

Words and Deeds: Son of Jesus?
By Jason Huff
November 4, 2018
Deuteronomy 18:9-12; Galatians 5:16-25; Acts 12:25-13:12

Our final Scripture reading is from Acts 12:25-13:12. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His holy Word. "When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark. In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with 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." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

A big part of traveling is finding out how they do things differently in other parts of the world. Just travel inside the United States and you'll find different accents, different foods, even different ways of thinking about familiar problems. Some places are friendlier; some places aren't. Leave the country and you'll see just how different other societies can be. I recently read an article that said that the popularity of the James Bond movies in the 1960s were as much for their exotic locations people had never been to as the adventures and gadgets of a super-spy.

Sometimes, when we read the Bible, it reminds us that it's from a different time and place. Some ideas that were commonplace to them seem strange to us. We're reading about not only a different culture and a different place but a completely different era 2000 years away. What stood out for me today in the passage were those things where we realize, "Wow, this is really different." But the differences between the culture and church back then and the culture and church today can teach us about who we're meant to be as ambassadors for Christ.

So we've returned to the story of Barnabas and Saul. Barnabas had gone looking for Saul to help take the gospel to the Gentiles. Once he found Saul, they taught in the city of Antioch for a year. They headed to Jerusalem to deliver an offering that the people of Antioch had taken to prepare them for a famine that had been prophesied. Now Barnabas and Saul are back in Antioch, and they have young John Mark with them.

We're given insight into the church's normal routine -- they worship, they fast, and they pray together. It's during one of these times that the Holy Spirit speaks clearly to them that Saul and Barnabas are to be set apart for a missionary journey -- a particular work that God has called them to do. They pray and fast some more, and then they lay hands on them to send them on their journey. The laying on of hands was a common way that the church signaled that they desired the Holy Spirit to be with and guide those they touched.

We're going to stop right here to think about two things we don't always see in the modern church. The first point we need to address is this: *the early church was a praying and fasting church*. That's not the central point of this passage. And yet it is just stated so matter-of-factly that we need to pay attention. This was ordinary for them. Praying and fasting as a church was part and parcel of the whole deal.

We might say, "Oh, we're a praying church. We pray every Sunday." But that's not what this is. We're talking about the members of the church regularly praying for extended periods of time together. Not a few minutes at the start of a worship service or at its end, but time spent in conversation with God. Where everybody felt comfortable coming before the Lord and talking with Him.

We are reluctant to pray. Every day at Compassion, I see the same thing. About half the people there at prayer time are fine to pray, and the other half say whatever they can so that the prayer will keep going around the circle. No judgment, just reality. And these are faithful people who love the Lord, who want to honor Him. We've been taught by the world that prayer aloud could somehow be offensive, weird, strange. But that's the way prayer was for most people in history. People didn't think their prayers; they said them out loud. There's nothing wrong with the way we pray; other people just did it differently.

But the big thing is that they prayed together. They were in agreement in prayer. They were around one another enough that prayer for one another, together, just happened. This was an interesting challenge to me this week because I've become aware that I am far busier than I want to be. My current work circumstances require me to work a lot, and I think that's true for many of us here. Modern life takes a lot of time. You know, people talk about the days without fast food restaurants, and it made me realize -- it's not like someone just came up with fast food and forced it on people. It filled a need because people didn't have enough time to make meals.

Fasting, too, is something we rarely make time to do. I thought about this briefly this week because I've always been of the opinion that the only reason to fast is obedience. Fasting doesn't make you more spiritual; it doesn't open God's ears magically because, as we've learned, God is full of grace and love and mercy towards us but we cannot manipulate Him through anything, not even prayer and fasting.

I have done myself a disservice, though, downplaying fasting. The truth is that fasting very quickly lets the light of God shine into the dark corners of our lives and reveals our true selves. If you've never done it before, try fasting for, say, two or three days. See what happens. I promise you, how much you need to rely on God will come pouring out.

