

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 15 OF 104

Made Clean

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Leviticus 14-20
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 17
Gospels	Matthew 15:10-39
General New Testament	Acts 16

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to move your class from the idea of cleanness as something we maintain to cleanness as something God provides. Leviticus supplies the picture, Matthew supplies the diagnosis, and Acts supplies the water. If the class leaves able to say where defilement actually comes from and how God actually deals with it, the week has done its work.

Doctrinally, several things need saying out loud. The Day of Atonement is fulfilled in Christ and is not repeated, which Hebrews 9 and 10 argue at length. The law of Moses, including its ceremonial cleanness and its civil penalties, is not binding on Christians, while the moral standards God restates through the apostles are. And Acts 16 will require you to handle Acts 16:31 carefully, teaching the whole conversion account rather than one verse of it, and to answer kindly the questions about household baptism and about an opened heart.

Formationally, notice who ends up clean in these readings. A leper outside the camp. A Canaanite woman with a tormented daughter. A woman selling cloth by a river. A jailer who had just fastened two innocent men into stocks. Not one of them cleaned himself up first. Put this question to your class: who is the person you have quietly decided the gospel is unlikely to reach, and what would it take for you to speak to them this month?

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Leviticus 14-20, and build the hour around chapter 16. Read the two goats slowly, then read Hebrews 9:11-14 and let the class see the connection for themselves. Deal with chapters 18 through 20 in the last fifteen minutes, plainly and without harshness.

Second session: Take up Acts 16. It is narrative, it moves, and it gives you two conversions to lay side by side. Plan your time so that the jailer's question and the full answer of verses 32 through 34 get at least twenty minutes, since this is where most of your class will be challenged during the week.

The other two readings: Matthew 15:10-39 and Proverbs 17 belong to the extended questions. Point out before they leave that Matthew 15:18-20 is the reason Leviticus was never enough, and that Proverbs 17:3 describes the only furnace that can reach the place where the trouble actually lives.

GENERAL OLD TESTAMENT **Leviticus 14-20**

Atonement and a Holy People

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The reading opens with restoration. Chapter 14 is not about diagnosing disease but about bringing a healed man home: two birds, one killed over running water and one dipped in the blood and released alive, cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop, then washing, shaving, waiting, and finally offerings. It is elaborate on purpose. Israel is being taught that a person cut off from the congregation does not simply wander back in. Someone has to make a way for him.

Chapter 16 is the summit of the book. Once a year, on the tenth day of the seventh month, Aaron laid aside his glorious garments, put on plain linen, and went where no one else could go, carrying blood for himself and for the people. One goat died. Over the other he laid both hands and confessed the iniquities of Israel, and a man led it away into an uninhabited land. The nation watched its sin walk out of sight.

Chapters 17 through 20 then take holiness out of the sanctuary and into ordinary life. The blood belongs on the altar and nowhere else. Sexual life is fenced in sharply, against both Egyptian and Canaanite practice. Wages are paid the same day, the deaf are not cursed, the blind are not tripped, grudges are not nursed, and the neighbor is loved as oneself. The refrain "I am the Lord" appears again and again, because in the end the reason for every one of these commands is the character of the God who gave them.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Moses is still writing at Sinai, and the tabernacle is the center of the camp. All of this belongs to the covenant God made with the nation of Israel.
- The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) was the only day the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, and he did it with blood and incense, never casually (16:2, 13).
- The word translated "scapegoat" in many versions renders a Hebrew term whose exact sense is debated. The function in the text is clear: the goat bears away the confessed iniquities of the people.
- Chapters 18 through 20 are often called the holiness code. Its structure is covenantal: because the Lord is holy, His people live differently from the nations on either side of them.
- The penalties attached to these laws (20:2, 10, 27) were the civil law of a theocratic nation. They belonged to Israel as a state under the old covenant and are not given to the church.
- Hebrews 9 and 10 treat this whole system as shadow and as annually repeated proof that sin was not yet finally dealt with. Christ entered once, with His own blood, and sat down.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Leviticus 16 gives Israel one day a year when the high priest passed behind the veil. Walk through what he did with the two goats, and talk about what that ritual taught the nation about sin that a sermon could not have taught them.*

Lay out the sequence plainly. Aaron first offers a bull for himself and his house, because the mediator needed atoning too. Then lots are cast over two goats. One is killed as a sin offering for the people and its blood is sprinkled on and before the mercy seat. Over the living goat Aaron lays both hands, confesses all the iniquities and transgressions of Israel, and it is led away into the wilderness by the hand of a suitable man, bearing them to a land not inhabited.

