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On the Move: Sending Acts 13

Happy fifth of July, it's the day after the fourth of July, which is why I said the fifth of July. Did you know that actually that independence continues to be celebrated around the world in Algeria, Cape Verde and Venezuela... they are celebrating their independence today. So, it's still Independence Day! I know it looks like most of you survived. I don't see any singe marks out there, so good to see you here. Another thing that we are celebrating – oh, that is interesting – so I was going to say we are done with the 90 Day Challenge, aren't we, right? How many of you have been doing the 90 Day Challenge? Okay, many of you. Are we done... yes we are, so I want to celebrate that.

One of the things that I have enjoyed about this is: as a church we've been able to be in the same scriptures together... to pray about them, to study them together, to even experience them together on Sunday mornings in our sermons. If you are visiting, by the way, and you don't know what the 90 Day Challenge is... the first 90 Day Challenge we looked at all of the gospels... 89 chapters of the four gospels and we went through and read them in 90 days and asked the question "What am I learning about Jesus"? And the second 90 Day Challenge we began to go through the Book of Acts; we asked questions about the Holy Spirit and were more reflective and took longer as we went through and read about the Holy Spirit.

But we are finished with the 90 Day Challenges. Many of you have been asking "Are we going to do another 90 Day Challenge"? Not quite, but in the Fall we are planning on doing something very similar, where we are studying scripture together, we'll have devotions, and we'll have small group curriculums. It will be called The Story, and we are going to go through The Story of the scriptures from Genesis through Revelations. I am very excited about that.

But, we are not done with Acts yet! There are so many great stories in Acts that we just want to continue to dwell in and to continue to look at how is the Holy Spirit moving here in As go into this second part of Acts, there is a distinct shift that happens. In the first part, we began to see how the Church was formed in Jerusalem and the surrounding area of Judea and into Samaria. We witnessed how the Holy Spirit was forming this Church, and we learned a lot from that. We learned a lot about the Holy Spirit and what He does in the life of a Church. Now there is a shift as the Church begins to move outwards... and begins to do missions in the world at large.

Remember, Jesus told the apostles that they would go into the world from beginning in Jerusalem, then into Judea, then into Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. So this latter part of Acts is about going into the ends of the earth. We begin to see the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, and it is quite an adventure! We will try to cover a lot in these next six weeks or so, and we are going to jump around a little bit. For example, we didn't do chapter 12—which is kind of sad because it's a great story—but we want to hit some of the major points as we go along, so today we are in Acts chapter 13.

I want to give a shout out to Pastor Bill; he memorized his passage last week, like Pastor Mark has been doing. How many of you have been enjoying that, when Pastor Mark memorizes? Isn't that wonderful? It's amazing to see him memorize it, and it really draws you into the text. And it is so wonderful that I am going to let Pastor Mark own it... it will be his thing. So I'm going to **read** today from Acts chapter 13. Join with me as we read, and find out what the Holy Spirit doing and how He is on the move.

Now 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 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." 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.

This is the word of the Lord.

Prayer: Father God, this morning as we study your scripture, Lord I ask that this would not be an exercise of intellect, Lord, but that this would be an exercise of the heart. Whereas we hear, grasp and understand, not only what your will was for the church at Antioch, Lord today may we understand and know what your will is for the church of Chapel Hill. Lord, may we be open and willing and receptive to what you would have us do. By your spirit, by your name, we ask in your name, Amen.

So this new series that we are venturing into is called *On the Move*, and we want to look at how the Holy Spirit is on the move. In our previous series we were asking "What is the Holy Spirit teaching us to do as disciples of Jesus?" But now we want to focus our attention on what is the Holy Spirit doing... how is the Holy Spirit moving in our world? As we begin this new part of Acts, looking at chapter 13, we see the Holy Spirit sending Saul and Barnabas out. You realize that this is actually the first time we see in Acts a church commissioning missionaries out into the world. Before this, missionaries were kind of accidental or individual. Persecution drove the church out of Jerusalem, so there were missionaries from that. We saw a guy get sucked up and popped right next to the Ethiopian on a road in the middle of nowhere, right? That was kind of an accidental mission thing. But as we have seen

happen here, this is the first time we see a church commission missionaries. That tradition is thousands of years old... when we bring people who are being sent out, lay hands on them and commission them. This is the first time we see that.

I want to look at how the Holy Spirit sends. How does the Holy Spirit send these guys out? The first thing that I want us to pay attention to is that the Holy Spirit sends by giving a greater perspective. Now think about this, and about the church in Antioch. Antioch is a little town in what is modern day Turkey, kind of right above Syria. Back then it was a major part of the Roman Empire, one of the three largest cities in the Roman Empire as far their spread was concerned. Antioch wasn't exactly the place for a Christian church to thrive. If you think about it, this is 15 years after Jesus died and went up to Heaven, so the church and Christians are very young. They are surrounded by a pagan culture. There were no Judeo Christian values in Antioch that they could work from and agree with. It was completely pagan. There were no Christian bookstores; there was no Christian radio, no Christian politicians that they could vote for. They were alone in the world... they were a little outpost of Jesus followers surrounded by pagan influences.

