

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

ACTS 16:1-5 JULY 15, 2020

During Donald Trump's presidential campaign he was asked how he would run his administration with regard to staff. What would be his criteria in choosing individuals to join him in office? The answer started: "Track record, great competence, love of what they're doing...references. We have to get the best people...and if we don't, we'll be in trouble."¹ He would echo that statement many times on the campaign trail.

Now, several years down the line, critics of the President often use his answer, changing it to say, "I only hire the best people," and poke fun at him due to not only the high turnover rate but also the often public disagreements that spill onto Twitter. In the end, in many cases, competence and references weren't *quite* enough to keep the job that was offered to them.

That's not meant to be a political statement, simply an observation. These jobs, of course, demand incredible amounts of sustained intensity from the people. The pressure is extreme and undoubtedly takes a toll no matter how competent a person is or how much they love the work. That's just a reality of these positions.

In the opening of Acts 16 Paul is on what we call his second missionary journey, which he starts by going back through some of the towns he had evangelized in his *first* missionary journey. These were not easy places to go. They were places where he had encountered deadly opposition. But, Paul wasn't afraid and *this* was the job - to be used by God to strengthen the churches. While revisiting the cities of Lystra and Derbe, Paul is going to bring a young man named Timothy onto his team. And Timothy would become much more than an assistant or partner to Paul, he'd become like a son to him. Later in life he would say that there was no one more like-minded with him than Timothy, his dearly loved son in the faith.² We can understand why Paul had such an affection for Timothy. As we follow his story through the Bible, we find he's one of the most remarkable characters of the New Testament. A man of great faith and great faithfulness. Great endurance and humility and grace. He had a great track record, a great deal of competence, great references, a love for the work and the people he'd encounter in it.

But, as we're introduced to him here, we're going to see something that surprises us. We're going to see Paul, the warrior of salvation by grace through faith and *not* of works, say to Timothy, "I'd like you to come with us on this trip to preach the Good News of grace, but *first* I need you to become a *bit more* Jewish. I need you to go through the rite of circumcision, and then we can go into the Gentile world and tell people they *don't* need to be circumcised in order to be saved."

So what's going on here? And what does it mean for us as people who also want to be a part of God's team that goes into the world preaching the message of Jesus?

Let's explore the what and why in these verses, starting in verse 1.

Acts 16:1a - Paul went on to Derbe and Lystra...

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWwLvs7IAMQ>

² Philippians 2:20, 2 Timothy 1:2

Just to keep us all on the same page: It was in the city of Lystra where Paul had worked a miracle, been mistaken for the god Hermes. Then people came from some other towns where Paul had taught that you are justified by *belief* and *not* through the Law of Moses and they stoned Paul to death. It seems that one of the people who witnessed this happen was young Timothy. He and some of the other new believers then gathered around Paul's body and saw God raise him to life again.

Acts 16:1b - where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a believing Jewish woman, but his father was a Greek.

We're not sure how old Timothy is at this point, maybe around 20 years old, maybe a little less. We know that 12 (or so) years later when Paul writes First Timothy he's still referred to as young.³

We're given some family information here, that Timothy's mother (Eunice) was a Jew who had been born again. In Second Timothy we'll be told that Eunice's mother, Lois was also a believer. They were a family with sincere faith, who searched the Scriptures and taught Timothy to do the same.

Whether Timothy's father was a Christian or what the Jews would call a "God-fearer," we don't know. We just know that he wasn't Jewish by nationality, he was a Gentile. And, while Timothy was raised in the Scriptures from a young age,⁴ he had not been raised as a *Jewish* child, as far as rites and rituals go. Beyond this, we can only make guesses about Timothy's dad. Some paint him as a pagan, others as a proselyte. It seems from the context of what comes up in a moment that he was, at least in the general area, a man of some sort of prominence, known throughout multiple cities.

Acts 16:2 - ²The brothers and sisters at Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him.

They spoke highly of *Timothy*, not his dad. So, Paul gets to town and is revisiting friends he made before and they can't wait to talk to him about this young man. "Do you remember that kid who was there when you were stoned? *Man* has he turned out to be a fine young Christian." Really, this is more than just, "He's a great kid." Christians from two churches in different towns are commending him to Paul, who was in need of another team member. And when we compile all the little bits of things we know about Timothy from references to him in letters later in the New Testament, what we find was that not only was he a good, upstanding young man, but that prophecies had been given concerning him and his service to the Lord.⁵ We know that he would receive spiritual gifting through the laying on of Paul's hands.⁶ We know that he had great leadership skills because he was able to step into difficult ministries in places like Corinth and Ephesus and help guide the churches there in truth. We know he had a strong backbone. He could watch Paul be brutally murdered but then when he was asked to go *with* him onto the field, he didn't flinch. He wasn't only well-respected in his little cul-de-sac, but already in multiple cities.

