

Acts 13:1-12

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[0 : 00] All right, so today we're going to hear of Acts 13.

It's not the central chapter in the book of Acts, but it's definitely a central chapter. So the book of Acts as a whole is Luke's account of how Christ continued to work in the world through the divine person of the Holy Spirit and through the body of which he is the head, that is, the church.

So this saga begins in Jerusalem and extends to Judea and to Samaria, but these are still largely Jewish areas. Gentile expansion is sporadic at best.

But here, Paul and Barnabas are set apart for that work, which is really good news for all of us who happen to be Gentiles. That is not Jewish, those of us who are not Jewish.

So let's read Acts 13, 1 to 12 together. This is on page 921 in your pew Bibles. Page 921.

[1 : 15] And it reads as follows. Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Mannaan, a lifelong friend of Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then, after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews, and they had John to assist them.

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

But Elamas the magician, for that is the meaning of his name, opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

[2 : 40] But Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?

And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. Immediately, mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

Then, the proconsul believed when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

So last Sunday, we celebrated communion, where we all partook of the body and blood of Christ as a church. My prayer is that this church never stops using crunchy bread.

Along with singing together, the collective crunch when we chew the crackers is a reminder that when we gather, on Sundays especially, we gather as a body.

[3 : 51] It's that function of the church that I want to focus on today. So I want to try something that many of you probably haven't done before. So in the churches that I was in growing up, sometimes the pastor would ask the congregation to turn to their neighbor and say something, often the theme of the sermon.

So I will ask the same of you to remind us all that we gather to hear the sermon not just as a lecture, but as a collective body feeding on the Word of God. So first step, you have to identify your neighbor.

So it's either someone to your left, to your right, in front, or in back of you. So first step, identify that neighbor. Okay? Okay? Sounds like neighbors have been identified.

So I want you to turn to your neighbor and say, neighbor. So three sentences.

I don't want to be a helicopter believer. Second sentence.

[5 : 01] Second sentence. You don't want me to be a helicopter believer. You don't want me to be a helicopter believer. And third sentence. Please help me not to be a helicopter believer.

You don't want me to be a helicopter believer. See? That wasn't so bad, was it? So, to explain that, I'm going to need two big points from this text. First, the church is a community on mission.

Meaning it's a community that has been sent by God into the world. And it is a community of commission. Meaning each of us, if we've been united to Christ by faith, has been sent by God into the world, and he continues to send us.

So that's our first thing. The nature of the church. That we've been sent both as individuals and as a community. Point two. We're sent not into a world that's full of rainbows and puppies that are ready to hug us at every turn.

But rather, a world that is hostile to us. And especially to the one whom we bear witness to. So the second point is the nature of our Christian task.

[6 : 11] So I say these things, obviously, not to scare us, but to encourage us. Because the resources that the Lord has given us are more than sufficient. So let's get back to the text.

It begins in Antioch. The new central office of the church. Where the disciples were first called Christians. Verses one to four. You have the prophets and teachers. And they're worshipping the Lord and fasting.

Now the first thing to know, which we see in verse one. Is the diversity and abundance of prophets and teachers in the church. You have Barnabas, the encourager. You have Simeon, who's most likely from Africa, as his nickname suggests.

You have Manan, who's a foster brother of Herod the Tetrarch. He grew up with Herod the Tetrarch. And this is the same Herod of the Gospels, who was involved in the deaths of John the Baptist and of Jesus himself.

So Manan grew up with royalty. But now he's standing with the church, facing bitter opposition. You have Lucius from a city in northern Africa.

[7 : 13] And you have Saul, the former Jewish pharisaical superstar. Persecutor of Christians turned evangelist. Think of this as similar to having the Avengers, Earth's Mightiest Heroes, at one church.

And this makes verse two a little bit more surprising. Because when the church is ministering to the Lord, probably praying and fasting, the Holy Spirit speaks.

Now we don't know if this was a voice from above or the still small voice that the believers are hearing. But however it happened, the message was clear. Verse two. Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.

So basically, the Holy Spirit says, your two best teachers, I've got another work for them, miles away in the middle of the sea. So not only was this probably a little weird for Paul and Barnabas, but it must have been tough for the congregation.