Two truths are being taught at once, and no lecture could do it as well. Sin costs life; someone dies. And sin must be carried away; it is not merely paid for but removed, out of sight, out of reach. Psalm 103:12 says as far as the east is from the west. Ask your class which of the two they have trouble believing, the payment or the removal. Most Christians who cannot forgive themselves have accepted the first and never received the second.

Question 2. *Leviticus 19 sets “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” in the same chapter as rules about harvesting field corners and mixing fabrics. How do you decide which parts of a chapter like that still speak to a Christian, and by what authority do you decide it?*

Answer honestly that the chapter does not come with labels sorting the ceremonial from the civil from the moral, and that anyone who claims an easy rule is oversimplifying. The authority for the decision is not our preference; it is the New Testament. The law of Moses as a covenant has been fulfilled and taken out of the way in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:13; Romans 7:4–6). We do not keep any of it because Moses said it.

But God’s character does not change, and where the New Testament repeats a command it binds us as Christ’s word, not as Moses’ law. Jesus takes up Leviticus 19:18 (Matthew 22:39), Paul takes up the sexual boundaries (1 Corinthians 6:9–11), James takes up the command about withheld wages (James 5:4). Meanwhile the mixed fabrics and the field corners teach us what kind of God we serve without binding the practice. Teach the class to ask, every time: has the Lord said this on this side of the cross?

Question 3. *Leviticus 18 and 20 deliberately set Israel’s sexual life apart from both Egypt behind them and Canaan ahead of them. Where does the New Testament take up that same standard, and what is holding it costing Christians now?*

Leviticus 18:3 is the hinge: do not do as they do in Egypt, and do not do as they do in Canaan. Israel’s sexual life was to look like neither the culture it left nor the culture it entered. The New Testament says exactly the same thing in different words. Marriage is honorable and the bed undefiled (Hebrews 13:4). Fornication is not even to be named among saints (Ephesians 5:3). The list in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 overlaps Leviticus 18 and 20 substantially, and then comes verse 11: “And such were some of you. But you were washed.”

Say what it costs without self-pity and without cruelty. It costs young people friendships and reputations. It costs adults the sympathy of coworkers. It costs some in your class a relationship they want. And there are people in the room, or people they love, for whom this is not theoretical. Preach the standard and the washing in the same breath, in the order Paul preaches them. A class that hears only the list will conclude the gospel has nothing for them.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace what happens to each of the two goats in Leviticus 16:7–22, and write down exactly where each one ends up and why.*

Lots are cast; one goat is for the Lord and one for removal. The first is killed as a sin offering and its blood is carried inside the veil and sprinkled on and before the mercy seat, cleansing the sanctuary itself. Over the second Aaron lays both hands, confesses Israel’s iniquities, and sends it away by the hand of a chosen man into the wilderness, to a land not inhabited. One dies for sin; one carries sin away. Together they say what one animal could not.

2. *Read Hebrews 9:6–14 and 9:24–28 beside Leviticus 16. List three ways the writer says the work of Christ goes beyond anything Aaron accomplished on that day.*

Hebrews says Christ entered the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that He entered with His own blood rather than the blood of goats and calves, that He obtained eternal redemption rather than a yearly covering, that He entered heaven itself to appear in the presence of God for us, and that He offered Himself once rather than often. Answers may pick any three. The repeated word to notice is “once.”

