

## **Acts 18:1-17: “Ends” In Mind V: To Corinth**

### **Introduction:**

Friends!

As always, as ever: I am so honored to speak to you all, and to be a part of our congregation. We're going to walk through today's passage, and I think in the end we'll be left with a simple reminder to consider what sort of pause in the frenetic activity of our lives we'll embrace, and what sort of people we'll embrace it with.

We'll also see a very important thing in play today, which I won't mention again, so I hope we can hang on to it. It's the privileged status of Judaism in the Roman Empire. Judaism was considered a *religio licita* an “allowed religion” in the Empire. Not all religions were. And we've seen that very important people respected Judaism's core-beliefs. That said, to the typical Roman all the significant theological differences between this early Christianity and this well-established Judaism seem to Roman rulers as just in-fighting, minor disagreements. It's not until later, around the time of Revelation, do Judaism and Christianity clearly part ways.

Of course, to those who are in the midst of clarifying religious differences they are matters of life and death, deeply important, and worth doing anything to settle, to win, even. There's an urge to have these matters clarified outside us by someone who can do something about the people we disagree with. I don't know if that urge is warranted or worthwhile or not. But when we discover these things that are, for us, non-negotiable--and make no mistake: Jesus' centrality as the Resurrected Messiah was a non-negotiable truth for Paul, and lie for those who stood against him--then we'll accept almost anyone's word that we're in the right and the other who we're disagreeing with is in the wrong. We see all this today and we'll see it again.

Right now, let's pray!

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Structure:***

Let me start with this! When it comes to today's passage, I really had a hard time simply structuring today's passage. It's sort of broken into two parts, the two parts that were read to us today, but the narrative

flow of the passage really disrupts the artificial...

And let me interrupt myself, here. Because I'm already, like, boring myself. And I want to remind us of something, in case we've forgotten it: We're "People of the Book." We're people who have come to believe that Scripture is the authoritative witness to God's nature and identity. We believe that the Bible is reliable and trustworthy when it comes to what it says about God, and about humanity and the rest of creation.

And believe it or not, just because I'm a pastor and a preacher and, like, when it comes to my job the Bible is like the Bible, just because I'm into Scripture, it doesn't mean that sometimes I don't think that piecing apart the narrative unity of a particular passage isn't tedious. It is tedious.

Sometimes we need bulldozers, and sometimes we need electron microscopes to get a job done. Sometimes we need to pay closer attention to a passage to discover meaning in it; sometimes it slaps us in the face. But in a godly way.

So what we're going to do now is this: We're going to

pay really, really close attention to the movement of this passage. What's highlighted, what's building, what's slowing down, and we'll make some conclusions about what we see. Today's message isn't long, because today's passage isn't long. But at least part of what I want us to take away from this morning is the basic reminder that we must expect to discover something in the Bible that matters for the Church. It may not matter for us today; it may not matter for us for years. But it may matter to someone who we're going to interact with very soon. And so when we come to Scripture, we have to come to it ready to bulldoze or, you know, do chemical analysis. The metaphor falls apart; we get it, though.

Before we get started, I want to say this: We're going to meet Aquila and Priscilla today. And that's an honor.

***First:***

Aquila and Priscilla are so important. Paul calls them his co-workers; they're mentioned in multiple New Testament letters. They host a house church. They correct the teaching of a man named Apollos, who is an important New Testament and Corinth-based teacher. They're the first missionary couple, the first church-planting couple. People will suggest that

Priscilla was even the author of the book of Hebrews, whose authorship is unknown, and if not her, maybe Apollos who she taught. Whether or not that's true, she was definitely the first traveling female teacher and preacher and church-planter. So really important, and her presence speaks to the way the early Church included women at all levels of its leadership, as it should.

Now: Paying attention to themes:

### ***Paying Attention To Movement & Themes: 1-4***

Let's read:

***18 After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, 3 and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. 4 Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.***

Paul's moved from Athens to Corinth. He moves into a relationship with Aquila and Priscilla; they've moved to

Corinth because they were forced to. So we see persecution and harassment introduced here, early in the passage. And we see the importance of specific people. We see Paul gathering with people who are like him: persecuted ones, tentmakers, those who are ethnically and culturally Jewish.

The story continues:

### ***Paying Attention To Movement & Themes: 5-6***

***5 When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. 6 But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."***

This movement into relationship continues; Silas and Timothy are gathered to Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla. Persecution and harassment continue; this time directed at Paul. And this time, rather than move to those who are Jewish, Paul separates from them. He declares his intention to do this for a second time;

we've seen this before.

### ***Paying Attention To Movement & Themes: 7-8***

***7 Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. 8 Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.***

He separates from the religious and culturally Jewish group, and gathers to the god-fearers right next door; Titius Justus' home is their space, and they're as close to the synagogue as they can get, because to draw near to the synagogue is to draw near to God. And yet: God's drawn near to them through Paul. And then: Surprise. Crispus, the synagogue leader, now separates from the synagogue and gathers to Paul, to Silas and Timothy, to Titius Justus, to Aquila and Priscilla, and to others. From his later letters to this church we know that Paul himself baptized Crispus.

And then there's a pause: All this gathering and separating stills out when God shows up, draws near to Paul just as, through Paul, God drew near to the

almost-synagogue in Titius-Justus' home.

We read this:

***Paying Attention To Movement & Themes: 9-11***

***9 One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. 10 For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." 11 So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.***

In the same way that there's a pause in the gathering and separating, there's a pause in the harassment and persecution. Paul settles in, teaching those who have believed and been baptized the word of God.

