

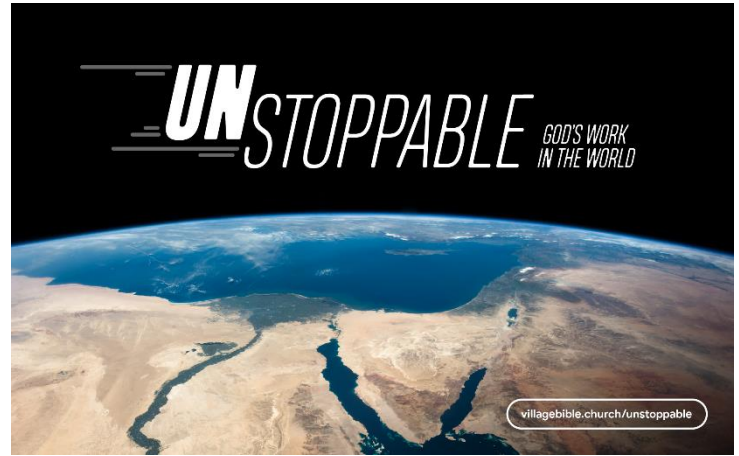


VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World, Part 12

Lifelong Learners – Acts 18:18–28

Tim Badal | December 2, 2018



Open your Bibles to Acts as we continue our series called “Unstoppable.” For the few past weeks we’ve been studying the second missionary journey of the Apostle Paul. He spent his first missionary journey in the area of Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. Now he’s moved to Macedonia, which is modern-day Greece. God Himself called Paul to go there through a vision in which he saw a Macedonian man asking him to come to them.

Today we’ll look at the transition between Paul’s second missionary journey and his third, and in this section we’ll learn some important truths about who we are. Albert Einstein said that once we stop learning, we start dying. He was a pretty smart dude and was right about this. It’s true for those who are students, but it’s especially apropos for us as followers of Jesus Christ. That’s because we have the privilege of knowing and being in relationship with the God of the universe. He has revealed Himself not only through His creation, but also through His Word and through His Son, Jesus Christ. For this reason, every day we have the opportunity to know more and more about our Lord and Savior, about the God Who has loved us and saved us despite our sin and failings.

We should long for this. It’s what theologians call the process of sanctification—becoming more like Jesus every day. The second we stop becoming more like Him, we start to die spiritually. But as we become like Him, we die instead to ourselves, to our sins, our temptations, and the distractions that would keep us from Him.

Even though Einstein wasn’t a believer, he understood that if we stop learning, we start dying. What we’ll see today is that the process of sanctification is a lifelong process. It will go on until we see Jesus Christ face to face. But there are times when we can think we’ve graduated from learning. Some of us think we no longer have to go to class. Yet as we’ll see in some examples in Acts this morning, mature followers of Jesus Christ are on a perpetual journey toward knowledge and wisdom and understanding regarding Who Jesus is and His role in our lives.

I found an article that looked at the lifelong learning experiences of both young people and old. Some of their stories were profound and others were quite humorous. A 12-year-old said, “I’ve learned that just when I get my room the way I like it, Mom comes in and makes me clean it up.” That’s pretty good.

One mother said, “Grandchildren and grandparents are natural allies.” I’m learning that with my own children.

Another woman said, “I’ve learned that you can tell a lot about a man by the way he handles three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights.”

A seasoned traveler gave this interesting piece of advice: “I’ve learned that the hotel mattresses are usually more comfortable on the side where there’s no phone or clock.”

Another traveler said he’s learned that wherever he goes, the world’s worst drivers always seem to follow him.

One I really liked was this statement from a boy: "I've learned you can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk." That's important to know.

A 58-year-old man made this profound statement: "I've learned that making a living is not the same as making a life."

And Peter Lynch, the former Fidelity-Magellan fund manager, uttered the same sentiment when he said, "No one on their death bed has ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time at the office.'"

These are truisms and they're often learned through the school of hard knocks. In our series we've observed the lifelong learning experiences of the disciples of Jesus Christ. They didn't have all the answers, but they were learning to be filled with the Spirit. They were learning how to live with and love one another. They were also learning how to endure difficult times with Christ as their priority in life. As they did this, they discovered how God's grace was able to empower them and how He allowed their ministry to have an impact on others.

As we look at the end of Paul's second missionary journey, some of you have wondered when that journey actually ended. We read in Acts 18:22 that Paul returned to Antioch, which would have been his final stop on that journey. Today, as Paul begins his third journey, we're also introduced to some new characters. One of these was a man named Apollos. We'll also see a couple whom we met a little earlier, Aquila and Priscilla. We'll be learning from these three lifelong learners some of what we need to know as we pursue our own relationship with Christ. As we find out how to rest in His promises, we will also develop a hunger to know God more intimately.

