

Thank you, and good morning. I like to tell folks that, yes, our two children are Cairn alumni, but neither of them were divinity majors. But I love them anyway.

Well, this was an occasion of selecting a text that I thought I knew what it meant, and I knew the points that I was going to draw from it almost before going to it. And then the more I studied, I realized that there was a lot more there than I had known or seen. And I'll tell you a little bit about that as we go on. But I do want you to have Acts 18 open before you, because we are going to be looking at some things there, not only the verses that were read, but some things that preceded that. And just by way of review or leading into the passage that we just heard read. Earlier in chapter 18, Luke tells us that after some time in Athens, Paul traveled to Corinth, where he met a Jewish couple that had come to that city from Italy. And they left Italy because Claudius, the Emperor, had issued this command that the Jews that were in Rome were to leave.

So this man and his woman left. And this couple consisted of a man named Aquila and his wife, Priscilla. We see that in verse 2. In verse three, we see that not only did Paul have been Jewish in common with them, but they shared the same trade. Paul and Aquila and Priscilla were tent makers. That is how they made their living. So Paul stayed and worked with them to support himself while he went about his custom of sharing the gospel with Jews in the synagogue and with Greeks in the marketplace. And he stays in Corinthians for a year and a half. And eventually, he and Aquila and Priscilla leave for Ephesus. And then after some time there, he leaves them in Ephesus while he goes about going to some of the regions that he had previously ministered in and strengthening the disciples in those regions. And Luke cuts away away from Paul and introduces us to an impressive figure named Apollos. This is the same Apollos, whom Paul mentions in his first letter to the Corinthians. You might recall that one of the ways that the divisiveness in Corinth showed itself was in some people claiming to be followers of Apollos, and others claiming to be followers of Paul and Cephas, Peter, and others to really draw the high card, say, Well, I'm just a follower of Christ.

To this, the apostle replied in 1 Corinthians 3, When one says, "'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything but only God who gives the growth." Now, Luke tells us in verse 24, that sometime after Paul's departure from Ephesians, Apollos came on the scene. He arrived, and Luke sees fit to tell us about his birthplace. He is a native of Alexandria, a city of no little significance. It was in a Egyptian city close to the mouth of the Nile River, and it derived its name from Alexander the Great. It was the second city of the Roman Empire, and it was the greatest city in the Eastern Empire. It was well-known for its massive library, and one historian notes that by the second century, its university was more prestigious than the ancient schools of Athens. When people of the first century, Greco-Roman world thought thought of Alexandria, images of cosmopolitan elitism and a center of high culture and advanced learning most certainly came to mind.

And from how it is that Luke describes Apollos, it seems apparent that he availed himself of the educational opportunities that Alexandria afforded. Luke says in verse 24 that he was eloquent or a learned man. The phrase that Luke used refers to someone who is articulate, well-educated. It was used in schools of philosophy of someone who was proficient in rhetoric. And when you hear rhetoric, don't just think, because sometimes we use that word disparagingly. That's just rhetoric. No, in that day, rhetoric was the study and the art and skill of communication, speaking with persuasiveness and clarity. The ESV reads that Apollos was competent in the scriptures, later in verse 24. There, the Scriptures clearly would be the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament wasn't in existence at this time, and Apollos was one who was competent in the Scriptures. There was a large Jewish population in Alexandria, and no doubt he had been nurtured on the hearing and the memorizing and the interpreting of God's word. But competent doesn't actually get at the force of the word that Luke uses. Luke used the word from which we get powerful. So in other words, Apollos was powerful or mighty in the Scriptures.

Now, that might mean that Apollos was a powerful orator, a speaker, a lecturer concerning Scripture. Rhetorical teachers spoke of rhetoric as power because of its ability to persuade. And it's interesting

that elsewhere in the Book of Acts, there are two other figures that Luke describes as being powerful in word. And indeed, those are Jesus himself, in Luke Chapter 24:19, in his gospel, and then in the Book of Acts, in chapter seven, in Stephen's speech, Stephen refers to Moses as being one who was powerful in word and deed. Verse 25, Luke continues this litany of descriptors about this man, Apollos. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. Now, we're not told where that instruction came from. This is probably a reference to his Christian instruction. And we read further that he was fervent in spirit. There's some debate amongst biblical scholars as to, is this a reference to a fervency in the spirit, the Holy spirit? Is this a fervency in his spirit, where it's a reference to his own enthusiasm and so forth? I tend to think that that is the case. Ajith Fernando, in his commentary on Acts, writes, "Apollos not only had a good knowledge of the word, but he also knew how to communicate it accurately. That is, he had developed skills in Bible teaching, and when he taught, he did so with enthusiasm and fervency." So Apollos, in his speaking, he gave the facts, but he also did so passionately, boldly, with enthusiasm.

