

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Character Forged in Crisis

(Character sketches from Scripture)

Bad Company

(Acts 16; Looking at the life of Lydia)

Study #7

Introduction: The company we keep...

In the book of Proverbs, Solomon wisely advised that we NOT run with troublemakers.

He gives specific counsel that we should be on guard against people who would use us to get rich (19:4), might deceive us by being overly friendly (27:6), or drag us into their foolish ways (13:20).

The Apostle Paul agrees with Solomon and with parents everywhere when he writes, **[1 Corinthians 15:33] Bad company corrupts good morals.**

(Complicating this sound wisdom, of course, is that we follow a Savior who was well-known for being a **“friend of sinners.”** And we have instruction from Paul, too, that we should befriend sinful people because Jesus came to save them. But that’s for another Sunday...)

We have the warning against “bad company,” but today, we see a Christian who chose association with men who had come to have very bad reputations - and will be challenged to be just like her.

Review of series...

After last Sunday’s break for the Ministry Fair when we focused on service, we’re close to wrapping up our summer series of messages I’m calling, Character Forged in Crisis.

The thesis of this series is that God does some of His most powerful work of character transformation when we are in the middle of hard times.

We’ve watched God form the character of Old Testament heroes Esther, Daniel, Habakkuk, and Nehemiah so that they could stand for God in very disruptive times.¹

The New Testament stories we’ve seen thus far (Barnabas and Philip) have challenged us to do the same as we shine for Jesus today.

We pick up the essential background to today’s character sketch in the book of Acts.

Essential background from the book of Acts... (15:36--16:12)

When we come to chapter 15, Paul and Barnabas have already spread the Gospel of Jesus throughout the region of Galatia on the First Missionary Journey.

They preached, performed miracles, were persecuted, led people to faith, and made disciples out of the new converts.

They then returned to the city of Antioch where they rested up a bit before traveling to Jerusalem.

They went there to defend the message of faith-alone-in-Jesus-alone for eternal life against some who were teaching something different.

Namely, these guys were teaching that obedience to the Mosaic Law was required to become a Christian or to be a good Christian.

¹ These all lived just before, during, or shortly after the devastating Babylonian overthrow of Jerusalem and the captivity that followed.

We can all be thankful to God that Paul and Barnabas' testimony won the day in Jerusalem and that the Gospel of grace was preserved.

Then they went back, again, to Antioch, their home base for ministry.

Then, **[36] After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are."**

That sounded like a great plan to Barnabas. But Barnabas insisted that on this second trip they take along John Mark, the one who had abandoned them on the first trip. Paul said, "No way!"

The disagreement became so intense that Paul and Barnabas split up. Barnabas took John Mark to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas² - and then Timothy - as his traveling companions on this second trip.³

Paul had lots of places he wanted to go to spread the Gospel on this second trip. But he kept on hitting roadblocks. The Holy Spirit didn't allow him to go to Asia. (Acts 16:6) Then, the Spirit of Jesus refused to give them permission to pass through Bithynia. (Acts 16:7)

Of course, God wanted the Gospel to go to these regions. It simply wasn't the time for Paul to go there, yet.⁴ Finally, they did get some clear direction.

[Acts 16:8] and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. [9] A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

² Silas was one of the men who took the decision from the Jerusalem Council to Antioch. Now, he replaces Barnabas as Paul's right-hand man.

³ Paul and Silas traveled due west from Antioch to Galatia, coming to Derbe and then to Lystra. In Lystra they met a young man, Timothy, who joined the team.

⁴ It was God's plan for people in both Ephesus (a city of Asia) and Bithynia to hear the Gospel - but at a later time (Acts 18:19-21; 24-19:41; 1 Peter 1:1)

And with that, they **[10] immediately** made plans to enter Macedonia.

[11] So putting out to sea from Troas, we⁵ ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; [12] and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days.