When you've got great gifted people in your congregation, you want to keep them. But this is our first point. The church is a community on mission. And what is that mission?

[8 : 25] Well, according to Christ, it is to go out into the world and make disciples of all nations. Note, disciples, not just converts. The goal is to train up learners in order to send them out into every sphere of human life.

So in that sense, the most important indicator of church growth is spiritual maturity. And so it's in the following verse that we have an act of the church that shows this kind of maturity.

The word has been spoken in a clear way. And verse three is the church's response. It says, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

The church is a place of commission. Meaning the church is meant to send people out, not just keep people in. We see this even in the language that Luke uses to describe the twelve disciples.

Throughout the Gospels, they're called disciples because they're learning from Christ in his earthly ministry. But after Christ dies, is resurrected and ascends, the twelve are then called the apostles.

[9 : 36] Because they're those who have been sent. Emboldened and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Obviously, that doesn't mean that they stop learning. But there has been a shift in their identity.

You likewise have been sent. Do you work? Your workplace is a mission field. Are you home with kids? Your children are an essential mission field.

Are you in school? Students definitely need Jesus. But you have not been sent alone. This is big point number one. You're part of a new community.

The church. Your local body of believers. Which brings us back to this main illustration. That thing that I told you to speak to your neighbor. I don't want to be a helicopter believer.

What in the world is that? Well, let's think about a helicopter. What's distinctive about what a helicopter can do? It can hover. One of the main tactical advantages of a helicopter is that it can escape congested areas easily because it can just take off and land vertically.

[10 : 47] When you're stuck in traffic on 95 or 15, like, this is the kind of transportation that you want. You just want to lift up and roll on out. But what does that have to do with the church?

Well, some of us want the versatility and the flexibility of a helicopter in our relationships. If we're in the midst of an especially hairy church conflict, maybe we would just like to lift off and rise above it.

Love is too hard, so maybe we'll just hover for a little bit until things die down. Maybe you think because you're only here for a few years or a few months, setting roots would be a bad idea.

Maybe you think, ah, it'll be a little too messy for me to get involved in people's lives and then have to leave. Maybe you think, ah, it'll be a little too messy for me to get involved in people's lives and then have to be a little too messy.

Let's be honest. Many of us have entertained these thoughts, or perhaps we are entertaining those thoughts right now. In one way or another, we've acted like helicopters, hovering over the fray out of fear of pain, or hovering over the joy out of fear of commitment.

[12 : 04] Church, I'm here to tell you that this will not work, and it's dangerous to your spiritual health. In one sense, the church does not need air support.

It needs foot soldiers. It needs Christians who are willing to guard one another in the trenches. Especially at a church like Trinity, it's easy to look at the fact that the population of the church is always shifting and to think that you won't be able to have a meaningful contribution to the community.

But there is no time too short to commit to a local church. There is no time that no one in the congregation needs encouragement, prayer, a moment of hospitality, a reminder from scripture, or some other manifestation of the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given you.

So that first sentence, I don't want to be a helicopter believer. Hovering over the life of the church does not serve my soul well. You deny yourself the love of your brothers and sisters.

Second one was, you don't want me to be a helicopter believer. For you to hover above the life of the church is to deny your brothers and sisters your love and your gifts and the opportunity to grow in the image of Christ with you.

[13 : 25] And that last one was, help me not to be a helicopter believer. We need one another for this to continue to work. We need to continue to encourage one another to be involved in one another's lives.

To pray for one another, to encourage one another, to continue to challenge one another. As members of the body of Christ, it is our joyous call to serve and grow with one another.

So, if you are a Christian and you have not made a local church your home, I commend Trinity to you for membership. Join a small group. Talk to the elders more if you're interested.

But keep in mind that if you do join, you're not just joining a group of people. The church is not just a social club. The great thing about verse 4 is what it suggests about the purpose and the power of the church.

Verse 3 says that the church sent them off. The Greek word really suggests that the church let them go. Because it's clear who's calling the shots in this story.

[14 : 32] The Holy Spirit is. He's the one who sent Paul and Barnabas to Antioch in the first place. And so he's the one who sent them away. He's also the one who brought you here.