3. *Leviticus 17:11 gives God’s own reason for forbidding the eating of blood. Copy out the reason, then read Hebrews 9:22 and 1 Peter 1:18–19 and explain the connection.*

God says the life of the flesh is in the blood, and that He has given it on the altar to make atonement, because it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul. Hebrews 9:22 draws the conclusion that without shedding of blood there is no remission, and 1 Peter 1:18–19 names the blood that finally did it: not silver or gold but the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.

4. *Leviticus 19:13–18 gathers commands about wages, the deaf, the blind, gossip, grudges, and hatred. List them, and mark the one you break most easily without noticing.*

Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him, do not keep back a hired servant's wages overnight, do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, do no injustice in judgment, do not be partial to poor or mighty, do not go about as a talebearer, do not take a stand against your neighbor's life, do not hate your brother in your heart, rebuke him rather than bearing sin because of him, do not take vengeance or bear a grudge, and love your neighbor as yourself. Most classes will land on the talebearer or the grudge.

5. *Jesus called Leviticus 19:18 the second greatest commandment. Name the neighbor you find hardest to love, and do one concrete, inconvenient thing for that person before next Sunday.*

Answers will vary. Listen for a real name rather than a category, and for an action rather than a feeling. The hardest neighbor is usually not a stranger but someone close enough to have caused injury. If someone names a person who has abused or endangered them, be careful: loving a neighbor never requires re-entering danger, and this is a conversation to continue privately rather than in class.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not bind any of this on Christians. The Day of Atonement, the cleansing rites, and the dietary and purity laws were shadow, fulfilled and removed in Christ (Colossians 2:16–17; Hebrews 10:1–14). Teach them for what they reveal about God and about the cross.
- Leviticus 18 and 20 name incest, adultery, homosexual practice, bestiality, and the sacrifice of children to Molech. Read them plainly; do not read them with relish. Affirm marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman, affirm that these sins are forgivable and forgiven (1 Corinthians 6:9–11), and remember who may be sitting in the room.
- The death penalties in these chapters were the civil law of national Israel under the old covenant. They are not a program for the church or for modern society. The church's discipline is spiritual (1 Corinthians 5:1–13; 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15).
- Chapter 15 material on bodily discharges and chapter 18's frankness may embarrass a mixed class. Handle the subject matter with dignity, summarize where detail is not needed, and do not turn it into a joke.

The Furnace and the Friend

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Proverbs 17 is a chapter about households and friendships under pressure. It opens at the supper table and keeps returning there: quietness over feasting, a wise servant honored above a shameful son, grandchildren as the crown of old men, a foolish son as his father's grief. Wisdom literature keeps insisting that the test of a life is not what happens in public but what happens in the kitchen.

Running through it is a concern with speech that starts fires. Verse 9 warns against repeating a matter, verse 14 against beginning a quarrel, verse 19 says whoever loves strife loves sin, verse 27 praises the man who spares his words, and verse 28 wryly observes that even a fool is thought wise when he keeps his mouth shut. A class that takes verse 14 seriously will find it changes more Tuesdays than most doctrinal discussions do.

At the center stands verse 3, which lifts the whole chapter above mere advice. Silver and gold are tested by fire; hearts are tested by God. That is why Solomon can be so interested in small domestic matters. The quarrel at the table and the grudge carried to work are where the furnace is actually doing its work on a person.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This belongs to the collection of Solomon's proverbs running from 10:1 through 22:16, made up of short, self-contained sayings.
- Most verses here are antithetical, setting a wise course against a foolish one in two lines. Reading them aloud slowly, one at a time, is the best way to teach this chapter.
- The furnace image in verse 3 recurs in Scripture for God's refining work (Psalm 66:10; Isaiah 48:10; Malachi 3:3; 1 Peter 1:6–7).
- Verse 15 uses the courtroom language of acquitting and condemning, the language Paul later takes up in Romans.
- These are general observations about how life normally runs under God's order, not guarantees, and not prophecy.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Verse 1 prefers a dry crust with quietness to a house full of feasting with strife. Describe a home where that trade has actually been made, and talk about what it takes day by day to keep it made.*

A quiet house is not an accident and it is not the absence of strong personalities. It is the result of a hundred small refusals: the last word not taken, the sarcastic reply deleted, the old grievance not raised again at dinner, the apology offered before it is deserved. Verse 1 is blunt about the trade involved. The feasting house may have more money, more activity, and more admiration from outside, and it is still the worse place to live.

