

The Converts: All Kinds of People

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God uses different methods to reach different kinds of people.

I used to be good at people watching out in public. But with the advent of smart phones and social media, you might think that people watching has turned into a lost art. Not so! People watching has merely moved from the physical sphere to the digital space. It has become incredibly easy to watch what others are doing by creeping on their social media profiles, not to mention the fact that there are some apps that will tell you where someone is—moment by moment!



Share a people watching story from your life. To what extent can you know someone just by watching them?

When you people watch—either in person or online—one thing that you will notice is that there are so many different people in this world, and every one of them has a unique story. And every one of them puts their hope in something and finds their meaning in something. The truth is while everyone is different in so many ways, we are all the exact same in other ways. We are all loved by God and need the gospel of Jesus Christ.



Name one or two friends, neighbors, or coworkers who are far from God. What do they put their hope in? What do they see as their redemption and purpose in life?

In this session, you will meet three different people who each had a unique encounter with the gospel and were changed. In these three encounters, you will recognize that God uses different methods to reach different kinds of people. For example, in Philippi, Paul and Silas saw converts from different social and economic backgrounds come to faith through their witness and testimony, even though the guts of their message was the same for all: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” By the end of this session, you will learn that God calls us to be faithful to deliver His gospel message to all kinds of people, regardless of their past, their appearance, or their present circumstance.

1. A Businesswoman Whose Heart Is Opened (Acts 16:11-15)

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, the next day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, a Roman colony and a leading city of the district of Macedonia. We stayed in that city for several days. ¹³ On the Sabbath day we went outside the city gate by the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and spoke to the women gathered there. ¹⁴ A God-fearing woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, was listening. The Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying. ¹⁵ After she and her household were baptized, she urged us, “If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

Curiously, in the verses preceding these, we see that the disciples were forbidden by the Holy Spirit from speaking the gospel in Asia and from even entering the region of Bithynia (16:6-7). But soon thereafter, Paul received a vision in which a Macedonian man was standing and pleading with him to come and help them (v. 9). It was because of this vision that the disciples set sail and ended up in Macedonia (v. 10). God had a plan for them, and He was going to accomplish His will.



Have you ever planned ministry, or perhaps a mission trip, in which you encountered opposition and were unable to fulfill your plan? Were you able to look back and see God’s hand providentially guiding that situation?

When the disciples finally arrived in Macedonia, it is not hard to imagine they were full of expectation for God to work in a mighty way. After all, the Holy Spirit prevented them from going one way and gave them a vision to come to this very city! However, after a few days in the city, they didn't experience any dramatic signs, miracles, or conversions. In fact, in place of a synagogue, a group of women gathered outside of the city by the river to pray. Paul and the disciples found this group of women and sat down to talk with them.

Then we read about the disciples meeting a woman named Lydia. One of the reasons—perhaps the only reason—God sent the disciples to Macedonia was so that this woman might hear the gospel and be changed! But then we also see a chain reaction happen.

The Lord opened up this businesswoman's heart and she accepted the gospel. Then her entire household was baptized. The disciples were then invited to stay with her at her house. This was providential because later on we read that after Paul and Silas were imprisoned and then released from jail, they went straight to Lydia's house, where they saw and encouraged the brothers and sisters in the faith before departing the city (Acts 16:40).

Voices from the Church

"The Lord is the one who graciously opens hearts to repent and believe the gospel. Because God is powerful and does this, it encourages us to pray for those who do not yet believe."¹

—Justin S. Holcomb

Lydia did not just hear the gospel and walk away.

Rather, God used her to minister to and bless the disciples. The gospel gripped her heart and changed her. God cares about the smallest of details, and He is deeply involved in the lives of everyone—one person at a time—and so should we be.



Why is it so easy to value ministry to the masses over ministry to the individual?



In what ways are both important?

2. A Slave Girl Whose Freedom Is Won (Acts 16:16-24)

¹⁶ Once, as we were on our way to prayer, a slave girl met us who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She made a large profit for her owners by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ As she followed Paul and us she cried out, “These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God.” ¹⁸ She did this for many days.

Paul was greatly annoyed. Turning to the spirit, he said, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!” And it came out right away.

¹⁹ When her owners realized that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities. ²⁰ Bringing them before the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are seriously disturbing our city. They are Jews ²¹ and are promoting customs that are not legal for us as Romans to adopt or practice.” ²² The crowd joined in the attack against them, and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had severely flogged them, they threw them in jail, ordering the jailer to guard them carefully. ²⁴ Receiving such an order, he put them into the inner prison and secured their feet in the stocks.

Paul exercised the authority that he had in Jesus and commanded the spirit to leave that girl. The evil spirit left her, everyone rejoiced, and all went home happily—not quite. Instead of celebrating that this slave girl was set free, her owners got angry because their hope for profit out of her was gone. Their source of income had been cast out along with the evil spirit. So her owners dragged Paul and Silas before the city leaders and leveled several charges against them, hoping something would stick.