And he's the one who's given you the gifts that you have. The church is the place and the group of people that he works through to shape you into the image of Christ.

And the Holy Spirit is the one who is with us when we face opposition. Like Paul and Barnabas. I want to read verses 6 to 12 again. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician.

A Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But El-Amas, the magician, for that is the meaning of his name, opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

But Saul, who was also called Paul, it's the first time he's called Paul, every time after this he'll be Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?

[15 : 53] And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. And immediately mist and darkness fell upon him. He went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

Then the proconsul believed. When he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. So on the island of Cyprus, our dynamic duo meets up with Bar Jesus, a Jewish false prophet, whose name means son of Jesus.

More on that later. His compatriot is the actual focus of this story, proconsul Sergius Paulus. A few notes on this guy. He's a smart man, a man of intelligence.

He's politically powerful, as a proconsul is a governor of a Roman province. Also, he's primed and ready for the gospel, as it's clear that the Holy Spirit has done preliminary work, getting his heart ready.

That's in the second half of verse 7. The fact that he called for Paul and Barnabas shows us that Sergius Paulus knows that there's something different about what these men have to offer. But Elemas can't have Paul and Barnabas moving in on his territory.

[17 : 04] Chances are this guy has spent a lot of time building his political influence. He has Sergius Paulus' ear. He trusts him in matters of faith. And now these pesky Christians are getting in the way.

And so, Bar-Jesus seeks to turn the proconsul away from the faith. So why does Paul get so angry? There's a legitimate rage in this utterance and in his gaze.

This is not just a benign stare. Imagine the stare that a mother gives her child when he's embarrassing her in public.

That stare that says, if you don't get right, when we get home... But Paul doesn't wait. Paul lets loose an indictment and a sentence, calling him a son of the devil and then blinding him.

You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? That sounds a little harsh.

[18 : 11] Is Paul overreacting? To that we have to say no. Because of verse 9. This is not Paul's overly emotional response.

This is the judgment of the Holy Spirit. So how is bar Jesus actually bar Satan? What makes this man a son of the devil?

Well, understanding the father-son relationship of this culture and time is necessary for us to kind of get the full brunt of what Paul is saying here. So now in the 21st century, we're in a time where you can hypothetically basically do whatever job that you want to do if you train for it.

But what we see in Christ's time and in the time of the apostles is a culture where as a child, specifically a male child, you do what your dad does. Jesus is referred to as the son of Joseph, the carpenter.

And according to Mark, Jesus did a little carpentry himself. It was customary for a father to teach his son the trade when he was about 12 years old. It was really important that children get into the family business.

[19 : 21] As opposed to, for example, someone like me who avoids the law like the plague while my parents are both in law, a first century Jewish man would be carrying on his father's business.

And this is the sense in which we see this same son of the devil language used by Jesus in John 8. When he speaks to a crowd who doesn't believe him, Jesus says this, you are of your father the devil and your will is to do your father's desires.

He was a murderer from the beginning and has nothing to do with the truth because there is no truth in him. So to be someone's child, this is for men and women, to be someone's child, biblically, is to do what they do.

So to be a child of the devil is to do as he does. It is to kill.

It is to steal. It is to deceive. It is ultimately to destroy. So insofar as someone acts these things out, one reveals one's parentage.

- [20 : 36] So bar Jesus, in seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith, performs an utterly demonic task, attempting to keep Sergius Paulus away from eternal joy and salvation through the knowledge of Jesus Christ as his savior.

So why does Paul get so mad that Elemas makes crooked the straight paths of the Lord? If a drug dealer peddles drugs to your child in front of you, do you just walk up to him and ask, oh, could you kindly not do that?

I imagine there would be some anger. Paul's anger is the anger that we should experience when we see a distortion of the gospel, the clear good news, the good news that we were created for God's glory, but chose to reject him, becoming corrupt to our very core and dead in our trespasses and sins, worthy of the wrath of God.

But while we were yet his enemies, God sent his son in the person of Jesus Christ, who lived a perfect human life and died and took the punishment that was due us as our substitute, and after dying, rose on the third day.