Being a lifelong learner is going to help us with several things. When you and I realize we're in process, that we're growing in knowledge until we die, it will do several things for us.

1. It will curb the level of our pride. If we know we're not a completed work yet, we're not going to assume we're smarter than anyone else.

2. It will make us teachable. Knowing that there are areas of wisdom we don't yet have, that we're not yet perfect in our understanding, then we'll be more open to being taught by other people and by God.

3. It will take the pressure off of having to be perfect. Some of us have a sense that we need to perform, that we need to always be right. We need to realize that it's okay to fail sometimes. It's okay that we don't perfectly fulfill God's purposes all the time. We're in process and God will give us grace and mercy in our times of need.

4. It will remind us that this is why we worship God. While we recognize that we're still growing, we also need to remember that the God we worship is not in process. He is complete and has never faltered or failed. We lay ourselves down before Him because He is a God Who is perfect, Who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

In the process of our growth as lifelong learners, there are three principles that will help us.

Lifelong learners acknowledge God's grace.

Let's look at our text in Acts 18:

¹⁸ After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. ¹⁹ And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. ²¹ But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus. ²² When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch.

Here again is our map. Paul travels from Cenchreae to Ephesus, where he leaves Priscilla and Aquila. He then returns to Caesarea and Jerusalem, where he fulfills his vow, then he heads back up to Antioch where he originally started his second missionary journey.

As I said, this passage marks the transition in Paul's journeys and in it we see some lifelong learning take place. The first thing we learn is that we need to acknowledge God's grace. We need to see God in every part of our day. It is there and there alone that we will truly grow in the knowledge and wisdom only God can bring. Only a fool lives each day thinking he has control over his own life, and only a fool uses skills and abilities he has received from God and takes credit for them himself. We need to acknowledge that God gives us every aspect of our lives—even the very air we breathe.



How much more foolish would it be for Christians who confess Jesus as Lord, who acknowledge that God is the Creator and Sustainer of everything, to live our lives without acknowledging our dependence on Him in every aspect of our lives. He is the One Who gives us the ability to make wealth, to enjoy the good things in life, even to endure trials. Our attitude every day should be, "God, thank You for this new day. Thank You for the privilege of being in relationship with You and with Your creation. I am going to bring You into all my activities and all my decisions."

Rewind your week for a moment. When did you invite God into your comings and goings? When you did invite God into your decisions? When did you invite God into your family affairs? When did you invite Him into how you spent your money, how you used your time? Far too many of us find ourselves saying, "Jesus is Lord," but not inviting Him into our lives and acknowledging His presence every day. But we see here that Paul did this in three specific ways.

Paul acknowledged God's protection.

We read in Acts 18:18 that Paul got a haircut. That might seem kind of weird to mention. We've never heard about him getting other haircuts, but we might assume he had many of them during his missionary journeys. In this case, the haircut was connected to a vow Paul had taken.

Apparently, he had taken a Nazirite vow, similar to what we read about in the story of Samson (Judges 13-16). In Samson's case, his supernatural power was connected to his uncut hair. Other aspects of the vow were not to touch anything dead, not to associate with things that are unclean, not to drink the fruit of the vine or any other intoxicating drink. We also know John the Baptist, a preacher of repentance and the forerunner of Jesus Christ, had also taken a Nazirite vow (Luke 1:15b).

Scholars have tried to understand why Paul would have taken some kind of vow. He was in the new covenant era. Why would a grace-oriented apostle like Paul revert into an old Judaic custom? It might almost seem hypocritical. But I don't think Paul's vow meant he was getting entangled with Judaism again. I side with those scholars who believe Paul had simply made a commitment to God after God did something for him. If we go back to Acts 18:8-9, we'll see that when he got to Corinth, Paul was weak and trembling. I think Paul may have made a deal with God. We've done that ourselves. We find ourselves in a bind and in our humanness we say, "God, if You get me out of this, I promise I'll do X, Y and Z."

