**Sermon Based Community Group Leader Guide**

**Acts 15:36-16:5**

**\* Read Acts 15:36-16:5. Open in Prayer.**

**\* Sermon Overview**

At Fegenbush, Pastor Aaron will do character studies on John Mark and Timothy, emphasizing that God uses imperfect instruments to advance His kingdom and to build His church. Regarding Mark, this question arises: “Can God overcome weakness and mistakes?” Regarding Timothy, this question arises, “Can God overcome our insecurities?” He will challenge us to be engaged in discipleship through the framework of discovering, developing, and deploying.

At East, Pastor Blake’s main point will be: God’s kingdom advances despite human conflict. Flowing out of this main idea, he will note (1) restoration from conflict through the gospel and discipleship and (2) prevention of conflict through the gospel and discipleship.

**\* Prompt Questions**

1. Was there anything that stood out to you in the pastor’s sermon? Are there any clarifying questions that you may have regarding the sermon?

2. How have you been seeking to apply the sermon in your own life this week? Or, what is one way that you can apply the sermon to your life this week?

3. What was the take away from the sermon for you? If you had to sum up the main idea of the sermon in one sentence, what would it be? What main themes do you see in the text and did you hear in the sermon?

4. How have you seen God at work this week in your life and in the lives of those around you? How has God been working in you this week through His Word, through prayer, through the body of Christ, and through service/evangelism? What were the highlights and lowlights of your week? How can we be praying for you specifically?

**\* Observation/Interpretation Questions[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Note: Please do not feel compelled to get through every one of these questions. I have given them in hopes that they will drive us back to the text so that we may diligently search the Scriptures as the Bereans did (Acts 17:10-15). These questions will give us a grasp of what the text says/means so that we can apply the text to our lives. I would encourage you to spend the majority of your time on application questions so that we can become “doers of the Word and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

**1. What is the context of Acts 15:36-16:5?**

*Luke wrote Luke and Acts (written around A.D. 62) to Theophilus in order to give him an accurate account of the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and to tell how Jesus continues to work through Spirit-empowered witnesses to carry the gospel to the end of the earth without hindrance and with boldness. Acts 1:8 serves as the theme verse of the book and as the outline for the book, for chapters 1-7 focus on Jerusalem, chapters 8-12 focus on Judea and Samaria, and chapters 13-28 focus on the end of the earth. The risen Lord sends His Spirit to empower followers of the Way to be witnesses who proclaim the kingdom of God to the end of the earth.*

*Acts 15:36-18:22 describes the second missionary journey of Paul, which lasted from around A.D. 49-51. Acts 15:36-16:5 details why Barnabas did not go with Paul and when Paul enlisted Timothy to join him. Sometime after the Jerusalem Council, Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (see v. 36). However, sharp disagreement arose between Paul and Barnabas when they discussed who should go on the trip. Barnabas desired to take John Mark, and Paul did not want to take John Mark. As a result, Paul took Silas, and Barnabas took John Mark; even through disagreement, God used both teams to advance His mission and to build up His church. Along the way, Paul enlisted Timothy to join him on the second missionary journey. As Paul, Silas, and Timothy journeyed, they reported on the events of the Jerusalem Council, and they saw churches strengthened and multiplied.*



Note: This map of Paul’s second missionary journey comes from the *ESV Study Bible.*

**2. What is going on in Acts 15:36-41?**

*Motivated by a desire to see how the brothers were doing, Paul proposed a trip to Barnabas for them to return and visit with the brothers from their first missionary journey. However, sharp disagreement arose when Barnabas suggested that they take John Mark, and Paul neglected to take John Mark because he bailed on the first trip. As a result, Barnabas took John Mark, and they went to Cyprus; Paul chose Silas, and they went to Syria, Cilicia, Galatia, and ultimately, beyond at the Spirit’s leading. In short, God advances His mission and builds His church despite human conflict.*

*As you read through the passage, reflect on the characters involved in this passage: What do you know about Paul, Barnabas, John Mark, Silas? How do their stories end, from what we know of them from the Bible? How do you see God using their gifts, personalities, etc. to build His church and advance His mission? Also, rejoice in the God who brings good out of human conflict. Finally, notice how God uses Paul and Barnabas to disciple/raise up church leaders.*

*For Barnabas, see Acts 4:36; 9:26-27; 11:22-25, 30; 13-14. For John Mark, see Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37, 39; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13. For Silas, see Acts 14:26; 15:22; 16:37-38.*

*Note that Luke marks major divisions in Acts by reference to time (see Acts 15:36; 18:1; 21:15; 24:1; 25:1; 28:11, 17).*

*ESV Study Bible: ““In the sovereignty of God, out of this disagreement came a doubling of their labor, for Barnabas went to strengthen the churches in Cyprus and Paul went to the churches in Syria, Cilicia, and then Galatia. In addition, both of their assistants (Mark and Silas) went on to have significant ministries themselves.”*