Ask the class what actually breaks the quiet in their homes, and press for the honest answer, which is usually not a great moral failure but fatigue, money, and tone of voice. Then ask what one person can do unilaterally. A great deal, as it turns out: verse 14 says the leak can be stopped before the wall gives way, and it does not require both parties to agree to stop it.

Question 2. *Verse 3 says the refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests hearts. How does God actually test a heart, and how would a person recognize that it is happening to him?*

God tests hearts the way a refiner tests metal, by applying heat until what is inside comes to the surface. In practice that means circumstances: the promotion that does not come, the illness that does not lift, the criticism that is partly deserved, the long stretch of obedience with no visible reward. James 1:2–4 and 1 Peter 1:6–7 both

describe trials as the process by which genuine faith is proven and purified. Deuteronomy 8:2 says God led Israel forty years to know what was in their heart.

How would you know it is happening? Usually by noticing what came out of you when the heat rose. The words you said in the hospital corridor, the resentment that surfaced when someone else was praised, the prayer you finally prayed at two in the morning. Tell your class that the point of the furnace is not information for God, who already knows, but revelation to us. Ask what the last hard month brought to the surface.

Question 3. *Verse 9 says covering a transgression seeks love while repeating a matter separates friends. Where is the line between covering an offense and confronting a sin that must be dealt with (Matthew 18:15; Galatians 6:1)?*

Verse 9 is not a rule of silence. It addresses the person who keeps bringing a matter up: the spouse who re-litigates a settled argument, the friend who tells the story to a third party, the member who cannot let a decade-old decision by the elders rest. That repeating is what separates close friends. Love covers, as 1 Peter 4:8 says, meaning it does not broadcast and does not keep score.

The line is drawn by purpose and by direction. Galatians 6:1 and Matthew 18:15 send you to the person, privately, for restoration. Gossip goes to everyone but the person, for entertainment or for leverage. And be clear about the limit: covering never means concealing abuse, a crime, or ongoing unrepented sin that is harming others. Say that plainly in class, because someone will otherwise take verse 9 as a command to keep a dangerous secret.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Go through the chapter and count the verses that concern the tongue, quarrels, or strife. Roughly what portion of Proverbs 17 is that, and why might Solomon give it so much room?*

Depending on how one counts, roughly a third of the chapter touches speech and conflict, including verses 4, 7, 9, 13, 14, 19, 20, 27, and 28. Solomon gives it that much room because speech is where the heart becomes public and because quarrels are the most common way ordinary households are ruined. James 3 works the same ground at greater length.

2. *Proverbs 17:15 says justifying the wicked and condemning the just are equally an abomination. Read Romans 3:23–26 and explain how God justifies the ungodly without being guilty of either one.*

Romans 3 says God set forth Christ as a propitiation by His blood, to demonstrate His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. God does not declare the guilty innocent by pretending; the guilt was borne. That is why justification does not make God guilty of Proverbs 17:15. The cross is what allows mercy and justice to stand in the same sentence.

3. *Verse 17 says a friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity. List the people who actually showed up the last time your life came apart, then ask whose list you are on.*

Answers will vary. Watch for the second half of the question, which is the one that changes behavior. It is easy to assess our friends and uncomfortable to ask whether anyone would put us on that list. Encourage the person who realizes he has been receiving friendship and not giving it to pick one name and act this week.

4. *Verse 22 says a merry heart does good like medicine. Add Nehemiah 8:10 and Philippians 4:4 to it, and explain how joy can be commanded rather than merely felt.*

Nehemiah 8:10 says the joy of the Lord is your strength, spoken to people weeping over Scripture they had just understood. Philippians 4:4 commands rejoicing in the Lord always, written by a man in custody. Joy can be commanded because biblical joy is not a mood produced by circumstances but a settled gladness in God that survives them. It is chosen and cultivated, which is why it can also be neglected.

