

February 28
Lesson 13 (NIV)

CALLED TO SERVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 33:1–12

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 16:11–15, 40; 1 Corinthians 1:26–30

ACTS 16:11–15, 40

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate 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. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

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⁴⁰ 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. Then they left.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:26–30

²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

KEY VERSE

When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. —Acts 16:15

CALL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Unit 3: The Call of Women

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify on a map the locations mentioned.
2. Compare and contrast the roles of Paul and Lydia in planting the church in Philippi.
3. Improve in his or her best area of service in categories of inreach, outreach, and upreach.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Career and Hospitality
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Entry to Europe (Acts 16:11–15, 40)
 - A. Philippi (vv. 11–12)
 - B. The Prayer Meeting (v. 13)
 - C. Lydia’s House (vv. 14–15, 40)
Humble Hospitality Builds Churches
- II. Correction to Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:26–30)
 - A. Calling the Ordinary (v. 26)
 - B. Confounding the Wise (vv. 27–29)
All Things Are Possible
 - C. Inclusion in Christ (v. 30)

Conclusion

- A. Serving as God Desires
- B. Glorifying in the Cross
- C. Prayer
- D. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

AegeanA-jee-un.

CorinthKor-inth.

CorinthiansKo-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

DerbeDer-be.

GalatiansGuh-lay-shunz.

Gentile *Jen*-tile.

Iconium Eye-*ko*-nee-um.

Macedonia Mass-eh-*doe*-nee-uh.

Neapolis Nee-*ap*-o-lis.

omnipotentahm-*nih*-poh-tent.

omniscientahm-*nish*-unt.

Philippi Fih-*lip*-pie or *Fil*-ih-pie.

Samothrace Sam-o-*thrays*.

Silas *Sigh*-luss.

Thyatira *Thy*-uh-***tie***-ruh (*th* as in *thin*).

Troas *Tro*-az.

Introduction

A. Career and Hospitality

Hospitality can make careers. Dolley Madison (1768–1849), wife of US president James Madison, was a great political asset in her husband’s career. James certainly had merit as a great writer and political mind, being called today the Father of the Constitution. But he was a shy man, not given to promoting his own interests.

After they wed, Dolley’s parties made people feel welcome and turned guests into political supporters. As the First Lady, Dolley largely shaped what it meant to hold that position in terms of hospitality and volunteerism.

Deidre Mathis’s hospitality career began when she was a world traveler on a tight budget. She would stay in hostels to save money. Deidre’s experiences of bonding with other women travelers inspired her to open her own hostel in downtown Houston. Her hostel combines her love of connecting with people with her passion for business. Hospitality made her welcome around the world; now she welcomes the world to Houston.

Going the other direction, we might say that careers can fund hospitality as well. This direction is the focus of an individual in today’s lesson.

B. Lesson Context

Paul and his companions began their second missionary journey around AD 52. It began with revisits to some of the cities Paul had visited on the first journey. These included Derbe, Lystra, and (perhaps) Iconium (Acts 16:1–2).

From there they headed west to Troas. While in Troas, Paul had a vision of a “man of Macedonia” who entreated him to come over to Macedonia and help (Acts 16:9). The vision served as a warrant for Paul to cross the Aegean Sea and enter Europe with the gospel—his first time to do so. Paul’s initial visits to the cities of Philippi and Corinth both occurred during this trip.

The city of Philippi sat in a commanding position on the fertile plain of the Gangites River, surrounded by mountains on three sides. Its site is in the northeast quadrant of modern Greece. About 400 years old when visited by Paul, Philippi was a major Macedonian city. Philippi’s name comes from King Philip II of Macedon, who conquered the city in 356 BC and renamed it for himself.

That was one of the first steps in Philip’s domination of the entire Greek peninsula. It set the stage for his successor and son, Alexander the Great, to march east and conquer territories all the way to India. The gold mines for which the city of Philippi was known provided great wealth for both leaders to fund their military campaigns. But the apostle Paul was in search of gold of a different kind, and he found it.

I. Entry to Europe (Acts 16:11–15, 40)

A. Philippi (vv. 11–12)

11. From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis.

Troas was a major seaport on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea. There Paul, Silas, and others were joined by Luke, for the “they” of Acts 16:8 changes to “we” in 16:10. These missionaries boarded a ship for Macedonia, going by way of the small island-city of *Samothrace* to the western Aegean port city *Neapolis*. From Troas to Neapolis was about 150 miles, which they sailed in two days.

12. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

Neapolis served as a seaport to the important city of *Philippi* (see Lesson Context). The journey between the two cities was about nine miles. In 168 BC, the city became a Roman *colony*, a place where veteran soldiers could retire and receive a tract of land to farm. Philippi was the easternmost point on the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway of about 535 miles in length, that crossed the Greek peninsula. Philippi appeared to be a good city for the missionaries’ task, for they decided to stay *several days*.

B. The Prayer Meeting (v. 13)

13. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate 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.

Paul's usual strategy was to visit the city's synagogue *on the Sabbath* to teach fellow Jews about Jesus (example: Acts 13:14b–15, 26–42). Tradition required that a community have 10 married Jewish men to have a synagogue, but that number seems to have been unavailable in this overwhelmingly Gentile city.

Instead, a group met outside the city gates by *the river*. This place could have been by the Gangites River, about a mile west of town, but this is uncertain. A *place of prayer* is a way of describing any synagogue. Since there was no synagogue there, the phrase suggests that those who gathered intended their meetings to be similar to those that occurred in synagogues.

What Do You Think?

How would you characterize your ideal place to pray?

Digging Deeper

For you personally, how does the issue of *where* to pray interact with the issue of *how* to pray?

This prayer group seems to have consisted solely of *women*. In addition to that demographic, Paul would have encountered them in terms of one of three religious persuasions: as Jews, as converts to Judaism (see Acts 13:43), or as God-fearing Gentiles who had not converted to Judaism (10:2, 22).

The third category is most likely, given the nature of the city of Philippi. Paul's willingness to minister to a group of Gentile women echoed Jesus' own ministry at Jacob's well (John 4:1–42; see lesson 10).

C. Lydia's House (vv. 14–15, 40)

14. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

Interestingly, the *woman ... named Lydia* bears the ancient name of the Kingdom of Lydia, which existed 1200–546 BC. It encompassed roughly the western half of the modern country of Turkey. So the woman Lydia was named after the area within which her town of Thyatira was located—an area from which Paul had just come, after having received a vision in which a “man of Macedonia” had invited him to come over (Acts 16:9)! There is a certain irony in all this.

In Paul's day, Thyatira was the chief source of dyed fabric. The woman Lydia specialized in *purple* cloth. This particular work was difficult but profitable for those with skill. To sell purple cloth was to deal in luxury items, so it is likely that Lydia had prosperous business connections in her hometown and sold products in far-flung cities like Philippi.

Like the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10), Lydia *was a worshiper of God* and may have been drawn to the Jewish faith without converting to it (contrast 13:43). Many barriers existed against full inclusion with the Jewish people. But Luke regularly recognized the faithfulness of those people who, like Lydia, worshipped and feared God (13:16, 26) or were otherwise “devout” (10:2). As Paul encountered such a one here, so he would again (17:4, 17).

Surely Lydia's prior worship of God had prepared her heart to hear Paul's message. *The Lord*, not Paul or his rhetoric, then *opened her heart* to Paul's presentation of the gospel. God had gone before his missionary, and God will continue after his missionary finishes. As Paul will later write

to the Corinthians, one person might plant a seed and another might water, “but God has been making it grow” (1 Corinthians 3:6).

15. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

Lydia responded to Paul’s message with faith. We can imagine that Lydia and *her household were baptized* right there at the river without delay. (The importance of baptism is seen in Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 6:3–5; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12–13; Titus 3:5; etc.).

As an outflowing of gratitude to God for accepting her into his family, Lydia invited Paul and his companions to her *home* to stay for a while. Asking the men to judge whether she was *believer in the Lord* reveals that this was also a test. Would the Jewish men visit the home of a Gentile woman? How included in God’s kingdom was she *really*? By insisting that the missionaries join her, Lydia revealed her own conviction that she and all her household were now entirely acceptable to the Lord. Nothing was lacking in her salvation.

Given Lydia’s vocation, we receive the impression that hers was a generous home, both in physical size and in hospitality.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways you can help provide and promote a ministry of hospitality?

Digging Deeper

What imperatives and boundaries do Acts 28:7; Romans 12:13; 16:23; 1 Timothy 5:10; Titus 1:8; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9; 2 John 9–11; and 3 John 8 establish in this regard?

40. 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. Then they left.

