

3/17/24 - Acts 18:1-22 - "Focus on Jesus Christ"

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[0 : 00] Today, we will be reading from Acts 18, verses 1 through 23. Please open your Bibles with me. After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth, and he found a Jew named Akela, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked, for they were tent makers by trade. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads. I am innocent. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.

And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titus Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household.

And many of the Corinthians, hearing Paul, believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking, and do not be silent.

[1 : 23] For I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you. For I have many in this city who are my people. And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

But when Galileo was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.

But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Galileo said to the Jews, If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint.

But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things. And he drove them from the tribunal.

And they all seized Sothenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Galileo paid no attention to any of this. After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Achilla.

[2 : 25] At Sincre, he had cut his hair, for he was under a bow. And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there. But he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. But on taking leave of them, he said, I will return to you if God wills. And he set sail for Ephesus. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and they went down to Antioch.

After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next to the region of Galatia and Furia, strengthening all the disciples. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. It's great to be back. Got a little bit of a break. That's what you want to call it. There's no break ever.

But a break from sermon prepping and sitting under the word of fellow co-laborers, Carmen and Rick, thank you for your faithfulness to God's word and to the edification and equipping of the church.

[3 : 29] And it's great to be back in the pulpit. And so hopefully I remember how to do this. There's quite a bit of stuff that happens in this passage.

And the content seems pretty much familiar. It doesn't seem like much is new. Things seem to be going business as usual.

Right? Business as usual. There's six mentions of Paul's departure from various locations. In verse 1, it's kind of segwaying from last week's sermon.

In verse 1, his departure from Athens to Corinth. Or verse 7 in Corinth, departing from the synagogue. And there's also the mention of departing for Ephesus. And there's even mention that he got a haircut in verse 18. Seems business as usual as he's departing for Caesarea in verse 21.

[4 : 30] Or 22, departing for Antioch. Or the departure in verse 23 for Galatia and Phrygia. Business as usual. He's building a ministry team.

He found Aquila and Priscilla. Fellow tent makers. That might be a little bit new. But it's business as usual. What does he do with them?

He takes them on his journey to Ephesus. Business as usual. Business as usual. There's business as usual with ministry work. In verse 4 and verse 19. Where Paul, just as Carmen preached last week.

Paul reasoned in the synagogue. His first stop in a location is to visit the synagogues. And he visits that in Corinth and Ephesus.

Business as usual as Paul makes known his care for the church. In Ephesus in verse 20 and 21. He says, I will return to you if the Lord wills.

[5 : 29] And then business as usual as his pursuit. Of greeting and strengthening churches all throughout Europe. Business as usual.

Don't we all deep down inside loathe business as usual? Don't we kind of hate that?

There's a lot of heads nodding. We won't let your employers know about that. I mean, isn't it true within just our frailty? We desire excitement.

We desire fresh. We desire new. And even in the most exciting business that we might be in. It always has an opportunity of sort of losing its fervor in our lives.

As we slip into what's known as the mundane business. Well, the way this passage is structured and the way I will preach it today.

[6 : 37] Is I want us to see the surrounding of all this usual stuff. That in the midst of all this normal business.

Are two separate seasons of ministry in Corinth. Separated by a year and a half time span. And I want us to ask Luke this question today.

Why has the Holy Spirit inspired this text? And I want us to ask how Paul's journey can speak to us today.

Especially what we make of the business as usual stuff. So the sermon title today is Focus on Jesus Christ.

And based upon how Luke has arranged this. And how it is structured. I believe what we will find at the end of our time. Is a main point simply this.

[7 : 43] That seasons will change. But our focus on Jesus Christ must not. Amen. Let's enter prayer together as we dive into this passage.

Father, thank you for gathering us here today. For commanding it for us to gather here today. And Father, we thank you for all the work that you do in this church.