*John Polhill writes, “Standing in the background was Barnabas, always the encourager, showing faith in Mark when others had lost theirs and eventually redeeming him—ironically, for Paul.”*

Derek Thomas writes, “No Christian is beyond hope of recovery. No matter how bad the fall may be, there is a road back to usefulness….(But) God forgives repentant sinners, and so should we. The good news is this: sins can be forgiven.” He continues, “Despite human disagreements, God’s work still goes forward. Even in church divisions and strife, God overrules our folly and sin to promote his work. This is not to excuse our culpability; rather, it is to evoke gratitude for the mercy and kindness of God. He brings about good from the worst of circumstances. He beautifies his church, despite what we do, in order that Christ might be glorified. Indeed, out of this division arose greater opportunities for the gospel to expand. Instead of one mission team, there were now two! Out of evil, good has emerged—proving once gain the truth of Romans 8:28: ‘for those who love God all things work together for good.’”

**3. What is going on in Acts 16:1-5?**

*On their journey, Paul met Timothy in Lystra, and he wanted to take Timothy with him on the trip. In order to prevent conflict in the future and to provide no stumbling blocks to Jews, Paul had Timothy circumcised. As Paul, Timothy, and Silas continued the journey, they reported on the decisions that had been reached at the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15:1-35). By God’s grace, Paul, Silas, and Timothy saw churches strengthened and multiplied.*

*Note that Iconium was about 20 miles from Lystra; Derbe was about 60 miles southeast of Lystra. Thus, it would be understandable that the churches at Iconium and Lystra would have members who knew one another. Yet, the fact that Timothy was well regarded by churches in both cities speaks to his godliness and giftedness. On the theme of good reputation, see Acts 6:3; 10:22; 22:12.*

*As you read this passage, think through these questions: Why did Paul circumcise Timothy? How might 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 speak to Paul’s reasoning for circumcising Timothy? As you read Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10, what principles might these passages give us for addressing indifferent matters (or gray areas)? What would you see as indifferent matters in our day? What Christian liberty might we need to sacrifice in order to keep from being a stumbling block?*

*For Timothy, see Acts 16:1; 17:14-15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4; Romans 16:21; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10; 2 Corinthians 1:1, 19; Philippians 1:1; 2:19-22; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 3:2, 6; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:2, 18; 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:2; Philemon 1; Hebrews 13:23.*

*On circumcision, see Galatians 5:3. 6, 11; 6:15; 1 Cor 7:17-20; 9:16-23.*

*For summary statements in Acts, see 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 8:25, 40; 9:31, 42; 11:24-25; 12:24; 14:21-23.*

*Derek Thomas writes, “God chooses broken vessels to accomplish his work, but at this stage at least, Paul saw in Timothy marks of godliness, gifting, and zeal. Just because some may think us unfit because of our personalities does not mean that this is God’s view of us. He uses broken vessels to achieve his purposes.”*

*Tony Merida writes, “Paul has Timothy circumcised out of sensitivity to Jewish audiences. Some argue that this act compromised the Jerusalem Council’s decree, but it didn’t. Paul resisted circumcising Titus, who was a pure Greek (see Galatians 2:3, 5), when the gospel was at stake. But Timothy’s situation was different. Timothy was both Jew and Greek. And because rabbinic law taught that a child born of a Jewish mother and a Greek father was considered to be Jewish, Paul knew Timothy would have constantly offended the Jews if he didn’t get circumcised. So as a matter of missionary strategy, as a sign of respect to Jewish heritage, and as an attempt to maintain Jew-Gentile unity, Timothy undergoes painful surgery. In time Timothy’s Jew-Greek background would allow him to bridge different cultures effectively.”*

*I. Howard Marshall writes, “As the son of a mixed marriage Timothy had an anomalous position. Jews were not supposed to marry Gentiles, but if this did happen, the children were regarded as Jewish and therefore liable to be circumcised. This had not taken place in the case of Timothy; his mother had not taken her Jewish responsibilities seriously, or perhaps her husband had refused to sanction the circumcision of the child. There is no mention of a synagogue in Lystra, and it may well be that Timothy’s mother had ceased to be a practising Jew. But Paul’s mission was bound to bring him into contact with Jews, and it was well known among the Jews in the area that Timothy had not been circumcised. Paul therefore took the step of circumcising him.”*