While in Philippi, Paul and Silas were arrested for casting a spirit of divination out of a fortune-telling slave girl (Acts 16:16–24). Following the conversion of their guard and release from *prison* (16:25–39), Paul and Silas returned to *Lydia’s house*. The unjust treatment of the missionaries was traumatic for them and the new congregation. This became a time for all to be *encouraged*.

Lydia’s home in Philippi surely became the initial meeting place for this group of believers. However, the book of Philippians, written a decade or so later, contains no reference to Lydia. We can only surmise that she was no longer in Philippi, perhaps having moved to Thyatira or elsewhere—maybe even having passed away. Her legacy of hospitality, service, and faithfulness endured in this church, however, as Paul celebrated the partnership those of the church had maintained “from the first day until now” (Philippians 1:5).

HUMBLE HOSPITALITY BUILDS CHURCHES

Elijah A. Frost organized a church in Cassville, Missouri, in 1885. The church met on Elijah’s front porch. Frost wasn’t a preacher, but he knew how to pray. He loved Jesus, the Word of God, and his neighbors.

His great hospitality invited others to learn and grow with him. These few dedicated Christians—praying in Christ’s name, praising God through spiritual songs, and trusting in God’s holy Word—turned a humble porch into a sanctuary.

Similarly, Lydia met with a few women at the river. Out of her humble prayer group would spring the greatest church in all of Asia Minor. The fledgling church began with women. The church grew in large part thanks to Lydia's hospitality.

Our churches are going to grow in the same way. How can your humble home and godly hospitality bless the church as Brother Frost and Lydia did?

—C. T.

What Do You Think?

In our era of ready access to restaurants and hotels, what emphasis should you and your church place on in-home hospitality? Why?

Digging Deeper

In what ways does a need for short-term versus long-term hospitality change your answer, if at all? Why?

II. Correction to Corinth

(1 CORINTHIANS 1:26–30)

A. Calling the Ordinary (v. 26)

26. Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

Paul had planted the church in Corinth in about AD 52. Now, in about AD 56, he writes a letter to that church while ministering in Ephesus. The letter is in response to troubling reports of factions and disunity (1 Corinthians 1:11).

Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians of what they had been before coming to Christ. Their church did not begin with leaders who had great educations, widespread social influence, or distinguished families. Doubly, Paul may have wanted to remind the Corinthians that their (mostly) Gentile backgrounds had prevented them from attaining any standing among God's people before.

Regarding being *wise by human standards*, Paul was well acquainted with the dangers there. He himself was able to quote Greek philosophers and scholars (see 1 Corinthians 15:33; Titus 1:12; Acts 17:24–29) while recognizing the overall defects in philosophies not grounded in Scripture (1 Corinthians 1:20; 2:1–5; Colossians 2:8).

What Do You Think?

Without giving directive advice, how would you counsel an unbeliever who was prideful of his or her status in life?

Digging Deeper

Under what circumstances would you and would you not use Scripture as part of your discussion (contrast Acts 17:10–12 with 17:16–34)?

B. Confounding the Wise (vv. 27–29)

27. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

Paul sees the great irony in all of this. All human wisdom and power are finite things and miniscule when compared to the power and wisdom of God. God is omnipotent (all-powerful) and omniscient (all-knowing) in ways humans barely begin to understand.

But God does not often choose to dazzle people into belief by displays of might and intelligence. God prefers to use *the foolish* and *the weak things of the world* to communicate his loving concern and his plan for humankind (see 1 Corinthians 1:28, below). In so doing, God is able *to shame* the world's expectations. In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul referred to the crucifixion of Christ as a "stumbling block." Christ's atoning death on the cross was scandalous, not what the Jews expected from their Messiah (compare Galatians 3:13–14).

We are reminded of Peter, who, when told that Jesus would accomplish the Father's will by Jesus' humiliation, suffering, death, and resurrection in Jerusalem, exclaimed, "Never, Lord" (Matthew 16:22). Peter did not expect the Messiah to bring victory through death.

28. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,

The word translated *lowly* is the antonym of the word for "noble" in 1 Corinthians 1:26—literally, "ignoble." In the Roman world, there was nothing more ignoble than a cross, the torture-execution for the worst criminals. It was especially problematic to Jews because of the curse of hanging on a pole (Deuteronomy 21:23).

Christians today see the cross as a comforting and victorious symbol. Churches display it. We wear it on necklaces and other jewelry. We even tattoo it on our bodies. Not so in Paul's day. The cross was shameful; nothing could be more despised among polite society. But God does not play by society's rules or expectations. A Christian seeing a cross in the first century would be struck by the completely unexpected and humbling circumstances of Jesus' sacrifice. What is scandalous for us may be glorious for God.

ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE

My 7-year-old grandson Alex: "I'm hungry!"

My daughter, Sarah: "That's impossible! You just ate lunch!"

Alex: "Mom, all things are possible with God. You might want to jot that down!"

My grandson is absorbing some important truths in his Sunday school class! While a silly example, his words are a great reminder that all things really *are* possible with God.

Lydia's story seems impossible. A man invited Paul to come to Macedonia (Acts 16:9), but Paul didn't find a man. He found Lydia, an independent, apparently single, wealthy woman. She was already the leader of a women's prayer group. She became a charter member of what would become one of the most influential churches in the area. Again, we think, "Impossible!"

Indeed, "all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27). What impossible task is God calling you to undertake for him?

—C. T.

29. so that no one may boast before him.

God's upside-down plan ensures that no one can claim credit for their own salvation. *No one* would think of the plan God enacted as the solution to human sinfulness. The paradoxical nature of the gospel does not allow anyone to *boast before* God.

Paul's example is instructive. His miracles did not speak to his own power, but to God's (1 Corinthians 2:4–5). And his preaching of the gospel was persuasive not because of his own eloquence. The Corinthians prided themselves as discerning, intelligent people—they could be impressed by a well-reasoned speech of no substance. But Paul had instead presented a message of the utmost importance. The truth of the gospel, not human skill, had convinced the Corinthian Christians.

C. Inclusion in Christ (v. 30)

30. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

God's *wisdom*, unlike the world's, finds fulfillment *in Christ Jesus*. *Righteousness* invokes a legal term that means even though we are guilty of our sins, "no penalty" is the sentence. The prophets often took this word further, defining it not in terms of a lack of wrong actions but as the presence of right actions (examples: Isaiah 33:15; Ezekiel 3:20–21; Hosea 10:12).

The Holy Spirit works *holiness* in us, teaching us to identify sin and empowering us to overcome it (Galatians 5:13–21) and produce the fruit of the Spirit (5:22–26). This allows us to live holy lives that would be impossible without God's power (Romans 8:1–16).

Redemption is a term associated with being freed from slavery. In the Roman Empire, a slave could purchase his or her own freedom. But sinners have no way to pay for our own freedom. We have not only been bought by the blood of Jesus—we have been set free from our slavery to sin (Romans 6:17). Instead we serve righteousness (6:18).

Put together, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption describe the reality of being in Christ (Ephesians 1:11). Through the cross God has made a way for us to be restored to fellowship with him. This is our salvation in Jesus Christ.

What Do You Think?

What are some practical ways for you to live more fully as a witness that you have righteousness, holiness (sanctification), and redemption in Christ?

Digging Deeper

What specific, personal weakness in this regard does 1 Corinthians 1:31 challenge you on?

What other passages apply?

Conclusion

A. Serving as God Desires

Our last four weeks have explored the examples of Anna, the prophetess daughters of Philip, the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, and Priscilla. In Lydia's case, she made use of her status and wealth to serve God. Her influence brought her household to Christ and had a ripple effect in Philippi. Her prosperous business allowed her to host Paul and his companions in her house, as well as the church that would grow from their efforts. These efforts were not accomplished for the glory of Lydia or Paul. Both sought only to follow Christ and lead others to him.

We might summarize the accounts from this unit and say that each woman served where God gave her opportunity and gifting. The same holds true today. When a woman senses God's calling

on her to use her job, her social connections, and/or the spiritual gifts he gave her for his glory, she can and will find a way to serve. While the same is true for men, the nature of women's ministries has often been less visible and sometimes considered less critical in spreading the gospel.

B. Glorifying in the Cross

As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, God chose the cross to show his wisdom instead of using what was already honored and revered in *any* human society. And the foolishness of the world became the wisdom of God. God still uses people following the way of the cross to show his wisdom to the world. Let us all continue to seek his wisdom and remain open to other “foolish” things God may choose in place of the “wise.” In this way, we seek only God's glory.

C. Prayer

Lord God, all Christians need places to serve! May we answer you as you call us to the right place at the right time and gift us in the right way to do your will. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

Seek the wisdom of the cross. Serve in its shadow.¹

¹ Krause, M. S., Terrill, C., Mehrle, D., & Nickelson, R. L. (2021). [Called to Serve](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, & M. K. Williams (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2020–2021* (Vol. 27, pp. 217–223). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.