

Sermon for May 1, 2016 – Easter 6

Acts 16:6–10 NIV84

Theme: **The Spirit leads us where Jesus needs us.**

- 1) Sometimes he says “No.”
- 2) Sometimes he says “Go.”

⁶ Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

It almost always happens: at some point in a pastor’s ministry he receives “a divine call” to serve some other place with the Gospel. What exactly does receiving a “divine call” mean? Is that merely a fancy way of saying that he has another job opportunity? And what’s this talk about prayerfully “deliberating” a call and “being led” to either accept or return it?

With the account of God calling Paul to Macedonia as our guide, let us consider these things under the theme: **The Spirit leads us where Jesus needs us.** 1) *Sometimes he says “No.”* 2) *Sometimes he says “Go.”*

Part One: Sometimes he says “No.”

What is a “divine call”? Basically, it’s God telling a person to publically preach the Gospel at a specific time and in a specific place.

How does God issue a divine call? Well, he can do it directly – like appearing to someone in a vision or talking to them from a burning bush; but usually he does it indirectly: commissioning his chosen ministers through the Church.

Take, for example, the apostle Paul: Right before our text, the church in Jerusalemⁱ commissioned him to encourage congregations in Asia Minor with a special message. Even though he heard no voice from heaven, Paul viewed this task as work that God himself wanted him to do.

After completing that important ministry, Paul returned to doing the work the Holy Spirit had originally called him to do: spreading the Gospel in Gentile lands.ⁱⁱ

Paul made a plan as to how he would go about this ministry. He thought it would be best to start by preaching in the neighboring province of Asia, but when he set out to do that, look at what

happened: *Paul and his companions. . . [were] kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.*

Now, why would the Holy Spirit prevent Paul from preaching the Gospel in that particular province? Was it because God didn't want those people to hear the Gospel? No, that was certainly not the case. Paul himself would preach there at a later date. Right now, however, the LORD wanted Paul somewhere else. This is why he led Paul along a road that went along the border of Phrygia and Galatia to a place called Bithynia.

“Ah ha,” Paul must have thought, “God wants me to preach here!” But when *they tried to enter Bithynia . . . the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.*

Now why didn't the Holy Spirit allow them to enter that region? Was it a matter of timing? Well, it was actually more than that. Even though the Christians in Bithynia would play a very important role in future Church history, God had not chosen Paul to evangelize that region. He chose someone else to do it.

Now think about this for a moment: Even though the Holy Spirit led Paul right to the border of Bithynia, He, in the end, said: “No, Paul. I am not sending you here. I have chosen someone else to conduct ministry in this place. Continue travelling the road I set you on and I will bring you to where you need to be.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I want to pause at this point in our text and apply it to present day ministry. Just as God called and directed his apostles of old, so he calls and directs his ministers today. Faithful pastors and teachers don't pick and choose the places they want to serve. The Holy Spirit leads them to the places he wants them to serve – and he accomplishes this through the divine call.

So imagine the situation: a faithful minister of the Gospel receives a call to serve someplace else. Does the fact that he received this divine call mean that he is obligated to accept it? No, not necessarily. Think of the example we have of the apostle Paul at the border of Bithynia: Even though the LORD led him to that place, the Holy Spirit also made it clear that he didn't want Paul to preach there. In a similar way, after careful deliberation, the Holy Spirit may also make it clear to a present-day minister of the Gospel that he needs to stay in his present place of ministry.

How did the Holy Spirit prevent Paul from entering Bithynia? Did a geo-political conflict in the area physically prevent Paul from crossing the border? Did the Holy Spirit simply speak to him in a vision? On another occasion, it seems as if the apostle's health played a role in where he preached the Gospelⁱⁱⁱ. Was that the case here? We will probably never know the answer to these questions this side of heaven. The important thing to note is this: the Holy Spirit, in some way, led Paul to the conviction that the LORD did not want him to conduct ministry in Bithynia.

So also today: whenever a faithful minister of the Gospel returns a divine call, it is only because he is convinced that the Holy Spirit wants him to stay. What leads him to that conviction? Who can say in general because each situation is unique. It could be that, upon further review, he

came to the realization that he is unqualified for the new call. Medical issues could prevent him from accepting. During the course of his deliberation, new problems, challenges or opportunities might come to light in his current place of service, which he is best suited to address. Regardless of how it happens, whenever a faithful minister of the Gospel returns a call it is only because the Holy Spirit led him to that conviction.

