

Paul's Missionary Priorities

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[0 : 00] So welcome here for this Sunday, June 1st, 2025. Time is flying, is it not? I know I say that periodically, but it really is. It really, really is. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here and to be back with you today.

Okay. So as maybe you noticed, maybe you didn't. Hopefully you did. But you did see that I put in a little bit of a nod there so that I could be with you. While I couldn't be with you in person, I wanted to just be with you in that way.

So hopefully that service was good, and it was encouraging for each of you just to see the work that God is doing in different parts of the world, different regions where the gospel is being shared, and the ways that Canadian Baptist Ministries, our denominational mission organization, is doing amazing work through the grace of God around the world.

So this morning, we're returning to our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World. And through this series, we've been exploring the New Testament book of Acts. So we're studying Acts together. I'm giving you just a quick refresher to remind us what we can learn from the first century church, its gatherings and leaders and its triumphs and its tribulations.

So all the sermons in this series are available on our website in case you ever want to go back and revisit a particular topic. I see, I get updates, and when I go in and upload a new sermon, I can see, you know, numbers climbing or whatever, and particular sermons, and even not from this series, but since the very beginning when I first began here six years ago, gasp, there are certain topics that people are interested in and want to revisit, and so you can catch up on this series or go back and re-listen to something along the way if you want to get caught up.

[1 : 59] So in our last sermon in this series, before we paused for Easter, yes, it was that long ago, we explored Paul and Barnabas' visits to the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Derby.

And remember, I said, don't get it confused with Kentucky because it ain't there. So we saw how Paul and Barnabas, in their mission journey, experienced various forms of persecution.

We also considered some of the ways that we, ourselves, might be experiencing persecution for our faith and our own lives. So following the attempt on Paul's life in the city of Lystra, the next day, Paul and Barnabas went to a city called Derby, and we learn in Acts 14.21 that they preached the gospel there and made many disciples.

And after that, Paul and Barnabas began to retrace their steps, which is interesting, something that we see. They visited many of the places where they had established churches already.

And then they finally returned to Antioch of Syria. Remember, there's two Antiochs, Syrian Antioch and Pisidian Antioch. So they finally returned to their home base where they had started their mission journey.

[3 : 11] So we're picking up in the story again this morning, and we find Paul and Barnabas still in the city of Derby. So if you want to turn to Acts 14, we're going to be in Acts 14, verses 21 to 28.

So there's a pew in the Bible in front of you. That's what happens to my brain sometimes. There's a Bible in the pew in front of you, or you can open your Bible app, or you can just listen to, as I've said before, the audiobook version, because here it comes.

They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church, and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.

After going through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Italia. From Italia, they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed.

[4 : 21] On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

So our passage this morning is only eight verses, but there is a lot packed in there. I see some people are probably counting to make sure I got it right. Eight verses.

So our sermon this morning is titled, Paul's Missionary Priorities. We're going to recognize the priorities that we can see that were consistent for Paul, actually, during his missionary journeys.

And this is the first time we kind of see these in action. But first, let's get an overview of the places Paul and Barnabas visited, or more accurately, revisited, and some of the events that happened along the way.

So, the return trip home. We know from our passage this morning that Paul and Barnabas headed home with stops along the way in Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch.

[5 : 24] So hopefully you remember, it was Lystra where Paul healed a lame man, but then was stoned. It was at Iconium where Paul had spent some time, but then fled another attempt to stone him.

And it was at Pisidian Antioch where Paul preached the gospel in the synagogue until he was kicked out of the region. So we can see a direct correlation, right? Paul preaches the gospel and is trying to get the message of Christ out to people, and then he's punished for it.

He's run out of town. Various things happen. But despite that persecution, Paul and Barnabas accomplished a lot. A lot. And as we heard in Acts 12, verse 22, they strengthened the disciples in those cities.

They encouraged them and urged them to continue in their faith, while also telling them then to expect tribulations, right, for the kingdom of God. So you've probably heard this said before.

You know, sometimes Christians, we grumble and we say, well, this Christian life ain't that easy. It's pretty tough, right? I challenge you to look through scripture and find anywhere that says, and God said, this will be a cakewalk.

[6 : 38] Right? Not once. Nowhere. And I, what's that? Jericho. It will be a cakewalk, blow some trumpets. But, you know, the reality is that Christian life is not always easy, but it is always blessing, filled with blessing.

So in Acts 14, verses 24 to 25, we learned that they preached in the city of Perga in Pamphylia. And this was the place where John Mark had left them early on in their journey.

