

A Light to the Gentiles

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Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 0 0] Well, as you're looking at page 125, Acts 13, which we're going to go through, also take out a map that's at the front of the bulletin.

We don't often have maps in the front. It has nothing to do with Vancouver. It is all about the Middle East. And I want to point out that this is a tale of two cities, in a sense, this passage that we're reading.

There are two Antiochs, same name. And one is Syrian Antioch, which is on the right side of the page as you're looking at it, starting point. And then there's Pisidian Antioch, which is up in the upper left-hand corner of the page there.

So Paul is going to take that solid line through Cyprus, up through the mountains there to Antioch. And that's what my sermon is about, that trip.

David Lay, geographer at UBC, was very happy and blessed, he said, to see this in the front of the bulletin. So he said, just make sure you tell the difference between the sea and the land.

[1 : 0 9] And I think we can there. The reason we have to look at this map is because there's a big shift that takes place in this chapter from Jerusalem to Antioch, Syrian Antioch.

It is a shift whereby the church is going to move out into the world in an intentional way. And it's going to all begin in Antioch.

Antioch is an incredible city. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire at the time. It was about 500,000 people that lived there. It was a multicultural place.

You can see the names of some of the leaders of the church. They were from Africa. That's why Simeon was called Niger, dark complexion. Lucius was from Cyrene.

That's from northern Africa. And then there was a guy from Manian who was from the court of Herod. He was one of the sort of foster children who were there to play with the royal children and to grow up with them.

[2 : 0 9] So they had somewhat of a normal life. But this guy is from the royal court. He understands what's happening in the world. This city was very cosmopolitan because it was at the intersection of the trade routes, west and east.

Important, vibrant city. And so as Acts unfolds, we're going to see the church in this city take a prominent role. The church was really well placed to be a jumping off spot for missions.

Because it had a good understanding of the wider world. It was a church that had a real sense of God's work in it.

This was a church that was established by people who had been persecuted in Jerusalem. And they preached the gospel to a mostly Gentile group in Antioch.

So it was a church that was very energetic and growing. Chapter 11 tells us several times that it was growing in numbers and in faith. And it was there at Antioch that disciples were first called Christians as well.

[3 : 16] We see in the book of Acts. That word Christian was a derogatory term. It literally meant people who follow Christ. People who follow this person who died on a cross.

You know, what glory is there in that? And the marvelous thing about that is, of course, we're called Christians now. But the marvelous thing is that they were known as that because publicly the city knew that these people were all about following Jesus.

Christ was at the center of their life. The city must have heard that this is what was most important to these Christians. Was a person who they assumed had died. But, of course, the message is that he lives.

And so they follow them in a real way in their lives. Now, a temptation for a church that has become pretty important, is in this incredible city with everything in it, and is successful in lots of ways, is to become inward looking.

You know, how do we maintain it? We are it as well. But they didn't. They didn't become inward looking. Quite the opposite. They were outward looking.

[4 : 25] They knew the gospel was a great treasure to share. And so their attitude was that they knew the reality of Jesus saving work in their lives. And they wanted that reality to be known by people far away.

They knew what Jesus had said to the disciples, that they would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. And what their concern was as a church was how could we take our place in that work of God, in that promise that Jesus had that would extend the gospel into the world.

And that's instructive for us as a church. That ought to be our wonderful mandate. The thing that we want above all else is how can we be part of that work of extending Jesus' ministry into the world.

And that is what we strive for at St. John's. Now, the church in Antioch is an encouragement to us because it actually does it in a big way. Acts 13 and 14 are about Paul's missionary journey that starts out in Antioch.

It's the first major move of the church into the Gentile world. And it was a success. You know, that's kind of the end of the story. I'm jumping ahead. But the church was established.

[5 : 39] The gospel spread throughout the regions. God wonderfully blessed this journey. And the thing that I want to talk about in this sermon is why was it successful?

Because of the fact that the reasons for its success are an encouragement to you and to me and to this church of St. John's. So I want to briefly go over those four things that was the reason for its success.