*Darrell Bock writes, “This act (of circumcision) prevents Timothy from becoming an issue to the Jews to whom he would minister. Even though Paul holds a view of freedom regarding the law (Galatians 5:2; 1 Corinthians 7:18), he is sensitive to how it works in a mixed community and in the context of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). So, out of respect for the customs of his prospective evangelistic audience, he acts to render moot any debate over Timothy’s lineage.” What about Titus? Bock answers, “But Titus, who is Gentile, is a different case and principle. He is not to be circumcised (Galatians 2:3–5; 1 Corinthians 7:17–24); there is no mixed-ancestry question, so there is no circumcision. This principle of sensitivity reflects what we see Paul say elsewhere about food practices (Romans 14–15; 1 Corinthians 10:23–30).” Bock concludes, “In sum, what is seen here is Paul’s cultural sensitivity. Instead of making Timothy a sideshow to the gospel in terms of whether he was a Jew or not, Paul permitted circumcision so that the gospel would remain the main topic. Knowing which principles are worth standing up for and which ideas are not worth elevating to an importance they do not deserve is a sign of discernment and leadership. Not every issue is worth starting a war over when it comes to the gospel and the ethnic unity of the church.”*

*On the circumcision of Timothy, John Polhill writes, “To have had a member of his entourage be of Jewish lineage and yet uncircumcised would have hampered his effectiveness among the Jews. It was at the very least a matter of missionary strategy to circumcise Timothy (see 1 Corinthians 9:20).”*

*On Acts 16:5, John Polhill writes, “This summary statement is not perfunctory, however. It underlines the importance of Paul’s concern to fortify and nurture the churches of his prior missionary efforts. He was not only concerned with planting the seed but also to see them grow and bear fruit.”*

**4. What are some application points from this passage?**

*In this passage, the major themes are conflict and discipleship. Despite human conflict, God advances His mission and God builds His church. He does this through Paul and Barnabas who disciple John Mark, Silas, and Timothy. From this passage, the following lessons/observations can be made:*

*(1) It is good and right to check in on the brothers—Paul had a desire to go see how the brothers he met on the first missionary journey were doing. In a similar way, you and I ought to have a desire to check in on our brothers and sisters in Christ in our community group to see how their walk with the Lord is going and to encourage them to continue in the faith. When is the last time that you spent time with people from your community group in a setting other than Sunday morning? Remember, Pastor Scott gave us an exercise focused on building relationships with people in our community groups, and the exercised encouraged us to know the following things about those in our groups: background, influences in life, monuments/pivotal moments in life, gifts, and struggles.*

*(2) Despite sharp disagreement may arise, God in His wisdom and for His glory uses this separation to advance His kingdom and build His church—Paul and Barnabas separate over a difference of opinion over an individual, not a crucial gospel doctrine. We do not know if Paul and Barnabas ever reconnected, but we do know that John Mark does become useful to Paul in the future, due in no small part to the encouraging work of Barnabas (see 2 Timothy 4:11). In your own life, how are you handling conflict? How have you seen God use conflict/separation over differences of opinion and passions to advance His mission and build His church in the long run? How can you see the different giftings, personalities, callings, etc. at play in this disagreement, and how might this example serve as a reminder that God uses this diversity to further His gospel?*

*(3) A good reputation is a strong witness of the power of the gospel—In Acts 16:2, we are told that Timothy has a good reputation among those in Lystra and Iconium. It is the godliness and giftedness of Timothy that made him a suitable assistant to Paul. In your own life, how do others speak of you? Do you have a reputation that points others to the grace and power of the gospel? What would it look like for us to pursue godliness that brings honor to God and serves as an encouragement to believers and as salt and light for unbelievers?*

(4) Following Jesus sometimes means forfeiting/sacrificing your liberty for the sake of others—Paul is motivated to circumcise Timothy in order to prevent a hindrance and stumbling block to the mission work in the days ahead. The action of Paul is motivated by reaching people with the gospel (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8-10). As a Christ follower, what are some things we might need to forego so that we may not provide a stumbling block to believers and unbelievers? Tony Merida writes, “As long as adapting doesn’t mean adopting a sinful action, we should be willing to follow certain cultural customs in order that hearers may receive the gospel….Put no stumbling block in the way of the gospel.”

(5) Discipleship is crucial to edifying the saints and equipping the saints for the work of the ministry—In this passage, we see the care that Paul and Barnabas take in raising up believers for the work of the ministry. In your own life, who have been the believers that most impacted your walk with Christ? Who are you discipling?

**\* Application Questions**

Note: Please do not feel compelled to use every question, for you will have time for 3 to 5 questions. I’ve tried to offer enough for you to pick the ones you think will best fit your group, as you know what your ladies or men are going through at this time and may need to hear. Also, please note that these questions might be adjusted to reflect what the pastor calls us to do in application of the sermon.

1. As you look at this passage, how does it call us to obedience and an others-focused mentality? Remember, Pastor Aaron is challenging us to be about obedience and others in 2018.