And Luke goes on to tell us more about Apollos. He says that he taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. Now, that could mean a number of things. I think it means that while he was aware of John the Baptist's ministry, his calling of people to repentance, and his calling them to believe upon the one who was coming after him, he was not aware of baptism in the name of Jesus. And when you look in Acts 19, we see some disciples there who are in a similar situation. But we have to keep in mind that this is a transitional period in the church. And we also need to keep in mind that Apollos was not teaching falsely or heretically. He was not teaching erroneously. Nevertheless, his teaching was incomplete. It was partial. We know that because Luke tells us that when Priscilla and Aquila heard him speaking boldly in the synagogue, verse 26, they took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately.

So there isn't any He disparaging by way of misinformation on the part of Apollos, as though he were teaching something that was completely off, and he needed to be corrected in that regard. But nevertheless, he was teaching something that was incomplete. There was a deficiency. There was a lack in his understanding and, consequently, in his teaching. So as one commentator notes, "They weren't correcting misinformation, rather, they increased his knowledge base." And just as an aside, but an important one, it's important to take notice of how it is that this couple offered this instruction. They did not correct him publicly, but Luke says they took him aside. They heard him in the synagogue. They recognized that there was something missing, but they didn't take that as the opportunity to offer the correction. They got him alone privately. It's possible that they invited him into their home, And they sat down with him and explained to him the way of God more accurately. F. F. Bruce, in his commentary on this passage, says, "How much better it is to give such private help to a preacher whose ministry is defective than to correct or denounce him publicly." That is a good word. And should I say anything, catch me privately afterwards. That needs to be corrected.

So why does Luke bother telling us about Apollos? What does Luke, and ultimately God, God want us to take from it? As I mentioned, when I selected this passage, I thought I knew. I mean, think about it. We're beginning a new academic year at a biblical university. What would be a better passage than one that features a Bible teaching, Bible studying, eloquent, learned man. I mean, that's great. And I do think that there is something exemplary about Apollos. I'll say some things about that as we go on. But I don't think that that's the main reason that this is included. And I was greatly helped in my study by someone who drew my attention to something that I otherwise would not have been aware of. Remember how Luke introduced Apollos in verse 24? "Now, a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria." And he goes on to mention his wife, Priscilla. But I want you to pay attention to that construction: a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. When Luke introduces us to Aquila and his wife in verse 2 of chapter 18, he says that Paul found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus.

Luke is doing more than simply telling us where these two Jews were from. The construction of the introductions of these two men in such close proximity suggests that there is a paralleling that is in mind. A number of commentators have noted that whenever Apollos is taught about or preached on, much is made, as I did, about his place of origin, his birthplace, Alexandria, this well-known city in the Roman Empire. But when it comes to Aquila and his introduction as a Jew, a native of Pontus, the tendency has been largely to just see this as a historical detail of very little significance. But there's

reason to question that.

Pontus. Pontus was a region on the Southern Coast of the Black Sea in what is now northeastern Turkey. And in the first century, Pontus was widely stereotyped in Greco-Roman literature as a remote, uncultured, and barbaric region. This stereotype can be traced back as far as to the fifth century BC. The Greek historian Herodotus, in the fifth century, wrote this, "Nowhere are men so ignorant as in the lands by the Yucaine Pontus, into which Darius led his army, for we cannot show that any nation within the region of the Pontus has any cleverness, nor do we know of any notable man born there."

And we can point to a variety of pieces of Greco-Roman literature echoing that stereotype about the people of Pontus. One writer tells the anecdote of a young man who was going to be studying with a noted philosopher, and the young man was from Pontus, and he asked what he must bring to the lectures. And the philosopher said to him, Bring tablets, parchment, and pen, and a mind, if you have mind to do so. In other words, bring a brain, too. This is the prejudice. This is the stereotype. This was a well-known view of people from the region of Pontus at this time. Thus, saying someone was from Pontus carried a social connotation of backwardness. Now, this is not to say that people from Pontus were really backward. But sinners then, like sinners today, make gross generalizations of other people groups in order to elevate themselves and their own. And this was the case with those from Pontus. The scholar whose work really helped me writes this, "While the stereotype concerning Alexandrians was one of learning and cultural sophistication, the common prejudice about people from Pontus was that they were uneducated and dim-witted barbarians. Anyone familiar with the widespread negative views of Pontus would certainly have been surprised that someone from this region would offer instruction and correction to a learned man from sophisticated Alexandria."

