

God's Mercy is for All People

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning everyone. Great to connect with you again this morning and thank you so much to Jackie and to Jolene. You have basically got the whole message for this morning and just put in a snapshot for me, which is just brilliant, but it'll be great just to dive a little bit deeper into Acts 16 and what the implications might mean for us. It was about three decades ago now. I was sitting in the church office in a country church when I responded to a knock at the door. I opened the door and there standing before me was a man who was intoxicated. He was in fact quite messed up. He slept the night down by the river. His face was covered in dry blood from a fight that he had had through the course of the evening with others sleeping down there.

And he knocked on the door because he wanted a sandwich and a cup of tea. I sat down, I got to the food and I sat down beside him while he ate his sandwich and he drank his tea and we talked and he recalled how his life was a mess up from all sorts of different reasons, but he wasn't looking to change. He wasn't looking really for a conversation. He just wanted the food and to be gone.

His life was a mess, but he was on one level content with where it was at that point. Now, as I talk with him, I had this thought in my mind that even to this day that I'm ashamed of, and that is the thought that I cannot imagine this man being in church. The thought that if I started to speak to him about a greater hope right now in Jesus Christ, he just wouldn't get it. He wouldn't understand it. I just thought this man was not the Christian type. I'm ashamed to say. My sinful prejudices were in full swing on that day and in that moment. So what do you think the Christian type is?

What sort of people are Christians in your mind? What sort of people get drawn into the Christian faith? Well, we're up to Acts chapter 16, as you have just heard, and we see here in this chapter that in fact God's mercy is for all people. That is, there is no Christian type. So get your Bibles, open up to Acts 16, the St. Paul's app if you've got it. Open that up. You'll see I've got some points there to get through. It's Acts 16, and we're ready to go. So first of all, God's mercy is to three people in Acts 16.

The first person we're introduced to is Lydia in verses 11 to 15. There are a few things that we know about Lydia straight up. She is from the city of Thyatira, which was part of Asia Minor in those days, and we know that she's a businesswoman. She is a dealer in purple cloth. Now, cloth, which was dyed purple and then from there turned into clothes and other items, was very expensive. The whole process was very, very detailed. It was expensive cloth, and it was really only the wealthy people, the rich people who could afford it. Purple cloth was therefore in their culture a sign of wealth. You wear something purple, you are a wealthy individual. It's the sort of thing that the royalty bought and the elite in society purchased. Lydia, therefore, is a person who sold beautiful clothes to beautifully rich people. Lydia is the equivalent, if you like, in our day of the owner of a chain of high-end boutiques in ritzy suburbs of cities. She was also, we are told here, a worship of God. Now, that's a technical term in the New Testament, which means that she is a God-fearer. Now, these God-fearers were

[4 : 16] Gentiles who had left behind their other religious practices and their paganism, and they started reading the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament, and starting to seek the Bible, the God of the Old Testament. And so Lydia is, therefore, an admirable person, a decent person, a pious, and a successful person. So how does God's mercy come to her? Have a look at verse 13 with me.

On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gates to the river where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. So the setting here is a low-key discussion. It's not a church service. Paul is not preaching, but the key is at the end of verse 14. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. Now, the word respond there means she is attracted to. The Lord opened her heart to be attracted to Paul's message. Lydia, that is, didn't just believe. She didn't have an intellectual assent to what Paul said, but she found what Paul said to be wonderful, to be beautiful. We also know broadly the content of what Paul was saying to this group of women, because back in verse 10, Luke tells us what their task was. After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. So what Lydia was attracted to is the core, the central message of the Christian faith.

The gospel, the good news is that Jesus Christ, the eternal son of God, came into the world that he had made, died for our sins and turned God's judgment away from us. But this Jesus rose again on the third day, eternally triumphant over evil, so that there is now no condemnation for those who put their trust in him, but only the prospect of everlasting eternal joy in his presence. And so Lydia wasn't just convinced that that message was true, but she saw it as beautiful. She was attracted to it. It was wonderful to her. Jesus, in fact, it was wonderful to her. God had opened her heart in such a way that Jesus looked magnificent. This is a woman whose business was beauty. She sold beautiful clothes to beautiful people, beautiful people, and she had never seen a beauty like this before. Jesus, Jesus was magnificent.

Jesus gave her life, and she gave her life to Jesus. And then we move into verse 16, and we see another recipient of God's mercy. It's verse 16.

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl, a female slave, who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune telling. Now, we know a lot about this person. Firstly, she is young. It says female slave, but the word used in the original language means that she is young, a young slave. She's a girl is who she is. She's a kid.

[8 : 17] Her parents must have sold her. She's been rejected by her family. She's enslaved and oppressed and economically exploited by her owners. But she's also enslaved with inner demons too.

We know from the original language that she had what was called the spirit of the python. Now, that doesn't mean much to us, but the ancient reader knew exactly what that meant.

It means that this girl belonged to a group of people that were odd, very odd. They spoke loudly. They acted weirdly. They cried out. They shrieked. They spoke in different voices.

This young girl would all of a sudden speak with a voice of a mature man. They were very troubled, very broken people, and they were isolating society. And yet, on so many occasions, what they predicted about the future actually came true. And so people were, at the same time, intrigued by them.