5. *Verse 14 says stop contention before it breaks loose, the way you would stop a leak in a dam. Name the argument you are currently keeping alive, decide what you will surrender to end it, and end it this week.*

Answers will vary. Press for the specific argument and the specific surrender: an apology owed, a text thread left unanswered, a point conceded, a subject dropped permanently. Listen for the person who insists he cannot stop because he is right. Verse 14 does not ask who is right; it asks who will stop the water.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Keep teaching the class how proverbs work. Verse 22 is not a promise that a cheerful person will not get sick, and it must never be used to suggest that a suffering Christian lacks joy.
- Verse 9 will be misapplied if you do not guard it. Covering an offense is not concealing abuse, crime, or unrepented sin that endangers others. Say so out loud.
- Verse 5, that mocking the poor reproaches his Maker, is worth pressing. Proverbs elsewhere connects poverty with laziness in some cases, and a class can slide from that into contempt. Both truths belong to the same book.

What Defiles, and Great Faith

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

This reading is the second half of a single argument. The Pharisees had complained about unwashed hands; Jesus now turns from them to the multitude and states the principle, then explains it privately to the disciples. Defilement is not something you catch from a table or a market. It is manufactured inside a person and comes out through the mouth. For an audience raised on ceremonial categories, this was an earthquake, and Matthew notes that the Pharisees were offended.

Then Jesus does something that makes the point with His feet. He walks north into the region of Tyre and Sidon, pagan territory, and there a Canaanite woman, a descendant of the very people Israel was told to drive out, comes crying for mercy. His silence, the disciples' irritation, and His words about the children's bread all seem to push her away, and each time she comes back with more faith rather than less. "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs." He answers, "O woman, great is your faith."

The reading closes with a second mass feeding, in Gentile country, with a crowd that had been with Him three days. Matthew 15:31 says they glorified the God of Israel, a phrase that tells you who was in that crowd. The chapter that begins with an argument about clean hands ends with Gentiles eating bread from the Messiah's hands. Let your class feel the shape of that.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Matthew 15:10–20 answers the controversy of 15:1–9 about the tradition of the elders and ceremonial handwashing.
- Mark's parallel adds the editorial comment that in saying this Jesus purified all foods (Mark 7:19), a change that becomes practical in Acts 10 and explicit in 1 Timothy 4:1–5.
- Tyre and Sidon are Phoenician cities on the Mediterranean coast, outside Israel. Mark calls the woman a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth (Mark 7:26); Matthew calls her a Canaanite, which sharpens the point for Jewish readers.
- The word Jesus uses for dogs is a diminutive, the household pet under the table, not the scavenger of the streets. The woman catches the nuance and uses it.
- The feeding of the four thousand is a separate event from the five thousand. Jesus Himself distinguishes them later (Matthew 16:9–10), with different numbers, different baskets, and different locations.
- During His earthly ministry Jesus was sent first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (15:24; Romans 15:8). The Gentile mission opens fully after the resurrection (Matthew 28:19).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *In 15:17–20 Jesus names what actually comes out of a person's heart. Read the list aloud slowly, and talk about why He begins with thoughts rather than with actions.*

Jesus lists evil thoughts first, then murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. The order is not accidental. Everything after the first item began as the first item. This is why the sermon on the mount had already gone after anger and lust rather than only murder and adultery, and it is why a person can keep a clean public record and still be, in Jesus' description, defiled.

The pastoral value here is enormous. Many sincere Christians manage their behavior and never examine the traffic of their minds, and they cannot understand why the same sins keep reappearing. Ask the class what they are feeding, hour by hour, and where. Then ask what a heart looks like that is being deliberately filled with something else (Philippians 4:8; Colossians 3:1–2).

Question 2. *The Canaanite woman is met first with silence, then with a hard saying about children's bread and little dogs, and finally with praise for great faith. Track what she says and does at each stage, and consider what Jesus was drawing out of her.*

Follow her carefully. She cries out with a messianic title, "Son of David," though she is a Canaanite. He answers not a word. The disciples ask Him to send her away. He says He was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. She comes closer, worships, and says three words: "Lord, help me." He speaks of the children's bread and the little dogs. She agrees with Him, takes the lower place without argument, and asks only for crumbs. Each apparent obstacle produces humility rather than offense.

