

For a link to Dr. Skinner's video on this lesson [click here](#)

Lystra Read Acts 14:8-20

A little background that may help make sense of this story.

- Lystra was a city in Lycaonia in what is today south-central Turkey. It had a reputation for being a cultural backwater. And some considered the people there ignorant and superstitious.
- The Roman poet, Ovid, tells a story about a place near Lystra. The gods, Hermes and Zeus visited the place disguised as human travelers. With the exception of one couple, the residents refused to show hospitality to the guests. In retaliation, the gods sent a flood to destroy everyone save the one couple.

Paul and Barnabas arrive in Lystra and the story that unfolds is both strange and amusing. As you might expect from Paul, when he arrives in town he begins sharing the good news. Paul notices a man who has been lame from birth and heals him. But this miracle has unintended consequences. The Lystrans immediately start speaking in their native language about what have they witnessed. They jump to the conclusion that the gods, Hermes and Zeus, have come to visit and so they set off to make preparations to offer sacrifices in their honor. Because the Lystrans have been speaking in Lycaonian, which Paul and Barnabas most likely did not speak, they are unaware of what is going on until they see the crowds coming with garlands and sacrificial oxen.

- How does knowing the story of the visit of Hermes and Zeus help explain the reaction of the Lystrans?
- When, if ever, have your efforts at witnessing to Jesus have unintended consequences?
- When have cultural differences landed you in strange and amusing situations? How, if at all, were you able to connect with other people despite these differences?

Paul and Barnabas are beside themselves and immediately begin to try to undo the damage. Paul gives a short speech that says nothing specific about Jesus. Paul tells the Lystrans there is just one true God, the maker of heaven and the earth. It is to creation that Paul next appeals to get his point across. God is good, Paul says, and the true character of God, can be seen in that God sends rain, makes harvest plentiful, and makes hearts joyful even for those who do not yet know God. The Lystrans do not need to be afraid, God does not harbor a secret desire to destroy people.

- Skinner characterizes Paul’s speech in Lystra as “desperate” and “sentimental,” but also as “an effort to meet the Lystrans where they are and to offer them a new religious perspective.” What do you think of Paul’s attempt to salvage the situation as a chance to preach the good news?
- If you had one minute to “preach the gospel” to someone who knew nothing about Christianity, what would you say?

In the end, Paul and Barnabas are forced to leave Lystra after others arrive and win over the Lystrans. Skinner writes, “One suspects [the Lystrans] could not let go of their previous ways of making sense of the world. Those are rarely easy for anyone to surrender.”

- When, if ever, has a new religious idea or insight challenged your faith or your previously held ideas/opinions about an issue? How did this insight change your faith or ideas?

Philippi Read Acts 16:11-40

A little background about Philippi

- Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia on the north shore of the Aegean Sea. It had fertile farmland and was located near gold mines. It was established as a Roman colony by the first Roman Emperor, Augustus (formerly Octavian). Its population was made up largely of descendants of veterans of Augustus’ battles and others with prominent military connections. As a Roman colony, it maintained close cultural and political ties to Rome.

Paul and Silas’ arrival in Philippi, with its close ties to Rome, means that the gospel is starting to penetrate into the heart of the empire and beginning to challenge imperial beliefs, traditions, values, and practices. Paul and Silas don’t arrive with a plan to take over the city, but the gospel they proclaim does seek to transform it. Their words and actions prompt the Philippians to close rank against the outsiders who are disturbing the (Roman) peace.

The story starts with the conversion of Lydia. She, too, is an outsider from Thyatira and she is one of the God-fearers. She gathers on the Sabbath day outside of the city with a group of other women to pray. It is there that she meets Paul, is baptized, and hosts the first church in Philippi.

- Why do you think Lydia and her group of fellow worshippers had to meet outside the city gate to worship? How does this notice help set the stage for what will follow?

The next scene involves a young slave girl who was possessed by a spirit of divination. The gift of divination was usually associated the god, Apollo, who was important in the Roman propaganda machine. The girl speaks the truth, declaring Paul and Silas to be slaves of the Most High God who proclaim a way of salvation. For a while, Paul tolerates the spirit, but eventually he becomes annoyed and casts the spirit out.

- Why do you think Paul stops the slave girl from shouting? Read Luke 4:33-35, 41. How does this story of Jesus' encounter with an unclean spirit compare? Why do you think Jesus did not permit the spirit/demon to speak?

