

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Showdown at Cyprus

Acts 13:1–12

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to Acts 13:1–12. We are continuing through Acts in our series "No Other Name." And today, we are going to see an epic showdown in the Bible.

I love a good showdown. I love a good faceoff. I love Ali vs. Frazier. I love "Thrilla in Manila" kind of stuff. "Down goes Frazier!" I love the movie "Tombstone." I love Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday going up against an army of gunfighters at the O.K. Corral.

I love showdowns in the Bible. I love Daniel in the lion's den. I love David vs. Goliath. I love Moses vs. Pharaoh. I love it when believers are challenged by the enemies of darkness, and they are required to trust God and overcome opposition.

Well that happens in Acts 13. The Apostle Paul has this cosmic showdown with a demon-inspired sorcerer named Bar-Jesus. What happens?

Last week, we saw a wicked ruler named Herod Agrippa get the best of the Apostle James. And then he imprisoned the Apostle Peter. But that "victory" (if you want to call it that) was short-lived, as all victories are for wicked people.

So what happens this time as another apostle gets into an altercation with the forces of darkness? Let's find out.

Go ahead and take your notes and write this down. Let me give you an outline for this passage. Here's the question that I want to answer in your notes—what's required of us, as Christians, if we want to faithfully and fruitfully serve Christ? Let me put the question this way—faithful, fruitful Christian ministry requires what?¹

You see, this passage today isn't really about how to secure a temporary victory in the Christian life. It's instead about how to fight a good fight. It's about what weapons of warfare you need to master as a follower of Jesus. What's required of us as Christians if we are going to serve Christ faithfully?

Four answers to that question. Here's the first.

1) Faithful, fruitful Christian ministry requires **prayerfulness** (13:1–3)

Here's why I say that. The church of Jesus Christ in Antioch was a praying church. And that focus on prayer wasn't unique to them in the book of Acts. What were the apostles doing in the upper room at Pentecost before the Holy Spirit came down and lit them up like a Christmas tree? They were praying (Acts 1:14). What were they doing before they chose Matthias to replace Judas? They were praying (Acts 1:24–25). What was the church doing for Peter when he was imprisoned by Herod Agrippa? They were praying (Acts 12:5, 12).²

Why were they praying? Because God's power is accessed in prayer. That's something the church has been doing since its very inception. Acts 2:42 says, "The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer."

¹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 2: "There is much truth in the humorous adage that some people make things happen, others watch things happen, while still others are left wondering what happened."

² They also prayed before laying hands on the seven distributors of benevolence that included Stephen and Philip (Acts 6:6). And they prayed for boldness when Peter and John were released from prison (Acts 4:24–30).

So we shouldn't be surprised to find the church in Antioch praying in **Acts 13**. Their prayers preceded the unleashing of Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to the lost world with the lifechanging truth of the gospel!³

Let's see how this happens. Look at **verse 1**.

¹ Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers,⁴ Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene,⁵ Manaen⁶ a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

Let's take a closer look at this. There were "prophets and teachers" in the church proclaiming God's Word. Whatever you believe about prophets and whether or not their ministry is applicable in our day, these guys were not just sitting around conducting séances and trying to predict the future. All prophets in the Bible had some combination of forth-telling and foretelling.⁷ In fact it was mostly forth-telling, and just a little foretelling.⁸

So these prophets and teachers were instructing the church with the truth of the gospel and the truth of God's Word. And they were teaching what we would call the apostles' doctrine (**Acts 2:42**), that had not yet been canonized as Scripture.⁹ We have the benefit of that now in our era with what we call the New Testament.

And speaking of the prophets and teachers, let's take a closer look at them. There are five men altogether. First, there's Barnabas. We know him (**Acts 4:36–37; 9:26–27; 11:22–30; 12:25**). He was a Jewish convert to Christianity from Cyprus. There's also Saul, who's the fifth man on that list. Saul (or Paul) was a Jewish convert from Tarsus (about 100 miles from Antioch). He was trained as a Pharisee in Jerusalem. He got saved dramatically on that road to Damascus (**Acts 9:1–30**).

But there are also these guys in the middle who we know nothing about. There's this guy Simeon called Niger. Niger means "black" or "dark-complexion" in Latin, so there's a good chance that Simeon was African. Then there's "Lucius of Cyrene" who was definitely from Africa. Cyrene is an African province. And then there's this guy named Manaen who was a close, intimate friend of Herod the Tetrarch, otherwise known as Herod Antipas. In fact, there's a good chance that Manaen probably grew up with Herod Antipas, which is really quite ironic. He grew up with the guy who killed John the Baptist and helped orchestrate Jesus's death (**Matt 14:1–12; Luke 23:6–12**).¹⁰ How amazing is that! Now this guy is a leader in the church of Antioch. And I'm guessing that Manaen was an aristocrat and a man of considerable wealth and influence.

³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 563: "'Mission' is not simply Christian existence, or 'everything that the church does,' but the deliberate activity of a community of faith that distinguishes itself from its environment both in terms of religious belief (theology) and in terms of social behavior (ethics), that is convinced of the truth claims of its faith, and that actively works to win other people for the contents of faith and the way of life of whose truth and necessity the members of that community are convinced. Intentionality and geographical movement are an integral part of authentic missionary work."

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 289: "Although it is possible grammatically to construe the first three as being prophets and the last two as teachers, it probably is best to see all five as comprising the congregational leadership as prophet-teachers. Paul and Barnabas already had been described as 'teaching' the congregation (11:26), and the additional designation of 'prophet' would emphasize the inspired, Spirit-led dimension to their teaching."

⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 289: "From the time of the early church fathers, some have equated 'Lucius of Cyrene' with Luke and seen this solitary reference as Luke's 'signature' to his book. Little evidence, however, substantiates this; and the Greek 'Luke' and Latin 'Lucius' are different names."

⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 289–90: "Manaen's relationship to Herod is *syntrophos*, which literally referred to someone suckled by the same nurse as a baby. Later it came to mean someone 'reared together' with someone. Manaen was thus of considerable social standing, a courtier and childhood companion of the king. Manaen was possibly the source of Luke's rather extensive treatment of Antipas (cf. Luke 8:3; 13:31f.; 23:7–12)."

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 289: "The gift of prophecy can be that of foretelling future events, as with Agabus (Acts 11:27). More often it is that of speaking an inspired word from God for the edification and direction of the community."

⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 553–4: "Christian prophets (see on 11:27) would have conveyed, as did the prophets in Israel's history, God's revelation, expressed in terms of exhortation, instruction, critique, encouragement, and at times disclosure about future events. Teachers are mentioned only here in Acts, but the central importance of teaching the word of God—revealed in Israel's Scriptures, in Jesus' ministry, and in the apostles' preaching—is evident in Luke's frequent references to teaching activity and to the body of teaching that is passed on. Luke's favorite term for the leaders of local congregations is 'elder' (see on 11:30; 14:23)."

⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 439: "A teacher's ministry would involve a less-spontaneous declaration and preaching than that of the prophets, including instruction and the passing on to others of the received apostolic teaching (Williams 1990: 223; 1 Cor. 12:28–29; Eph. 4:11). This was how the church taught its doctrine before the use of the books that later became a part of the NT."

¹⁰ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 374.

And here's what's remarkable about these leaders. This is a group of leaders in Antioch, but none of them are originally from Antioch. And the church displays great socio-economic and ethnic diversity.¹¹ There's a combination of Jews and Gentiles. Two of the men are (probably) black Africans.¹² Barnabas was a Greek-speaking Jew, a Hellenist. Barnabas is wealthy. We've seen that already in **Acts (4:36–37)**. Manaen was probably wealthy too, since he grew up as a close associate of Herod Antipas. Paul, on the other hand, was a hardworking tentmaker (**Acts 18:1–3**; see also **1 Cor 4:12**; **1 Cor 9:6-18**; **1 Thess 2:9**; **2 Thess 3:8**). If there was any wealth to be gained in being a Pharisee, he had lost out on that when he converted to Christianity.

And here's some geographical and historical background (see the map below). You might remember from earlier in **Acts**, Barnabas went to Tarsus and found Paul and brought him to Antioch to help spread the gospel to Gentiles. That was in **Acts 11**.



Antioch, etc.¹³

That's when they started serving the church in Antioch together. Later, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem with a gift of benevolence at the end of **Acts 11** (see **11:27–30**). They returned at the end of **Acts 12** (see **12:24–25**). And by this point in the narrative in **Acts 13**, several years have passed. And Antioch is a powerful, dynamic church with good leaders, faithful Bible teaching, worship, prayer, etc. This is a healthy church. This is a good church.

And by the time that Paul and Barnabas came back to Antioch (with John Mark, by the way), the number of prophets and teachers in Antioch had increased. They've got five good teachers in the church: Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Paul.

So look what God does in **verse 2**.

² While they¹⁴ were worshiping¹⁵ the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart¹⁶ for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."¹⁷

¹¹ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 376: "It is significant that the church in Antioch had such a culturally diverse leadership in keeping with the diversity of the population of the city (13:1). Did Luke mention the names and backgrounds of the leaders to highlight this diversity?"

¹² Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 21: "This was the church staff at Antioch — a racially integrated group of go-getters."

¹³ Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), June 7, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

¹⁴ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 374: "'They' refers either to the prophets and teachers or to the whole church; the latter is more likely."

¹⁵ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 5: "In Scripture, however, *leitourgeō* means more than public service; it describes priestly service. In the Septuagint it described the priests who ministered in the tabernacle (Ex. 28:41). Serving in a leadership role in the church must be viewed as an act of worship to God. Such service consists of offering spiritual sacrifices to Him (cf. Heb. 13:15–16), including prayer, oversight of the flock, studying, and preaching and teaching the Word."

¹⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 439: "The verb ἀφορίζω (*aphorizō*) basically means 'separate' someone or something out. It can mean to appoint someone to something, as here."

¹⁷ R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Acts 13–28 for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God's Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2019), 13–4: "This meeting in Antioch was true fellowship. Churches today often settle for a watered-down vision of fellowship which typically includes eating a meal and talking about the newest movies and latest professional sport developments. This is not biblical fellowship. True fellowship radiates the glories of Christ through prayer and love. At this prayer meeting in Antioch, God answered and set apart two

Now let me say two things about **verse 2**. Don't move past this too quickly. **(1)** This word for "worshipping" in Greek (λειτουργέω [*leitourgeō*]) means to perform a religious duty or service.¹⁸ It's used into OT Septuagint almost exclusively for the work of priests and Levites, for their religious acts before the Lord.¹⁹ The idea here is that they were working for Christ in the church. They were serving the Lord. **They weren't sitting around playing cards waiting to be called for ministry.**²⁰