***Paying Attention To Movement & Themes: 12-13***

But the pause ends. And harassment and persecution start up, too. This time all the Jewish Synagogue members gather together as an angry mob, and take Paul with them and ask that he be charged with incite to worship. And why not, right? Paul's lost them their synagogue leader, he's lost them their God-fearers,

he's lost them any number of people to what they feel is a totally blasphemous turn in Judaism. Again, Gallio doesn't care about these matters he sees as internal, small differences at all. Those inside, do.

But the period of peace that God promised, the pause and rest, has come to an end.

We read on:

***12 While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. 13 "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law."***

***Paying Attention To Movement & Themes: 14-17***

And we keep reading:

***14 Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. 15 But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter***

***yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.”  
16 So he drove them off. 17 Then the crowd  
there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue  
leader and beat him in front of the proconsul;  
and Gallio showed no concern whatever.***

Gallio introduces a pause in the story's movement, too; interrupts, literally, the moment. But he interrupts it with total indifference. He drives them off. And all the energy of the crowd, which has been heaved toward Paul shifts in light of Gallio's total indifference, and cascades down onto Sosthenes. It's likely Sosthenes, as the synagogue leader, hatched this plan, rallied this mob. And helped move them to do what they did; and he reaps, upon himself, all the anger and frustration that was rallied in them. Vengeful mobs, once they are rallied, nearly always let out their violence rather than let go of it.

We're supposed to see how God's moving here, too: Away from Sosthenes. Away from the synagogue members, who have joined together in violence. Gallio and God's relationship is obscure and indifferent; I think we're supposed to see God use Gallio, if we see anything at all.

We'll see next week as this group moves on--Paul, Aquila and Priscilla--probably taking the end of persecution as a sign from God to do so, that the period of rest in Corinth had come to an end. Timothy will join up later, Silas we don't know.

### ***On Gathering:***

What can we make of this? If, that is, we pay attention to the ways people move, here.

I think we can say that there are ways to gather together that are good, and there are ways to gather together that are bad. In today's passage, both groups gather with those of like-mind, those who they feel safe with, can consider "us" rather than them. There are two groups in today's passage: Paul, Silas and Timothy, Aquila and Priscilla, and others with them--Titius Justus, Crispus, their households. And there are those who've followed Sosthenes, who have gathered with vengeance in mind, who've been harassing and persecuting Paul, and would chase after others if Paul fell. And so it might be simple to say don't gather with others who are out to harass people, to persecute them, who are so full of rage that they can't say no to some violent expression of their anger. Don't gather with them. And yet, we might be tempted to. Avoid

those crowds.

Because, what we see from today's passage at least, is that God doesn't draw near to those crowds. Instead he draws near to the ones who, as far as this scene goes, do very basic, unimpressive things. Teach and talk about God. Baptize. Work together. These are simple, small, shared-faith things.

Another way to think about this is simply to consider what the groups you've gathered with value and practice. What does Smoky Row value and practice? Can we say? Can we show? I hope so. But take stock of your alignments, because we can't allow ourselves to slide into an angry mob that God has abandoned.

What this passage does is highlight how deeply important our relationships are for our character. Sosthenes was an agent of vengeance; Paul was an agent of dependance. That is, modeling a life dependent upon and guided by God. Paul's community was one that worked hard and simply for God. Sosthenes' community was one that strategized how to harass and punish. Our character is shaped by those we draw together with, and God will draw together with those who make choices in line with

God's character.

***On Pauses:***

And I think, in the middle of all this movement, and the gathering together and the separating apart, and the action that this passage is filled with, I think that there's something interesting about the inaction, too.

There's the first pause in the passage, one that God is clearly involved with in every way. God promises space for Paul to do his work in. Paul settles in. The Church grows. Paul himself, and certainly those around him, enjoy this.

And there's a second pause, which takes the shape of Gallio's total indifference. It arrests all motion, all energy. Paul is saved in it, but Sosthenes is beaten, the synagogue losing its second leader; the first to new faith, this second to their own faithless violence.

The only real way in which we're like Gallio, honestly, is that we live in a time in which there is so much activity, our only pauses might be indifference, some sort of life-fatigue, in which we just don't care to care, and can watch someone beaten in front of us--or something like it--without missing a beat. We've got no

cares to give. That's a dangerous pause, and by the time we recognize it, we need more than remedial faithfulness, we need God's direct intervention to wake us up to caring, and help us.

Let's do this, instead, though. Let's dream. That is, let's open ourselves up to the Spirit, and invite some pause in the middle of our moments, which are harassed by something, if not for our faithfulness. As we seek to gather with those of like mind who are on God's side and for God's things, let's make sure that it's not indifference that catches us unawares, and drives us toward some bad choice, but instead, let's do what we can to embrace any rest, any peace, that God gives us. It's much better to embrace the burden that's easy, the yoke that's life, than become so indifferent to what's going on around us that we not only incite violence, but don't even see it.

### ***Conclusion:***

So there's coming and going in today's passage, there's arrival and departure. There's gathering together, moving together to harass and persecute or to bless and baptize. And there's stillness. Pause in the action: On the one hand, shaped by God for God's purposes, on the other, marked with indifference. We

can see our own tendencies in today's passage; I hope we can choose the better way in each case.

Lastly, know this: When Paul will write later to the Corinthians, his co-author is named Sosthenes. It may be that on the other side of this leaders' decision to help the mob chase Paul out of town, which led to his beating, that Sosthenes himself came around, came to the Lord, and became a leader in the Church. It's a maybe, but it's a romantic one. I hope we can make better choices than he did well before we end up as bad off as he did.