What He is drawing out is faith that will not be turned aside and that makes no claim on its own dignity. This is also instruction for the disciples standing there, who wanted her gone; they are watching a Gentile out-believe Israel, which is a theme Matthew keeps sounding (8:10). Be careful how you handle the hard saying. Jesus is not insulting her ethnicity for sport; He is stating the order of His earthly mission and giving her room to answer, and she answers magnificently.

Question 3. *The disciples come to Jesus worried that the Pharisees were offended by what He said. When is offending people evidence that we have told the truth, and when is it evidence that we have told it badly?*

Sometimes offense is unavoidable. Jesus said what was true and men who had built their careers on the tradition of the elders were offended, and He did not soften it; He called them blind leaders of the blind. The gospel offends. The cross is called a stumbling block (1 Corinthians 1:23), and a preacher who has never offended anyone has probably not said much.

But the New Testament is equally clear that some offense is our own fault. Speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15), seasoned with salt (Colossians 4:6), not quarrelsome but patient (2 Timothy 2:24-25). The test is not whether someone got upset; it is whether the offense was in the message or in the messenger's tone, timing, and motive. Ask the class for an honest example of each from their own experience.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Write out the evils Jesus lists in 15:19, and add the ones Mark includes in Mark 7:21-22. Mark which of them are invisible to everyone but God at the moment they occur.*

Matthew names evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies. Mark adds covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, pride, and foolishness. The invisible ones dominate: evil thoughts, covetousness, deceit, an evil eye, pride. That is precisely Jesus' point, since the Pharisees were policing what could be seen on a man's hands.

2. *Jesus says in 15:13 that every plant the Father has not planted will be uprooted. Read Matthew 7:21-23 with it and describe the kind of religion He is warning about.*

He is warning about religion that God did not plant, meaning teaching and practice that originate with men. Matthew 7:21-23 shows the same thing from the other end: people who prophesied and cast out demons in His name, active and sincere, and yet heard "I never knew you." Zeal does not sanctify what God has not authorized. Both passages put the question of authority ahead of the question of sincerity.

3. *Find every word the Canaanite woman speaks in 15:22-27 and copy her sentences in order. What do those three short speeches have in common?*

Her words are "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed," then "Lord, help me!" and then "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." All three call Him Lord, all three ask rather than argue, and all three get shorter and humbler. She never disputes His statement; she stands on it.

4. Set the feeding of the four thousand (15:32–39) beside the five thousand in 14:15–21 and note the differences in location, numbers, loaves, and leftover baskets. Suggest why the Holy Spirit preserved both accounts.

The five thousand were fed in Jewish Galilee, from five loaves and two fish, with twelve baskets left over, after one day. The four thousand were fed in Gentile territory, from seven loaves and a few small fish, with seven large hampers left over, after three days. Both are preserved partly because they are separate historical events and partly because together they say the same bread is for Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus Himself insists on the distinction in 16:9–10.

5. Jesus locates the trouble in the heart rather than in the hands. Name one habit that is steadily shaping your heart in the wrong direction, and give it up this week rather than managing it.

Answers will vary. The important word is “give up” rather than “manage.” Listen for specifics: an app, a program, a running conversation, a habit of complaining, a Saturday night pattern that ruins Sunday morning. If someone names something genuinely addictive, follow up privately rather than leaving them with a resolution they cannot keep alone.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Matthew 15:11 is about ceremonial defilement, not about license. Jesus is not saying that what a Christian eats or drinks is morally weightless; Scripture still forbids drunkenness and calls the body a temple (Ephesians 5:18; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20).
- Do not let the exchange with the Canaanite woman be read as Jesus mocking a foreigner. Explain the diminutive, explain the order of His earthly mission to Israel, and let her answer stand as the point of the story.
- Avoid teaching from her persistence that enough determination obligates God to act. She receives mercy because Christ is merciful, not because she wore Him down.
- Some students have been taught that the two feedings are one story told twice. Matthew 16:9–10 settles it. Handle it calmly as a question of reading the text carefully.