It would have been easy for Paul and Silas to ignore this slave girl and continue on their mission. Sure she was aggravating them, but she wasn’t their focus, right? Or was she?

The slave girl and Lydia offer an interesting contrast. Lydia was a business owner who probably had significant financial means. She was a committed worshiper of God who was probably open and eager to hear about Jesus. It was probably easy for Paul to step into her life with the gospel.

Voices from the Church


“Christian ministry inflicts losses on the evil one and he will not give in easily.”²

—Paul Mumo Kisau

The slave girl, on the other hand, had nothing, not even her freedom. She was not a worshiper of God and probably wasn't even looking for Him. While this girl no doubt received her fair share of attention in public, she probably frightened most people away from her.

Two very different people with the very same need—deliverance through Jesus. The slave girl reminds us of our need not to count anyone out and always to be ready to be used by God to meet their needs, no matter what they may be.

 In what ways are individuals commonly enslaved today? What does freedom from such enslavement look like?

 How can we bring the hope of the gospel to such people?

There is power in the name of Jesus! Evil spirits flee at the name of Jesus and people experience freedom in the name of Jesus. We read about the power that we have in Jesus when we pray in His name in John 14:13-14: “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”

Demons and evil spirits are subject to Jesus, so we pray and minister in His name: “The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name’” (Luke 10:17). We read of the same commissioning and empowerment in Acts 4:29-30: “And now, Lord, consider their threats, and grant that your servants may speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand for healing, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”



What is the connection between sin and the need for freedom from enslavement?

3. A Jailer Whose Hope Is Restored (Acts 16:25-34)



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

²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains came loose. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison standing open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself, since he thought the prisoners had escaped.

²⁸ But Paul called out in a loud voice, "Don't harm yourself, because we're all here!"

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He escorted them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹ They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house. ³³ He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴ He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, and rejoiced because he had come to believe in God with his entire household.

When the jailer woke up and saw that the doors of the prison were open, he thought his life was over. He was asleep on the job and thought all the prisoners had escaped. Roman jailers were personally responsible for their prisoners and could be executed for allowing them to escape. However, unbeknownst to him, no one left. Everyone stayed put.

In fact, when the jailer realized that no one had escaped, something happened in his heart and he realized that there really was a God and that Paul and Silas knew this God! Perhaps the jailer had heard Paul and Silas preaching in the city before this. Perhaps it was seeing them live selflessly and not try to escape when given the opportunity. Perhaps it was their concern for his life, or maybe it was that he fell asleep listening to worship songs ringing in his ears. Whatever it was that prompted him, we know that God was at work, and Paul and Silas were prepared to respond.



What are some circumstances in which we can show care and concern for others that they would not harm themselves?

The jailer rushed to Paul and Silas and asked them, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul characteristically responded by appealing for the jailer to believe in Jesus and then preached the gospel to him. The gospel preached and proclaimed is powerful. However, when the gospel is first personally lived out in a person’s life and then preached and proclaimed to those who know him or her, the impact is exponentially multiplied.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

82. *New Identity of the Believer*

When a person places faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God’s wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God’s family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ’s perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a “new creation” in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, becoming more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

Moments like these can happen all around us on any day. While there may not be a literal earthquake involved, people around us are being shaken in different ways. Just like the jailer at first, many will experience something or receive news that will cause them to despair and feel hopeless. Will we be ready to step in with the hope of the gospel? Others will hear something, see something, or experience something that opens the door for them to consider the gospel. Will we be ready to turn our attention away from ourselves and what we are doing and give it to them to share Jesus?



What do we need to be doing to make sure we are aware of people who may be struggling with hopelessness?



What can we be doing to prepare ourselves for sharing the gospel with those who feel hopeless?

Conclusion

It's important that we be ready and willing to share the gospel with anyone around us at anytime. The gospel crosses over all divisions and barriers that man has established—culture, ethnicity, socio-economics, politics, and more—and so should our love and compassion. So build relationships with your lost neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family. Live out the gospel before them. Embody the gospel sent to them. And pray for an opportunity to share the gospel with them—to preach the same message that Paul preached and that we all need: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

CHRIST CONNECTION: The gospel reaches different people in different ways. In Philippi, Paul and Silas saw converts from different social and economic backgrounds comes to faith through their witness and testimony. Their message was the same for all: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to be faithful to deliver His message to all kinds of people, using a variety of methods.

1. What steps should we take when we find someone whose heart has been opened by the Lord to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

2. How can your group/church prepare one another for and encourage one another in the midst of persecution for the sake of God's mission?

3. How can we change our perspective and expectations regarding miserable situations with a view toward hope, both for ourselves and others?

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