

Empowered for the Mission

Acts 13:1–12

Introduction

Over the past several weeks, we've been walking through Acts and watching what happens when ordinary people are filled with the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the Spirit came with power and gave birth to the Church. Since then, we have seen the Spirit form that Church through worship, fellowship, generosity, courage, holiness, reconciliation, conversion, and welcome. Each story has shown us that the Spirit does not merely comfort God's people; He prepares them to join God's mission.

As we've made our way through these stories, one thing has become increasingly clear. The Holy Spirit has been preparing the Church for something. None of these moments stand alone. Each one builds on the one before it. God is forming a people who are ready to participate in something much bigger than themselves.

That brings us to Acts 13, and in many ways this chapter marks yet another turning point in the story. Up to this point, Luke has focused primarily on what God is doing within the Church. Beginning here, the focus begins to shift outward. The gospel has taken root, the Church has been established, and now the Spirit begins sending His people beyond the places where they have become comfortable.

It's easy for any church to become focused on itself. We naturally think about our programs, our traditions, our buildings, our budgets, or even our own spiritual growth. None of those things are unimportant. But they were never meant to become the destination. They were always preparation for something else.

The Church does not exist simply to gather. We gather so that we can be formed into the people God sends. The Holy Spirit was not poured out at Pentecost merely so believers could enjoy meaningful worship services together, as important as those are. The Spirit was given so that the Church could become God's instrument for bringing the good news of Jesus Christ into the world—to be ambassadors of His Kingdom in this world. At St. John's, we summarize that calling by saying, "We exist to connect real people to a real God in a real way."

That is exactly what happened in today's passage. The church at Antioch has become a healthy, vibrant community of believers. They are worshipping together, praying together, and growing together. But healthy churches don't simply grow inward. **Healthy churches are continually sent outward. They understand that God's mission has always been bigger than the walls of any one congregation.**

As we look at this passage this morning, I want us to notice three characteristics of a church that is truly empowered for God's mission. First, God's mission requires ongoing listening. Second, it requires ongoing sacrifice. And third, it requires ongoing perseverance.

That does not mean this is an easy word for us to hear. Many of us know what it feels like to love a church and still wonder what the future will look like. We know what it is to pray for renewed life, to carry concern for people we miss, and to feel the weight of decisions we would rather not have to face. But Acts reminds us that the Church's hope has never rested in its size, its resources, or its ability to preserve what it has known. Our hope rests in the living Christ, who still speaks by His Spirit and still sends His people with purpose.

I. God's Mission Requires Ongoing Listening

Luke begins this chapter in a way that might surprise us. If we were writing the story, we might expect it to begin with Paul packing his bags, preaching his first sermon, or setting sail for distant lands. Instead, Luke takes us into a worship service.

He tells us that while the leaders of the church were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke. Before there was a journey, there was worship. Before there was movement, there was stillness. **Before anyone went anywhere, they first learned to listen.**

That reminds us of something we often forget. God's mission never begins with our ideas. It begins with God's initiative. The Church doesn't decide where God ought to work and then ask Him to bless the plan. **Instead, we seek to discover where God is already at work and join Him there.**

Over the past several months, we've returned to the same question again and again. **God is still speaking. But are we still listening?** I think this passage invites us to ask an even more careful question.

God is still speaking. But are we actually hearing what He is saying? Those aren't quite the same thing.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus often says, "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen." Then, in the book of Revelation, Jesus repeats that same challenge to each of the seven churches: "Let anyone who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Of course everyone listening had ears. Jesus wasn't talking about the ability to detect sound. He was talking about something much deeper. Hearing sounds and truly hearing God's voice are not the same thing.

Most of us have had the experience of someone asking, "Didn't you hear what I said?" We probably heard the words. They simply did not register. Our minds were somewhere else—on a phone, a screen, a task, or the next thing we needed to do. We heard sound, but we were not really listening.