And even maybe those who are ill or traveling. That are joining us on live stream. Know that you are with them. And speaking to them even at a distance. And Father, we pray for your word to enlighten our mind and our heart today.

Father, we pray that your words. Your words provide to us a wealth of edification to our lives.

And that we see Jesus above all things in our lives today. Make this so, Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit. We praise in Jesus' name. Amen.

[8 : 56] Amen, everyone. Amen. I heard like three more people on that. Come on, people. All right.

Let's dive into it. The first section, I want us to see, like I said, the ministry seasons. We have a ministry season from verse 5 through 11.

Inside of all this business as usual, we see these two ministry seasons. The first being starting in verse 5 to 11. It says, when Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word.

Testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And verse 6. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, your blood be on your own heads.

I am innocent. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles. Despite what we have read in this passage so far of business as usual, we have to see that this incident in Corinth in this ministry season is quite unusual.

[10:12] As Paul makes a very sharp statement, literally washes his hand of the issue. He says, I am innocent. And walks out of the synagogue and says, I'm going to go to them out there.

This is unique. He didn't leave the city. There was work to be done. I mean, Corinth was a pretty prominent city. It had more people than Youngstown did.

80,000 people in Corinth. And so there were a lot of people, a lot of things going on. They had Greek worship of Aphrodite, Poseidon, and Apollo. Even today, the temple of Apollo still exists. And so we should see that there was work to be done. And so it would be unusual for him to remain in the city after making such enemies. Right? And in verse 7 and 8, this leads to the home of the neighbor, Titius Eustus, is how I believe they would pronounce it.

And you know the phrase and the saying, keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer? Obviously, Paul was using that strategy.

[11:22] He goes and bunks in with the neighbor next door to the synagogue with people who want to charge him with blasphemy. So he bunks up next door. But the author, Luke, does something unique here.

He seems to not only spotlight the bad, the rejection, but he seems to also spotlight the reception. He says in verse 7, Titius was a worshiper of God.

In verse 8, Crispus, the synagogue ruler, even though he was rejected by those in the synagogue, the synagogue ruler was a believer. His whole household believed. This is good stuff.

And at the end of verse 8, there were conversions, there were responses to Paul's message, faith and baptisms. You see, there was good and there was bad in this.

And we might believe for a moment that all this is business as usual. It's stuff we've heard before.

[12:29] Reception and rejection. And this being one of those same sermons as the one before that I copy and paste. And how often we miss how unusual this narrative actually is.

We would think things are going as usual. Reception, rejection, all this stuff. No big deal, right? But how often might we miss the stress and the strain that reception and rejection can have upon our hearts and exhaust us to our core?

Reception and rejection. Reception and rejection. Time and time and time again. How often we miss that stress and strain.

Upon our hearts. And how it exhausts us to our core. The good exhausts us. The bad exhausts us. I mean, if you look at stats that are staggering with pastoral ministry, there's over 80% of pastors consider quitting ministry.

Quitting this. And half of that 80% actually does quit. And that's a pretty generous number. It's very much so more.

[13:52] But I'm running on old stats. Most of these who leave don't even last five years. Get exhausted and find something else to do.

And I don't want you to miss this church. In the middle of all of this usual stuff, the Lord speaks to Paul. Verse 9.

And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking, and do not be silent, for I am with you.

And no one will attack you to harm you. For I have many in this city who are my people.

And there's an end quote there. In verse 11, he stayed a year and six months teaching the word of God among them. You see, what the Lord would speak to Paul in the stillness of this night reveals God's great care and concern, not only for Paul, but also for the people around who need to hear the message of salvation.

[15:14] Anyone who wants to accuse God of not loving, of not caring, is silence at this very statement in the stillness of this night.

Gospel work requires radical surrender. Radical surrender. Not just for full-time and part-time pastoral staff, or for just the Apostle Paul from centuries ago, but this stands true for every Christian who is called by name to surrender themselves to God, you and me alike.

