

*Words and Deeds: Spirit Led*  
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*Isaiah 63:11-14; Luke 12:8-12; Acts 16:6-15*

Our final Scripture reading today is Acts 16:6-15. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. 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. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. 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.”

Sometimes, pastors are accused of using big theological words nobody understands. Well, today I’m going to use a big psychology term instead. Today’s \$10 term is cognitive dissonance. What is cognitive dissonance? Cognitive means the process of thinking, the wheels in your mind turning. Dissonance is the unpleasant feeling you get when two things clash because they aren’t in harmony. Cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable feeling you get when two opposing ideas clash in your mind, or when your actions clash with your beliefs.

Here’s an example. I believe in following the law. When I’m in a hurry, I go over the speed limit. My actions clash with my beliefs – ow. My *actual* belief is that following the law is important, but not as important as me being on time. And because I’ve never gotten a speeding ticket, my belief is validated because I don’t break the law enough for any police officer to care.

We often don’t notice when our beliefs and actions contradict one another. We believe in eating healthy, but we eat Burger King or Taco Bell a lot. We believe in a good night’s sleep, but we’re on YouTube or Facebook or binge-watching Netflix until midnight. We believe in exercise until we have to get on the treadmill. In all these situations, our *real* belief is different from our *imagined* belief. And it’s ultimately our *real* belief that determines who we are.

The apostle Peter demonstrates it perfectly. Peter honestly believed, he imagined, that he would not let Jesus go to the cross. Peter confidently says he would never abandon Jesus or deny Him. That’s what Peter genuinely thought. Yet when the day came and guys with swords showed up, Peter’s real beliefs came out. He was a coward; he fled the scene of Jesus’ arrest and then denied knowing Jesus three times when he was confronted later that night.

The cognitive dissonance for Peter was too much. When he denies Jesus, he weeps bitterly. He knows he has failed. Everything he thinks about himself comes crashing down. At the moment when it mattered, his *real* beliefs, his real self, came out. It was utterly in conflict with who he thought he was. He is devastated. He's in a funk until Jesus restores Him as His disciple by the seashore. It's then that Peter realizes he is forgiven, this was part of God's plan, and from here on, Peter's actions match his words.

In today's passage, nobody seems to have any cognitive dissonance. Nobody seems conflicted. The cognitive dissonance should come to us as we read it. We might read it very straightforwardly – “this happened and this happened and this happened” – as a journalist's report. Luke is a model for journalism even today. But if we read it that way, we've missed the shocking bit. Things in today's passage should make us say, “Whah?”

It's very easy to miss the important things in this passage because there are a lot of place names... a lot of cities and regions are mentioned, and we don't know anything about them. It's easy to get lost in those names. Don't feel bad, because it's not just because all these places sound weird and existed in the ancient world.

If I told you that I took a trip from the region of Evansville to Nashville, then from Speedway over to Broad Ripple before I went to Whiteland and Franklin, you'd probably have no idea what I was talking about. As a Michigander, you'd have no point of reference. But as a Hoosier, I know all of those places. In the same way, I couldn't have a conversation with my director at work one day because she got caught up in me saying that a donor was from Port oRlon, with the emphasis on RI, rather than Port Orion that sounds like an Oreo cookie.

Don't let those details stop you from seeing the most important thing. Paul's troop originally visited churches he established on his first missionary journey. They plan to go into some new cities to preach, ones that are a part of modern-day Turkey. And the Holy Spirit kept them from going there. So instead, they travel along the borders of the region, not near major cities, seeing where the Holy Spirit would lead. They again try to go somewhere – this time, a region called Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus (another name for the Holy Spirit) won't allow it. They pass it by too. They finally reach a city named Troas.

In Troas, Paul has a vision. There's a man from Macedonia begging for Paul to come and help them. No missionary has yet been there – it's southeastern Europe, including modern countries like Greece and Bulgaria, Serbia and Kosovo. The group immediately packs up, concluding that the vision was God's way of signaling to them that they were to head there.