Doors Opened in Macedonia

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Acts 16 is the chapter where the gospel crosses into Europe, and Luke tells it with unusual care. It begins with a young man of mixed background joining the work and with Paul making a concession for the sake of reaching Jews, which is remarkable given the letter he is carrying from Jerusalem. Then comes a stretch of frustrated travel: forbidden to preach in Asia, not permitted to go into Bithynia, moving until they run out of land at Troas.

The vision at Troas is the turning point, and verse 10 contains one of the great quiet details of Scripture, the sudden appearance of the word “we.” Luke has joined the party. At Philippi there is no synagogue, so they go to a riverside prayer meeting, and the first convert on the continent is a woman from Thyatira who deals in expensive cloth. Luke says the Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. Heart opened, word heeded, household baptized, home offered.

The night in the prison is the heart of the chapter. Two men who have been stripped, beaten with rods, and fastened in stocks are praying and singing loudly enough that the other prisoners are listening. The earthquake opens everything, nobody runs, and a Roman jailer who was about to kill himself falls down trembling and asks what he must do to be saved. Within the hour he has heard the word, washed their wounds, been baptized with his household, set a meal before them, and rejoiced. The gospel had been in Europe less than a week.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This is Paul’s second preaching tour, beginning about A.D. 50, with Silas in place of Barnabas after the separation of Acts 15:39.
- Timothy’s mother was Jewish and his father Greek (16:1; 2 Timothy 1:5). His circumcision was voluntary and strategic, removing an obstacle to preaching in synagogues, not a concession that it was required for salvation.
- Philippi was a Roman colony, which is why Luke stresses the magistrates, the lictors with their rods, and the alarm when Paul reveals Roman citizenship (16:37–38).
- Ten Jewish men were needed to form a synagogue; the riverside prayer place suggests Philippi had no such community, which is why the first hearers were women.
- The “we” sections of Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16) mark where Luke was personally present.
- The signs worked by the apostles confirmed the word they preached (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4); they were credentials of revelation, not a permanent feature of church life.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul has Timothy circumcised in 16:3, just after carrying a letter that said circumcision is not required. Explain why that is not a contradiction, and name the principle Paul is following (1 Corinthians 9:19–23).*

The Jerusalem letter settled a doctrinal question: circumcision is not required for salvation, and no one may bind it. Paul never surrendered that, and in Galatians 2:3–5 he refused to circumcise Titus precisely because men were demanding it as necessary. Timothy’s case is entirely different. No one was making it a test of salvation. Paul acted voluntarily, because Timothy’s Jewish parentage would have made him a needless scandal in every synagogue they entered.

The principle is 1 Corinthians 9:19–23: to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews. On matters God has settled, Paul would not move an inch. On matters of liberty, he gave up his rights constantly to remove obstacles from other people’s path to Christ. Ask the class where they are doing the opposite: compromising on what God settled while insisting on their preferences in matters of liberty.

Question 2. *Lydia is a successful businesswoman and the jailer is a Roman civil servant with blood on his hands. Compare the two conversions and list everything the two accounts have in common.*

The differences are obvious and the similarities are the lesson. Both heard the word of the Lord spoken to them (16:14, 32). Both responded that same day. Both were baptized, and in both cases the household was baptized as well. Both immediately opened their homes: Lydia constrained the preachers to stay, and the jailer set food before them. Both are marked by joy or by eager hospitality afterward.

Luke is making a point by pairing them. A wealthy religious woman already seeking God and a hardened pagan employee of the empire arrive at exactly the same door by exactly the same means. There is no separate gospel for respectable people. Ask your class who they have privately written off as too far gone or too self-sufficient, and read verse 33 again.