He was a shoo-in for rookie of the year, when it came to the spiritual draft. But, we *never* see him parading or indulging himself in selfish pursuits or trying to make a name for himself. His faith was sincere and his desire was to glorify God with his life, not glorify himself. Paul noticed. And the Holy Spirit noticed. And God *would* do great things through this life.

³ Ellicott's Commentary For English Readers

⁴ 2 Timothy 3:15

⁵ 1 Timothy 1:18

⁶ 2 Timothy 1:6

This is an encouragement to all of you younger listeners. You can glorify God in your youth. You can serve God in your youth. We try to create space for that here at Calvary. Sometimes we could probably do more, but we believe that God can use young men and women the way he used Timothy. And if you're there just thinking that life feels like the same thing over and over, just going to school, doing your chores, the same routine, remind yourself of this truth: You exist to glorify God and to be used by Him for His eternal purposes. Because that's true, make your life ready the way Timothy did, by learning the Scriptures, learning to be faithful, learning to love others and choosing God's way instead of any other.

So, here's Timothy, rookie of the year, ready to go. Paul's ready to draft him. There's just *one* thing...

Acts 16:3 - ³Paul wanted Timothy to go with him; so he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, since they all knew that his father was a Greek.

I remember when I was lifeguarding years ago, there was another guy about my age who was trying to get into the coast guard. He told me that he had a meeting with his recruiter, went in ready to go, but because he had an ingrown toe-nail, they said, "We can't take you until that's cleared up." You with a military background know there are many conditions that can keep you out of service.⁷

Now, let me read verse 4 and then we'll circle back to what's going on here.

Acts 16:4 - ⁴As they traveled through the towns, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem for the people to observe.

On first glance it doesn't make sense that verse 3 is right next to verse 4. "We're going to go tell people that circumcision is not a requirement, but before we do that, you *have* to be circumcised, otherwise you can't come!"

The issue isn't terribly complicated, we're given Paul's justification in verse 3. In the immediate region, Timothy's dad was a well-known figure. When Paul and Silas and Timothy went into synagogues in these places, it would be a big ingrown-toenail to have an uncircumcised member of the team. A lot of the Jews in those cities wouldn't even be interested in hearing their message because of it. So, in order to *remove* that potential and probable barrier, Paul said, "Let's just bypass it." And, frankly, Paul faced a *lot* of obstacles, day in and day out, so if he was able to get rid of one, I'm sure he was glad to.

While the reasoning isn't *complicated*, it does raise a lot implications for us. It's easy for me to think, "Well, I'm not half-Jewish, I'm not Timothy, I'm more like *Titus*." Paul would explain to the Galatians that Titus, who was a Gentile, was *not* compelled to be circumcised.

But, what about this Timothy thing? What can it teach us? Because, if it was me, I would've just said, "Well, why don't I just meet you when you get to a city *where they don't know my dad*?" This team was going to end up in Philippi and Thessalonica. No one knew Timothy there. And, after all, it wasn't their *business* whether he was circumcised or not, right? And, wouldn't it be Paul, telling *Timothy* of all people, "We know that the law is not meant for a righteous person."⁸ So what gives?

⁷ <https://www.military.com/join-armed-forces/disqualifiers-medical-conditions.html>

⁸ 1 Timothy 1:9

All that is true. And Paul would *never* say that Timothy (or anyone else) would have to be circumcised or follow the Mosaic Law *in order to be saved*. The Bible could not be clearer: We are saved by grace alone through faith alone. No works, no merit, no rituals, no payments can be made to purchase for yourself a ticket into heaven.

Paul's decision to have Timothy circumcised wasn't about *salvation*, it was about *mission*. He would do what was necessary to remove obstacles to delivering people the Gospel. Even when it was inconvenient or painful or, in some cases, dangerous, this was what was necessary to accomplish the mission. And it wasn't that Paul just forced this on *others*. We know what kind of man he was. He, himself, lived by this code. He said, "When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. Even though I'm not subject to the law, I lived under it when I was around them so that I could bring them to Christ."⁹

I know most of you here, this evening to be kind and decent people. When you're driving in your car, maybe headed somewhere important or maybe not important, maybe just somewhere you want to go, and an ambulance comes up behind you, lights and sirens on, what do you do? You pull over. You set yourself aside in an effort to save life. That's the idea.