All the gunk starts spilling out on day two, if not earlier. All the selfishness, all the garbage, you start to see just how easily things start to slip when we miss our food. Fasting reveals our utter dependence on God because we think everything is good until something we expect goes away. Much of the way we act has to do with our easy circumstances. When those circumstances change, we realize just how messed up we are. Why did the ancients fast? Obedience, of course. But I also think it was because they knew that fasting would help them see all the issues getting between them and God.

I'm not going to tell you, "We're going to become a praying and fasting church today, starting right after the service." We're too weak to do that; I'm too weak to do that. But I would like to see us regularly plan for times of prayer and fasting, just like we plan for fellowship meals. In the next 45 days, we have four fellowship events planned as a church. I think having a day of prayer and fasting together, or at least a time of prayer and fasting, can help us see clearly who we are and what God is doing in our midst. Think about it; pray about it. I don't have solutions today. But I do see the early church finding its way through difficult persecution and tough decisions through fasting and praying.

Next thing I see here: *God calls individuals to ministry through the church*. Sometimes when we get really excited about our faith, we think, "Oh, God must want me to do something!" I've met people who are like, "God said to me I need to become a pastor!" And a few of them become pastors. A lot of them don't. Because while many might want to act, not all are called.

God's special call on individuals is a calling confirmed by the community. When I felt God calling me to prepare for pastoral ministry, I talked about it with the church I was serving in music ministry. They were a support and saw the gifts in place. The presbytery – the group of local churches – saw it too. There was agreement that the Holy Spirit was calling me to do this.

Thankfully, the ancient understanding of call and the modern understanding of call are pretty close. Not every church follows it. But it's a good thing to remember, when someone asks you, "Why do you think someone is qualified to be your pastor or Bible teacher," that we believe in a sense of call confirmed multiple times in multiple ways.

Saul and Barnabas aren't sent out because they feel like they should minister to the world. They go because they are called; they were effective because they were called. There are a lot of "ministries" that bring in people and money that aren't what God desires to see done. We want to investigate, confirm, and then act on His call. Is everyone called to be a faithful Christian witness where they are? Yes. Are all called to minister in an official capacity? No.

Moving on...Saul and Barnabas head out on this first missionary journey, they go catch a boat from Seleucia to the big island of Cyprus, and they reach the city-state of Salamis. They start teaching there. They go to the Jewish synagogues first. Saul will later tell us in Romans that this was part of his calling – to minister to the original members of the covenant first, and then go to the Gentiles when that work was complete. They always acknowledge that the Jewish people are the first people of the promise. So they go around the island and God gives them new converts, new churches.

Then they reach Paphos and attempt to meet with the proconsul of the island, Sergius Paulus. He was appointed by Rome as a statesman to the island, to keep the peace – by force if necessary. Sergius Paulus wanted them to come to him; he was interested in what they were teaching; he was a smart guy. Yet there’s this guy named bar-Jesus, which means, “Son of Jesus,” trying to stop them from getting Sergius Paulus to convert. The Son of Jesus is opposing the men of Jesus.

Now Jesus was a popular Jewish name, and had been for millennia. The book of the Bible we call Joshua is the name Yeshua – same as Jesus in Hebrew. It means, “God saves.” Plenty of Jesuses were around. Yet this “son of Jesus” is going up against the apostles of Jesus the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Not only that, but he’s a sorcerer. There are a few words that should never go together, and two of them are Jewish and sorcerer. There are about two dozen crimes called abominations in the Old Testament that could get someone the death penalty, and practicing any sort of divination or sorcery or magic or witchcraft was one of them. God was that serious about His people not turning astray to demonic powers.

But as it turns out, Jewish sorcerers were surprisingly popular in Gentile lands. The Jewish people had over a millennium’s worth of history. Many Roman leaders had their own magicians, and they believed there was a great deal of religious wisdom and knowledge to be had from having a Jewish magician around. When Saul and Barnabas show up, bar-Jesus knows that he could lose his meal ticket. So he tries to sway Sergius Paulus.