So, as you can see: **The Spirit leads us where Jesus needs us.** Sometimes he says “No.” Sometimes he says “Go.”

Part Two: Sometimes he says “Go.”

I wonder what the Apostle Paul and his companions were thinking as they travelled those hundreds of miles northwest from Pisidian Antioch. They seemed to be going nowhere - passing major city after major city. What was the LORD doing? Where was he leading them?

Soon Paul and his companions ended up in Troas, which was literally the end of the road on which they were travelling. They physically could not walk any further. Now what? Well, the LORD showed them what: ⁹ *During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”*

Understand that this vision was no ordinary dream. It was special. It was distinct. It was the Holy Spirit’s way of laying on Paul’s heart a desire to share the Gospel on the continent of Europe.

The people in Macedonia were in need: they were trapped in Satan’s clutches, slaves to sin, living in unbelief, dying and doomed to hell. They had no knowledge of their Savior.

Paul and his companions had the message they needed to hear: that *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*^{iv} Not only did they have that message, but God had also specially gifted Paul and his companions with the talents and ability necessary to effectively witness that Gospel in Europe.

We read: ¹⁰ *After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

What convinced Paul that God had called them to preach the Gospel in Europe? Was it just the vision? That was certainly a major reason behind his conviction, but the way this verse is worded in Greek there were other reasons as well. After Paul received the vision, it seems as if he thought through his entire journey up until that point: the fact that the Holy Spirit had prevented them from doing ministry in Asia and Bithynia, and that the LORD had led them to the edge of the continent with no place to go except across the sea – all these things, together with the vision, gave Paul the conviction that God wanted them in Macedonia. God showed them the need. He gave them the desire to help. All these things combined were the Holy Spirit saying: “go”.

What the Holy Spirit did for Paul and his companions, he also does for his faithful ministers of the Gospel today. No, I am not saying that he gives us a vision as to whether or not we should accept a divine call. He gives us something better: he gives us conviction!

Now, please understand what I mean when I say “conviction”. I am not saying that a pastor simply feels the “fuzzy wuzzies” towards a particular call and goes on that. No, like Paul, a faithful minister of the Gospel considers his entire journey – how and where the LORD has been leading him throughout his life. He considers the talents and gifts God has given him, as well as his weaknesses. He considers what he has done and left undone. He considers the needs of the people who are calling him as well as the needs of those he is currently serving. Most importantly, he considers the message of Christ crucified that our world so desperately needs to hear. Souls are dying throughout the world! Where can he best serve? Where does the LORD want him to serve?

And, as he prayerfully considers these things, the Holy Spirit plants a conviction in his heart that grows and grows until he knows the answer. And if that conviction is to “go”, then that is what the LORD is leading him to do.

Now, understand that a faithful minister of the Gospel can’t just “decide” on a whim. The Holy Spirit works when and where he chooses. This is why deliberating a call often takes time and effort. This is why a minister needs the counsel and input of others – and lots of prayers. A faithful minister of the Gospel doesn’t want to make a decision based on what is “good for him”. He wants the LORD to lead him to do what is best for Christ’s kingdom. His heart goes out to both places to which he holds calls – praying that the LORD will provide for both places equally well. He prays for direction and conviction – not because he’s worried he’ll make the wrong decision (there really is no “wrong” decision), but because he truly loves God’s people. As a servant of the LORD, he simply wants to go where he can best serve God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: I hope this sermon gave you some insight and understanding as to what a “divine call” is and why a faithful minister of the Gospel might accept or return a new call. **The Spirit leads us where Jesus needs us.** Sometimes he says “No.” Sometimes he says “Go.” Whatever the LORD leads a minister of the Gospel to do, we can be sure the God will use that decision for the good of his kingdom. We don’t have to worry about where we will serve or who will serve us with the Gospel. Our dear Savior is in heaven, ruling over all things for the benefit of his church – and that is the greatest comfort of all. Amen

ⁱ Cf. Acts 15:22,25.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Act 9:15; 13:2-4

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Galatians 4:13

^{iv} John 3:16 NIV84