Before I became a pastor, I was a Christian, just as we all are. How many of us within this room have ever thought of throwing in the towel?

Right? If we want to be honest, we're talking about men being vulnerable. Right? How many of us in this room have thought about throwing in the towel? Maybe your faith growing stagnant.

Situations that are just weighing really, really heavy upon you. You're just like, I can't take it anymore. Maybe you're hurt from your past church, or maybe current church, or maybe other

church members who have hurt you.

[16:35] Maybe you've thought about throwing in the towel because being part of an inner city church in Youngstown just doesn't seem too appealing. It's hard. It's violent.

So let's just pack up, just like everyone else does in Youngstown, and find something different that suits people's desires. But what we see here is that our energy depletes in the good or the bad. And it's interesting because sometimes the very things that ought to bring us encouragement are the very culprits of tempting us to quit. A full food pantry, praise the Lord, but guess what? It is exhausting. And seasons of reception and rejection on and on again are exhausting. And the encouragement the Lord gave Paul was to keep going.

And church, everyone here today, I confidently stand here before you as one of those who have considered throwing in the towel in ministry.

[17:47] Confidently stand here and urge us all to keep going as well. To keep going. God's glory is not reserved for those who abandon His mission.

What glory is there for God if we just run away when times get hard, when we're uncomfortable, when we're stretched to our core with good stuff and we run?

God's glory is not reserved for those who abandon the mission. That's not saying that God may lead us to a different place and a different time and location that takes great and heavy prayer, but not to just a knee-jerk reaction to a situation just up and leave.

And so if the things that bring us encouragement are the culprits of tempting us to quit, we know our eyes cannot be fixed upon the business then.

but we have to focus our attention upon the one who orchestrates the business. We can't be focused upon the numbers of the food pantry.

[18:57] We can't be focused on the numbers of people in a seat. We can't be focused on baptisms. We can't be focused on church membership numbers and all those statistics. We are focused on the one who's orchestrating it all and allowing whatever to come.

Numbers can be up and it will exhaust us. And guess what? Numbers can be down and it can exhaust us. And maybe our propensity to quit actually has nothing to do with any of the statistics around.

But that little ticker that's within that is fixed on the wrong thing. If the work exhausts us we cannot focus on the work or the fruit of the work.

And that's not saying that we shouldn't pay attention and celebrate numbers and baptisms and food pantry stuff. Those are good things but we cannot worship it.

Amen? To be a faithful pastor I can't focus on that stuff. I have to focus on Jesus. And guess what? The same remains true. If you want to be a faithful parent don't be looking to your kids to affirm that parenting work.

[20:17] Right? That will challenge your faith. You focus your eyes on Jesus. To be a faithful spouse. Your spouse is going to let you down time and time again.

How do you do it? You focus on Jesus. To be a faithful employee at some thankless job. You're not going to get affirmed by some boss who just looks at you as a number.

You focus on Jesus. The same is true for friendships, relationships, boyfriend, girlfriend, and even simply being a church member. And that pesky music, you just, it just rubs you the wrong way.

Focus on Jesus. Fixating our eyes upon Jesus keeps us faithful to God's mission. And where we see that happen in Paul's life in verse 11, and he stayed a year and six months teaching the word of God among them.

This is incredible, church. And so we see this second ministry season take place. A year and six months, a year and a half pass, and there's been change.

[21:44] And what we see is focusing on Jesus Christ during change. And so there's a new guy in town here, a new proconsul.

He's the guy in charge who took office, Galio. And Paul was, again, attacked by the Jews and taken before tribunal, a court, essentially.

In verse 13, we see their accusation. This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.

You see their accusation? It's the same as all others. It's blasphemy, essentially. And they want the government, the Roman government, to think that this matters to them, right?

Trying to get them to do their bidding. In other words, they're saying, Paul is reading Andy Stanley, and he's unhitching from the Old Testament.