The first one, very simply, is that the church in Antioch was prayerful. That's why this was successful. So if you look at verse 2 and 3, it's, Well, they were worshipping in the Lord and fasting.

Those two words, worshipping and fasting together, means that they were praying together. While they were doing this, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work for which I have called them.

So the Spirit speaks clearly, but they still want discernment. They still want to know God's will. Probably thinking through strategically how they will send Barnabas and Saul.

[6 : 42] Where will they send them? What are the synagogues that they will start with? And so they really depended upon God for that leading. And so verse 3 says they continue, probably with the church, in the worshipping and the fasting.

And so this is also something that's really new to the church. This is uncharted waters. It's uncertain as to how they do this. The Israelites were not about sending missionaries with the gospel to far parts of the world.

And the Christian church had not really done that in an organized way before. So they would have had to make those strategic decisions that I was talking about. They wanted God's lead for it.

And there's a crucial lesson for us here at St. John's on this. Because through our various challenges, one of the things that God is doing is he is moving us as a congregation to more and more depend upon God in prayer.

To come to God with the decisions that are important for the church so that we will honor him and the work of the gospel in the world. He wants us as a church and in our own personal lives to understand prayer as being so much a part of our life that is like eating and breathing.

[8 : 01] God in Antioch was doing this. It is the reason for the success of the mission. He is actually moving us in the same direction here at St. John's as well.

Now the second reason for the success of the missionary journey besides prayer was generosity. And there's a real sense of generosity in this church of Antioch.

They held their treasure very loosely. They wanted to share, they were very quick to share the blessings and the treasures of gospel leaders and money.

And they actually took joy in giving that away for the sake of God's work in the world. And probably one of the reasons for this is that they were very grateful for the salvation that Jesus had brought them.

Many of them were Gentiles who would, by every human measure, be far away from God. But they had been brought close into the very family of God through the grace of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 00] And they were grateful for it. It showed in their generosity. And that's why they sent, on this journey, their most beloved leaders. The ones that were the strongest teachers.

Barnabas and Saul. And verse 3 says that the church sent them off. There was literally a releasing. They had to let go of people who were beloved to them.

There was probably a loss to the church that they felt. But they also felt a great joy in the commitment of sending them. At the end of chapter 14, when they get back, we find out that the way that they released them was they handed them over to the grace of God, is the wording.

And literally that means handing them over to God's protection and also to his enabling work in their lives as they did their ministry, as they went about their preaching.

So you see what's happening here is that the church in Antioch is giving up that which is precious to them so that people that they do not know will be blessed by the wealth of blessings in the gospel.

[10 : 12] They have this generosity. And because of it, the gospel flourishes in the world. Now I think Antioch here is teaching about probably two of the most important indications of spiritual health in a church.

And that is that first of all, that a church takes the light and desires that the gospel would go into the world. That the light of the world would go into the darkness of the world far away and close by.

They are generous to committing to bringing the gospel to these places because they want the spread of the kingdom in the world. And the second sign of spiritual health in any church is that they are very generous with their resources.

They send out their best teachers and leaders. They are committed to praying long term for missionaries, for the work of ministry in the church and outside of it. Especially when that happens for people they don't know or for people who are far away.

It is an indication of generosity that comes from knowing the grace of God in your own life. Just as a little aside, back in Acts 11, there was a famine in Jerusalem.

[11 : 24] And it's Antioch who is quick to send their elders down to Jerusalem with lots of money to buy food for people that they don't know, who they care deeply about. There is a generosity of spirit in Antioch.

And so the best indicators of a healthy church are not growth of numbers or lots of programs or kind of a good feeling of relationships. It's actually that they are mission-minded and they are generous for the sake of Christ.

And I want to encourage you at St. John's because God is working in these two areas in our church in a wonderful way. Our interest in missions work overseas and locally has really grown at St. John's over the years.

More and more of you are coming to Missions Lunch to get to know missions ministries and people that we are supporting who bring the gospel to different places in the world. Every year our missions budget is increased and we're moving towards 10%.