And here's the thing about missions. We're about to see Paul and Barnabas embark on this great missionary endeavor.²¹ But God doesn't just pull them out of thin air. **God doesn't pull them off the shelf, dust them off, and throw them into this missionary task.**²² **God calls the faithful. God calls those who are already serving and worshipping and leading and ministering.**

"How do you know that, Tony?" Because the biblical principle is this, "He who is faithful with little will be faithful with much" (Luke 16:10). **And nobody goes from 0 to 60 in the church and jumps into Christian leadership. Nobody who's sitting on the sidelines gets a call to become an elder. Nobody who fails to serve in the local church takes their show on the road to minister in other churches.**

Look, I know the book of **Acts** moves fast, so sometimes we lose our chronological bearings. But this is something like ten to fifteen years after Paul's conversion at Damascus. **So Paul is not a spring chicken.** He's been serving the Lord for a while. He was probably in his early to mid-40s in Antioch when God said, **"Go!"**

And notice a second thing in **verse 2**. **(2)** They were fasting. The church was fasting. **I'm feeling some conviction right now with that last statement.** Fasting, if you don't know, is a voluntary setting aside of provision (usually food) that heightens spiritual awareness.²³ It makes dependence on God more acute. It makes prayer more fervent, desperate, and also painful. Don't kid yourself about that, fasting is painful. It's supposed to be painful.

So let's read **verse 2** again.

² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

men who would turn the world upside down. Never underestimate the power of true fellowship when God's people gather together in prayer."

¹⁸ See DBL Greek 3310 #2, λειτουργέω. And BDAG, λειτουργέω ①, 590.

¹⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 440: "The only occurrence of the verb λειτουργέω (*leitourgeō*, worship) in Acts also appears here (NT: Rom. 15:27; Heb. 10:11; the cognate noun is in Luke 1:23). In the OT, it is mostly used for priestly service at the temple (Exod. 28:35; 38:27; Num. 1:50.)"

²⁰ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 21: "Worship and service go together and should never be separated. If we try to work for the Lord without worshipping him, we will settle for legalistic, self-centered service. And if we worship and never work, we will end up with a form of godliness but no power."

²¹ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 13: "These chapters do not merely chronicle the geographic movements of a faithful apostle. They demonstrate the power of the gospel as it advances throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond. This mass movement of the gospel, however, began when the people of God sought his name through fasting and prayer."

²² MacArthur, *Acts*, vol. 2, MNTC, 6: "Spiritual men with effective spiritual ministry will see God extend their spiritual mission. God chooses for further ministry those already actively serving Him. He is not likely to take idle Christians down from the shelf, dust them off, and entrust them with important work."

²³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 554: "Fasting, which involves the abstention from food and sometimes of water (Jonah 3:7; Esth 4:16), was often associated with mourning the dead as a sign of grief, with penitence for sins as an expression of repentance, with prayer as a form of appeal for God's intervention, and with preparations for encountering God as a means for becoming more alert for the reception of revelations from God.²³ In the Old Testament, the only fixed day of fasting was the annual Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29–31). Other communal fasts were observed on occasions of national disaster (Neh 9:1). In the post-exilic period, the number of days of fasting increased (Zech 8:19 specifies four days of fasting). In Second Temple Judaism, fasting was recommended alongside prayer and almsgiving as a practice of piety and devotion (Tob 12:8). Some believed that "they that fast for God's sake receive beauty of face" (*T. Jos.* 3:4), and that fasting is an aid to piety as it protects the mind from impure thoughts (*T. Sim.* 3:4). Others argued that while God rewards fasting with his favor (Jdt 4:9), one should not fast in an attempt to manipulate the will of God (Jdt 8:16). For some, fasting was a way to obtain revelation (2 Bar. 9:2–10:1). According to Luke 18:12, pious Pharisees fasted twice a week.²⁴ John the Baptist fasted regularly (Matt 9:14; 11:18). Jesus fasted for forty days in the desert (Matt 4:2). During the three years of his ministry, Jesus and his disciples did not fast, but Jesus announced that his disciples will fast after his departure (Luke 5:33–35)."

This is, as I understand it, an audible voice of the Spirit, possibly through the prophets.²⁴ This is not normative in the church today, since we have a closed canon of Scripture. But worshiping, fasting, and sending missionaries out are normative.

Look at **verse 3**.

³ Then after **[more]** fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

The laying on of hands is important here. There's no conveyance of the Holy Spirit or anything like that with this act. All the church is doing here is saying, **"We affirm your call. We are unified with you in this sending out."**²⁵ **And we are praying in solidarity with you."**²⁶ The laying on of hands is a conveyance of authority. They are saying, **"We authorize you to do this on behalf of our church and for Christ and his kingdom."** And they sent them off.

A better translation of that last statement "they sent them off" is they "released" them. The Greek word is ἀπολύω. Here's another way to translate it, "They unleashed them."

When I was a kid, I had a German shepherd named Tasha. She weighed about 40 pounds. And if you had her on a leash when she saw a squirrel, you had better hold on for dear life. And when I think of Paul and Barnabas being released by the church into the world, I just think of this gigantic German shepherd who's got a squirrel in its sights. And that dog is raring to go. And all that's holding that dog back is an owner with a leash.

And so, once the church affirms Paul and Barnabas and their calling, they don't just send him off. They unleash them. It's a prayerful thing. It's a worshipful thing. It's a Spirit-led thing. It's a church-generated thing. It's church leaders and church members rallying around Christ's mission together, **"Go into all the world and preach the Gospel!"** And they unleash their best people to go accomplish Christ's mission!²⁷

That's another marvelous thing about this church in Antioch. They aren't hoarders.²⁸ They send their best people—two of their five leaders.²⁹ What an amazing statement right there! I guess it wasn't really their choice, when you look at it. The Holy Spirit told them to separate those two guys for this mission. Who's going to argue with the Holy Spirit?