If you were in this church that you might have felt a little outnumbered, a little surrounded by the people around you. A little... discouraged. Maybe it felt a little like this video clip shown from Lord of the Rings: our heroes are backed up into a corner in this valley, in a place Helms Deep (it's a citadel), and they are surrounded by the forces of evil. It looks absolutely hopeless. I don't know about you, but how many of you feel like that today? How many of you feel like we are becoming more and more a minority surrounded by the forces of evil and becoming more and more hopeless, day by day?

Actually, I don't think that's how the church in Antioch felt. I think that the Holy Spirit had a different perspective on what they were doing and what they were experiencing. I think it looked more like a different kind of scene: we go from hopeless to on the charge. This has reminded me of a passage and scripture in the Book of Revelation, chapter 19. John has a vision and he says:

"I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and his thigh he has this name written: King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

John wrote this passage, not so much to predict the future for the churches that he was writing for, but to tell them what was happening in the present. He wanted the

churches, in what is now modern day Turkey, to understand that there was a different perspective on what they were experiencing. He wanted them to see the spiritual reality of who they were following... of this man named Jesus. That, in fact, he was on the throne, he was this warrior sitting astride this white horse, charging into battle... and that we are his church following him into battle.

That is the truth of the matter now, and that was the truth of the matter for the church in Antioch. A church that is on the defensive does not send out two of their best men. That is not the attitude... that is not the perspective they had. Let me remind you, Jesus is never on the defense. Let me say that again, Jesus is never on the defense. He is always on the offense, He is always on the go, on the move, on the charge... and the question we have to ask is whether we are going with him or not. When you read the story of Jesus, you realize that there was a moment in his life when he was mocked, he was beaten, he was nailed to a cross, and it sure seemed like he was losing. But, in fact, he was winning the battle, and he won the war. Jesus is never on the defense, he is always on the offense.

In Matthew chapter 19, He tells Peter about his church... that the gates of hell will not prevail against this church. Gates are a defensive measure; you cannot be attacked by gates. So what he is saying is: the church is on the offense. The church is called to attack the forces of evil. This is what the Holy Spirit has given to the church in Antioch, and I pray that he gives us this perspective today... a greater perspective on who we are... charging forward with Jesus Christ against the forces of evil in this world.

You may sometimes feel like you are on the defensive. You may sometimes feel like you are surrounded by forces of evil, even as a church, but let me promise that is not what is happening. So I encourage you, if you feel that way, ask "How is Jesus on the move, how is the Holy Spirit on the move in this situation?"

The next thing I see is how the Holy Spirit sends people. The Holy Spirit sends by setting people apart. In verse 2 you see that the Holy Spirit actually says to the church, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them to." This is actually a term that beckons back to the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament we see the same phrase used when God tells the people of Israel to set apart Aaron and his sons to be priests for Him. That means that they were literally separated from the people for a distinct purpose or cause. The apostle Paul actually uses this in his ministry; if you read his letter to the Romans chapter 1, he says "I, Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God..." So Paul definitely understood that he is different. Paul said, "I'm different and set apart to do something really unique." He was to go to the Gentiles, and that is why we're here, sitting in this church. We are the Gentiles, and Paul's ministry ultimately led to this.

So, yes, he was set apart, but there is a greater sense to being set apart. Is Paul the only one who is set apart, or are missionaries the only ones that are set apart?

I would say, no. The last time I shared with you, one of the things that I wanted to draw out is that we are all uniquely gifted, we are all uniquely called to something that God has given us to do in the service to His church and in service to His world. In that way, we too are set apart.

But there is even a greater sense of what it means to be set apart by the Holy Spirit. We can see this in 1 Peter, chapter 2, he tells the church there “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellences of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

All of us are actually set apart; we are a chosen people of royal priesthood. So what does it mean to be set apart? Does it mean that we have different clothes, different hair, do we take our kids to a different school? Maybe if you are Amish, but I would suggest that it means something much different than that. It means one thing really... being set apart has to do about how we love.

This past week, unless you were hiding under a rock, you probably heard that the Supreme Court made a ruling in favor of same sex marriage in our country. I experienced this while we were in General Assembly in Florida. Looking at social media, you saw a lot of people celebrating this decision. They celebrated this with a hash tag that said *#love wins*, and honestly that made me feel defensive. What it insinuates is that anyone who opposed the ruling by the Supreme Court justices, was about hate. I had to pause and say, “Lord Jesus, if there is any hate in my heart, please take it away from me, because that is not what I am about.” So I agree, love wins, yes, love wins... it has to.