And there is more and more involvement in the Anglican network in Canada. We have an important place there. We are strengthening and being a resource to churches throughout Canada for the sake of the gospel in various parts of Canada.

[12 : 41] And there's involvement with Malawi. The Bishop of Malawi is coming here, Bishop Brighton, in April. These are signs of an interest in God's work throughout the world, the gospel to the ends of the earth.

And secondly, here at St. John's, we should be encouraged by the indication of generosity that is taking place at St. John's. It is amazing to read. If you look at your parish life notes, usually I don't direct people to read it during the sermon, but there it is.

It's a very well written piece from Joanne Laurie. And in it, we have a description of what has happened financially at St. John's over the last year. So a year with big legal expenses, uncertain economy around us, our giving was over budget.

And we entered 2010 with a small surplus. This is a tremendously encouraging thing because it means that we have turned to God in our need and he has given us generous hearts, the kind of heart that Antioch has, and the ability to give.

This should be something that moves us forward. And what Paul says to the churches is, continue in that grace. Continue in the grace that God has given you, this commitment to his gospel.

[13 : 57] The reason this is encouraging because it reveals a strong sense of commitment to Christ and to one another that comes from this kind of giving. It's also a sign that God's doing a good work through the word and through the ministries of this church as well.

And a giving like this gives confidence as we face times that are uncertain, times where we're not sure where God is taking us. There's a blessing, there's a joy, there's a peace that comes from giving in this way.

We are all affected by it. There's a confidence in God and his provision as well. Now I move on from prayer and generosity to things that happen in Barnabas and Paul's life.

There's two things I want to mention. And one is, the third reason for success is that Paul's message everywhere he went, in Barnabas too, was that it was focused on Jesus Christ completely.

So, if you look at your maps again, Saul and Barnabas sail first to Cyprus, and what he does is he preaches through the whole island there, you see, and he ends up, goes from Salamis to Paphos.

[15 : 06] And he would have spent several months at least there. And he finished by teaching the pro-council who was the Roman governor, the highest ranking Roman official. And he was astonished, this official, in verse 12.

If you look at that, what is he astonished at? He is not astonished at how great Paul is at speaking or his persuasive arguments. He is astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

And that wording means that it's the Lord Jesus himself who astonished this man. Because that is what Paul's message was. His message was Jesus Christ, the good news of him, who is the risen Lord, who forgives sins and brings eternal life.

If you want to look further into this, we see in wonderful detail, in verses 14 through 43, Paul continues up, by water, up towards what is now Turkey.

And then he goes through the mountains and into the other Antioch, Antioch of Pisidia. And there he goes to the synagogue, which is always the pattern.

[16 : 15] And he speaks to both Jews and Gentiles who are there. And these are Gentile God-fearers interested in the Jewish faith. And what we see here is a message in two parts.

So 17 through 24, Paul talks about something that they would have been all familiar with, that God had chosen Israel to be his people and David to be their king, and that he was going to bring his saving promises about through them.

Now the second half is new. It's challenging stuff to hear. It's Paul's claim that Jesus is the fulfiller of all God's promises.

God's promises to the forefathers and to David. And he is the key to Israel's future. In fact, he says, all the scriptures are fulfilled in this man, in Jesus dying and rising again.

Now this is a bombshell. And it is wonderful how people received it. Paul has a heartfelt appeal at the end that they not miss out on the salvation offered in Jesus Christ.

[17 : 23] And so he says, let's quickly look at it. He says, verse 32 at the top of page 126, and now we bring you good news that what God promised to the Father, this he has fulfilled to us, their children, by raising Jesus.

And he goes on to say, just a little bit further down, let it be known, verse 38, let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

And a call to respond to him. What we see here is that the message is Jesus. This is the wonderful bombshell. And it is a call to respond to the living Lord Jesus.

This is what Paul's message was all of the time. And it's wonderful that people begged him to come back the next Saturday to be able to share this good news. They are deeply affected by it.

And for us, we should understand that this is really the fundamental pattern of our church. Our message, like Antioch's message, Paul's message, Barnabas' message, is meant to be centered always on Jesus Christ.