The good news that if we trust Jesus Christ solely and wholly for our salvation, our sins are forgiven, and he clothes us with his righteousness, and he seals us with his spirit, through whom he shapes us into his image.

- [22 : 05] That is the good news. Anything substantively different from that is a despicable distortion. Let's take an example from the gym.

Imagine that for me to secure my own salvation, I have to lift a 500-pound weight. If we can imagine the weight in front of me, it's 500 pounds.

If I can successfully lift this weight, I will effectively defeat my sin and essentially win at life. Unfortunately, I mean, do I look like I'm going to lift 500 pounds?

I do not spend two hours a day doing CrossFit. 500 pounds would destroy all kinds of muscles and ligaments or whatever I engage in trying to lift that monstrous weight.

So someone might say, oh, you just need a really good spotter. You just need somebody to come alongside you and just kind of help you out. Nobody's going to be able to help.

- [23 : 08] That's not going to work. And that's also not what Jesus does. Jesus is not someone who just comes alongside you and kind of gives you that little extra push that you need. We're not just a little bit sinful and we just need Jesus to kind of come in and shine us up a little bit.

No, down to our thoughts and our desires we've been sullied. We place our faith in Christ alone because it is in his death and resurrection that our sins have been forgiven.

He took them once and for all and gave us a new identity in him. We don't need a spotter. We need to step aside and let him take the weight on his shoulders.

Whether it's 500 pounds of metal or the guilt and power of my sin, it's way too much for me but it is not too much for the Savior. Anything that purports to be the gospel but does not revolve around complete dependence on the Lord Jesus Christ, his life, his death, and his resurrection is a poisonous distorted lie.

There's another prominent teaching that the Lord's prominent teaching today that the Lord's primary desire for you is that you be prosperous, that you be healthy, that you be wealthy, that you be happy, that by your words you can kind of speak these things into existence.

- [24 : 36] This gospel is toothless. The true gospel promises joy in the midst of suffering, strength in the midst of weakness. Any power that you have is not yours but the power of Christ if you are joined to him by faith.

Anything less is garbage. Yes, that's strong language, I know, but these are matters of life and death and they require the utmost attention.

And this is the reason why the judgment on the false prophet, Bar Jesus, is blindness. You may be reminded of another story that involved Paul and blindness, his own.

Do you remember the story? Paul, breathing murder, is on his way to Damascus on a rampage, persecuting Christians left and right, tying them up, bringing them to prison, and in other cases, even overseeing their deaths.

If anyone was a fervent enemy of Christianity and not likely to be converted, Paul was that guy. But God had a different plan. When Paul was on that road, the resurrected Christ appeared to him, calling him out and subsequently blinding him.

[25 : 52] Paul had to find Ananias, who nursed him back to health, restored his sight, and had him baptized so that he could begin the most fruitful Christian ministry ever.

Then, a few chapters later in the same book, this same Paul comes across a man just as spiritually blind as he was, just as intent on keeping people away from Jesus as he was.

I can't help but think that in the background of this encounter, Paul is seeing himself and recoiling. Has this ever happened to you?

Ezekiel 36 describes this phenomenon. God promises in verses 26 and 27, which we read earlier, in salvation to remove your heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh.

He promises to place his spirit, his own spirit inside of you and to cause you to walk in the way that he would have you walk. But a few verses down in verse 31, he describes how we will view our old selves.

[27 : 04] He says, then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.

Sometimes we're especially sensitive to see others who are suffering as we are or who have sinned as we have. Has your faith penetrated you this deeply?

Has it shaped your affections? Has it shaped your emotions? Do you see your sin in the ways in which you rebel against God and recoil in loathing?

Does that then remind you of the joy of God's grace and his forgiveness? This is, I think, the root of Paul's anger and the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in him in this moment.

He sees in Bar-Jesus a little bit of his former self, blind to the joys of Christ and seeking to bring others down into his own blindness.

[28 : 08] So, the Holy Spirit, through Paul, makes Bar-Jesus' physical situation match his spiritual situation. But he does so with mercy.

