

May 28, 2017

Church Planting  
*Unlocking Potential*  
Acts 18:23-28

**Opening Words:** On July 1, I will begin my twenty-fourth year of service at Western Reserve Church. I am proud of the progress we have made. However, I will admit we have not made as much progress as I had hoped. The reason for our stunted growth is not geographical. There are many in our area who are unchurched and spiritually confused. The reason for our stunted growth is not a lack of human effort. Many hard-working volunteers fill our building weekly to maintain our organization. It is my opinion our problem is more spiritual in nature. We need a revival. In other words, we need to experience the Holy Spirit, first hand.

In the summer of 2013, I began a sermon series called *Church Planting*. It is a story of the Book of Acts, which testifies to the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who created the church originally and it is the Holy Spirit who will revive the church. Acts holds the key to our future success. At first I thought I could complete my task in three years. I was wrong! I don't believe I will complete my task until Labor Day 2018. This summer we are going to look at Paul's third missionary Journey (Acts 18:23-21:16). This is sermon number forty-three in the series. Today's scripture reading is Acts 18:23-28. I have called this message *Unlocking Potential*.

**Acts 18:23-28** After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. <sup>24</sup> Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. <sup>25</sup> He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. <sup>26</sup> He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. <sup>27</sup> When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. <sup>28</sup> For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

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Bill Bradley once said, "*Leadership is unlocking someone's full potential.*" I believe that quote is true. If you find some truth in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the eighteenth chapter of Acts. It is the beginning of Paul's third missionary journey. In our reading for today we are introduced to a man named Apollos. The scripture says it clearly. He had relocated to Ephesus from Alexandria, the

second most important city in the Roman Empire. The scriptures do not say it, but it is extremely possible that he was Jewish. There was a large Jewish population in Alexandria. There is more to him than his citizenship and heritage. There is his education. Verse 24 says he was a charismatic learned man. For that reason, people listened to him. His teachings were accurate, but his teachings were incomplete. Like John the Baptist, he told the people to repent. He knew nothing of Jesus's saving acts at Calvary. The scriptures do not tell us how many heard Apollos, but the scriptures do highlight two, Priscilla and Aquila. You remember them. They were followers of Paul and aides to the early church. This is no other way to say it. They saw the potential that beat in Apollos's heart, and at this point the scripture begins to speak to us. They illustrate for us that unlocking potential often is a team effort. You know it is true. One of the things that saddens our society is lost potential. Do you know of anyone who wasted their potential? Do you know of anyone who isn't living up to their potential? Did you know 75% of all Americans say they are not living up to their potential?

Several weeks ago, the National Football League held their annual draft. The airwaves were filled with all the details. After the draft, every team announced they got the player they wanted. In 2007, the Oakland Raiders had the very first pick in the draft. They got the player they wanted. They drafted a quarterback from LSU named JaMarcus Russell. The Raiders signed him to a six year, \$61 million contract. He couldn't miss. He was full of potential. It didn't work out so well for JaMarcus Russell or the Raiders. He lasted three years in the league. He was a disaster from the word go. It is safe to say, he didn't live up to his potential. Bleacher Report considers him the worst first round pick in NFL history. Don't feel bad for JaMarcus, he got to keep \$39 million of his contract. It is painful to see someone not live up to their potential. Listen to what I am about to say.

The scripture lesson for today is not about lost potential in athletes or entertainers. It is not even about lost potential in students. However, I do believe these words would be helpful when working with them. It is about lost potential within the life of the church. The goal of every pastor in every church is to help each person reach their full potential. Yet, a single pastor is not enough. In church, we are responsible, both laity and clergy, for one another. In other words, you play a role in unlocking the potential in the person sitting next to you. Let me take it one step further: you play a role in the success of a fellow church member you do not even know. That is what makes this message so challenging. Lost potential in the life of the church has eternal consequences. Priscilla and Aquila didn't want to see Apollos's potential wasted, so they took certain steps to help him maximize his potential. Those steps did not die with the early church. We can still practice them today. We are going to look at those two steps in the next few minutes. If you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

In 1827, a 16-year-old girl named Eliza married the local 20-year-old tailor named Andrew. Some believed Eliza was crazy because Andrew didn't seem to have much of a future. He had never been to school, so he couldn't even read. Eliza loved the young

man, but was enchanted with the person he could become. She taught her husband to read, write and spell. Those days were difficult, but he proved to be a fast learner. She taught him to reach for his dreams. He did. In time, he would become the Military Governor and Governor of Tennessee, member of the United States House of Representatives and a United States Senator. In time, he would become Vice-President of the United States and on April 15, 1865, upon the death of Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson became the seventeenth President of the United States. I don't consider him a great president, but I do believe he reached his potential because his wife believed in him. This is the question: Do you believe in your fellow church members?

