



## Women in Paul's Ministry Proverbs 16:24

### Planting

"Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body." Proverbs 16:24 (New Revised Standard Version)

In preparing this lesson on the women in Paul's ministry, I first had to overcome obstacles in my own mind. When I reflected on women in connection with Paul, there were several verses of Scripture that were foremost in my thoughts. The words of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34 were fresh in my mind, "*As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.*" Flipping through the pages of the New Testament, I took note of Paul's words to Timothy, "*I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent*" (1 Timothy 2:12). Yikes! What would I bring to a study on faith by focusing on these passages? But then the Lord reminded me of two things: first, Galatians 3:27-28, "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus;*" and, second, that I'm writing about women in Paul's ministry, not necessarily on issues of conduct in worship or household relationships. The former passages I referenced above have a great deal to do with speaking about women from a cultural expectation, though the later passage promotes a radically new culture centered on the liberating power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Still, I had to give it some time before I could begin this lesson. I was asking the Savior how to approach this study, setting aside some of my own life and ministry experiences. Sadly, there are those in the church universal who are quite content to pigeonhole women into a particular role in ministry, basing their opinions or doctrines on one or two verses from the Bible, discounting the example of Jesus and even the life of Paul. So it was with great relief when the Spirit led me to a verse from Proverbs. That verse set Paul in a new light for me. The writer of Proverbs asserts that "*pleasant words,*[one translation says, "gracious words,"] *are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.*" I began to see that what some term incidental words spoken of and to women are in fact very telling about Paul's acceptance and deep appreciation for women.

As I explored the New Testament I found that Paul was in the habit of acknowledging women in ministry. But I also discovered that his pleasant words were not simply included at the close of an epistle. Paul spoke pleasant words, words of grace and hope into the lives of many women; some of their names are known to us from the pages of the Bible, some from history, and still many more are known only to God. In looking in the Book of Acts and in Paul's letters, women figured greatly in Paul's ministry.

I would categorize them into three camps: (1) women in need, (2) women in denial, and (3) women who were indispensable to the work of the Kingdom. We will take a closer look at three groups of women who figure prominently in Paul's ministry.

## **Tending – Women in Need**

### **Read Acts 16:16-19; Philippians 4:2-3**

In Acts we find Paul and Silas arriving in the city of Philippi. They are going about their business of preaching and teaching about Jesus. They encounter a problem that will create a ruckus and land them in jail. There is a slave-girl who is sticking close to them, announcing who they are and whom they represent. This unnamed slave is not speaking freely. She is under demonic control and though she speaks convincing words, the locals knew that she wasn't an adherent to this new faith. Neither Paul nor Silas needed a demonic spirit to act as an advance man for them. Luke tells us that the power of this spirit of divination was real. The slave was a moneymaker. From the Scripture we aren't told if Paul felt sympathy for this young woman. It happens that she became a distraction and a nuisance. Paul in his annoyance decided to speak some liberating words to this young woman. The pleasant words, the gracious words, the power words, Paul used were not spoken to the slave directly, but to the spirit. Those words spoken in the name of Jesus Christ drove the spirit out of her. The slave was free of that evil controlling influence. She had been a woman in need, but perhaps had never known such control over her own faculties.

The slave girl had been a woman in need, who was helped by Paul. There would of course, be consequences to this deliverance. Luke doesn't record how she adjusted to this change. But it is evident from the text that her owners knew that the slave was no longer a mouthpiece for the demonic. She was no longer a tool in trapping people into fatalism. Her material value was diminished, but her greater value to God was revealed.

**Questions:** She was a woman who didn't know that she needed help. What women today are in need of liberation? Of having someone speak words of power and grace into their lives?

In Paul's writing to the Church at Philippi we also find women in need who were in relationship with Paul. In Philippians 4:2-3, we are introduced to Euodia and Syntyche. They are believers in the Lord Jesus, and yet, there is discord between them. Even Christians can have difficulties and need to be reminded of shared faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul doesn't take sides with either woman in the dispute but focuses on several points of common ground. They are women with whom Paul has worked. The terminology that Paul uses states clearly that they worked together side by side. There is no hint of hierarchy, but of people using their giftedness to further advance the Gospel. Euodia and Syntyche worked not only with Paul, but with other men, chiefly with Clement and to the other saints in Philippi. It would also seem that Paul makes a particular point in stating that these are co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Relationship with God on earth promises eternal relationship with God in eternity.

**Questions:** What can you learn about peacemaking /reconciliation from Paul's concern for Euodia and Syntyche?

## **Women in Denial**

### **Read Acts 24:24-27**

When we think of women in Paul's ministry we may be tempted to focus on the success stories. But the witness of Scripture is that not everyone is open to change, correction or even to good

news. In Acts we meet Drusilla and Bernice, two women who occupy positions of influence and power. They are given the opportunity to learn about God's grace. From history we know quite a bit about both women as they were granddaughters of Herod the Great.