Note, he's just going to be blind for a time. This is not a final judgment, but a warning that would hopefully lead to Elamas' own repentance.

So, hearing all of this, you might think, well, that's all well and good, but I'm just an ordinary believer. I'm no Paul. I'm not going to be going around blinding people and calling people children of the devil.

That could get weird really quickly. Yes, you're right, that could get weird very quickly. But this episode tells us a lot about how a life infused with the Holy Spirit should look.

There will be times where you will face opposition and a firm rebuke will be necessary. Sometimes you will need to shut somebody down. But, there also will be times where a firm rebuke is inappropriate.

[29 : 16] Example, let's say that a friend comes to you and tells you that they're really excited about a church. You, being the savvy 21st century person that you are, go home and the first thing you do, you check the website.

But in looking at the website, you notice a few red flags. Maybe Christ is just seen as special but kind of one among many religious options.

Maybe it's a place where the Bible is seen as fraught with error and in need of revision by conscientious believers. upon finding these things out, do you find your friend and attempt to call down fire from heaven?

Probably not. No, you would engage your friend in conversation. You would determine what it is about that church that draws them and you would apply the true gospel to that longing.

Sometimes that's the way to go. Sometimes what I affectionately call the sledgehammer method is necessary. But in order to discern which is appropriate when, we must be in constant prayer and we must be in constant community because it is the Holy Spirit that offers that guidance.

[30 : 29] This is why Luke, in recounting this experience of Paul's, prefaces it by saying that Paul is filled with the Holy Spirit in verse nine when he does this.

It is God's power and it is in submitting to God's will that that power is manifested in us. And this brings us to the end of our passage.

The joyous climax. Verse 12. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had occurred for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Two things. First, he believed when he saw. Here is a case where seeing really does lead to true believing.

But it's even deeper than that. The proconsul seeing is in direct contrast to the false prophet's blindness. This is a reminder of the purpose of this passage and of the book of Acts as a whole.

[31 : 46] This is the story of the Holy Spirit opening eyes and hearts through the work of believers. A story that we as the church are a part of and that we've been invited to take an active part of.

Few things are more satisfying than seeing the light in a student's eyes when they finally figure something out. That feeling is multiplied exponentially when you see the gospel take root in someone's life.

Point two, the teaching of the Lord. It says that the proconsul believed when he saw what had occurred for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

That seems weird. It didn't strike me as a very didactic passage, meaning it's not like Paul went through kind of a point-by-point explanation of the gospel in this passage.

What does he mean by the teaching of the Lord? I think this shows us that the gospel, while it is primarily a message, yes, it is also a way of living, thinking, and breathing in the world.

[33 : 03] The proconsul was amazed at the power that a believer in Jesus Christ and partaker in his spirit has access to. The word is a powerful thing, brothers and sisters.

The church is a powerful people, a people who have been sent out on a mission, and a people who have been sent to commission. That is who you are.

that is who we are. Each of us has a full-time Christian ministry because it's part of our identity. My faith and my relationship with Christ are not just things that I reckon with on Sundays or whenever I have small group.

These things ought to extend to and fill our thoughts, our words, and our actions. Because in the world that we face, whether it's in the office, whether it's at home, whether it's in church, whether it's a stop-and-shop, whether it's in your car, whether it's on your way to class, we face an enemy who wants nothing better than to make us fall and take us off of the straight ways of the Lord.

But we have the word of God in the scriptures. We have the very spirit of God as a gift of faith. And we have one another.

[34 : 25] Father, let's go out in power. Amen? Let's pray. Father, before your son went to the cross, he told his disciples, it is to your advantage that I go away.

For if I do not go away, the helper will not come to you. surely this was as confusing for the disciples as it may be for us sometimes. But Lord, I pray that you continue to remind us and solidify in us the fact that having the Holy Spirit inside of us is even better than having Jesus beside us in this present life.

May the believers this morning come to a deeper communion with you through your son in your spirit. Lord, may the non-believers here come to a saving knowledge of you through repentance and faith.

Lord, we thank you and we praise you. In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, and by the power of your Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Well, to respond, we're going to sing a song about being sent forth and sent out with the gospel. So let's stand and let's stand.