But what does that mean when they say this on social media, like Twitter and Facebook? What does that mean for our culture? As I thought about it I realized, it means something about acceptance, accommodation. When someone says that they are _____, that we should accept who they are... That is what it means to love in today's culture... to accept completely, to embrace whatever somebody says they are, without reservation. And that's a very appealing way to looking at love, but I found it anemic, I found it lacking... especially, when I began to look at who Jesus is. The kind of love Jesus has—when you look at Jesus on the cross—is defined not by “live and let live” as our culture says. Jesus defines love by saying “I die, so that others may live.” “I die, so that others may live.” That is the love of Jesus.

So, we as followers of Jesus are called to love in that same way. In my family I die so that my son may live, I die to my selfishness, to my laziness. In my marriage, I die so that my wife may live, in every aspect, in well-being, in the way that she knows and sees Jesus through the way that I put to death my selfishness, my right

to be angry, my laziness. In my neighborhood, I die so that my neighbors may know life, know Jesus. In my workplace, I die so that others may live. This is what it means to love, and it is such a rare thing in our culture. Our culture does not really know what love means. It is so rare to see this kind of love, that when you see it, it is like a match being struck in a dark room, it becomes so obvious that something different is happening in here.

I think we got a chance to see this in the public sphere recently in Charleston, North Carolina. We saw a man, Dylann Roof, join a Bible study, and an hour into it he stood up and shot nine people in cold blood. The man was caught, put in jail and then he was arraigned. The families of the victims that he shot had a chance to speak to him. This is what they said. [video clip played] It's hard to watch. When you see this, you cannot doubt, for a moment, that those people are set apart, that they are different... that the power of the Holy Spirit must have been in them to say those words... to forgive this man for killing their family members. That's the difference. That's what it means to be set apart in this world... to love the people who hate you... to die, so that others may live. They had every right in the world to be angry with that man, to assault him with their words if not more. They laid their rights down for the opportunity to offer him life... life in Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, when we are called by the Holy Spirit to be sent out, this is what it means to be set apart, to be a people who are different, who follow our Lord in the way that He loves. This is what love means, and I will say "Amen. Love wins". Are you willing to die so that others may know life?

We have seen that when the Holy Spirit sends people, he gives them a greater perspective. We've seen that when the Holy Spirit sends people, he sets them apart.

The last thing I want to point out to you is that when the Holy Spirit sends people, he calls them into the offensive posture. What is the offensive posture? It is simply this: the church in Antioch was in a posture of prayer when the Holy Spirit called them. The church in Antioch was worshipping, fasting and praying and that is the first thing they did before the Holy Spirit did anything in their lives. And that is the offensive posture. When the church is on its knees, when it is praying before the Lord, then the Holy Spirit is on the move.

When I was in Florida, witnessing what was going around in our church upon the news of the Supreme Court ruling, I was humbled. And I was somewhat grieved, because I saw a lot of people racing to their Facebook pages. I saw a lot of people racing to Fox news, to the front page of the newspaper in fear, in bewilderment and confusion. I'm afraid I did not hear much of a call to pray, and I believe that is our call. I believe that is what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do. If we want to be a church that is on the offensive, then the Holy Spirit is calling us to pray.

There is no movement of God in history that did not begin with sincere, consistent, disciplined movements of prayer on the part of the church. No movement of God in history—the Great Awakening, the Billy Graham Crusades, Pentacost, even this, the church in Antioch sending out two of their greatest men to be missionaries—began without prayer. How should we expect anything to change in our country, in our neighborhoods, in our households, if it does not begin with prayer? How would the Holy Spirit know that we are ready, if we have not taken a posture of listening, if we have not taken a posture of beseeching the one who can really, truly change everything. If we are not in that posture, then we are not ready!

I believe that today, that is what the Holy Spirit is calling us to be in the posture of prayer. Actually, prayer is the thing that began it all. Before He set them apart, before He gave them a greater perspective... they were praying. It all begins with prayer.

I want to leave you this morning, on this thought of prayer, with an unofficial 90 Day Challenge. You might not hear it again from the pulpit, and there are no devotional booklets to hand out with this. My challenge to you is for the next 90 days to be disciplined in your prayer. Specifically, I challenge you to spend 15 minutes daily in prayer... at least 15 minutes. I challenge you to take the literal posture of kneeling, because when your body is in a posture of humility and of beseeching, it does something to your heart. So, if you are able, I challenge you to kneel as you pray. And thirdly, I challenge you as you pray, to pray specifically... Holy Spirit, move in my neighborhood. Pray for specifics... Lord, move in my neighbors who look like they have a broken home. Lord, move in my workplace for ___ who I know is going through a hard divorce right now... Lord move in his life. Lord, move in my country.

You know, if you want to see these things happen, it begins right here in your own life... in your own sphere of influence.

I really believe that God is on the move, that He is on the offense and the question that we have to ask, is "How can I follow Him? How am I a part of what the Holy Spirit is doing today in our world?"