Question 3. *Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns at midnight with open wounds on their backs and their feet in stocks. What makes that possible for a human being, and where in your own week does the same capacity get tested?*

Two things make it possible, and both are in the text. First, they knew why they were there: they had been sent by a vision, and the shame of the beating did not change the assignment. Second, they had somewhere to put their attention besides their own backs. Prayer and singing are not distraction techniques; they are acts of allegiance. Paul later wrote to this very congregation, from another confinement, about rejoicing always and about the peace that guards the heart (Philippians 4:4–7).

For the class, the test rarely comes as a beating. It comes as a diagnosis, a layoff, a wayward child, a long unanswered prayer at two in the morning. Ask what they actually do at midnight, because that is the honest measure. Then point out the detail Luke adds: the prisoners were listening. Somebody is always listening to how a Christian handles the dark.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the route in 16:6–12 on a map, marking where the Spirit forbids, where the vision comes, and where Luke quietly begins writing “we.”*

They go through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, are forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach in Asia, come to Mysia and try to go into Bithynia but the Spirit does not permit them, pass by Mysia to Troas, receive the vision, and sail by Samothrace to Neapolis and then Philippi. The “we” appears at 16:10, immediately after the vision. Note how much closed door there is before the open one, and how Luke joins precisely at the moment the direction becomes clear.

2. *Read Acts 16:14 with Romans 10:17 and Acts 17:11. By what means did the Lord open Lydia’s heart, and what does that tell you about how anyone is converted?*

The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. The opening and the speaking happen together; she was not overwhelmed apart from the preached word. Romans 10:17 says faith comes by hearing the word of God, and Acts 17:11 shows the Bereans receiving the word and searching the Scriptures daily. God works through His word on hearts willing to attend to it. This is not irresistible grace overriding a will; it is truth given entrance by a woman already worshipping and listening.

3. *Copy out the jailer’s question and Paul’s answer in 16:30–31, then read straight through verses 32 to 34 and list everything that happened before the man rejoiced.*

The jailer asks what he must do to be saved, and Paul answers, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.” Then verse 32 says they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. He took them that hour of the night and washed their stripes. He and all his family were baptized immediately. Then he brought them into his house, set food before them, and rejoiced. Belief was the starting point of an answer that was completed before dawn in water.

4. *The slave girl was saying something true about Paul and Silas (16:17). Explain why Paul refused her testimony, and compare how Jesus handled a similar situation in Mark 1:34.*

Paul refused it because the truth spoken by the wrong witness discredits the message. Her announcement came from a demonic spirit and from a girl whose owners were profiting from her, and to accept that endorsement would have tied the gospel to the occult in the minds of everyone in Philippi. Jesus likewise did not allow demons to speak, even when what they said was accurate (Mark 1:34; Luke 4:41). God does not need testimony from the darkness.

5. *Lydia opened her home the same day she was baptized, and would not take no for an answer. Name one door of yours (home, table, car, calendar) and open it to someone specific this week.*

Answers will vary. Look for a name and a date. Hospitality in the New Testament is not entertaining; it is opening what you have to people who cannot repay it (Luke 14:12–14; Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9). If someone says their home is not ready, point out that Lydia's invitation came hours after her baptism and that the jailer served supper in a house that had just been shaken off its foundation.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Acts 16:31 is the single most quoted verse for salvation by faith only. Do not skip past it and do not argue about it; simply read verses 32 through 34 aloud and let the class see what happened before the man rejoiced. Belief is the beginning of the answer, not the whole of it (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Mark 16:16).
- The baptized households of Lydia and the jailer are used to support infant baptism. The text says the word was spoken to all who were in the house and that he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household (16:32, 34). Teach that gently and from the text.
- Lydia's opened heart will be cited for irresistible grace. Keep the phrase joined to what follows: she heeded the things spoken by Paul. God opens hearts through the preached word, and hearts can also be closed against it (Acts 7:51).
- The spirit of divination and the earthquake invite speculation about present-day miracles. State plainly and kindly that these signs confirmed the word while revelation was being given (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10), and keep the class on the text.

NEXT WEEK'S READING: Leviticus 21–27 · Proverbs 18–19 · Matthew 16:1–17:13 · Acts 17

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