is this? Who would voluntarily take on the grief of the world? Who would voluntarily become an outcast? A leper, a eunuch, a Gentile, a Samaritan, a criminal, unclean.

Who would voluntarily become that and trade places with me? Who would quietly and obediently trade places with people like this so that they could be invited into the household of God while he was slaughtered?

[22 : 21] And it's precisely at that moment, as he's looking up and wondering, who in the world is this? That Philip comes up and he says, I know you're reading Isaiah.

You have any questions? And you can imagine the words almost tumbling out of this man's mouth. Who is this? Is it Isaiah?

Is it someone else? Who is this? And Philip's able to say, I can tell you. His name is Jesus. And he loves you more than you can possibly imagine.

You know, this man who's had the door slammed in his face by the law in Jerusalem, he finds another door opened in the person of Jesus Christ to come in and become part of the family. And this is why he says, hey, look, there's water. Baptize me right now. Oh, right? It's because this is what baptism means, right?

[23 : 27] Baptism is the family marker, right? Some families, you all have red hair and you're like, oh, you know, they're part of the, you know, the Smith family because they all have red hair and you can tell a mile away, that's a Smith for sure, right?

Baptism is the distinguishing marker of the household of God. If you're baptized, that means you're part of the family. He says, I want to be baptized right now. There's water. Let's do it right here, right now.

So let's look at some of the implications of this. Compare this Ethiopian man to Simon. But Simon ultimately says all the right words, does all the right things, but ultimately he's about his own greatness.

The irony is this Ethiopian man is probably far greater in status than Simon was, but he doesn't exalt himself. He's humbled.

He's been humbled. Life has humbled him. He's not focused on his own greatness anymore. Maybe 10 years ago he was, but no longer. He's seeking greatness that comes from above, right?

[24 : 30] He's willing to risk everything in order to know God, and that's because he's already chased after greatness and it let him down. He's probably chased after other religions and they let him down. He knows it's all empty, and the only thing that can really speak to the hunger in his own soul is God himself.

And he is desperate for the forgiveness that comes through Jesus, even though he doesn't know that name. And listen, if you come to God with a heart like that, regardless of who you are, regardless of where you're from, regardless of whatever decisions you've made, God is going to welcome you in as a member of his beloved family.

God is going to welcome you home. But here's the question that I think that we need to consider. There's a place for this Ethiopian eunuch in God's family.

Would there be a place for a person like this in a church like ours? Right? Because honestly, if you're not married with young children and you walk into a church like ours, I think it would be very hard to feel like you belong.

It'd be very hard to feel like you could fit in. One of the most revolutionary things about the early church is that while it upheld the sanctity of marriage, while it upheld the sacredness of the family, it de-centered the nuclear family as the only viable way to be an adult.

[25 : 57] And that's radical. But we see that in our gospel reading. Right? When the disciples come and they say, Jesus, your mother and your brothers are here. And he says, what do you mean? I'm surrounded by my brothers and sisters.

Right? There's a new understanding of what it means to be in a family. And it's not a nuclear family, although that's very important. It's the family of God. And so for the first time in history, you have a community that says, blood and kinship matter, but they're not the ultimate thing.

The ultimate bond is not through blood. It's through water. It's the water of baptism that is the stronger bond. Right?

So people may not be blood-related, but they're related through the waters of baptism. They become family. And this is why, unlike the surrounding culture, where Christianity held up singleness right alongside marriage, as a viable, and some would say, depending on how you read Paul, preferable way to live as an adult.

Because membership in God's family became centered. Membership in a nuclear family was important, but it became de-centered. Right? So people who didn't have a nuclear family, for whatever reason, came flooding into the church, right?

[27 : 16] Widows and orphans who had been abandoned by their families, left on a hill, you know, out on a hillside to die. You know, people who had lost their spouse through death. Former slaves who had never married, right?

All of these people came streaming into the church. Because they could immediately become part of God's family and gain a whole community of spiritual mothers and fathers and brothers and

sisters and sons and daughters.

So I think one of the ongoing questions we need to ask ourselves is how are we proactively ensuring that this community reflects that gospel reality?

How do we live as a true church family where every single person is loved and cared for as they should be? So let's bring all this together.

Why are Christians called to relentlessly pursue and love the other? Why is this at the very center of our faith? Because at the very center of our faith, we have a God who was willing to do the exact same thing for us.

[28 : 29] Until you know what it's like to be an outcast, until you know what it's like to have the door slammed in your face, until you know what it's like to be told, you will never be welcome here, until you've experienced that on an emotional level, I don't think you will ever feel really compelled to go after such people.

But what the gospel tells us is that we have all experienced or would have experienced the exact same thing. If we tried to enter into God's presence apart from Jesus Christ, because of our uncleanness, we would have had the door slammed in our face.

It's only because Jesus threw open the doors, came out, grabbed us, embraced us, and welcomed us in. And it's only because of the scars on the hands that embraced us that we became part of God's family.

And so this is what compels us to go after anyone who's ever had a door like this slammed in their face. And if we desire to have the same kind of impact as the early church, the same kind of radical diversity, we need more Phillips.

We need more Phillips. We need more people, and some of you are such people. We need more people who are listening to the Holy Spirit and obeying God when He calls you to go to people on the fringes.

[29 : 54] And by the way, if you live in D.C., the great thing about D.C. is you don't have to go far to find somebody who is very different from you are. Right? Our immediate neighbors are all racially and ethnically and culturally and religiously and politically vastly different from us.

Right? So when you live in a place like D.C., all you have to do is walk out your front door and you're going to the nations of the earth because the nations come here. And I can almost guarantee you that if you ask the Spirit, the Spirit will reveal to you someone in your immediate, in your immediate circle who is searching for Him.

Right? Somebody who has tried career, they've gone after their own greatness, maybe they've tried politics, they've tried maybe other religions, but what they're really looking for is Jesus.

They just need someone to come alongside them and to show them the way. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for Philip. We thank you for Simon and for this Ethiopian man. We thank you for the example they give us.

[31 : 18] And now I ask that these would not just remain as words or ideas, but that through the power of your Holy Spirit, whatever of this is of you, of your word, would become flesh in us, would begin to change how we see ourselves and how we see others.

And I pray that our community would be filled with the same other pursuing love that you have shown us. And we pray this for your glory.

Amen.