Now remember, as we were talking about that part, John Mark suddenly goes, I'm going home. And there's really no explanation, right? He just, he's with them. He's a partner. He's supporting them in the work they're doing.

And then he just says, I'm going home. So now, there hasn't been any specific mention of them preaching on their mission until now. So we heard it this morning in this passage.

But we can assume that their words and actions also served as an important witness for God. So while they may not have been preaching as the, you know, the way we might understand it, standing in front of a group of people, telling God's word, talking about the gospel, speaking about Jesus, their actions and other words would have been an important witness for Jesus.

[7 : 59] So next we learned that Paul and Barnabas traveled to a city called Italia. Now if you're interested, in a contemporary setting, it's on the south coast in a southern region at the time called Pamphylia.

Pamphylia. And in the modern day, if you were to look for it, it's in a region called Antalya in Turkey. So that's where it is, kind of in the southern region of Turkey.

Antalya was where they left by ship. It was a coastal city. It was an important port city. And from there, they returned to their starting point, which was Antioch of Syria, as we talked about, or Syrian Antioch.

So we heard this morning in Acts 14, verse 27, that when Paul and Barnabas arrived there in Antioch, Syrian Antioch, they gathered the church to give a full account and report on what they had done during their trip.

Did you catch that in the passage? So we often hear, you heard them last week, we hear reports from missionaries. We heard that from some of the CBM contacts on Solidarity Sunday, which last week was identified as.

[9 : 07] So they report back on things that they need prayer for, things that they have done, or places they have been. They report on accomplishments, and not in a prideful way, right?

But they're letting people back home know what they've been up to. So this report by Paul and Barnabas certainly seems like the first report of this kind, right?

We don't really see this in the New Testament until now. And it seems to serve as a model for what has become customary for people who are serving in missions, for people who are reporting back to their sending churches, right?

Or their sending organizations. So we hear that Paul and Barnabas also told the other disciples that they had opened the door to faith for the Gentiles.

We're going to explore that a bit more next week, and a bit of controversy that comes from that. But then they stayed, the very last verse in that passage we have this morning, says they stayed with the disciples in Antioch for a long time, it says.

[10 : 09] So we don't know how long, years, months, but they were there, right? They planted and stayed with the people who had sent them. So as we consider Paul's first missionary journey, what can we identify as his priorities, right?

We can see things, as I said a moment ago, that were priorities for him. Well, first of all, in Acts 14, verse 7, it tells us that despite being persecuted, Paul and Barnabas continued to preach, right?

They continued to tell the gospel of Christ. And in Acts 14, verse 21, we also learned that they returned to Syria and Antioch, and Scripture tells us they preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples.

So clearly, Paul made it a priority to preach the gospel. We can see it throughout his mission, throughout his ministry. So a direct result of their preaching was that people turned to the Lord and became disciples themselves, right?

That should be, that's the natural progression, as you hear the gospel of Jesus, and you want to follow him, ideally, right? That's the progression people want to see. So in becoming disciples, they were being, these people were being obedient and being baptized.

[11 : 23] That was part of the progression as well on the ongoing discipleship journey. And Jesus said in Matthew 28, verses 19 to 20, I love that one sentence.

Surely, I am with you always to the end of the age. Do you feel Jesus with you? Do you feel Jesus here this morning? So not only did Paul preach the gospel, he was also faithful in teaching new converts and helping them to grow in their faith.

This is a priority for him. Paul made it a priority to make disciples. Today, missionaries often focus on establishing parachurch organizations or seeking to meet the broader needs of communities, right?

We hear about missionaries working to establish schools and working to support people as they are working in their communities to establish success in ways that also connect with their faith for people who are indigenous to the region where they're missioning.

Missioning? Where they're serving as missionaries. Acts 14, verse 23 says, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord in whom they put their trust.

[13 : 03] So while missionaries now, we tend to, they certainly do help establish churches in local communities and countries. But this was a real priority. This was the primary focus at that time was to establish local churches.

And so we see that as a priority for Paul. We've seen that Paul retraced his steps and he purposely visited or revisited, as I said, cities where they'd already been, where he'd already been during his first missionary journey, right?

He worked his way down through and worked his way back. In fact, we'll see in the coming weeks that he returned to those communities, returned to those believers over and over during his ministry, which speaks to the fact that Paul made it a priority to strengthen and encourage fellow believers.

You see that as well. Acts 14, verse 23 says, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.

So as you may know, the books of 1 Timothy and Titus offer us qualifications, they outline qualifications, for people who might be called to serve in these kinds of roles, church leadership kinds of roles.

[14 : 19] So Paul made it a priority in his ministry as well to appoint elders in every church. That was something that he made sure happened. So he established local governance, local leadership in those churches so that they could sustain themselves.