Nearly two hundred years before Paul got to Philippi, the city had become a Roman possession. That gave it some clout. It gained more clout when Caesar made Philippi a Roman colony. (42 BC)

That gave the city the benefits of lower taxes and Roman soldiers to keep it secure.

Once they arrived in Philippi,⁶ Paul and Silas and Timothy (and Luke, the author of Acts) spent a few days getting to know the place.

Then, on a Sabbath day, they made their way to a place where they thought they might find people receptive to the message of Jesus.

Meet Lydia (Acts 16:13-15)

A Gathering at the River (16:13)

Paul's general strategy upon landing in a new city was to go, first, to the Jewish synagogue.

So, when he rolled into Philippi, he looked around to find where the Philippian synagogue was - and found that there wasn't one.

That's because, in ancient times, there had to be at least ten Jewish men to form a synagogue.

Evidently, there weren't ten Jewish men in Philippi.

⁵ The word "**we**" indicates that Luke (the author of Acts) was traveling with Paul.

⁶ Philippi boasted a medical school, and was a principal city for politics, culture, economics and trade.

So, the few Jews who were in Philippi congregated every Sabbath day at a quiet spot beside the Gangites River that flowed through town.

[13] And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were thinking that there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled.

To this small group, Paul presented the Gospel of Jesus. One of the women was paying extra close attention.

Lydia Hears, Believes - and her household, too... (16:14-15a)

Her personal life

[14] A woman named Lydia was listening...⁷

There's a lot we don't know about Lydia. For one thing, we don't know her marital status. Some have guessed that she was a widow (pure speculation) and others that she was unmarried (again, pure speculation). We simply don't know.

For another, it's possible that we don't know Lydia's name. "Lydia" could be an adjective indicating that she was "a woman from Lydia," since the city of Thyatira was in Lydia.⁸

But we do know some things.

She was a businesswoman

[14]...she was a seller of purple fabrics⁹ from the city of Thyatira...

⁷ The imperfect tense of "*listening*" may indicate that Paul spoke to this group more than once.

⁸ It is odd that Lydia is not mentioned in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Some wonder if "Lydia" was either Euodia or Syntyche. I doubt it...

⁹ From Thomas Constable: During the Roman Period, laws restricted who could wear clothes dyed purple, because it was the most precious of all colors. Thus, Lydia undoubtedly dealt with an exclusive and affluent clientele. The color purple was derived either from a shellfish (the murex) or from the root of a plant.

So, she was a businesswoman from Thyatira, a Greek city well over one hundred miles from Philippi.

Thyatira was well-known for its dyeing industry. And articles of clothing dyed purple were highly prized and very costly.

We figure that Lydia was either a saleswoman of a Thyatiran firm that sold purple articles of clothing, or she was the firm's owner.¹⁰

She was evidently a woman of means, having a house in Philippi where she lived when business took her there.

We also know something about her spiritual journey.

Spiritual journey

Lydia was a Gentile. But she had converted to Judaism and was a ***[14]...a worshipper of God*** - otherwise known as a proselyte.¹¹

It's likely that she had accepted the Jewish faith back in her hometown of Thyatira where there was a strong Jewish presence.

When we meet her, she is in Philippi, faithfully taking part in a sabbath time of worship at that "***place of prayer.***"

So, while most Philippians were worshipping the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome, Lydia and those with her were worshipping the one true God on the banks of a river.

Paul's first evangelistic message in Europe was given to this small group of women in Philippi.

Now, what might have gone through Lydia's mind as she considered what Paul was saying about Jesus?

¹⁰ Lydia would have belonged to the Dyers' Guild, a group whose home base was in Thyatira.

¹¹ Like the Ethiopian eunuch we saw a couple of Sundays ago from Philip's evangelistic conversation with him (Acts 8)

I think she would have been fascinated to hear how Jesus had fulfilled the Jewish Scripture's prophecies about the Messiah.

She would have been moved to hear about His death and resurrection. I suspect that this devout woman would have been drawn to believe in Jesus.

