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(Acts 15:36-16:40)

Intro. Well, we are certainly in the midst of bowl season—a couple of big bowl games yesterday & the Orange Bowl Friday night. There are more big games tomorrow & the following week. As most of you know, my wife is a BIG Alabama fan & when she found out the championship game will be played in Tampa, she wanted tickets. When we discovered they are going for \$4,500 each, we decided against it. She said she didn’t want to go without me, but I told her she would still have plenty of fun without me. That reminds me of a story where a diehard fan was surprised to see an empty seat at the Super Bowl stadium & remarked about it to a woman sitting nearby. “It was my husband’s,” the woman explained, “But he died.” “I’m very sorry,” said the man. “Yet I’m really surprised that another relative, or friend, didn’t jump at the chance to take the seat reserved for him.” “Beats me,” she said. “They all insisted on going to the funeral.” (*Coffee Break*). That lady had her priorities & when you think about it, we all have priorities in life, don’t we? As we begin a new series on “Missions 401: To the End of the Earth” from Acts 15-28, we begin in chapters 15-16 with “Putting the Gospel First” (read Acts 15:36-41; 16:6-15, 25-40).

Theme: Obeying God’s call & evangelism

Background: After Jesus gave the Great Commission, telling His followers they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit so they could be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria & the ends of the earth, we see that unfold in the rest of Acts. Chapters 1-7 take place in Jerusalem. Chapters 8-12 are in Judea & Samaria. Chapters 13 & following are to the ends of the earth, with the first 3 chapters of this section focused on Paul’s 1st missionary journey.

- These chapters show the beginning of Paul’s 2nd journey, a journey into Europe with the gospel & because Paul put the Lord & His gospel first, nothing would deter him from that mission.
- **What are some ways we can demonstrate “Putting the Gospel First” in our missions endeavors?**
- 1. When necessary, divide & conquer & reach more people with the gospel (15:36-41)**
- Sometimes we hear the words “divide” & it conjures up negative thoughts, but it need not do so, because some divisions are helpful. With the case of Paul & Barnabas & their disagreement over John Mark, they divided & had 2 missionary teams
- Studies show time & again that one of the best ways to grow a church is to do so by starting new small group units & to do so effectively, some people have to leave their group to help start a new one—we need more new SS classes started in 2017—is the Lord calling you to help start a new class? Will you put the gospel first?
- In the upcoming weeks, we will be purchasing some video equipment through a couple of designated gifts & we want to use it to reach more people online but also to offer another simultaneous, contemporary service on the South Campus—we will need to find out what families we can count on to help us get that started, but such a division can help us multiply in ways we never have before

Illus: The story is told of a prosperous, young investment banker who was driving a new BMW sedan on a mountain road during a snow storm. As he veered around one sharp turn, he lost control and began sliding off the road toward a steep cliff. At the last moment he unbuckled his seat belt, flung open his door, and leaped from the car, which then plummeted to the bottom of the ravine and burst into a ball of flames. Although he had escaped with his life, the man suffered a ghastly injury. Somehow his arm had been caught near the hinge of the door as he jumped and had been torn off at the shoulder. A passing trucker saw the accident in his rearview mirror, pulled his rig to a halt and ran back to see if he could help. When he arrived at the scene, he found the banker standing at the roadside, looking down at the BMW burning in the ravine below. Incredibly the banker was oblivious to his injury and moaned, “My BMW! My new BMW!” The trucker pointed at the banker’s shoulder and said, “You’ve got bigger problems than that car. We’ve got to find your arm. Maybe the surgeons can sew it back on!” The banker looked where his arm had been, paused a moment, and groaned, “Oh no! My Rolex! My new Rolex!”—while he should have been focused on losing his arm, we shouldn’t be focused on losing a few class members or church members to start something new to reach more, because the gospel should be our first priority

2. When possible, re-invest & encourage previous partners in the gospel (15:41-16:8)

- One of Paul’s trademarks was his continual visits to people from his previous mission trips—on his 2nd missionary journey, he revisited everyone from his 1st visit. On his 3rd missionary visit, he re-visited people from the first journey & parts of his 2nd journey (also writing to them)

