

Session 9

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Acts 8:26-40

Memory Verse

Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning with that Scripture.

– ACTS 8:35, CSB



Unity in Diversity

THEOLOGICAL THEME: The Lord directs His followers to reach the world with the gospel and not judge or rank people according to race, gender, culture, or anything else. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation and that applies to every person we encounter.

Think about a time when you felt isolated or didn't fit in with the rest of the group. As a kid, was there ever a time when you were excluded from your peers for not being athletic enough, dressing differently, or just being different?

Dr. Seuss wrote a book about the subject of prejudice and exclusion that speaks into the world we live in today. *The Sneetches and Other Stories* tells the story of sneetches who are all the same except for some have stars on their bellies. The ones with stars hold themselves above the other sneetches because they are fortunate enough to have a star. An entrepreneur develops a factory that put stars on bellies, so the plain sneetches line up to get stars. In the ensuing chaos, the exalted group of sneetches changes from those with stars to those without, and the only ones who thrive are the factories who put on and take off the stars. It is a fun yet powerful story that stresses the problem of focusing on prejudices and divisions instead of recognizing the value of all people.¹

 What feelings of being left out did you deal with as a kid?

 How does the Sneetches story relate to our society today?


Session Summary

The early church grew as they learned what it meant to be Christ followers in real time. The world they lived in was very divided by cultures, races, and religion. It was heavily prejudiced in many directions even though the gospel has always been meant for every nation, tribe, and tongue. Philip demonstrated what it meant to follow the direction of the Holy Spirit and to obey His instructions.

Because God is always at work around us, we need to be in tune with what the Spirit prompts. When we are quick to obey Him, we find ourselves being used by God in ways we might never have imagined. All believers have been given the ministry of reconciliation for all people. We are to take advantage of every opportunity that comes our way regardless of the culture, race, or religious background of those we encounter.


1. The Right Place (Acts 8:26-28)

An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip and gave him instruction. When we read about the Lord speaking to someone in the Bible in a dramatic fashion, it can be tempting to question why we don't have the same kind of experiences ourselves. We must understand that God still speaks today, even though it might be in different ways. Our job is to listen and obey.

 How can we be confident God has spoken to us today? How does that change the way we listen to/for Him?

The instruction Philip received was to go south to the desert road toward Gaza. At the time he received this instruction, Philip was involved in great work of the Lord where he was, so it could have seemed odd that he was told to leave. He was also told to take a very difficult road for travel. Why would God want Philip to stop what he was doing for the sake of the gospel and go on a difficult or unpleasant journey? As we will discover, there was a plan working out perfectly, but only God knew the details. All Philip received was one step of the plan, and he could choose he would respond to God.

Too often we expect God to lay out His whole plan for us so that we can decide whether to obey or not. Philip could've wasted time asking questions or giving excuses but instead he simply went. He obeyed the Lord without reservation. This kind of obedience positions believers to get in on what God is doing. Because Philip responded immediately in obedience, he was able to be part of a work of God he could not have imagined.

 **When has your obedience to the Lord put you in position to be part of something bigger than you had in mind?**

Once on the road, Philip encountered a man from Ethiopia. There was every opportunity for Philip to ignore, overlook, or dismiss the foreigner. However, Philip was on a mission from the Lord, and he knew God had called him to that place at that time. Instead of focusing on cultural differences, Philip focused on what God was doing.

Every day, Christ followers have the choice to speak up, reach out, and overcome barriers to be part of God's plan. If we want to be used by God, we need to recognize we have to decide daily to obey God or not. We should be looking for the opportunities He is offering us in the places we go. When the Lord speaks to you, are you willing to obey even if you don't have the full plan? Do you tend to get caught up in asking for more details instead of obeying? If we really want to be in the right place for God's work in our lives, we need to be intentional about how we respond when He speaks.

 **Application: What needs to change in your life to show obedience to God daily?**

2. The Right Time (Acts 8:29-35)

The Lord continued to speak to Philip and told him to go and talk to the man in the chariot. Again, when God spoke, Philip responded immediately. Philip did as the Lord directed him, setting up the encounter with a man who was able to take

the gospel into a completely different country. There was no delayed obedience; it was immediate and complete.

Many of us wait for the perfect circumstances before obeying God's voice. We wait for the right position at work. We wait for the right house, car, or material possessions. We wait for our family to be a certain way. It is easy to get caught up in thinking that everything must be perfect for us to do something, even to share the gospel. One of the tools the enemy uses to stop the work of the church is to lead God's people to wait instead of obeying.

? When was a time you waited for certain things to happen before you took the next step with God? Why is this a problem?

When Philip approached the Ethiopian man, he noticed the man was reading from the book of Isaiah. The time was right for Philip to step up and share the gospel, so he didn't wait for anything else to happen. He knew God was working. He knew God had directed him to that specific place. He also knew God had a plan Philip would be involved in. Think about all that might happen in the world if the body of Christ stopped waiting and started obeying the Lord.

? What do you think would be different if you and every believer started obeying God instead of waiting on the perfect moment or circumstance?

As Philip approached the Ethiopian, he heard the man reading aloud and recognized the book of Isaiah. Many believers won't bring up the gospel with people they don't know because they aren't sure how to have a Jesus-centered conversation that isn't awkward. Philip gives us an excellent example of how to be bold in our faith and how to read a situation. He observed and listened to the man, then found some common ground to ask a question. When you are attempting to begin a gospel conversation, asking questions is a great way to get the ball rolling. Philip was bold without being antagonistic. He simply asked what the man was reading.