Someday in this church we are going to send out some of our best people. Count on it. We will lay hands on them and pray for them and say, "Go. Go plant a church. Go preach the gospel in another part of this world." We don't hoard God's people or God's resources. Leaders and pastors and missionaries need to be sent.

Now notice this in **verse 4**. That being led by the Spirit in **verse 2** wasn't an isolated occurrence. Look what happens in **verse 4**.

²⁴ Not all agree with this. For example, ANDREAS VON KARLSTADT: "It must be noted that it is not written that the Spirit spoke through visions in their sleep or through dreams. Rather, without any addition, the Spirit spoke. It is likely, therefore, that the Spirit of God addressed and taught the apostles inwardly that they were to set apart Barnabas and Paul." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 172.

²⁵ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 21: "Just as in the Old Testament the offerer placed his hands on the sacrifice, expressing his identification with it, so now the assembled church of Antioch laid their hands on these two ambassadors for Christ. They were saying in effect, 'Brothers, we are with you in this great enterprise. As you go, we go. We are part of you.'"

²⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 284: "This was a Jewish method of identification and appointment. With the laying on of hands by the leadership of the congregation, Barnabas and Saul were consecrated. While they were appointed by God, they were also appointed by men, because God made His will known through the leadership of the church of Antioch."

²⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 440: "One wonders where the church today would be if Antioch had not been led to look beyond its own community and city limits to do evangelism."

²⁸ CHRYSOSTOM: "As soon as they were ordained they went forth and hastened to Cyprus... In Antioch there were enough [teachers]." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 159.

²⁹ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 377: "The message the church received was to release their best for missionary service (13:2), and their earnestness was such that they were willing to do so (13:3). This is typical of churches that have a missionary vision, churches whose main aim is more than survival or maintenance. Missions is so important to them that they willingly take steps that may seem harmful to the church in order for the missionary program to thrive. They have a corporate 'others orientation.'"

⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit,³⁰ they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

So, the Holy Spirit is conducting this mission. The Holy Spirit is leading this expedition. God's in charge of this whole thing. So, who gets the glory for the successes of this mission?

Write this down as a second point. What's required of us, if we want to faithfully, fruitfully serve Christ? First of all there's prayerfulness. And here's a second thing—sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

2. Faithful, fruitful Christian ministry requires **sensitivity** to the Holy Spirit (13:4)

So are these just two isolated occurrences of the Holy Spirit's leading in the book of **Acts**? No. Listen, hear me on this. The Holy Spirit is mentioned in the book of **Acts** over fifty times. That's fifty times in twenty-eight chapters! And throughout this book the Holy Spirit is leading and empowering and guiding and authorizing faithful, fruitful Christian ministry.³¹

Whatever you believe about the Holy Spirit, and the ways in which he works in our own era, you can't discount his role in the church or in the life of a believer. Christians who do that make a huge mistake. Faithful, fruitful Christian ministry requires sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.³²

So, how does someone cultivate a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit? You might be saying right now, "Tony, I want to be faithful and fruitful in my Christian service. I want to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. How do I do that? The Holy Spirit is not speaking to me audibly like he must have been with Paul and Barnabas."

Good question. Here are some ways to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading. (1) Prayer. We see that modeled for us in the text. As they prayed, the Holy Spirit prompted them to set apart Paul and Barnabas. (2) Fasting. We see that here too. We don't fast to manipulate God or try to induce some spiritual experience. That's the wrong motive. But giving up food or some other daily habit heightens spiritual awareness.

How else can we cultivate a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit? (3) Seek godly counsel. Notice that Paul and Barnabas had each other. And they also had other church leaders praying and discerning the Spirit with them. They had the church that was leading them and praying with them. I'm always suspicious of the guy who says that he's led by the Holy Spirit and is operating as a rogue agent outside of the auspices of the church. I don't get that. And I don't trust that.

So, there's counsel, but there's also (4) Conviction. Listen to the Spirit's inner prompting that convicts, warns, and confirms. Keep in mind that the conviction of the Holy Spirit is never going to contradict what is stated in Scripture. The Holy Spirit wrote down these words in the Scriptures. The same Holy Spirit inside of you is the Holy Spirit who wrote this book. So he's not going to lead you or prompt you in a way that's contrary to this Word. And the more you know this Word, the more sensitive you will be to the Spirit's leading. (5) Don't quench the Spirit (1 Thes 5:19-21) by resisting him. (6) Don't grieve the Spirit (Eph 4:30) by harboring bitterness, anger, or unforgiveness. Instead, (7) Use your gifts of the Spirit (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-31; Eph 4:11-13; 1 Pet 4:10-11) for the edification of the church. (8) And seek to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). And over time, you will be surprised how your walk in the Spirit and your sensitivity to the Spirit has grown.

Okay, back to our story. Here's Paul and Barnabas led by the Spirit. And the Spirit leads them first of all to Seleucia, which is about sixteen miles from Antioch. And then they board a ship and sail roughly a hundred miles to Cyprus, an island in the middle of the Mediterranean just off the coast of modern day Turkey (see map below).

³⁰ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 375: "Verse 4 reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the one who ultimately sends his servants out."

³¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 561: "The missionary work of the early church—indeed of any church—can be adequately understood only if one grasps the reality, the power, and the work of the Holy Spirit as the effective reality, power, and work of God himself."

³² MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 2: "What marks a Spirit-filled church? A Spirit-filled church may be defined simply as one whose members walk in obedience to the will of God. Since God reveals His will in Scripture, a Spirit-filled church must be deeply committed to the Word of God."



Cyprus, etc.³³

Why do they go to Cyprus? Some people suggest it's because Barnabas was from Cyprus.³⁴ Some suggest, it's the next logical place to spread the gospel from Antioch. But the obvious answer is because the Holy Spirit told them to go to Cyprus. Again, who's going to argue with the Holy Spirit?³⁵

And verse 5 says,

⁵ When they arrived at Salamis,

Salamis is the port city on the eastern coast of Cyprus. It was the largest city on the island. It was a large, pagan, polytheistic city. And when the missionaries got there, what'd they do... they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.³⁶ And they had John to assist them.

So, just to be clear, when they got to Cyprus, they hit the ground running. They didn't unpack their bags. They didn't wait around forever for the right moment. They didn't spend thirty years building friendships with people looking for the right moment to sneak in the gospel. They didn't dilly-dally around with a bunch of small talk. No. They went into the synagogue, and they started *proclaiming* the Word of God, the gospel.

Write this down as a third point from the text.

3. Faithful, fruitful Christian ministry requires **proclamation** (13:5)

Let me say something about this. **I know that is common in Christian circles to say, "Preach at all times and when necessary use words." I've heard that platitude lots of times. And I get it. In fact, I've used that before to explain the importance of not only speaking the gospel but living out the gospel in front of people.**

But can I say something right now about that? Sooner or later... sooner rather than later... you've got to say something. You've got to talk about your faith in Christ. You can't just live out the gospel; you've got to proclaim it. How are people going to get saved if Christians don't tell people about Jesus? You've got to open your mouth... you've got to risk rejection and opposition, if you are going to be a faithful witness. You've got to proclaim!

You got a verse for that, Pastor Tony? I do. **Romans 10:14.** Paul says about unbelievers, "[H]ow are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" **You've got to open your mouth. You've got to say it. And Paul practiced what he preached in Romans**

³³ Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), June 7, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

³⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 291: "Barnabas was himself a Cypriot by birth (4:36), the Hellenists had already begun some witness on the island (11:19), and other natives of Cyprus belonged to the Antioch church (11:20)."

³⁵ CHRYSOSTOM: "Do not ask why, when it is the Spirit that directs their movements. For they were not only ordained by the Spirit but also sent forth by him." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 159.

³⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 556: "The plural 'synagogues' (see on 6:9) indicates that the Jewish community was large, its members meeting regularly in several locations. Barnabas and Saul preach 'the word of God' (see on 4:29, 31), i.e., the good news of Jesus, Israel's Messiah and Savior... In the first century Philo describes Cyprus as 'full of Jewish colonies' (*Embassy* 282). There were evidently several synagogues in Salamis (Acts 13:5)."

10:14. He went into the synagogue, as was his custom when he would evangelize a community, and he proclaimed the gospel.³⁷

Here's the thing. Here's what we've got to realize. Fruitfulness in the book of Acts is tied to boldness. There's no fruitfulness without courage. There's no fruitfulness without guts. And you're not going to lead someone to Christ by just sheepishly, passively, bashfully "living out the gospel in front of them." You've got to talk. You've got to speak the truth to those who are lost.

You might say, "Tony, I get so nervous sharing my faith." I do too! You might say, "Tony, I get so tongue-tied and inarticulate when I share my faith." I do too sometimes! Practice makes perfect.³⁸

You might say, "Tony, I feel inadequate and foolish sometimes telling people about Jesus." I do too. I listen to my sermons sometimes and think to myself, "Tony, you sound like a raving lunatic. Dial it down, man." "Why'd I say it that way? Why didn't I say it better?" And I tweak, and I refine, and I try to say it better. I try to say it more profoundly. I try to say it more passionately. I try to say it more compassionately. But I can't stop saying it.

I feel like Jeremiah writing in the OT. "But if I say, 'I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (20:9).

Here's something that I feel strongly about here at our church. If we want to experience faithful, fruitful Christian ministry, we need more boldness... we need to get more courageous... we need to get more determined in our conviction to proclaim the gospel to the lost. And when I say "we," I mean "we" ... me included. Because faithful, fruitful Christian ministry requires proclamation.

And speaking of proclamation of the gospel, if you're here today and you haven't put your faith in Christ Jesus, let me do for you what Paul did for so many two-thousand years ago. Let me inform you that without faith in Christ, you are a lost sinner heading for hell. You are a sinner in the hands of an angry God. But Christ Jesus, because he loves you, he died on the cross for your sins. And your faith in him saves you. Your faith in his finished work on the cross reckons you a sinner no more. Instead you are a child of God. And your destiny after death in this world is an eternity with him. Put your faith in his death and resurrection and be saved.

Here's the fourth point from our message. Let's talk more about boldness.

4) Faithful, fruitful Christian ministry requires **fortitude** in the face of opposition (13:6-13)

Look at verse 6. Here comes the showdown that we've been waiting for.

⁶ *When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos,*

So here's the situation. Paul and Barnabas travel the whole length of the island of Cyprus, about a hundred miles from Salamis on the east to Paphos on the west (see the map below).

³⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 291-2: "Here they began a pattern that Paul would perpetuate throughout his missionary career. Where there were local synagogues, he began his ministry by preaching first in them. There was an extensive Jewish community at Salamis, and evidently several synagogues were there.

³⁸ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 21: "Never share your faith and you will never look like a fool. Never stand for righteousness on a social issue and you will never be rejected. Never walk out of a theater because a movie or play is offensive and you will never be called a prig. Never practice consistent honesty in business and you will not lose the trade of a not-so-honest associate. Never reach out to the needy and you will never be taken advantage of. Never give your heart and it will never be broken. Never go to Cyprus and you will never be subjected to a dizzy, heart-convulsing confrontation with Satan. Seriously follow Christ and you will experience a gamut of sorrows almost completely unknown to the unbeliever. But of course you will also know the joy of adventure with the Lord of the universe and of spiritual victory as you live a life of allegiance to him."



Cyprus, etc.³⁹

And Luke doesn't tell us what they did in all of those regions. But my guess is that they preached the gospel and set up churches.⁴⁰ That's what they do elsewhere. And we find out later that there were churches in this region after Paul and Barnabas left.⁴¹

And everything thus far has been hunky-dory. They haven't, as far as we know, been opposed. So this evangelism and church planting stuff must be pretty easy. **It's like shooting fish in a barrel.** Well, not so fast. There's a showdown that's awaiting them in Paphos.⁴²

Look again at **verse 6**.

⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician⁴³ [a sorcerer of sorts... probably a combination of both demonism and clever parlor tricks], a Jewish⁴⁴ false prophet named Bar-Jesus.

Believe it or not there was actually a fair amount of Jewish occultism spread out around the Roman Empire at this time.⁴⁵ This Jewish sorcerer's real name is Elymas. We see that in **verse 8**. But he calls himself "Bar-Jesus" which means "Son of Jesus" or "Son of Salvation." We'll find out in a moment he's really a "son of the devil."

Look at **verse 7**.

⁷ He was with the proconsul,⁴⁶ Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence,⁴⁷ who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

Now here's the thing. I feel like this entire passage has just kind of slowly escalated to this showdown between Paul and Bar-Jesus the magician. And this is the great climax of this narrative.

So here's the situation. Paul's preaching the gospel faithfully with Barnabas and John Mark. And there's this proconsul guy, Sergius Paulus. He's a very important government leader, and he's intelligent to boot. And

³⁹ Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), June 7, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

⁴⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 557: "The return of Barnabas and John Mark in AD 49 to Cyprus (15:39) indicates, perhaps, that there were churches on Cyprus which they wanted to visit and assist in their ministry, just as Barnabas had gone from Jerusalem to Antioch to assist the newly founded church there."

⁴¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 556–7: "The verb translated as 'traveled from place to place' (διελθόντες) and the phrase 'the whole island' (ὅλην τὴν νῆσον) suggest missionary work: in 8:4 the same verb conveys the meaning of missionary activity. The distance from Salamis to Paphos is about 180 kilometers (112 miles). Assuming that private travelers walked about 25 to 30 kilometers (15 to 20 miles) per day, the journey from Salamis to Paphos involved seven days of walking—a period that does not include longer stays in the cities through which they passed."

⁴² MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 8: "When God's people seek to advance His purposes, satanic opposition is unavoidable."

⁴³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 444: "The references to magicians are rare, with only two occurrences of this term in Acts (Matt. 2:1, 7, 16 [more neutral in force, of the magi who visit Jesus]; Acts 13:6, 8; but conceptually in 8:9, 11; 19:19). Bar-Jesus may well be a court astrologer."

⁴⁴ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 15: "What should strike the reader as uncommon, however, is the oxymoron of a Jewish magician. Jews, according to several Old Testament texts, should have nothing to do with sorcery, divining, or magic."

⁴⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 293: "Josephus mentioned a number of such Jewish sorcerers who had great successes among the Gentiles."

⁴⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 291: "It is a testimony to Luke's accuracy in details that he designated Sergius Paulus (v. 7) the Roman proconsul (*an-thypatos*), the correct term for the administrator of a senatorial province."

⁴⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 558: "The term 'intelligent' does not describe him as a God-fearer. He was evidently a pagan, the first polytheist that Christian missionaries have contact with in Acts."

he's interested in what Paul is preaching. So Sergius Paulus summons Paul and Barnabas to come teach him the Word of God. And that's great. Smart guy wants to hear the gospel. Fantastic!

But this man of intelligence has not very intelligently allowed himself to be bewitched by this Jewish sorcerer named Bar-Jesus. And look what this sorcerer does when Paul starts infringing on his territory.

Look at **verse 8**.

⁸ But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name)⁴⁸ opposed⁴⁹ them, seeking to turn the proconsul away⁵⁰ from the faith.

You've got Paul and Barnabas on one side preaching the gospel. You've got Elymas Bar-Jesus the magician on the other side, opposing them. And you've got this guy, Sergius Paulus, the proconsul, who is hanging in the balance. This is the showdown. This is the main event. This is the metaphorical "fork in the road." What are Paul and Barnabas going to do? Are they going to back down? Are they going to retreat? Maybe they'll go back to Antioch and say, **"We went as far as we could, but we had to quit when things got hard"**?

Is Paul going to acquiesce to the powers of darkness? Or does he "man up" in the power of the Holy Spirit and lock horns with this adversary?⁵¹

Now before we see what Paul does, let me ask you a question, "What would you do in that situation? What would you do? Would you tuck tail and run? "I guess God doesn't want us to be here, because there's opposition." What would you do? Would you chummy up to this sorcerer? "Hey man, be cool. Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, sorcerer-guy."