God didn't allow them to travel and preach where they wanted, because God had other plans in mind. Because if you notice, in Troas the text changes from “they” to “we.” Luke, the author of Acts, must have lived in Troas, and he joins in the narrative from here. We're no longer reading a journalist compiling the facts from others – now we are reading an eyewitness account of Paul's journeys.

Here's what I want us to catch, and what is likely going to cause some cognitive dissonance for us. The Holy Spirit twice stops the disciples from going where they want to go. Then God sends Paul a vision that the entire fellowship agrees is God's direction for their future. What is going on here? This passage should make us stop and pause. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit didn't let them go somewhere?

First, let's note that the group is letting the Holy Spirit set their agenda rather than following their own. Remember last week? Paul and Barnabas, the closest of friends for 15 years, parted ways because they both had their own agendas when it came to Barnabas' nephew John Mark and whether or not he'd be allowed to come on this second missionary journey. That mistake is not repeated. Paul is not following any agenda as to where he's got to go. He and his companions are actively engaged with the Holy Spirit and doing what He says (and stopping when He says, "Stop.")

But second, and perhaps more importantly for us, are we expecting the Spirit to speak to us? I don't necessarily mean with an audible voice ringing in our ears, but are we looking for His guidance to us? Twice, the fellowship on this journey is stopped by the Holy Spirit. We do not know how. Luke doesn't say. Maybe as they were heading in those directions, someone got sick or a mule went lame. Maybe when they prayed, they all sensed something was off. Maybe the Holy Spirit said something to one of them directly. All those are possible; which one is the truth is just us guessing.

But here's the thing: they were looking for the Holy Spirit's leading, and when they weren't to go to a certain place, they recognized the Holy Spirit's guidance and followed it. They weren't following their own path but the path laid out by the Spirit of Jesus. They expected the Holy Spirit to show them the way.

There was nothing directly wrong with preaching in the province of Asia. In fact, there are seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation, all of them in the province of Asia. All of them were established during later missionary journeys. God didn't ignore this area at all. But for whatever reason, it wasn't in God's plan or timing for them to go there at this time. It would have been appropriate to preach there – it just wasn't what God wanted then.

Here's where the cognitive dissonance comes in: do we believe that the Holy Spirit could lead us in the same way? Do we believe that the Holy Spirit could be so real to us as to direct our daily lives? Even if His leadings are subtle, do we give Him credit for them? I'd like to think most of us live our lives in ways that are generally biblical, we aren't intentionally defying God's ways, and if we do, we repent and change direction. But we rarely expect God to lead us through His Holy Spirit. We rarely stop long enough to ask, "Spirit, what would you have me do today? Of all the good choices before me, which one is best?"

I believe the Holy Spirit intervenes in modern life. I believed and said "no" to CrossWay twice so He could say "yes" to us now. The first time, we tried to rent property at the former Foam Factory on Hall Road. There was a church already there, Ascension Lutheran, that purchased our old property. We really thought it was a good location. The owner said he didn't want another church in his building.

Nearly two years ago, we were looking to rent a building that Evident Church was using. The landlord was fine with it, but the city wasn't – too little parking, they said. Both times were difficult. Both times, we had to keep worshipping on Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons instead of on Sunday morning. It was painful to go through the work only to be told “no.”

And yet, had we entered into a rental agreement at the prices quoted, CrossWay would not exist today. Had the Holy Spirit not stopped the deals, we would not be in this location, rent free, able to spend money on helping those in need and getting our name out to newcomers to the area. You could say that the building owner stopped us, or that the city government of Chesterfield stopped us. Or you could look past that and see that it was the Holy Spirit working to keep us from disaster by taking on debts that would not serve God's Kingdom.

The question for us today is not how the Holy Spirit speaks – if through direct speech or influencing the actions of others or giving us dreams and visions, since it seems that all of those are valid at some point in time or another. The question for us is, do we expect Him to speak to us? Are we waiting on the Lord with confidence that He is moving and will direct us if we wait upon Him and listen to Him?