God directed Philip to the right place at the right time so that he could open the door for Philip to share the good news with the man. Too many people claim that they don't share about Jesus with people because they don't want to offend. Philip shows us exactly how to go about being bold in our faith while also being inviting. Read the situation. Ask a question. Listen and enter in as the Spirit prompts.

? Application: How can you apply what you've learned from Philip's example to an opportunity you have to share the gospel?

3. The Right Result (Acts 8:36-40)

After Philip asked the Ethiopian what he was reading, the man admitted he needed help understanding what he was reading. Some lost people have never directly rejected Jesus but have never had anyone explain the gospel message. If we are not careful, we will be quick to rush to judgment about others who may desire to hear what we have to say about Jesus. Our responsibility is to go through the doors God opens for us. We are not to judge or make assumptions but to take advantage of every opportunity that comes our way.

? Why is assuming things about others a hindrance to sharing with them? When have you experienced this personally?

The gospel message is for every person from every tongue, tribe, and nation, and it is for people of all social and economic standings. The Ethiopian was in a chariot reading aloud. He was a high official for the Queen, and it could have been intimidating to initiate a conversation with him. When Philip boldly asked the man what he was reading, it affirmed that God was at work because the foreigner invited a Jew into his chariot to learn from him. In his obedience, Philip made himself available and opened the door to conversation.

? Why is asking questions a good way to start a conversation? What are some questions you might ask that could lead to gospel conversations?

When Philip realized the man was reading about Jesus, he started his explanation of the gospel. Philip had been preaching and teaching about Jesus and now had the opportunity to pour into this man who could take the gospel back to another region. God had not just been preparing Philip for this encounter, He was also preparing the Ethiopian for it. We can be encouraged that when God is working in us to open doors, He is also working in other people to prepare them for what we share.

The right time and right place led to the right result. As Philip shared about Jesus and His work as the perfect sacrifice for all people, the Ethiopian was ready to respond to the gospel. He believed what he heard and accepted Christ. He heard the truth and knew it was for him. As they continued traveling, they saw a body of water and the man asked Philip why he couldn't be baptized. This is a further indication of the man's change of heart.

Imagine what it would have been like for Philip to hear that confession of faith from a man he had never seen before on an unfamiliar desert road that God told him to travel. It was a beautiful confirmation of his obedience when he was able to lower the man under the water and raise him again to walk out his new faith in Christ.

? Application: How is God calling you to go to others for the sake of gospel conversations today? How will you respond?

Conclusion

God is always at work around us. As Christ followers, we need to be listening and paying attention when He speaks so that we can join what He is doing. Philip gave us an example of how to respond when the Lord prompts us to act. Obedience is the key. If you want to be involved in the work of the gospel, one of the first things to do is to practice immediate obedience instead of asking questions or waiting for more information. Even when God only gives you the first step of His plan, like Philip, you can trust that He will be with you in every step until you see the whole situation play out. When you obey the Lord, you will find yourself in the right place.

God is not only concerned with the right place but also the right time. When He instructs or prompts you to act, it is the right time to speak up about your faith. Philip found himself on a desert road, the right place, looking for the door God was going to open, the right time. When God told him to approach the man in the chariot, he evaluated the situation and asked an appropriate question to start a conversation. The fact that the Ethiopian was reading from the book of Isaiah confirmed that God was working on his heart and preparing him for the meeting with Philip. You can trust God to be at work when He calls you to obey in a certain time and place.

Philip was not concerned about race, culture, or religious background. He simply obeyed God. When Philip was faithful to preach the truth about Jesus, the Lord provided the right result. He believed in Jesus and requested to be baptized. There is no time like the present to be obedient to what God has called you to do. If you want to be part of the right result, you must be willing to be in the right place at the right time. That happens when we are living under the direction of the Holy Spirit and obedient to what God says in His Word.



How has God spoken through His Word? How does His Word give us everything we need for obedience to Him?

❓ How have you been guilty of assuming things about people without really knowing them?

❓ Where might God be opening a door for a gospel conversation? What do you need to do to take advantage of opportunities God gives you?

Here's How to Become a Christ-Follower:

Read the following verses and ask after each one: "What does this say to me?"

- **All have sinned:** Romans 3:23 & 1 John 1:8
- **The wages of sin:** Romans 6:23 & John 3:18
- **But while we were sinners, salvation was provided:** Romans 5:8
- **Become a Christ-follower:** Romans 10:9-10 Confess and Believe

Accepting Christ is Just the Beginning:

Next Steps:

- Publicly profess your faith by being baptized (Matthew 10:32-33; Luke 3:21; Romans 6:4).
- Join a church which follows the Bible, where you can grow in your faith through prayer, Bible study and fellowship with other Christians.
- Get involved in groups for encouragement and accountability.
- Begin a daily personal worship experience with God where you study the Bible and pray.
- Share with others what Jesus has done for you. Tell your story (Romans 10:14; Matthew 28:19-20).
- Begin to live for God (Romans 12:1-2, 9-18; James 1:19-27).



FOR NEXT WEEK

The Beginning

Main Passages

- Acts 9:1-12

Session Outline

1. The Backstory (Acts 9:1-2)
2. Meeting Jesus (Acts 9:3-6)
3. Transformation and Healing (Acts 9:7-12)

Memorize

Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning with that Scripture.

- Acts 8:35, CSB

References

¹Dr. Suess, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (HarperCollins Publishers Children's Books, 2017).