Drusilla was born in A.D. 38 to Herod Agrippa I and Cypros. For a time she was married to the Syrian King Azizus. However, in A.D. 53, believing the teachings of a Jewish magician, she left her husband to marry Antonius Felix, the Roman procurator of Judea. Together Drusilla and Felix had a son named Agrippa. Only one verse of Scripture is given to Drusilla, but it speaks volumes. She is wife to Felix and a Jew. She is given the opportunity to learn about saving faith in Jesus. There is no favorable acknowledgement or response from Drusilla. Her husband would meet with Paul for two years. But there is not the slightest inkling of curiosity on her part.

**Questions:** Why do some people choose to ignore the godly people? Although Drusilla and Paul shared a common faith as Jews, it did not produce any particular bond of loyalty or help. In what ways does our shared faith in Christ stir us to action?

### **Read Acts 25:13, 23; 26:19-30**

As we read this portion of Acts, Paul had been imprisoned for two years in Caesarea. In due time he would come before a new governor and King Agrippa II. Paul would tell the story of his conversion from religion to faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 26:1-23). It would be another occasion for Paul to minister to yet another woman. Unlike her sister, Bernice would actually make use of the opportunity to hear Paul speak of his faith.

Bernice was also a daughter of Herod Agrippa I. Her life story is equally well recorded by history. When her first husband died, she was married to an uncle with whom she bore two sons. She would marry again to silence rumors that she was engaged in an incestuous relationship with her brother Herod Agrippa II. Later in life, she would also become the mistress of Titus, the Roman commander who destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and who eventually became emperor of the Roman Empire.

In his ministry before Agrippa's court, Paul was speaking pleasant words, gracious words, a call to repentance. But in this instance the words fell on deaf ears.

**Question:** From the text, why would Paul's call to repentance be so challenging for Bernice, Agrippa II, and those in their court? Why is the call to repentance a challenge for many of us?

### **Women who were Indispensable**

#### **Read Romans 16:1-16**

As Paul closes his letter to the church at Rome he departs from his teachings about sin, judgment, grace and mercy to emphasize the importance of human relationships within the Christian community. Of the 27 people named in this passage, we are surprised to find so many women mentioned. I would characterize all those listed as being indispensable to Paul's ministry. The tone of this portion of the letter is gratitude, punctuated by kind esteem. We lift up the names of Phoebe, Prisca or Priscilla, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, and Julia as being saints of distinction. We aren't told much about the background of these women before Paul came to know them. Were they women in need or women in denial about the course of their respective lives? Speculation leads us nowhere. The reality is that Paul speaks very pleasant words, gracious words about all of these women.

**Question:** What are some of the terms and/or phrases Paul uses to describe the women in Acts 16:1-16? Give it some thought and name some who are women in your life who could be described in similar terms?

Briefly, we can look at the first two women named in this passage. Paul recognized the kinship he has toward Phoebe and loyalty he owes to Prisca (Priscilla). Phoebe is a minister in the church at Cenchreae, a city not far from Corinth. It is believed that she may in fact have been the courier of Paul's letter to the church at Rome. He singles her out for her labors, generosity and true example of faith (Romans 16:1-2). He calls those in Rome to accord her the respect that she as a saint deserves.

Likewise, Paul speaks well of Prisca with whom he was in ministry (Acts 18:1-3,18-19,24-26). Prisca and Aquilla were a ministry team and it is a great testament to their faith in Jesus that they counted Paul a brother. It wasn't enough for them to merely speak good news, but to be willing to yield their lives for a brother. Such courage may remind us of the words of Jesus in John 15:13, "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*"

**Question:** In this epistle Paul did not down play the role of women in his life and ministry. He speaks well of them and wants them to know they are important to him and to the church. In what way do you see yourself as an indispensable, essential worker for God?

### **Harvesting**

What are the pleasant, gracious words you might speak into the lives of those you love? How will the Holy Spirit help you? How might you live so that other saints speak pleasant, gracious words into your life?

### **Celebrating the Bounty**

In our study today we've looked at women in Paul's ministry. Some who were notable because they gave of themselves wholeheartedly and some who held back making a commitment for whatever personal reason. Each one of us is in a position today to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the work of the God or to holdback and miss an opportunity for blessing and godly affirmation. My prayer for you is that you may have pleasant words spoken into your life, words like a honeycomb, that brings sweetness to the soul and health to the body -- to your body and to the body of Christ our Lord.

As time permits, close this portion of your program by reciting or singing the first verse of *Gracious Spirit, Dwell with Me* by Thomas T. Lynch and Richard Redhead

“Gracious Spirit, dwell with me  
I myself would gracious be.  
And with words that help and heal  
Would Thy life in mine reveal.  
And with actions bold and meek would for Christ my Savior speak.”

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