But...

...might she also have worried that she would be rejected by her adopted Jewish family for believing in Jesus?

...would she be concerned that her Gentile friends and family would ridicule her for following yet another faith path?

...might she have worried about the impact this decision would have on her business?

We don't know, of course. But whether she had any of these concerns or not, while Paul was speaking about Jesus, **[14]...the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.**

The Lord graciously removed the obstacles that were keeping Lydia from believing. He tore the blinders off so that she could see the truth clearly. Just like Jesus said the Father would do, He drew her to Himself (John 6:44) so that she responded positively. She believed.

And just like that - there was a Christian in Philippi who wasn't an apostle!

Soon after her heart was opened, she was baptized. Then, members of **"her household"**¹² were also baptized, meaning that they also believed. And, just like that, there is a faith community in Philippi.

We keep on reading and learn more about the kind of woman Lydia was.

Lydia's Hospitality (16:15b)

[15b]...she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay."

She was inviting Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke to make her home in Philippi their base of operations while they were in the city.

That's impressive hospitality.

For some reason it appears that Paul was hesitant to stay in Lydia's house. She had to **"prevail"** upon them to accept her offer.

And, in the end they accepted. And it is reasonable to assume that Lydia's home became the meeting place for the church that would be established in Philippi.

We can picture Paul and his friends resting at Lydia's home at the end of each day and using her home as a base of operations to meet with inquirers, or to instruct new believers.¹³

We now have a pretty good sense as to who Lydia was.

- She was a successful businesswoman and a sincere seeker after God.
- She was a devout converted Jew who became, instantly, a devout converted Christian.
- She was wealthy enough to have what we assume was a second home in Philippi and was generous enough to provide hospitality to Paul and his friends.

Because of the apostles' labors and Lydia's generosity (a true "person of peace"), the Gospel was making great progress in Philippi.

We can only imagine how excited Paul and his crew were about what was happening in the city.

We don't know for how long there was relative calm, with Paul staying at Lydia's home, holding meetings, preaching the Gospel, and making disciples. Days? Weeks? Months?

But it wasn't long after Lydia's generous offer of hospitality that the Christian movement in Philippi took a dangerous turn.

¹³ This first act of hospitality may have laid the groundwork for the financial partnership that Paul describes between himself and the Philippian church.

¹² This is never well-defined; blood relatives? work associates? employees?

Paul's Reputation-Ruining Ministry in Philippi (Acts 16:16-39)

Casting Out a Demon in Philippi (vv. 16-18)

Luke tells us that there was in Philippi a slave-girl who was possessed by a demonic spirit.¹⁴ This spirit enabled her to tell people's fortunes. This ability earned her masters a lot of money.

As the apostles were, again, on their way to the place of prayer (the river), this young woman saw Paul and Silas.

The demon within this slave girl knew the source of Paul's message. She was following them and crying out, **[17]...*"These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation."***

Paul was ***"greatly annoyed"*** (v. 18) at being identified as a messenger from God by a demon. And this kept on happening, day after day, for many days.

Finally, he had had it. So, he **[18]...*turned and said to the spirit,***¹⁵ ***"I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!"*** ***And it came out at that very moment.***

And we think, "PRAISE GOD!" The slave-girl is set free from her bondage to the demon. A captive has been set free by Jesus' power. And it IS great news.

But, as with so many actions that might be taken, Paul's action was accompanied by unintended consequences.

Slandered for Helping a Demonized Slave Girl (vv. 19-21)

¹⁴ The English words ***"a spirit of divination"*** translate two Greek words ***"a spirit"*** and ***"a python."*** The concept relates to the Greek city of Delphi where the god Apollo was believed to be embodied in a python snake. The original priestess at Delphi was purported to be possessed by Apollo and thereby able to predict the future. Therefore, anyone possessed by the python spirit could foretell coming events. No doubt an actual demon gave such a person predictive powers.

¹⁵ Paul spoke not to the girl, but to the demon itself.