- It is right for us to establish mission partners & to revisit them, when possible, to encourage them in their work
- We've done that with Indianapolis in the past & New Hampshire & Bolivia & Cuba & more & hopefully, we will have opportunities to re-invest in some of those places & some of those people in the future

Illus: A professor once spent a summer teaching in Mexico & he took his children with him. To pass the time as they drove, one of his young sons, Larry, watched for license plates. The trip to Mexico netted him plates from 24 states, and while they were there he saw four more. So when they started back, he was over halfway to having "collected" all 50. Their return trip was during the peak vacation season, and to top it off, they went through Yellowstone National Park—a license-plate collector's paradise. By the morning of the second day there, he had just one more state to go: Delaware. Larry became obsessed with finding a license plate from Delaware. When they stopped to see Yellowstone's magnificent sights, he didn't glance at them. He preferred to run up and down the parking lots, looking at license plates. Talk about stress! Talk about anxiety! You would have thought that his whole life depended on finding a Delaware license plate! When they stopped to eat in a cafeteria near Yellowstone Falls, Larry begged his father to let him look for license plates. "Please, I don't want to eat," Larry said. "Can't I just stay here in the parking lot?" "No," they told him, "you have to eat." So he went inside and ate as quickly as he could get the food down and then headed out to the parking lot. No sooner had they finished their meal, however, that Larry came bounding across the parking lot. "Come here! You've got to see it! You won't believe it if you don't see it!" All of them went running out—and there, just pulling out of a parking space, was a blue Volkswagen bus with Delaware license plates. In fact, we got a picture, and decades later, when they look at their Yellowstone pictures, that's the picture that tells more about what they did in Yellowstone than anything else (*Signs of the Times*, August, 1992, 12)—don't miss opportunities to reinvest because of the wrong focus

3. Without question, help reach the unreached & under-served with the gospel (16:9-40)

- After Paul retraced his steps in the East, he tried to turn South & North, but the Spirit prevented him from doing so. Thus, Paul traveled West to Troas until he ran out of real estate & heard from a vision to go to Europe, where the gospel was yet to be known
- Paul's obedience to God's vision to him resulted in Lydia & her family coming to know the Lord, as well as the Philippian jailer & his family—they believed in the once-crucified-yet-risen Lord & then they were baptized as their confession of faith
- Paul didn't let imprisonment stop him in his mission, because reaching the unreached was without question for him—we need that kind of resolve

Illus: A lighthouse along a bleak coast was tended by a keeper who was given enough oil for one month and told to keep the light burning every night. One day a woman asked for oil so that her children could stay warm. Then a farmer came. His son needed oil for a lamp so he could read. Still another needed some for an engine. The keeper saw each as a worthy request and measured out just enough oil to satisfy all. Near the end of the month, the tank in the lighthouse ran dry. That night the beacon was dark and three ships crashed on the rocks. More than 100 lives were lost. When a government official investigated, the man explained what he had done and why. "You were given one task alone," insisted the official. "It was to keep the light burning. Everything else was secondary. There is no defense" (sermonillustrations.com)

- When possible, we should go & help missionaries where the authentic gospel is hardly known—we are going to Ecuador next month to train pastors & assist in cities where the gospel is hardly known
- We are looking to partner with a church planter in Miami because over 90% don't know the gospel & it should be easy for us to send multiple teams each year to help with a variety of ministry opportunities
- Sometimes we cannot go certain places, because they are restricted to us traveling there, but we can pray & give to support the missionaries who are there undercover & we should do so without question

Conc. In a Berlin art gallery is a painting by German painter Adolf Menzel (1815-1905). Only partially finished, Menzel intended to show Fredrick the Great speaking with some of his generals. Menzel painted the generals and background, leaving the king until last. He made an outline of Fredrick in charcoal, but died prior to finishing it. Many people come to the end of their lives without ever having put Christ into his proper place, center stage (Karl Laney, *Marching Orders*, 45). I want people of FBS to put the gospel first, but to do so, you must have Christ at the center of your life. Would you trust Him today?