There are some students here today who have a test tomorrow, so they're making deals with God: "God, if You'll let me pass this text, then I will do X, Y and Z." There are salesmen in this room who say, "Lord, if You make the deal happen, I promise I will do X, Y and Z." Is that altogether bad? I don't know. There's some foolishness here, because usually it means the student didn't prepare for the test or the salesman wasn't as prepared as he could have been. But I would say it's fine—if you accomplish what you commit to do. I think God is okay with this kind of bargain, and I think that's what Paul was doing. I would speculate that Paul went into Corinth pretty beat up and broken, so he said, "I'll keep preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, but I'm tired of getting beat up and thrown in prison." And who can blame him for that? It happened over and over again in every city he went to. He would preach, they would get mad, they'd bring him before the authorities, they would beat him and throw him into prison, then eventually they would throw him out of the city. So when he came to Corinth, he told God he'd keep preaching if God would protect him.

Remember how God responded in Acts 18:9–10? *“And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.’”* Verse 11 tells us that Paul *“stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.”*

It's not hard to see that Paul kept his commitment to preach the gospel for the next 18 months. That may well have been what his vow was all about and what the haircut was connected to. Paul would have agreed to take a Nazirite vow as a part of his total dedication to God because God was protecting him. Essentially he was saying, “I will honor You. I will go above and beyond to show my allegiance to You.” So for 18 months Paul didn't get a shave or a haircut. He didn't touch anything unclean. These weren't practices that would make him right with God—that was Old Testament Judaism. Rather, it was to show the world his total submission to God as part of his growth toward becoming like Christ.

There's a difference between works that promote sanctification and works that are seen to bring justification. We see this spelled out in Ephesians 2:8–10: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”*

Paul committed himself to the works of God and made the vow in order to demonstrate his commitment. But then when he got ready to leave Corinth, he got a haircut. Yet he also had to travel to Jerusalem to completely fulfill the vow. In all of this, we see Paul's gratitude for God's protection.

When was the last time you thanked the Lord for protecting you from harm? What about your health? Do you realize how fragile human beings really are and that our health is held in the hands of God? Apart from His protection, we and our family could be very sick. Right now, I'm thankful to God for protecting the health of my aging parents. Thanking God is something we do too rarely, but Paul committed himself to this vow to remind himself of God's faithful protection in Corinth.

Paul acknowledged God's grace in his plans.

We read in Acts 18:19 that Paul went to Ephesus next, which we'll talk more about in the coming weeks. There he had some initial success, and the people invited him to stay longer. That didn't happen often, especially in the synagogues. So how did Paul respond? “I can't stay.” For one thing, he still needed to go to Jerusalem to fulfill his vow.

This should remind us that when we commit to doing something, we need to keep that commitment. Fifteen years ago, when I started in ministry, it was easy. Here's why. When someone said they would be in the nursery or usher or lead a small group, they did what they promised to do. Somewhere in this last 15 years, however, commitments have been thrown out the door—which is not a good thing. At times it feels like we as a staff are trying to herd cats. Y'all are running all over the place. I get that we're busy. But this is a lesson I'm trying to teach my boys right now. When you say you're going to do something, even if something better comes up, you do what you said you were going to do. You're only as good as your word, and you need to keep your commitments.

Paul definitely wanted to stay in Ephesus, but he had made a commitment to God and was determined to see it through. But notice what he told them in verse 21: *“I will return to you if God wills.”* Those three words, that caveat, will revolutionize our planning. It will change the way we look at the future. Paul had a vision for what could take place. He wasn't floating in the wind. He did have a plan, an agenda. He wanted to spend more time in Ephesus—but only if it was also the will of God.

Whatever your vision for tomorrow is, you need to add those dots, *“...if God wills.”* Some of our young people are saying, “I'm going to finish high school and then get a four-year college degree. I'm going to meet the love of my life there in college. I'll find a job. We're going to have three kids and a dog, then live happily ever after.” Some people expect life to go that way, and they work hard to make it happen. But what they forget is *“...if God wills.”*

As a business person, I have plans. As a pastor, I've got plans. But each one of us—the elders of this church and you—need to recognize what that means. It's not that long-term plans are wrong, but every long-term plan should end with *“...if God wills.”* We are fragile, and our lives are but a vapor, apart from what God intends to do. If He doesn't show up, our plans don't mean anything. Paul told the Ephesians, *“I will return to you if God wills.”* Acknowledge God in your plans.

Paul acknowledged God's grace in his pursuits.

In Acts 18:22, we're told that Paul made it to Jerusalem, then he headed back to his home base in Antioch. Verse 23 then says, *“After spending some time there, he departed.”* We might read this and just think, “Well, Paul is off on his next journey.”

But from a human standpoint, Paul may have been very tempted just to say, “I’m back now in Antioch—I’m done. In spite of beatings and abuse, I’ve been faithful to proclaim the gospel. This is home sweet home and I’m retiring.” Everybody would have been okay with that. How could anyone be mad at him after all the years he spent on his journeys? He had scars to prove the horrors he had endured. But he didn’t stop.