[18 : 34] Because he is the message. He is the one who transforms and heals and forgives and brings reconciliation and true life. Our church is nothing without that.

All the sermons, all of our Bible studies, our pastoral care, our Sunday school, our teaching times, the times of gathered worship, and even our organizational meetings are all focused on Jesus Christ.

We proclaim him and we serve him together. Whether we're serving coffee or whether we are preaching. If that's not the case, we're no longer the church. But because it is the case here, we are the body of Christ.

We are defined by him. He is our center. He is the living Lord Jesus for us. And I want the last point to make about why this journey was successful.

Not only because of the prayers of Antioch, the generosity of Antioch, the Christ-centered preaching of Paul and Barnabas, but because Paul and Barnabas knew the living Lord Jesus was with them.

[19 : 40] You see that theme throughout Acts. It's a wonderful thing. And we see here, emphasize that the Holy Spirit is with Barnabas and Paul, particularly in times of opposition and difficulty and opposition.

And you know, this was not a trouble-free trip. There were all kinds of problems. John Mark takes off. We don't know why, whether he had somebody that he loved back in Jerusalem or because he got upset because Barnabas' cousin was taking second billing or because he wasn't looking forward to going over the mountains to Antioch, Pisidia.

Whatever reason, he left the team. Very important part of the team. There were also a long and difficult journey and there was lots of opposition to their preaching. But the amazing thing is that there is not really a hint of discouragement.

Even though they felt it, they were not dissuaded from this journey. They pushed on. There is a boldness in the face of persecution to move ahead with the gospel.

And that's because the Holy Spirit is with them. It tells us that three times throughout this, always in times of uncertainty or in times of opposition, the Holy Spirit is with them, it says.

[20 : 54] And this is a wonderful thing because what is being done here in Acts is we're seeing that God, Jesus Christ himself, are with them, strengthening them to continue and they particularly know it when it's difficult.

The thing I want to particularly look at is that when they preach God's word, that's when the most opposition happens. And two things happen simultaneously each time they share the gospel.

There is joyful belief and there is rejection, strong rejection. We saw it in Cyprus where the magician Elemas opposed Paul, seeks to turn the proconsul from the faith, which would be a strategically terrible thing.

And Paul looks at him, filled with the Holy Spirit, intently, it says there, and he tells him, you're making crooked the straight path of the Lord. And he pronounces that the Lord is going to make him temporarily blind.

Just like what happened to Paul. A sign of spiritual blindness. And what happened as a result is the proconsul believed. Paul is bold in the face of that opposition because he knows the Holy Spirit is with him.

[22 : 03] And then at Antioch, that second Sabbath, bad things happened in the synagogue in terms of the way that the Jewish leaders understood it. They came and the whole town shows up.

Their reserved pews were taken over. And it was a, just standing room only. And they were jealous. And we see in verse 45 that they contradicted and reviled Paul.

It wasn't a quiet Anglican service there in Antioch. But at the same time, many Jews followed Paul. And the Gentiles were glad and glorified the word of God.

It says there that Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly in response. Far from getting discouraged and saying, we got to get out, they pushed forward with the gospel. And it's only because they knew the risen Jesus was in their lives.

And I think it's important for us to know that there will always be opposition to the ministry and preaching of the Lord Jesus. That is what Satan does. It happens in your personal life.

[23 : 06] It happens in the church as well. It is normal. Satan does not want the kingdom of God to expand. But it is also normal, and we see it in Acts, that the risen Lord Jesus lives in you by the Holy Spirit, that he overrides and overrules the hardship and the discouragement for his good.

In fact, it is particularly in those times that we can know the Holy Spirit's comfort, his guidance for us, and his strength as well to be faithful to this mandate that Jesus has given to us.

And so I want to close by saying that those four things that made the journey a success, which was the church committed to prayer, the church generous, Paul and Barnabas, Christ-centered in their preaching, and the knowledge that the Lord Jesus was alive and with them by the power of the Holy Spirit, all of those things can be boiled down to the fact that Jesus was absolutely central in the church in the church at Antioch and in Paul and Barnabas' personal life.