This has been gnawing on me ever since I started reading this passage. In our weekly Bible study, we've been discussing prayer the past couple of weeks. And at least a couple of us realized that we often pray out of obedience to God, but not out of expectancy. We want God to do something but we expect nothing. And when I say expect, I don't mean like “force God to do something.” We obviously can't do that.

But when we pray, we often are like, “OK, I've prayed, guess that's it.” We don't expect God to move mightily, even though the entire biblical record shows God's hand moving in incredible ways, doing awesome deeds, displaying His grace through signs and wonders and healings. When we ask for things that are according to the Father's will for us, God says He will answer and give us good gifts!

Do we expect answers to our prayers? Do we expect the Spirit to be leading us through life as the counselor Jesus promised us? If not, are we willing to start living in expectation of all God will do? Looking for Him to do what He has already promised He will do? Because I believe that God is no less powerful than He was in the first century, and I believe that God is no less willing to show His power and display His affection on us as He was then either.

Here's what I want us to examine this week in our lives: are we being faithful, or is our faith closer to superstition? We don't want that feeling like our actions don't meet up with our words, so be honest. When we live in faith, we know Jesus loves us and has promised our best. Superstition follows Jesus not out of love, only out of fear of His wrath. Faith looks for the Spirit to direct us and wants to see His movement because we want to follow; superstition wants to justify our bad choices and looks for coincidences to say, “God must want that for me.”

When we pray in faith, we pray confident that God has heard us, confident that God will answer us, and confident that whether He answers “yes” or “no,” He is making the very best choice for us. When we pray out of superstition, we pray because “it can’t hurt;” we pray expecting no real answer; we pray scared that God might answer clearly, because that would mean God might change our lives from what they are and require us *to* change.

All of us have some of both. Some of us have a strong faith. Doesn’t mean we don’t lean to superstition at times. Sometimes we’re just following what we’ve been taught and the way of the world. Our culture is two-faced; it says that there’s nothing beyond what we can see and touch, no God, nothing supernatural. Yet we create stories about aliens and monsters and boogeymen, and a surprising number of younger people are turning to ancient pagan practices and forms of witchcraft. Even in the church, we call upon God all the time, but we don’t expect God to move as He promises He will. We can be two-faced too.

God put it in our hearts to know that He is real and engaged with us and our world. Submitting to God and His will gives us a meaningful life where we can know God’s pleasure. But living in superstition doesn’t do that. If we find we’ve been living out of fear more than faith, out of superstition rather than real, expectant belief, that’s OK – as long as we are willing to move from one to the other, as long as we are willing to live lives trusting that God is in fact moving and does reveal Himself regularly.

Don’t worry that you’ve lived a long time out of obligation or duty or “playing at church.” Just turn to God and ask for Him to see where He’s been moving in your life, to reveal to you those places where God has been active and you’ve missed it. There are plenty of those in my life, and probably yours too.

It’s good that God is active and moving. The end of the passage shows us why the Spirit was leading them where they needed to go. As they traveled up to and through Macedonia, they stop in Philippi, a place where there’s apparently no synagogue. They go to the place of prayer and meet Lydia, a God-fearing woman. Her business is purple cloth – something rare and expensive, the color of royalty. God opens her heart, and she believes.

Her whole household is baptized, one of our first suggestions that baptism is the replacement for circumcision in the new covenant, one meant not only for older believers but for their younger family members as they are raised in the faith. Lydia takes the fellowship into her home and provides for them. Because of her wealth, they have support for their ministry. God provides for Paul and Silas and their ministry band, both by steering them away from places God didn’t want them yet and steering them towards those who would care for them and provide for them as they preached the good news of Jesus’ salvation.

Friends, we live with a lot of cognitive dissonance in our lives. Our actions don’t measure up with who we want to be. But the Spirit is changing all that for all of us, for every believer. The Spirit is our counselor to lead us into all truth. He will lead us so that we follow the ways of God. If we allow, He will change us so that we become people of integrity, whose thoughts and beliefs and hearts and actions all line up. Will we become Spirit-led people? Will we look for Him to be working in and around and through us? May it be so for all of us.