The owners of the slave girl were furious at Paul. Now that the demon was gone, their hope of income from her fortune-telling was also gone.

So, they dragged Paul and Silas before the Philippian magistrate, accusing them of ***"causing our city trouble."*** (v. 20) They accused Paul and Silas of being anti-Roman troublemakers.

Arrested, Beaten, Jailed - for doing what was right (vv. 22-24)

This public humiliation continued as they stood before the city's officials. They were stripped of their robes and were beaten by long rods on their bare backs.

They were then thrown into the inner recesses of the city jail, had their feet fastened in the stocks, and were left to bleed themselves to sleep.

That is a hard story! But it wasn't the end of the story.

A Wonderfully Redemptive Turn! (vv. 25-34)

While Paul and Silas were in jail, they started singing hymns of praise to God. Around midnight, God sent an earthquake that opened the prison's doors and that released the prisoners from their chains.

The jailer, who knew full well what Rome would do to him if the prisoners escaped, was preparing to take his own life to avoid Rome's punishment. (v. 27)

And when Paul saw what the jailor intended to do, he assured the jailor that all the prisoners were still in place in the jail. (v. 28)

The jailor, realizing that his life had been spared, asked, **[30]** ***"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"***

To which Paul and Silas replied, **[31]** ***"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."***

Well, the jailer did believe and was baptized, along with all the members of his household who also believed and were baptized. (exactly the same as Lydia's story)

Paul and Silas then left the jail to spend the rest of the night with the jailer at his house.

A Challenging Exit from Philippi (vv. 35-39)

The next morning, the city's officials sent police to release Paul and Silas from jail (v. 35) - and the police found them gone.

So, they went to the jailer's house, found the apostles, and told them to leave the city "*in peace*" (that is, quietly, out the back door, to not make a scene).

Paul refused and demanded that the police lead them out, as was proper given that they were Roman citizens.

They finally did lead the apostles out of the jail and kept begging them to leave Philippi.

Which they did, after one brief stop on the way out of town.

Re-Meet Lydia (Acts 16:40)

[40a] They left the prison and entered the house of Lydia...

This is the postlude of the story, which is usually the part of a story we're most likely to ignore. Today's postlude is the message.

Since they last saw Lydia, Paul and Silas have become *personas non gratis* in the city.

They have been accused of disturbing the peace, acting contrary to Roman ways, and stealing the livelihood of some fine, upstanding citizens of Philippi by exorcising a demon from a slave girl.

Those accusations led to arrest (without trial), public flogging, and imprisonment.

All they did was serve Jesus. All they did was release a slave girl from demonic oppression by Jesus' power.

Now, having been in Philippi for a very short time, they were not only NOT "*above reproach*," they were considered the dregs of Philippian society.

On the day after their incarceration, Paul and Silas, along with their friends Timothy and Luke, left the jailer's house (which was probably near the jail) and began walking to Lydia's Philippi home.

I'll assume that news traveled quickly in ancient Philippi. I'll assume that Lydia had felt the earthquake of the previous night and had heard about the apostles' personal earthquakes and knew what had happened to them as she watched them walk toward her home.

We don't know what she was thinking. So, what would you be thinking if you found yourself in Lydia's shoes, watching Paul and crew walk toward your house? Maybe...

"This doesn't look good. (After all, Solomon warned us to not associate with troublemakers. Opening up my home to these guys opens me up to suspicion. I'll be considered guilty by association if they come in. What will the city officials think of me if I welcome Paul? What will my neighbors think of me?"

Those would have been normal thoughts for anyone in the first or the twenty-first century watching the likes of Paul walk toward their home.

But open her door to them she did. Knowing full well that by doing so she was inviting ridicule and danger for associating with these Christian scoundrels.

[40] They left the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brothers and sisters, they encouraged them and departed.

Notice who the encouragers were. The encouragers were the apostles who had just been unjustly beaten, arrested, and jailed.