[22 : 44] He's abandoning it all. And looking to the government to care, right? They don't care about Andy Stanley. They don't care about the Jews' law.

This is a Gentile nation. You're in the Gentile world. I mean, how could they even make an accusation of that?

If Paul was saying that Jesus was the Christ, and you see these Jews accusing him of teaching things that are contrary to the law, if you are divorcing the gospel of Jesus Christ from the law, you are in severe error.

Severe error. How mistaken we would be to conclude that Jesus Christ's message is contrary to the law rather than central to its fulfillment.

fulfillment. How could we ever be at that place? Is it not the law that places our sin on trial?

[23 : 53] Is it not the cross that acquits us of the penalty of our sin? And is it not Jesus Christ who hung upon the cross and pays that ransom and that penalty in full?

The wages of sin is death, friends. But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ.

This is the good news of the gospel, and if you're an unbeliever today, if you have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, well, you heard it today. Welcome. You've got a decision to make.

Continue your laboring of forgiving your sin on your own terms or surrender yourself fully to God's terms, which is faith in Jesus Christ. It's at your fingertips right now.

If only it might reach the depths of your hearts. And for a believer today, this finds our reassurance of our labor, and not in our labor, but that in Jesus Christ alone.

[25 : 02] we can't ever confess our sin and atone for our sin at the same point. We needed someone to go forward just as blood and goats of the Old Testament atoned for sin.

Jesus Christ, atonement covered that sin. Satisfaction for our sin, and we are forgiven. And how many of us living in such a sinful world with so many sinful temptations need that reassurance today?

And welcome to that reassurance for us. You see, the gospel of Jesus Christ is central to the law because what?

It focuses on Jesus Christ. Even the law focuses on Jesus Christ. And so, in verse 14, Paul is about to speak as the Lord instructed him a year and a half earlier.

And it seems like he was interrupted by this Roman official, Galileo. And he spoke. He discarded the whole entire ordeal.

[26 : 11] He's like, I don't care about your law. Just go away, essentially. Right? It's an ordeal of words, of names, and of the law.

Who cares about this stuff, right? In verse 16 and 17, after which we find that Paul was not held responsible for this situation, but it was actually the ruler of this synagogue at this point where we meet the new ruler was Crispus a year and a half ago, but now it's Sothenes.

He was held responsible for the outcome of this trial and how it went. And this nation, state, this state within this Roman nation handled it their way.

If the government's going to wash their hands of it, well, let's publicly humiliate this guy for not doing well on our behalf. They publicly humiliated him.

They beat him in the street over words, over names, over the law. living in a day today where there is not much tolerance for words, for names, for the law.

[27 : 24] We can only hope that the governments today and the future will dismiss that nonsense, just as Galileo did, seeing no issue of wrongdoing or vicious crimes, as we see in verse 14.

But we live in a strange time period. Live in a strange time. When I was in the English class, we had seven pronouns in the English language. And somehow along the way we've invented 78 or more pronouns that relate to our gender identity.

And even blatant misgendering of people is seen as wrongdoing and a vicious crime where people are penalized for doing that.

And the law of God, if there's words and names, well, the law of God is completely dismissed or attributed to hate speech, to ever attribute a world being sinful and somebody needing saved.

Well, who are we to say that? That is hateful speech. This is our world we live in. And just a pro tip around that pronoun thing, just a pro tip, just learn people's first names, all right?

[28 : 40] And you get around all of that, all right? And it doesn't matter. And avoid the whole debacle. Pro tip's over. But what do we learn from this little incident that's unfolding between this relationship between the people resting in the government and all over words, names, and the law, all this stuff?

Well, we learn something again, that the world will go to government officials to go to the government to do their bidding, right? That's what the government was put in place for by the people.

But it is also true that the government can also make the work of God, the government can make the work of God easy or difficult.

Both are true. The government has the power of making this stuff here easy or very difficult. But what the government cannot do is redefine God's reality, God's truth, and God's plan.