And so if Lydia is an owner of a high-end boutique for the rich, this girl is a drunk, addicted prostitute, exploited by her pimps, living in a seedy suburb of the city, but also able to predict the future.

[9 : 40] Repulsive, and yet in some level, we're attracted to her. How did God's mercy come to her? Verse 17. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved.

And she kept this up for many days. Now notice that she knows exactly who Paul and his team were, and nobody else knows who Paul and the team are. She knew who they were and that they were coming to tell them the gospel.

She knew that they were coming to tell them the way to be saved. She was impeccably accurate, even though the source of that accuracy was, in fact, evil.

And then we read this in verse 18. Finally, Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the Spirit, Now, the Apostle Paul here looks really impatient and really unloving with this girl.

That's because he is. That is, you know, he's not Jesus after all. We know that. But it also shows us that this little encounter is not a made-up encounter.

[10 : 59] This is not the way that you would write a legend. You would write it this way. If it was a legend, you'd say, Paul, deeply moved by compassion, turned and looked on the girl with mercy, and said, You poor, troubled soul.

But that's how you'd write legend. But that's not what's happening here. Paul got irritated. He was fed up. And he said, In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her.

And at that moment, the Spirit left her. So Lydia gets a Bible study down by the river. This girl gets a power encounter.

Lydia needed to see that Jesus is more beautiful and magnificent and fulfilling than her money and her purple clothes. This girl needs a new master.

She needs a new lord. A new boss over her life. And she gets that. The third person we encounter here is a Roman jailer.

[12 : 17] Now this person comes on the scene because the owners of the slave girl are pretty ticked off by the income loss that Paul has now inflicted upon them by healing the slave girl.

Paul and Silas are handed over to local magistrates who order them to be beaten without a trial. And then in verse 23, we read this. They were thrown into prison and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.

When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet to the stocks. So what do we know about him? The first thing we know is that he's a jailer.

And that means that he is most likely an ex-Roman soldier. When the ranking soldiers retired, they generally moved into civil service roles.

He was what we would call in our society nowadays working class. His home is comfortable, but his home is, how do I put this, a long way from the harbour.

[13 : 31] We can also see that he was a brutal guy. Verse 23, he is commanded by the magistrates to guard Paul and Silas carefully.

In verse 24, he says, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet to the stocks. That is, he didn't wash their wounds, he didn't bandage them up, he didn't do anything that you would consider carefully looking after them.

He didn't do anything for them. He was asked to watch them closely. Instead, he put them into the deepest dungeon, away from the light, away from the air. And he also puts them in the stocks.

The stocks, spread your limbs out past what was considered normal. It induced incredibly painful muscle cramps. It was unnecessarily cruel.

It was a form of torture. This is a guy who Paul just frankly could not sit down with like he did with Lydia and talk with about the gospel.

[14 : 39] He had to show the good news of Jesus Christ in his life. And so this jailer notices two things in the lives of Paul and Silas. He sees in the face of suffering a peace and a joy and in the face of cruelty a kindness and a forgiveness.

Verse 25. About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening to them. They were listening.

The word actually means they were fascinated, amazed by Paul and Silas. Now this is a culture where if you are in grief, you wail.

If you are angry, you curse. That is, you express the inner emotions in very verbal, verbose ways.

And here we have Paul and Silas expressing peace and joy in quite tangible ways. They were singing praises to God rather than cursing.

[15 : 52] And the jailer would have either heard it, he certainly would have experienced it. The joy and the peace. But the jailer also experienced a kindness and a forgiveness.

Have a look in verse 26. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose.

The jailer woke up and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. This jailer was not going to wait for his own execution for failing to secure the prisoners.

And in that moment as he draws his sword Paul calls out don't harm yourself. We are all here.

So not only does Paul and Silas not leave themselves but somehow they managed to keep the other prisoners with them as well. They had an opportunity in this moment to pay back for the treatment that they had received.

[17 : 02] they didn't take it. And in that split second moment it moved this jailer. Verse 29 the jailer called for lights he rushed in and he felt trembling before Paul and Silas.

Not the other prisoners he knew it was Paul and Silas these are the guys here these are the guys who are different. He says sirs what must I do to be saved?

they overcame evil with good they overcame mercilessness with mercy with unkindness with kindness they forgave him and he was amazed they saved his life and now he wants his life to be truly saved.

He knows that Paul and Silas have something that he does not have. It's got to do with their God. They have a power in their lives that produces peace and joy and kindness and forgiveness.

He doesn't have it doesn't have any of it and he wants it. What must I do to be saved? He wants a relationship with the God that they've been praying and singing praises to but notice the question what must I do to be saved?

[18 : 29] He assumes that he needs to do something here. Paul's answer is very simple in verse 31 believe in the Lord Jesus and you'll be saved. Believe in what Jesus has already done for you and you will be saved.

Once again Paul has demonstrated the gospel to this jailer. that's what he's done all the way through here. He has demonstrated the core message of Christianity.

Now did you notice that little incident in verses 35 to 39? Paul is released but he doesn't go quietly. It's very odd.