There would be a shock value in this narrative for anyone in the first century who was acquainted with this stereotype. If there was going to be any correction, if there was going to be any instruction, certainly it would be in the direction of the Alexandrian to the Pontic. Certainly not the Pontic to the Alexandrian. And add to that the further absurdity of the fact that Aquila and Priscilla are menial trades people. And beyond that, one of the people who is listed first in this account is a woman who is offering this instruction and correction. Now, do you remember to whom the Book of Acts was addressed? Not a rhetorical question. Theophilus. The gospel of Luke as well as the Book of Acts, are written to Theophilus, a Greek. Theophilus would have certainly been familiar with the ethnic stereotypes of Pontus. But not only that, Apollos himself would have been thoroughly acquainted with the widely circulating and unflattering reputation of the people of Pontus. But that did not stop him from hearing Priscilla and Aquila out, or from heeding their instruction.

He didn't adopt the stance of, I'm an Alexandrian. I come from the second city of the empire. I am eloquent. I am mighty in the Scriptures. Do you dare offer me instruction? No. He humbly accepted their instruction. And because he did, he didn't just help those who had believed through grace in Achaia. Luke says in verse 27, he greatly helped them. See, what we have going on here is the chain of discipleship. Priscilla and Aquila had been in partnership with Paul. They pass it on to Apollos. Apollos, in turn, uses that knowledge in order to greatly help other believers.

I hope that as you are here for your biblical education, as you are growing in the knowledge of God's word, that it wouldn't simply be for the purpose your own spiritual well-being, but that it would be so that you are better equipped to greatly help other believers. Notice how he helped them. Verse 28. It wasn't by directly teaching those who had believed by grace, but by powerfully refuting the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. The word translated as refuting is a strong one that means to overwhelm someone by argument. And it doesn't mean overwhelm, such as to do anything untoward, but it means to speak in a manner by way of argument, such that there is no counter-refutation.

As one scholar puts it, this verse reflects the language of public debate used of a contest in which rhetoric is used, which involves argument or proofs and refutations offered back and forth to convince the audience. I sometimes hear Christians disparage the value of public debates because they don't change anyone's mind, according to those who say this. I think there's reason to question that conclusion. But I know one thing, and I know that on the basis of the testimony here, as was the

case with the believers who listened to Apollos effectively refuting the enemies of the gospel, public debates can be a great means of spiritually edifying other Christians who listen in by assuring them of the reason that their confidence in Jesus is well-grounded. And that was the case with these believers in Achaia, as they heard as they witnessed Apollos refuting the enemies of the gospel, showing why it is that Jesus is the Messiah.

So God used Apollos' gifts. But among all the things that are exemplary about Apollos. I don't think it's any of the things that Luke explicitly mentions in that list. It's what is implicitly there, and that is his humility. The late John Stott was right in his estimation of the Alexandrian. He wrote, "Apollos combined the rare gifts of eloquence and humility. He who had taught many was ready himself to be taught by Priscilla and Aquila. It is this openness to correction which marks the truly great."

The gospel transcends and overturns human measures of status. This text should call us all to consider how radically divergent the values of the Kingdom of God are in comparison to the values and hierarchies and the categories that humanity creates.

Are there any classes of people from whom you are unwilling to learn or receive correction from? Are there any kinds of Christians from whom you close yourself off because they're one of "those"? People from a certain ethnicity or gender or economic or educational level. "I'm willing to learn, but it must be from someone whose status I deem as being at least the same as mine or above." If we nurse such an attitude, we must repent. The gospel of grace obliterates social stereotypes, and it levels us, teaching us not to look down on anyone, but only up to our gracious God and savior, Jesus Christ.

May we strive to demonstrate, yes, this love for the Scriptures, this boldness. May we seek to become men and women who are powerful in the Scriptures. But may we do so with humble hearts. May we do so being alert to how it is that other believers, regardless of from where they come, may be channels of God's gracious intervention, correction, encouragement in our lives so that we might be better prepared, more fully equipped to love God, to love our neighbor, and to advance the gospel by the power of the Spirit.

Let's pray. Our Father, we pray that you would search our hearts for where it is that there are categories of people, those that we are prone to think that we cannot learn from, other believers about whom we may entertain stereotypes that may be well trafficked in the world around us, but have no place in your kingdom. Father, we thank you for including this in your word. We pray that you would grant us the humility of heart about which we read and spoke. And Lord, we thank you that your grace is great, that there is no category of person that is beyond its reach. And therefore, Lord, there is no category of person by whom that grace may benefit us. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts that are sensitive to you. Bless us in this day, we pray. Amen.