Verse 23 goes on to say that Paul “*went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.*” We might assume Paul needed some “personal time” at this point. After all, he was just as human as we are. But he did what we need to do as well: he acknowledged that God also had real desires and goals.

So yes, even as Christians, our human selves want to do things our way, to go where we want to go. God however calls us to live and go His way—and the railroad track of His will does not move. Nothing can thwart what God has established. We sometimes think we can persuade God to join us in our plans and pursuits. What we need to do, however, is to adjust our plans and pursuits to His. This is what Paul did. He continued to do God’s work, seeking to advance His Kingdom. Essentially he said, “God knows my desires, but I’m going to trust that He’ll meet those in His way and time and not in mine.”

Brothers and sisters, we must acknowledge God in every aspect of our lives. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “*Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*” Don’t forget that our lives are lived before God. The Latin phrase is *coram deo*, which means to live in God’s presence. When you do this, it will revolutionize the way you live, the way you act, the way you make decisions, because you realize you need God, as the hymn writer says, each and every hour.

Lifelong learners admit that growth is necessary.

Look next at Acts 18:24-28:

²⁴ Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately. ²⁷ And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, ²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Now here’s a new guy, Apollos, who’s going to teach us something about learning. He was a young man with all the great things going for him. This was the new boyfriend your dad wanted you to bring home, ladies. He was an awesome dude. I’m going to list his attributes using the letter E.

1. Egyptian. His native city was Alexandria in Egypt, a place of great prominence in that day. It was the second largest city in all the Roman Empire. It was named after the great conqueror Alexander the Great, having been designed by him to be the best possible place to live. In the *U.S. News & World Reports* of the ancient world, Alexandria would have been the number one place to raise a family. When Apollos let people know where he was from, their response would be envy. I understand that, because when I tell you I live in Hinckley, I see your jealousy if you don’t live in that great metropolis to our west—God’s country.

2. Educated. Alexandria was a place of higher learning, the Oxford of the world. The Athenians wished they were Alexandrians. The best schools, the best teachers, and the best libraries were in Alexandria. In fact, the library of Alexandria contained over 700,000 ancient books. It was the place to be. It was said that a million Jews who spoke Greek lived there. In fact, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, was translated by teachers in Alexandria. You might not realize this, but 90% of the time when Jesus quoted the Old Testament, it came from the Greek Septuagint. Apollos could tell people, “That Bible came from my home town.” We read in verse 24 that Apollos was “*competent in the Scriptures.*” He knew the Old Testament backwards and forwards.

3. Eloquent. We’re also told that Apollos was eloquent. The word Luke used was *logeia*, which is related to the word *logos*, which means word. That means Apollos was not like your preacher who stumbles over words and butchers the English language. This guy’s vocabulary was second to none. People loved to listen to him. But his *logeia* also had to do with what he taught. He could take incredibly difficult truths and make them easy to understand. He was the quintessential preacher.

4. Enthusiastic. Finally, Apollos had enthusiasm. We’re told he was “*fervent in spirit.*” That means his teaching was charismatic and would draw a crowd. So what was the problem? Why would Aquila and Priscilla have to pull him aside? Everything he taught was

good. Apollos taught accurately about Christ, but he only knew about John's baptism. What does that mean? In essence, all that Apollos taught was the Old Testament and the Gospels. He nailed those, no doubt. But he had not yet heard Village Bible Church's series on Acts. He didn't know about Pentecost. He didn't know about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He didn't know what the church was. He didn't know that salvation was by grace through faith alone. He didn't know that Gentiles were now welcomed into the family of God.

Commentator Warren Wiersbe said, "It wasn't that he was insincere; it wasn't that he was inaccurate—it was that he was incomplete." Who can blame him? In the ancient world there was no internet or TV or radio. He had no idea what was going on in other parts of the world. So as Paul and his friends heard the message Apollos was teaching, they pulled him aside to teach him what he did not yet know.

Admitting that growth is necessary doesn't mean you are not gifted.

There's a truth for us here as well. This incredibly gifted man was willing to be teachable. This preacher was willing to listen to his congregation. Admitting that there are areas where we need to grow doesn't mean we're not gifted. Apollos was very gifted. In fact, one commentator said Apollos was spoken about in more flowery terms than almost anyone else other than Jesus Himself. That's pretty impressive.