Can I just make an observation? I think that too often, we as Christians, fold when opposition comes. I think that too often, we as Christians, acquiesce to the powers of darkness. We retreat in the face of opposition. And too seldom do we stand our ground, fight through the adversity saying, "Let's do this... Let's get it on... Let's get it on right now. I'm not going to quit on what God has called me to do, just because I'm facing some adversity."⁵²

The word that I used to describe faithful, fruitful Christian ministry is "fortitude." And I think that's something that's in short supply among Christians. Gutsiness. Grit. Determination. Courage.⁵³ Steadfastness through opposition. And without that, so much potential fruitfulness is thwarted, because God's servants don't follow through when opposition hits.

⁴⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 557n53: "The term 'Elymas' is not attested as a Greek name. Several explanations of the obscure 'Elymas' deserve to be mentioned. (1) 'Elymas' derives from a Semitic root akin to Arabic, *alim* ('wise, learned'); thus Bruce, *Acts*, 297; Haenchen, *Acts*, 398–99 n.2; Hemer, *Acts*, 227–28. (2) 'Elymas' derives from the Aramaic term *haloma* ("dreamer"); cf. Lazarus Yaure, 'Elymas-Nehelamite-Pethor,' *JBL* 79 (1960): 297–314. (3) The reading of Codex D should be preferred, which has 'Hetoimas' (Ετοίμας), a term that can denote a person who has "that dexterity and rapidity of speech and action which are acquired by practice, qualities indispensable to a sorcerer or conjuror" (Haenchen, *ibid.*, 398, translating Zahn, *Apostelgeschichte*, 416; cf. Rius-Camps and Read-Heimerdinger, *Acts*, 3:30–31, 41–42); this Hetoimas/Bar-Jesus has been identified with Atomos, a Cypriot Jew who was a magician during the time when Felix was proconsul (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.142); cf. J. Rendel Harris, 'A Curious Bezan Reading Vindicated,' *Expositor* 5 (1902): 189–95; Zahn, *Apostelgeschichte*, 414–19. (4) The verb in v. 8 (μεθερμηνεύεται) should be taken in a non-technical sense ('was understood to mean'); cf. Johnson, *Acts*, 223. Note that LGPN lists Ἐλύμας as a name, with reference to Acts 13:7 (LGPN 1:151, for Cyprus/Paphos)."

⁴⁹ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 375: "Elymas presumably opposed Paul and Barnabas because their ministry jeopardized his standing with the proconsul. Such opposition to the gospel for selfish reasons is common in Acts [See 5:17; 13:45; 16:19–21; 17:5; 19:25–28]."

⁵⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 444: "Διαστρέφω (*diastrephō*, turn away) is often used of preventing someone from embracing the truth."

⁵¹ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 377: "Elymas was trying to keep someone else from learning the way of salvation through "all kinds of deceit and trickery" (13:10). The salvation of Sergius Paulus was so valuable that this hindrance had to be rooted out. We too may at times need to speak and act strongly against those who try to keep others from the truth."

⁵² Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 21: "The sad reality is, many of us are too soft! We think, 'This cannot be God's will — it is too hard! I know it is not God's will — it hurts!' The bright reality, such a part of Paul's life, is that there is no trial or difficulty Christ cannot see us through."

⁵³ RUDOLF GWALTHER: "And verily it becomes us to resist, boldly and constantly, anti-Christians, that they may think people do not fear them. For why should we fear them, seeing he is greater who is on our side? Why also should they be the more encouraged through our cowardliness, who already are in turmoil with the terrors of their evil conscience?" Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 174.

So what does Paul do? What does he do? Look at **verse 9**.

⁹ But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him

How many of you think that Paul could give a look that could make paint peel off the walls? How many of you think Paul could stare somebody down?

You know when I was a kid, my mom had a look. My mom had a look that would bypass your face and go straight into your soul. And when she gave you that look, it was over.

Now what do you think Paul's look was like? I just kind of envision him with locked jaw, eyes blazing, nostrils flared, teeth grinding, seething with indignation as he was breathing.⁵⁴ And after about thirty seconds of staring and seething at this guy Bar-Jesus, he said...

¹⁰ and said, "You son of the devil,

Not Bar-Jesus meaning "son of Jesus." Paul says, **"You're a son of the devil."**⁵⁵

... you enemy of all righteousness, full of⁵⁶ all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?⁵⁷

Some people might read this and say, **"That's not very seeker-sensitive, Paul."** **"Where's your cultural sensitivity, Paul?"** Paul forgot to read that book on *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.⁵⁸ Why's he so angry? I think Paul is angry because this guy, Bar-Jesus, is challenging the gospel. And Paul, full of the Spirit, isn't having that. It's time for spiritual confrontation.

And look what happens. Look at **verse 11**. Paul continues...

¹¹ 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.

So much for the showdown. That wasn't even much of a fight. That was more like a Holy Spirit beat-down than a showdown. Paul's like, **"You're blind, magic boy."** And that was it. He's done. It's over.

When Alastair was little, we used to watch these videos of killer whales in the wild. I love orcas. I think they are awesome. And we watched this video once of a showdown between a great white shark and a killer whale. And the big question in the video was who's the apex predator in the ocean? Who would win in a head to head contest? So we watched for like an hour these experts give their opinion with all of this diagnosis of skill and intellect and size and ability and all that.