2. In Acts 15:36-41, Paul and Barnabas go separate ways over a sharp disagreement. Biblically, how ought we to handle disagreements and division? Have you seen God bring about good through our disagreements/divisions?

3. Barnabas took John Mark (his cousin) to Cyprus, which is the home country of Barnabas. Barnabas carries John Mark to a place he is a familiar with and a place where he can encourage him for further ministry. How might the example of Barnabas instruct us in leading those who have “failed” or withdrawn from ministry before? How is this passage a reminder of leading others and encouraging others in response to their past failures/sins/etc.?

4. In Acts 16:1-5, we see that Paul chooses to have Timothy circumcised. This is an attempt by Paul to alleviate hindrances to gospel ministry. In our own lives, what hindrances might exist to sharing the gospel with those around us? What does it look like for us to become “all things to all people” in order to win some to Christ (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-23)?

5. Acts 16:5 tells us that churches were strengthened and multiplied. What is it that is leading to the strengthening and multiplying of churches? Take time to pray for our church, churches in our area, and churches around the world to be strengthened and multiplied.

6. Discipleship is crucial for the building up of John Mark and Timothy. In your own life, who has been the crucial influencers in your walk with Christ? What was it about those individuals that the Lord used to help you grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ?

7. Have you ever been discipled? Have you ever discipled anyone? If yes, what did that look like? If no, what might that look like? Take time to pray that God would raise up disciple-makers in our church and that God would multiply disciples at Highview.

8. Later, Paul and John Mark would be reconciled. Do you know of anyone who you need to be reconciled with today? What would it look like to move past disagreements and divisions?

9. Here are some good questions to reflect on and act on this week (these were passed along to me by Pastor Aaron and Dr. David Jones):

A. What do you take as the main theme from this sermon?

B. What have you learned today about Jesus’ character that has affected you daily?

C. Do you have any clarifying questions concerning the sermon?

D. What did the Holy Spirit convict you of because of His Word today?

E. Will you ask forgiveness and what will you change?

F. Will you be willing this week to pass on to someone else what you’re learning about Jesus? How will you be intentional this week to do so?

10. In his book, Asking the Right Questions, Matthew Harmon gives the following instructions/questions for understanding and applying the Bible:

A. Understanding the Bible

1. What do we learn about God?

a. Look for God’s character (who he is, what he is like).

b. Look for God’s conduct (what he is doing).

c. Look for God’s concerns (what things, events, people, he is concerned about).

2. What do we learn about people?

a. Look for aspects of what it means to be created in God’s image.

b. Look for the fallen condition.

c. Look for how God’s people should live.

3. What do we learn about relating to God?

a. Look for things to praise and thank God for.

b. Look for sin to confess and repent.

c. Look for promises and truths to believe.

4. What do we learn about relating to others?

a. Look for how we should interact with and treat others.

b. Look for ways to pursue reconciliation with others.

c. Look for specific ways to love, serve, and care for others.

B. Applying the Bible

1. What does God want me to think/understand?

2. What does God want me to believe?

3. What does God want me to desire?

4. What does God want me to do?

**\* Sermon Take Away**

Rejoice in a God who uses imperfect instruments to advance His kingdom and build His church and pour your life into others for the sake of leading them to know and follow Jesus.

**\* Bible Reading Plan**

1. Monday—Acts 7; Ezra 7

2. Tuesday—Acts 8; Ezra 8

3. Wednesday—Acts 9; Ezra 9

4. Thursday—Acts 10; Ezra 10

5. Friday—Acts 11; Nehemiah 1

6. Saturday—Acts 12; Nehemiah 2

7. Sunday—Acts 13; Nehemiah 3

**\* Unhindered: A Study of Acts (Part 2)**

1. February 4th—Acts 16:6-40

2. February 11th—Acts 17:1-15

3. February 18th—Acts 17:16-34

4. February 25th—Acts 18:1-23

5. March 4th—Acts 18:24-28

6. March 11th—Acts 19:1-41

7. March 18th—Acts 20:1-16

8. March 25th—Acts 20:17-30

--. April 1st (Easter Sunday)

9. April 8th—Acts 21:1-26

10. April 15th—Acts 21:27-22:29

11. April 22nd—Acts 22:30-23:35

12. April 29th—Acts 24:1-27

13. May 6th—Acts 25:1-12

14. May 13th—Acts 25:13-26:32

15. May 20th (Mother’s Day)—Acts 27:1-44

16. May 27th—Acts 28:1-31

1. For this discussion guide, I used the following resources: Darrell Bock, *Acts;* I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*; John B. Polhill, *Acts*; Derek Thomas, *Acts*; R. Kent Hughes, *Acts*; R. C. Sproul, *Acts*; John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of* Acts; Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesu in* Acts; *ESV Study Bible*; *NIV Zondervan Study Bible.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)