It was against the law to throw a Roman citizen into prison without a trial and Paul is a Roman citizen and he has not had a fair trial.

So now these magistrates are running scared. Their livelihood and even their lives are on the line here. So you've got to ask yourself the question why did Paul not speak up before he was thrown into prison?

[19 : 42] When the magistrates were standing there and they're getting beaten, why did they not just put their hand up and say hey guys Roman citizen, you know, against the law. Why did he raise that issue afterwards and not before?

One reason is he's identifying with the church in Philippi who will not have the same privileges that he has got and will suffer the same way he was suffering now.

But more importantly the main reason is that this jailer needs him to go to prison. This jailer needs him to go to prison so that he could be saved because the jailer is not free.

Paul needed to surrender his physical freedom so that this jailer might know true salvation and freedom. Paul gave up his freedom so that the one who thought that he was free could in fact be truly free.

Paul and Silas were in stocks in the dungeon but they were singing. That is their incarceration and their suffering could not take touch.

[20 : 58] It could not take away the freedom and the joy that they already had in Jesus. The reason why Paul was happy to go into prison because he was already free. The jailer had the keys to the chains but he was not free.

he needed rescuing. He needed to be saved. And it was only because Paul kept his mouth shut, surrendered his body to the magistrates, then to the crowd and finally to the prison that this jailer found true freedom.

Only then and in that sense the apostle Paul was walking in the footsteps of his savior Jesus Christ. Jesus was beaten so that we could be healed.

Jesus was put on trial so that we could be free from condemnation. Jesus was restrained by nails to a cross so that we might find liberation from death.

He was executed for our sin so that we would be set free from sin and death. He chose not to speak up. He chose not to call down legions of angels.

[22 : 21] He chose not to plead his cause. As a lamb is silent, so was Jesus Christ in front of his accusers. And he chose it for us.

And we see this is the immediate impact on this jailer. Belief in Jesus transforms this jailer.

Firstly, we see upon release coming out of the prison, he showed compassion and care and he washed their wounds. Secondly, he's baptized as a public declaration that he is now lined with the Christian faith and the Christian community.

Christianity is both personal but it's never private. It is personal but it's never private. And thirdly, he got what Paul and Silas had.

You see it there? He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God. He is now finally free.

[23 : 25] God's mercy is in fact for all people.

They are a snapshot if you like to show how very different people come to put their faith in Jesus Christ. Three very different people. One was from Asia, one was a Greek, one was a Roman.

Economically, they are upper class, middle class and low class. One was spiritually open, one was spiritually hostile and one was indifferent.

One was logical and gentle, one was apathetic and brutal and one was troubled and oppressed. The good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone and everyone needs the good news of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is for you. There is no such thing as a Christian type. The gospel can and has changed anyone from the morally respectable religious person through to the serial killer, from advanced cities to jungles, from palaces to refugee camps.

[24 : 42] How has it done that? Because it's true. true. The gospel is true for everyone. We live in a culture that says, well, if it's true for you, then it's true for you.

But Christianity doesn't do anything with you. It doesn't help you in any way. Unless what Jesus says about himself, his perfect life, his death for our sin, his resurrection and reign over all things is actually true.

If it's not true, it is powerless to bring transformation and change. Powerless to set you free. If it's not true, it doesn't work.

But if it is true, it works for everyone. There is no religion in the world as culturally diverse as Christianity because it's true. Every world religion has the majority of its people in one or two continents.

Except for Christianity. Approximately 20% of Christians are in Africa. Another 20% in Latin America. Nearly 20% in Asia.

[25 : 51] A little more than 20% in Europe. And a little less than 20% in North America. That's spread and impact across all kinds of different areas and cultures and people groups.

No other religion is even close to being that well distributed. Because it is true for all people. There is no Christian type.

There is no greater unifying power on the face of the earth than the good news of Jesus Christ. It brings diverse groups of people together. I love the last verse of this section.

After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. This is the new Christian church of Philippi.

It is all those who have believed in Jesus Christ. Who are they? At the very least we know in this new church is Lydia. It's in her house. Lydia, the slave girl and the jailer.

[26 : 59] worshipping Jesus side by side as new description brothers and sisters in Christ.

Friends, how much clearer does the Bible need to be that heritage, social class, gender means nothing? Nothing.

None of it's a hindrance or a barrier to Jesus. There is no Christian type. And so for the Christians tuning in, listen to me right now.

God can and does work in the most unlikely individual. Just like me.

Just like you. It's what I'd forgotten. All those years ago sitting on that front step of the house with that intoxicated man that that was me spiritually.

[28 : 04] I'd forgotten that. But if you're not a Christian yet, this all simply means that God's mercy is for you.

The good use of Jesus Christ is for you. I don't know, I may not know you personally. You may have just tuned in. But I do know that you are the Christian type.

The gospel can change anyone. Jesus was beautiful enough for Lydia, powerful enough for the slave girl, and liberating enough for the jailer.

He's got what you'd need right now too. There is no Christian type and who knows what you'll become when you see Jesus as beautiful, powerful, and liberating for you and your life.

Amen.