Well after watching this whole documentary, they finally showed footage of this killer whale approaching a great white shark. It was somewhere right off the coast of San Francisco. And this killer whale just rammed into the great white shark. And he flipped him over. And the shark was so disoriented after that, he was done. He was dead in about a minute. And then the killer whale came back with his friends, ate its liver, and then left him floating dead in the ocean.

That's kind of like this showdown between Paul and Elymas. One massive display of spiritual power and the fight was over. God gets the victory.

Now what if Paul had backed down? What if he had abandoned this opportunity? What if Paul had said, **"Live to fight another day. This guy Elymas... he's too powerful. Let's sail over to Greece or somewhere else and start again?"** What if he did that? Well if he did, here's what he would've missed out on.⁵⁹

¹² Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

⁵⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 561–2: "For Luke's readers, whether in the first century or today, the Elymas episode serves as a warning against involvement in occult practices of any kind. People involved in magic or sorcery may not become literally blind when they encounter preachers of the gospel, but they are metaphorically blind, groping about in darkness. Missionaries, evangelists, and pastors can be assured that the power of the one true God who works through his Spirit, conveyed through Jesus' witnesses who proclaim the gospel, is stronger than any magic."

⁵⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 293–4: "No one familiar with Aramaic (as Elymas probably would have been) could have missed the pun."

⁵⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 559: "Paul accuses Bar-Jesus of being 'full' (πλήρης) of all kinds of deceit and fraud. Luke's readers will contrast this description with Paul who is 'filled' (πλησθεῖς) with God's Holy Spirit (v. 9), proclaiming the word of God (v. 7)."

⁵⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 293: "Like Peter with Simon Magus (8:20–23), Paul turned on Elymas with a vengeance."

⁵⁸ Sproul, *Acts*, 224: "Obviously the Apostle had not taken time to read Dale Carnegie's book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He lashed into this man and gave him what for, and we are told that he spoke in this manner while filled with the Holy Spirit."

⁵⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 294: "For the Christian reader a further important point has been made: Christianity has nothing to do with the magic and superstition of this world; its power, the power of the Word and Spirit, overcomes them all."

He was astonished, not just by the miracle but by the teaching of the Lord.⁶⁰ It was the whole package. Once again, God doesn't just do miracles in the book of **Acts** for the sake of miracles. Miracles always have a purpose.⁶¹ They are always pointing to the power of Jesus Christ and the power of the gospel. And God used this band of ragamuffin missionaries (Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark), hundreds of miles from their home church, to confront the powers of darkness and convert this proconsul in Paphos.

By the way, I haven't mentioned this yet. The proconsul was the most powerful person on the island. This guy's influence over the region was immense. And in just a few moments, in one fell swoop, God said, **"Enough of your silly Gentile paganism... enough of this magician of yours and his superstitious parlor tricks. You're with me now, Sergius Paulus. You're with me."** And this proconsul believed.

And I should say this for Elymas Bar-Jesus too—at least God didn't go all Ananias and Saphira on him. He's still alive. He's got a chance to repent and believe.⁶² He wouldn't be the first guy struck blind who later came to faith in Christ.⁶³

And as for Paul and Barnabas, God used their gutsy confrontation with the enemy to produce in them faithful, fruitful Christian ministry.

Now here's the principle for us. I'll close with this. I know that not every encounter with opposition is going to end as quickly or decisively as this one. And I don't have apostolic powers like the Apostle Paul to just strike people blind in the power of the Holy Spirit. I wish I had those powers. That would be fantastic. "Pastor Tony, I didn't agree with your sermon last Sunday." "Oh yeah, you're blind! Take that." "How do you like me now?" I wouldn't mind that gift.

And I'm not in the habit of calling people "a son of the devil" by the power of the Holy Spirit. I've wanted to call people "a son of the devil" before. But it wasn't the Holy Spirit.

So we live in a different era. And we're not apostles. But here's the enduring principle of this passage. Faithful, fruitful Christian ministry requires showdowns. It requires confrontation with opposition. And sometimes opposition lingers. Sometimes boldness and gutsiness has to be borne out for days and weeks and years of opposition. **Some missionaries have spent decades of their lives in places where they saw little visible fruit.**

But here's what I believe. To the extent that you press on faithfully and boldly and courageously through opposition, God will produce fruit in your life. No perseverance; no fruit. Little perseverance; little fruit. Great perseverance; great courage... great boldness for Christ in the midst of opposition... great fruitfulness. God give us more of that!

So I don't see Paul's actions with Bar-Jesus as normative for Christian ministry. But I see in this narrative a microcosm of our human experience with Christ. I see here a brief and powerful picture of what triumph of opposition looks like. God calls. God sends. We serve him. Opposition comes. Believers boldly and courageously persevere. And then there's fruit.

⁶⁰ JOHANN SPANGENBERG: "The magician becomes blind; the proconsul becomes able to see. Unbelief makes the magician blind. Belief makes the proconsul able to see. For when the proconsul saw this event, he believed and was astonished by the teaching of the Lord." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 175.

⁶¹ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 378: "The miraculous, then, was important because it directed people to the truth."

⁶² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 560: "The punishment will be limited in time: the blindness will last 'for a while' (ἄχρι καιροῦ). This qualification may imply the hope that Bar-Jesus will give up his opposition to the proclamation of the gospel by Paul and Barnabas, and perhaps express the possibility that Bar-Jesus may begin to walk on the 'straight paths' of the Lord, repent, and come to faith in Jesus."

⁶³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 446: "Paul judges his former self here."