The apostles had known all along what following Jesus was going to cost. These guys had already paid the price of suffering. The

brand-new Philippian Christians hadn't yet been baptized into suffering.

So, Paul and Silas encouraged Lydia and her household with the truth that Jesus followers should expect suffering AND with the truth that it would all be worth it to suffer for Jesus...which will now undoubtedly happen because she welcomed them into her home.

Conclusion:

Prior to a couple of weeks ago when I started thinking more deeply about Lydia than I ever had, I would not have included Lydia in my list of "Great Heroes of the New Testament." Now I do.

She provided hospitality to Christians who suffered just because they were Christians .

As the people of Philippi would have seen it, she sided with a bunch of losers and troublemakers. We see it today as an act of courageous loyalty.

And, if we learn anything from the letter that Paul would send to the church at Philippi not too long after his visit, we learn that persecution did, indeed, linger after he and his friends left.

In the first chapter Paul affirmed that they were opposed by urging them to stand firm for the Gospel, **[28] in no way alarmed by your opponents.**

He reminded them, **[29] For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer on His behalf.**

He affirmed them for **[30] experiencing the same conflict** (persecution) **which you saw in me.**¹⁶

¹⁶ He also urged them to prove themselves **[2:15]...blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world.**

The believers in Philippi endured persecution.

And if it seems odd that someone as central to the founding of the church in Philippi as Lydia is not mentioned once in Paul's letter, it may be that there was simply not room to include all the Philippian heroes who stood strong for Jesus in one short letter. (At any rate, Paul knew that Lydia's "*Well done!*" was coming soon enough.)

That Lydia opened her home to provide hospitality to Paul and crew right after having believed in Jesus is beautiful. It's an act of generosity prompted by gratitude.

That she opened her home to Paul and crew AFTER they had become bad company in Philippi is kingdom-of-God sized inspiring.

Lydia models for us the essential grace of showing Christian love for fellow Christians who suffer for Jesus.

As the author of the book of Hebrews puts it: **[Hebrews 13:3] Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are badly treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.**

This is a repeated theme in our New Testaments.

We who are not being persecuted are to stand with Christians who are. If we aren't suffering for Jesus, we're to identify with Christians who are.

Here at the end, I'm going to share three thoughts about what it will mean to stand with suffering fellow-Christians.

First, as is clear from Acts 16, since we are family, we should, by all means, stand with them.

Luke identifies those Paul wanted to encourage who were gathered in Lydia's house as **[40]...the brothers and sisters.**

This is so important.

Whenever I have a chance to speak with someone who is brand-new to the faith, I love to affirm that they are now God's son or

God's daughter. I remind them that I am God's son and then state the obvious: I am this new believer's brother. We're family.

You're family with every Christian alive today.

If you look at a world map that shows where Christians are suffering some of the most intense persecution, you will want to remember that the Christians who live in those places are members of your family.

They are your sisters and brothers in Jesus, and it is only right that we stand with them, give to meet their needs, and identify ourselves as family.

Second, they need our prayers.

In the places that are hostile to our faith, Christians usually have fewer and worse job opportunities, are often rejected by their relatives and friends, may face physical beatings, and have to meet secretly for worship.

Our family members are strengthened to stand firm in these severe hardships by our prayers. We can pray for their protection, for their faithfulness, and for their fruitfulness.

(To aid your prayer for persecuted Christians, I commend to you the Voice of the Martyr's monthly magazine and the VOM app that comes with a daily prayer focus on a nation where Christians are persecuted.)

They treasure and count on our prayers.

Third, when we learn about and remember and reflect on the experiences of our suffering fellow-Christians, we will be drawn to imitate their faith.

We will learn to affirm what they know -
 That this world is not really our home.
 That we really don't quite fit in here.
 That this life is not as important as the life to come.
 That Jesus is worth any risk, danger, or sacrifice.

We'll grow in grace as we stand with our persecuted family in any and all the ways we might do so.