What's next? Well, Paul was never able to remain with a church, right? That's partly why he established leaders in local churches. He was never able to stay as a permanent fixture, for lack of a better way to put it.

His calling was to travel and preach. He was never called by Jesus or called by the Spirit to, okay, I'm going to do this, and then this last church is it, and I'm going to pastor and lead this church.

I mean, they wouldn't have called it pastoring, but I'm going to lead this church, and I'm going to stay here, right? First church of Paul, that would have been it, or Paul's first church, maybe. I don't know. I'm sure lots of churches take credit for being the most connected.

How many First Baptist churches are? Lots of First Baptist churches. I keep saying to people, I would rather hear of Second Baptist Church. We were that close. We were so, oh, they beat us.

[15 : 34] That would be fun, actually. I would be, I would love to pastor Second Baptist Church. Maybe we'll change our name. No, we won't change our name. All right. So he commended churches to the Lord's care.

Well, what does that mean? Because he was never able to stay there, right? He wanted the Lord, he wanted to commit these churches, to dedicate these churches to the Lord's care, to God's grace, to God's provision, to God's protection.

This was something he intentionally did. He commended churches to the Lord's care. So then we see this, what I talked about a moment, like we saw in Solidarity Sunday.

What was another priority? Well, we learn a bit in our exploration of Acts that the church in Antioch of Syria had sent Paul on this journey. We remember that probably, right?

And so we recognize from our passage this morning that he returned to that church. But not only did he return there, it wasn't just like, hey, is there a pot like this Sunday? I'm back. Let's hang out.

[16 : 35] It was for a reason. Well, what was the reason? It seemed that Paul believed, he was committed to the fact, that it was only proper that he report back to the church that had sent him.

Gave them a clear understanding of what God had called them to do on their behalf, with their blessing, with their sending to some extent, right? So Paul made it a policy and a priority for him to report back to the church that sent him.

When Steve Roadhouse comes from Gull Lake, right? Gull Lake is a mission in some ways of Bramard and so many other churches in our denomination. So Steve comes and reports back, right, of what our work and our prayers and our investment of finances and time and so on and encouragement is doing when the boots are on the ground, right?

And so missionaries do that as well. They come back and we see that Paul laid the groundwork for this and that it was a priority for him. So this morning we've had front row seats to this return journey, this debrief that Paul and Barnabas gave of their first missionary journey.

We've taken some time to recognize these priorities of Paul, these missionary priorities that he valued and we can see repeated throughout his ministry.

[17 : 58] They were visible here and then they characterized his ministry going forward. It's a great model. So we could correctly say that Paul's priorities were actually the priorities of the Holy Spirit.

Can you see that? You may remember that who sent Paul and Barnabas on this journey in the first place? The church, yes, but the Holy Spirit.

We learn that in Acts 13, 1 to 4, and I won't read it here, but that was the commissioning of the Holy Spirit sending Paul and Barnabas on this journey. So the Spirit undoubtedly guided them and sustained them and encouraged them in the work that they did as well.

That was what the Spirit did for them. That's what the Spirit hopefully does for each of us that we can recognize in our lives. Sustaining and blessing and encouraging and filling and energizing.

That's what the Spirit does for us. So today many churches and missionaries are involved in what we would tend to see as foreign work. Is that fair? They establish missions, as we talked about, or parachurch organizations that are outside of churches.

[19 : 11] So they still, as I said before, they do establish churches or help local people establish them. But today we see more extra church things, more parachurch things happening.

They create oversight of churches that are then indigenous to the country or region that they visited, right? So in a way, we can see the same thing that missionaries often do, which is establish an organization within a country and then step back, right?

Asking God to bless and lead and direct from there because they cannot stay oftentimes, right? But Paul and Barnabas' ministry was different and we see similarities, right?

We've seen common themes. But they established autonomous and independent congregations that were intended then to continue under God's sustaining, under God's guidance, under God's encouragement.

They commended congregations that were established to God's word and God's care, right? They gave them the tools, they connected them with the Lord, and they stepped back.

[20 : 25] I believe if we truly want to see the growth of God's kingdom, not just the denominations of human beings, we'd be wise to carefully study and faithfully apply the policies and priorities of these early church leaders, early examples of our faith, like Paul and Barnabas.

My hope is that as we continue to explore the leaders and lessons of the book of Acts, we won't just be looking at the history of our faith. That's part of it. But we'll also be reminded of the valid lessons that we can learn as we look to the future, both in our own lives and in our faith journeys, but also the future of our church, here and globally.

Amen.