Saul is having none of it, and full of the Holy Spirit, he calls out bar-Jesus. Calls him a child of the devil, and enemy of everything right, lays it all out, and Paul does what bar-Jesus can’t do – he tells him the future. He’s going to be blind – for a time, won’t be able to see the light of the sun. And it happens immediately. Sergius Paulus is already taken with the Word of God, and when this happens, he has no doubt – he becomes a believer on the spot.

Now this is our final place where things look different today than they did in the ancient Near East. But here’s something I think we can take to heart today: *blunt, painful, politically incorrect truth does not diminish the gospel when spoken in the Spirit to save souls*. Notice that when Saul goes on his diatribe against the sorcerer, he is full of the Holy Spirit. These are not Saul’s words; they are inspired words. They are truth. And bar-Jesus knew it. Being a Jewish sorcerer betrayed everything he was to stand for as a member of God’s chosen people. He had chosen to deny the faith of his fathers to gain money and influence. God would have been more than justified to have struck him dead on the spot.

What Saul says is really uncomfortable to us. Yet it’s no worse than what Jesus said. He called the Jewish leaders who refused to listen to Him and who constantly opposed Him children of the devil and whitewashed tombs – perfect looking on the outside but full of death on the inside. Jesus showed amazing love and grace to people guilty of vile crimes, but He had harsh words for the self-righteous, for the people who claimed to know God yet walked in wickedness.

Saul and Jesus never attended church growth seminars. They would have flunked Church Growth 101. It teaches you to be dynamic, winsome, and most of all, inoffensive. Sin and guilt and hell? Steer away. How can you convert someone who's offended by you? Don't do controversy. Don't talk about anything remotely political. Don't share an opinion that's biblically based if it will harm your relationship with people filling the seats.

But we're supposed to be Jesus' disciples, not disciples of the latest church guru. Jesus didn't care that He deeply offended the 5,000 He'd miraculously fed the day before. He didn't care that the Pharisees despised Him and wanted Him dead. All He cared about was people coming into the Kingdom of God – not fake converts, not people who just wanted more free food and a good show, but people who were open to being genuinely changed by the Holy Spirit.

Now does that mean that we can go around spouting harsh words at people we don't like? Remember that Saul was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Unless you can claim that, I'd think twice. And yet, when circumstances warrant, the Spirit can use painful truth to get someone motivated to repent and believe.

Over 10 years ago now, I was in a class called CPE – Clinical Pastoral Education. You were a chaplain for four months under supervision, and every few weeks, you had a debriefing session with your supervisor. And it was no holds barred; they could ask you anything. And one day, my supervisor asked me in that session, “Why are you so self-destructive?”

At first, I was clueless about what she was asking about. Then I got that she was talking about my weight. At first I was offended, though I tried not to let that show too much. I had been seeing a dietician and had lost some weight, I'd been working on it, trying to get better. I just saw it as a problem. Those words stuck with me, and they were painful, and I was unhappy with that supervisor for some time. Her theology was weird, too, so I just wrote it off to that.

And yet those painful words were right. My eating is self-destructive. It is a way of self-medicating personal pain. It's taken me ten years to get past the point of saying, “I've got to diet,” and to the point of saying, “I need to deal with wounds in my past that have made me self-destructive. I want to deal with the lies I've told myself that make me run to food.” Those painful words ten years ago were right. I'm glad they were said. They help me heal now.

Proverbs 27:6 says, “The wounds of a friend are faithful, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.” So when you hear something that wounds you from the pulpit, when a Christian brother or sister tells you something in love that is hard to hear, when you know it to be true even though it's painful, don't take offense. God may be using it to build you up, to repair the damage sin has done. Saul called out the sorcerer bar-Jesus. We don't know what eventually happened to him. But that callout with the power behind it convinced Sergius Paulus to get right with God. Difficult words in the hands of the Holy Spirit convict us of our sins and lead us back to Jesus.

And it's my prayer for us this week that we too would be like Sergius Paulus. The last verse this week says, “When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.” May we too be amazed by the teaching of the Lord, turn to Him in faith, and know His great love for us.