### **Engage**

If you want to unlock someone's potential, believe in them. In the scripture lesson, Priscilla and Aquila believed in Apollos. They took time to get to know him. Verse 26 says, they invited him back to their home. It was not a professional relationship. It was a personal relationship. That sounds simple, but it is really quite hard. One of the great fears in our society today is talking to strangers. The first thing you must do is talk to them, but simply talking to them isn't enough. You must engage them, which means you must believe in them. Can I ask you a question? How many of your fellow church members do you really believe in? I hate to say this, but I believe your list is very small because you don't even know your fellow church members. We have seen many new faces over the past few years. It is easy to talk to long-time friends. It is hard to talk to someone new. Do you know what drives me crazy? Going to a church dinner and finding a new person sitting alone. No one is sitting with them because everyone is sitting with people they have known for decades. Today, I want to challenge you to talk to someone you don't know. The first step in engaging someone is getting to know them. If you promise to talk to a stranger before you leave this building, say, "**Amen!**" Before you can unlock someone's potential you must know them.

Jan Paderewski (1860-1941) was Polish pianist and composer. Later, he became a political activist. When he left Poland to play his first concert in Britain, he asked an influential compatriot to give him a letter of introduction. He hoped that letter would open doors. His friend wrote the letter and gave it to him in a sealed envelope. That letter was never needed; his debut was a great success. That was a good thing. Some years later, while going through his papers, he came upon the letter and opened it. It read: "This will introduce Jan Paderewski, who plays the piano, for which he demonstrates no visible talent."

### **Encourage**

If you want to unlock someone's potential, encourage them. In the scripture lesson, verse 27, Priscilla and Aquila encouraged Apollos and wrote him a letter of acceptance into a new community. In other words, they helped him. Have you ever been shocked by the number of discouraging people? I have. How many times have you been criticized when trying to do something for God? I have spent time trying to figure out why there are so many negative, discouraging people. Do you know why? This is my

conclusion: Our society has a surplus of narrow-minded, frightened, cheap, selfish people, who don't want to be exposed for what they are: narrow-minded, frightened, cheap, selfish people. Your good work makes them look bad, so they try to get you to stop. The people who changed my life didn't discourage me. The people who changed my life encouraged me. If you want to unlock someone's potential, encourage them. If you find some truth in that statement, say, "**Amen!**"

Down in Danville, Kentucky this morning is a woman by the name of Norma Marcum. I haven't spoken to her in years, but at one time she was a major person in my life. This is the truth. I went back to visit her once and she had forgotten me. I was just one of a long list of student pastors at her church. Her greatest asset was not her good looks, nor her bank account. Her greatest asset was her welcoming, encouraging spirit. She was more than a parishioner; she was a friend. I can't tell you how many hours I spent in her home, hungry for her unconditional love. During my seminary years, I turned to her when I needed help. There was one day I will never forget.

It was one of the darkest days in my life. It was near the end of the semester and I was overwhelmed by school. Besides my church, I worked several part-time jobs, so I didn't know how all the work was going to get done. At home, there was nothing but illness and financial debt. I was driving home from school and began to fill up with emotions. I pulled off on the side of the road and weighed my options. On that late afternoon, there only seemed to be one option. I was going to quit school and bury my dream of being a minister. Emotionally spent, I drove to Mrs. Marcum's house to tell her the news. When I walked in the back door, she told me to pour a cup of coffee and tell her about my day. I must have been the picture of brokenness, because she said to me, "What is wrong?" I looked at her square in the face and said, "I have no other option. I am quitting school and moving back to Ohio. I am going to get a real job and get out of debt." With those words, she got up, mumbled something to herself, and walked into her kitchen. She returned with a ham and cheese sandwich and sat next to me. Then, she saved my life. She looked me square in the face and said, "Take my hands!" Then, she said something I had never heard before." She said, "Russell, someday you are going to be a great man. Eat this sandwich, go home, and get some sleep. Tomorrow morning, go back to school and try again." I did, and in time I graduated. I know I have told you that story in the past, but that moment changed my life. I tell you that story for one reason. It is not to tell you that I am a great man; you know better. I tell you that story for one reason. One person can make a difference in someone's life. Mrs. Marcus unlocked some of my potential. Can I ask you a question?

What are you doing to unlock someone else's potential? If you want to unlock the potential in the life of this church, you must do two things. First, engage others; don't ignore them. Second, encourage others; don't discourage them.

Bill Bradley once said, "*Leadership is unlocking someone's full potential.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"