Sadly, some departments are reporting more incidents where people are *not* pulling over for emergency vehicles.¹⁰

But we understand the need. I may be on my way somewhere, but when a siren goes off, we're potentially talking life and death. So *compassion* trumps my *convenience*. And when we're talking about God's rescue plan, we are expected to lay down our own lives, to step down from our own comfort or convenience or rights, the way Christ did, as we try to save people who are headed toward an eternity in hell.

Timothy had a lot of great spiritual skills. He was set up to be a great pastor and teacher and leader in the early church. But all those skills wouldn't have mattered much if he held onto his own comfort and convenience and refused to put himself on the altar for the Lord's glory.

In Paul's two letters to him, which we have in the New Testament, the apostle talks a lot about avoiding meaningless arguments and debates. Get past those endless bickerings and into something deeper.

Once Timothy was a pastor, Paul would say to him: "You're called to serve God. You're called to do the work of an evangelist and I want you to set an example for others."¹¹ An example in what? Well, many things, but some that connect back to this first choice in Acts 16 are to: To endure all things for the elect that they may obtain salvation.¹² To pursue gentleness in his conduct.¹³ To not quarrel, which the servant of the Lord must not do, but to instead fight the good fight and "compete according to the rules."¹⁴

Here in our text, Paul saw something in Timothy. He saw his potential. He saw the calling God had placed on his life. He imagined all the things the Lord would do through him, great things. But there

⁹ 1 Corinthians 9:20

¹⁰ <https://www.ptleader.com/stories/police-motorists-arent-pulling-over-for-emergency-vehicles,7138>

¹¹ 1 Timothy 4:12

¹² 1 Timothy 2:10

¹³ 1 Timothy 6:11

¹⁴ 2 Timothy 2:5

was this thing that might slow him down or hold him back from full effectiveness. Something that might keep him from moving about freely on the field.

In the first *Cars* movie, The King comes up to Lightning McQueen and says, “You got more talent in one lug-nut than a lot of cars has got on their whole body...but you’re stupid.” He tries to tell Lightning that he needs to learn humility and how to be a team player. Unfortunately, Lightning has to learn the hard way.

Timothy didn’t. He was ready to walk the talk. He lived obedience, even when obedience was inconvenient for painful. There was no way that he was going to hold onto some liberty if it would be a barrier between their message and the lost.

Now, how might this example translate to us? We, too, are called to do the work of an evangelist. We, too, are lucky enough to have been drafted into the King’s eternal work. Circumcision isn’t an issue in our time or culture. But it is *still* our duty to concern ourselves with the fate of the lost and do what we can to reach out to them. That’s the proper conduct of a Christian. To make it our business to clear the way so that help can arrive through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To be like our Lord, who *stepped down* from heaven into the backwoods ruin of earth and live a life of radical, loving compassion so that people could be saved from their sins.

We can take a cue from Timothy and this strange start to his missions work and find ways to avoid meaningless arguments with those we’re trying to minister to. That certainly means not *starting* them, but it also might mean cutting something away that might be an easily removed obstacle. Maybe that Facebook post needs to be deleted. Maybe that article of clothing that is *meant* to be inflammatory isn’t the best attire for preaching a Savior of compassion and grace.

Men like Paul and Timothy show us that this Christian life is a real and personal faith. It’s meant to be thoughtful and active, not only outwardly active, but inwardly as well.

If we follow Timothy through the New Testament we find that he was often the guy sent to tackle the difficult assignments. At one point, he’s sent to pastor in Corinth - a church with a lot of problems to overcome. It seems he was also sent to minister for a time to the church in Ephesus. A difficult city and a difficult ministry. Good reputation, a fine heritage and impressive references are good to have, but it’s humility, obedience, and being willing to die to self that makes a person useful to God in hard situations like those. It’s that kind of Christianity that results in a healthy church. Dr. Luke would agree. Look at verse 5.

Acts 16:5 - ^sSo the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Why? Because of the Holy Spirit, of course, but it was the Holy Spirit working through people who took their Christianity seriously and who believed that it was their duty and privilege to obey and be a part of the rescue effort here on the earth. And, often times, that meant pulling over to the side so the ambulance could get through. Laying down rights or conveniences so that the Gospel might have a little less resistance in the ears of people who didn’t even know they needed to be saved. This life of grace and compassion, truth and purpose was winsome to people because it spoke volumes of Christ’s love and ability to save.