Later, when he was pastoring in Corinth, there were some who boasted, "We follow Peter," while others said, "We follow Paul." This was reasonable, as these were both recognized apostles of Jesus. But there was a third group who claimed that they followed Apollos. Paul responded that such divisions were nonsense, but at least that gives an indication of how gifted Apollos was. Yet Apollos shows us that no matter how gifted we are, we still have more to learn.

Boy, does this 42-year-old preacher need to hear that. I don't know about you, but there are times when I read my own press and I begin to think I don't need to learn anything more—especially from people I may view as inferior to me. I'm coming to realize that I can learn from my children, from my wife, from the church staff, from people in my small group, from people all over this church. No matter how gifted a person is or may think he is—and I'm not saying I'm that gifted, not in comparison to Apollos—he is not exempt from the need to grow. This principle not only applies to our Christian context, it also serves us well in the outside world. Oh, how much the world needs teachable people, who know they are gifted but also realize others have something to share with them.

Admitting that growth is necessary shouldn't cause you to grumble.

The picture here is that as soon as Apollos has finished speaking, Aquila and Priscilla immediately approach him to speak with him. The Greek literally implies they draw him close to themselves, as a baby might be nurtured by its mother. Then privately, they begin to teach him things he wasn't aware of. But Apollos does not grumble. He doesn't say, "Who do you think you are? Don't they know who I am? Don't they know how many Twitter followers I have?" He listens to them without complaining.

Oh, how we too need to be willing to listen to God's grace being proclaimed through all kinds of people. Apollos realized he had places where he still needed to grow.

Admitting that growth is necessary provides an opportunity to glean from others.

One of the things I speak of on Sunday evenings in my theology class is that it's important for us to do theology in community. Each of us understands and knows God a little differently. We've experienced Him in different ways. We have different questions and struggles. That's why my class is open to both young and old people, both men and women, both new believers and old. I want all kinds of people to be there, because we need others to show us parts of God we're not aware of. We can glean revealed truths about Him from one another.

I'm a better Christian because of you and what you're teaching me out of your own relationship with Christ. You've experienced things I haven't, and when I talk with you, you help my relationship with Christ to grow as well. I might never encounter God in the ways you have. And hopefully I'm doing this for you as well. Apollos teaches us that as lifelong learners, we have much to gain from one another.

Lifelong learners accept God's game plan.

The process of learning involves one final thing: we need to accept God's game plan. Learning takes two components: learners and teachers. All of us play both roles. Right now I'm in the teaching mode, but am I always the teacher? No. There are times, especially when I'm with my mom and dad, when I'm the one being taught. I need to learn from others who have lived longer than I have.

God's game plan involves everyone.

Each of us is either learning or teaching, or sometimes even both. So where are you right now? If you're a learner, be the best learner you can be. Be teachable and open, as Apollos was. Maybe you're a teacher, like Aquila and Priscilla. Follow their guidelines. Be loving and kind. Don't be harsh. Remember you have been a learner as well and that some learning doesn't come quickly. Sometimes as we get older, we forget how long it took us to learn some lessons, especially how much we struggled in the process of learning to follow God.

God's game plan involves engagement.

Second, we have to engage others. When you're alone, you're not a student. You cannot be a student without a teacher. In the same way, you can't be a teacher without a student. We need one another. What makes us better either at learning or teaching is having someone ready to give or receive knowledge.

Teacher, you may find that you've been walking with the Lord for a long time. Even though you haven't stopped learning yourself, you have a good grasp on God's will and plan for your life. My question for you is who is your student? Who's your Apollos?

Or maybe you're younger, or you're new to the faith and have lots of questions—more than maybe you're willing to admit. You need to find someone trustworthy to guide and teach you, then be willing to listen.

We need each other. I cannot teach the Word of God without you sitting here, and you can't learn about the Word without someone teaching it to you. This is exactly why God built the church, a place where we can engage one another in this learning process. Remember, the word "disciple" means learner.

God's game plan involves encouragement.

At the end of our passage we read that the church in Ephesus sent Apollos off after they had given him a more accurate understanding of God's ways. They encouraged him to go out to preach to others, and they wrote to the disciples to welcome him. Acts 18:27 says, *"When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed."* We need to encourage one another.

At times I run the risk of being too negative, and I'm sure I'm not the only one. We focus on what others are doing wrong rather than on what they're doing right. But as we work with one another, we must do so with a spirit of encouragement—hoping the best, believing the best—so people can be best positioned for God to do great things through them.

Are you like Apollos? Are you like Aquila or Priscilla? Each of us plays an important role in the process of teaching and learning. This coming week presents us with a great opportunity to accept and start living out God's game plan, not only for our own good, but for the good of those around us.