The government is not at luxury of doing any of those three. A lot can happen in one and a half years of Paul preaching in this city. You've got a new ruler of the synagogue, you've got Galio as the pro consul, and a lot can happen within the next one and a half years, especially walking through 2024, which is an intense election year.

[30 : 14] Intense election year. A lot can happen in a year and a half. But you see, our focus, right, church, our focus was never intended to be upon the government government or our rights or our privileges, but upon Jesus Christ.

They come from Him alone. It's even written in our Declaration of Independence. That's where those rights come from. Amen? As stressful and exhausting as the work of God can be, God called Paul not to be silent, and its imperative still reverberates within the walls of Steel Valley Church today.

and will continue until the end of time. Within God's word is the absolute truth about reality, about sexuality, and of spirituality, all of which find their centrality of Jesus Christ as the basis of truth, the focus on Jesus.

Times will change, but the truth of God will never change, and so may we never waver, as God will not. So maybe I'll try to end on a little illustration.

Sometimes illustrations hurt, so you can go ahead and use a bathroom, and if you don't want to gamble, but I have anxiety. It's not officially diagnosed, but I think it's called baseball anxiety.

[31 : 52] I dealt with that as a young child. I would get up to bat, and boy, I couldn't focus on anything.

Everyone's looking at me. I'm responsible of taking this stick and hitting that ball, moving that fast, and I got my parents cheering for me.

This is trauma, right? Not really. I won't be that soft, but it's anxiety.

There's fear, but there's also excitement. What if I really make contact with this stick and that little ball, and it goes flying over the fence? There's excitement in that, but in that, there's a transcendent tip, whether that's scoreboard, has a winning and victory written all over it, there's a transcendent tip that exists.

There's a transcendent tip that exists even if you're down, and there's no way that Rudy's ever going to be put in to get the winning touchdown, right? There is nothing, no matter what's going on around, the transcendent tip remains true.

[33 : 08] What is that tip? For all the batters, keep your eye on the ball. keep your eye on the ball. Both in the excitement of the good of the game and the bad of the game, the loudness of the crowd or that last-minute change of picture to those left-handed pitchers that just mess everything up for a right-handed batter, right?

The focus remains the same and true. You see, the object of our focus is more vital than the sport. The object of our focus is more vital than the sports. Don't play games. Don't play church. Don't play parenting.

Don't play marriage. Don't play employee, employer. Be a Christian. Focus on Jesus. keep your eye upon Jesus.

And everything else will align. Trust me, it will. And so I believe that there are four radical lessons that help our focus as we see all the business of this passage, especially as we stand back and see the two ministry seasons.

[34 : 27] I see with Paul's vision, there's a radical lesson in that because gospel work is guided by God. we can have good plans or bad plans, but guess what?

God's guiding it all, right? Gospel work is guided by God, even in times of fear and anxiety, which sometimes requires radical surrender for Christians.

The second lesson, radical lesson I think is here, is regarding rejection. Gospel work is challenging and demanding. God bless you.

Gospel work is challenging, it's demanding, and it often demands radical trust, radical trust when opposed by the world. The third lesson I see is that gospel work is also lonely.

I don't think that it's a mistake that Paul is establishing churches with a plurality of elders, not just the CEO over the churches.

[35 : 42] Gospel work is lonely, which requires radical relationships with those who are willing to walk through the fire with you. And so Paul took Aquila and Priscilla.

And the fourth radical lesson I believe is here, is seeing that one-and-a-half year mission gap.

Gospel work is steadfast against the ever-changing times and seasons of life.

The pitcher in the baseball game can change, the score can change, the excitement can be loud or die down, but the gospel work is steadfast against the ever-changing times and seasons of life.

You see, seasons will change, but our focus on Jesus Christ must not. Will you remain steadfast in the gospel work God has called us all to here?

And I'll leave that for you to decide. Let's pray. any any spirit on