When the slave girl's owners see what has happened they drag Paul and Silas into the marketplace and before the magistrates. This is no matter of private religion or spirituality but rather public. Notice that the charge they bring against Paul and Silas is not damage to property, but disturbing the peace and promoting foreign customs and a foreign way of life. See how the ranks begin to close. The slave girl's owners are making a purity or nationalist argument. Paul and Silas are outsiders polluting the city.

The city leaders have Paul and Silas tortured and thrown into prison. In the middle of the night an earthquake destroys the prison foundation. Incarceration will not deter the Holy Spirit! When the jailor wakes up and sees the doors open he assumes the prisoners have escaped. He prepares to kill himself until Paul stops him. Writes Skinner, "Suddenly it's clear [the jailor is] the real prisoner here, serving a system that perpetuates itself through dominance and control over others. But Paul and Silas' God has just unmasked the futility behind those displays of strength." The jailor seeks a way out and Paul and Silas have one. They share the good news of Jesus and baptize him and his family.

- How do the jailor's actions later in the story (see 16:32-34) indicate that his new belief in Jesus frees him from the old system?
- What systems in our society "imprison" people through domination and control? What kinds of things can the church do to cause "earthquakes" or at least tremors to free people from these systems?

The story comes to an end as the city leaders release Paul and Silas, but not before the shocking revelation that Paul and Silas are, in fact, Roman citizens. So quick were they to judge them as Jewish outsiders that their treatment of Paul and Silas denied them their rights and privileges as Romans citizens. Before they let them go, the leaders are forced to apologize to Paul and Silas.

- Why does the revelation that Paul and Silas are Roman citizens alarm the Philippian authorities? How does their reaction further illustrate a system

designed to protect the traditions and privileges of insiders while denying those same privileges to outsiders?

The city leaders had hoped to release the men quietly, but Paul insists that the leaders come to him. Skinner notes there is a triumphalist tone to Paul's demand and such a tone can come across as its attempt to dominate and control others.

- Does such a triumphalist tone make it easier or harder to witness to Jesus? Why?

Ephesus Read Acts 19:11-41

The resistance Paul faces in Ephesus unfolds in two parts. The first part concerns the seven sons of Sceva who were exorcists. After watching Paul cast out spirits in the name of Jesus, they too try use Jesus' name as a means of casting out spirits. To use someone's name is to summon their power. The seven exorcists, who are not followers of Jesus, are trying nevertheless to capitalize on Jesus' power. Like others (think of Judas Isacariot and Simon the Magician who stories we considered in lesson 4), it doesn't end well for them. On the other hand, a number of people did respond to Paul's preaching and his acts of healing and became believers. Some of these too were practicing magicians who in response to their new Christian faith burned their trade books.

- The Bible tells us the books were worth 50,000 silver coins. That's a lot of money that could've been used to support the fledging church. Why do you think they burned their book and didn't sell them?

The second part of the story unfolds in response to the insight of the non-believer, Demetrius. Here again some background information will be helpful to make sense of the story.

- Ephesus is on the west coast of modern day Turkey. It was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire at this time. The city had a millennium-old association with the goddess Artemis. Her temple in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world and it drew lots of visitors from around the Mediterranean world. These visitors brought a lot of money and business with them to spend in Ephesus.

Demetrius was a silversmith whose business made and sold shrines and images of Artemis. His insight is essentially this according to Skinner: "The arrival and growth of Christianity in his region will be bad for business. His reasoning is simple: 'Christians won't just believe differently than they used to. They'll use money differently. If they win the battle of ideas, their values will make our values look bad. Unpopular values quickly become unprofitable.'"

- How do you spend money differently – than other people, or than you did at other points in your life – because you are a Christian?
- What ways of making money do you think the good news threatens today, as it threatened the Ephesian artisan trade?

When Demetrius raises his concern he appeals not only to the pocketbooks of the Ephesians but also to their civic pride. If Christianity takes over, the temple of Artemis will be ignored and the city's reputation will flounder, he argues.

- What or who would you identify as the 'images of Artemis' on which communities today depend for status, influence, and wealth?

An angry mob (and stupid – they don't know why there are there; see 19:32) forms in response to Demetrius' speech. They spend the next few hours shouting "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." Neither Paul nor any of traveling companions are able to get in a word. Eventually the mob is dispersed when the town clerk reminds the people that there are in danger of being charged with rioting (a severe offense in the Roman Empire). Paul, he says, has not blasphemed Artemis and if the artisans have concerns about their business they can use the legal channels available to them.

- Although the town clerk is not a Christian, what, if any, insights or lessons do you think he offers to Christians about how we should speak and act when others resist or reject our witness to Jesus?