That's what it boils down to. And so our prayer as we leave this chapter should be that our life in St. John's would always be Christ-centered. So that we, like Antioch, who have great resources and are well-placed to be used by Lord Jesus, that we would allow him to use us in significant ways to bring the light of the gospel into the darkness of the world, to really be loving the fact that through the gospel people's lives will be transformed and made joyful through the presence of Jesus.

Yes, we face uncertainty and opposition as Paul and Barnabas did, but as we focus our attention on Jesus Christ, no matter what happens in our uncharted times, God is with us.

[24 : 57] He is with us to bless the work of the gospel here into the world. But also, as we leave this chapter, we should think about our own personal lives, that those lives that we live would be also Christ-centered in our place of work, in the office, in our place of study, in our family life, in the great decisions that we make, in our careers and relationships, that we would know that Christ is at the center and that we have a treasure to share with the world that is ours by the grace of Jesus Christ.

And may God give us boldness, his Holy Spirit, that we might be faithful in giving that, that great treasure of Jesus Christ, a way. Amen. Please bow your heads or kneel to pray.

Gracious Father, thank you for enabling us to worship you this morning, for time and safety to hear your word, confess our sin, sing of your greatness, and be amongst a community who has their foundation in you.

Thank you that in worshipping together, we gain glimpses of the magnificent paradox, how messy we are, and how passionately you love us. Lord, in your mercy.

You are a prayer. Thank you for Luke. Thank you for his recording of the Acts of the Apostle, for his carefulness and his passion for detail, for our sake.

[26 : 36] May we be part of Jesus' ministry in the world. May we be prayerful, generous, Christ-centered, and may your spirit be in us and with us.

Lord, in your mercy. God of all creation, we pray for our world in so many places. We pray for leaders who are wise and humble.

We pray for the hungry, the homeless, and the forgotten. May you hold them tight in your soft embrace. We pray for the difficulties and fighting in Afghanistan.

We pray for the Christians in Egypt. We ask that you protect the innocent, and may the mercy and tenderness of your love come to those who seek you.

We pray now for our city of Vancouver, specifically as we count down to the Olympics when we will host the world.

[27 : 42] May we truly invite them in. We ask for the undeserved gift of communal graciousness, that we might work together to share your bounty to us.

We ask for patience with the downsides, and we ask that we might never hold it against our guests. We pray that we would truly love whomever you put in front of each of us.

Lord, in your mercy. We ask your blessings on those who serve in ministries supported by our own congregation.

We pray for those locally, Richie Spidell in his work with navigators and university students, and Kirsten Rumery in her work with living waters. Further afield, we pray for your blessing on Jeremy Curry in Nepal and the Cantillon family in Jerusalem.

Be near to each of them. Lord, in your mercy. Amen. In our own congregation, we beseech you, God, for direction and for love.

[28 : 48] As we face the need to make decisions about our legal predicament, we desperately want to honor you and to be faithful to whatever you call us to. Please guide us and give us obedient hearts.

We beg you to protect and to strengthen our unity and our vulnerability together. Father, we ask yet again for the possibility of mediation, of a settlement outside of the court system.

And while it seems hopeless, we know your creativity is far more than we can ever imagine. Lord, in your mercy. Dear God, we pray for pain and for sorrow in each of our lives.

We desperately need your comfort and wisdom and healing and cheer every day. we pray for those in pain amongst us together. For Harold, Yvette, Jean, Rosemary, Marguerite.

And in a moment of silence, we pray for those known specifically to each of us. Be with them.

[30 : 07] Bring them to mind that we might pray for them and love them well throughout the week ahead. Lord, in your mercy. Father, as we try to cope with the immense uncertainty in our lives, personally, in our cities, in our world, as Christians we're increasingly maligned, may we learn anew of the depth of your trustworthiness and your love.

May we become ever more people of grace, humility, and generosity. And may we live in the reality even in these dark, short January days that you bring glorious, unquenchable, wonderful light to our lives and to our world.

And we rejoice. Amen. Amen. Thank you.