The same thing can happen in our spiritual lives. We can read Scripture, attend worship, pray familiar prayers, and still fail to hear what God is actually saying to us. **Listening requires more than our ears. It requires a heart that is open, attentive, and willing to receive whatever God wants to say—even if it challenges us or asks something difficult of us.**

That naturally raises another question. How do we know it's really God's voice? That is an important question because not every strong feeling is the Holy Spirit. Not every idea that comes into our minds is a message from God. Not every opportunity is necessarily God's calling.

The way we discern God's voice is by knowing God's heart.

And we come to know God's heart through the Scriptures, especially as they reveal themselves in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The Spirit who speaks in Acts is the same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures and the same Spirit we encounter in Jesus. **God's voice will always reflect God's character.** It will lead us toward love, mercy, justice, humility, holiness, forgiveness, and faithfulness. **The Spirit will never contradict the One who reveals the Father to us.**

The more we know Christ, the more readily we begin to recognize His voice. Just as sheep learn to recognize the voice of their shepherd, disciples learn to recognize the voice of Jesus because they have spent time walking with Him. **But hearing God's voice is never the end of the story.**

Notice what happens in Antioch. The church hears what the Spirit says, **and then they respond.** There is no indication that they postponed the decision or waited to see if it felt more convenient later. Hearing led to action.

That's true for us as well. Every time God speaks, we respond somehow. Sometimes that response is obedience. Sometimes, if we're honest, it's resistance. Sometimes it's delay while we convince ourselves we'll deal with it later. **And sometimes we think doing nothing isn't really making a choice. But it is.**

Doing nothing is still a response. Choosing not to act is itself a decision. We cannot claim to be listening if we are unwilling to respond to what we hear.

And that leads directly to the next part of the story. Once the church heard what the Spirit was saying, they had to decide whether they would hold tightly to what they had, or place it back into God's hands. **Because genuine listening always leads us toward sacrifice.**

II. God's Mission Requires Ongoing Sacrifice

Once the church in Antioch heard the voice of the Holy Spirit, they were faced with a choice. Hearing required a response. The Spirit had spoken clearly: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." That could not have been an easy decision.

Barnabas wasn't simply another member of the congregation. He was the encourager. Saul had become one of the church's most gifted teachers. These weren't the people they could most easily spare. They were among the very people they would have wanted to keep. Yet after more prayer and fasting, they laid their hands on them, blessed them, and let them go.

That is the nature of sacrifice. Sacrifice is never comfortable. If it doesn't cost us something, it really isn't sacrifice. By its very definition, sacrifice asks us to surrender something that is valuable to us. It requires us to loosen our grip on something we would naturally prefer to hold onto.

King David understood that in 2 Samuel 24 when he was looking for a place where he could offer worship to the Lord. The owner of the property offered it to him for free, but David refused to offer the Lord a sacrifice that had cost him nothing. He insisted on purchasing the threshing floor himself, declaring, *"I will not offer to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."* David understood that worship and sacrifice cannot be separated. **Love that costs nothing eventually becomes little more than convenience.**

We understand that principle in every other part of life. When you love someone, you willingly make sacrifices that you would never make for anyone else. Parents sacrifice for their children. Spouses sacrifice

for one another. Friends rearrange their lives for people they love. We don't usually stop to calculate the cost because love changes what we're willing to give.

The same is true in our relationship with Christ. We do not sacrifice in order to earn God's love. Christ has already accomplished that for us through the cross. We sacrifice because we have already experienced His love, and love always calls forth a response.

In fact, Jesus Himself is the greatest example of what sacrificial obedience looks like.

Before the cross, Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane knowing what lay ahead. There, in one of the most deeply human moments recorded in the Gospels, He prayed, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not my will, but yours be done." He prayed those words once. Then He prayed them again. And then a third time.

I do not believe those repeated prayers reveal weakness. They reveal the depth of His obedience. As the weight of the cross came fully into view, Jesus continued saying yes to the Father's will. His first yes was real. But His ongoing yes, as the suffering drew nearer, became even more costly.

I wonder if that isn't where many of us discover that discipleship is hardest. **The hardest yes is often not the first one.** The hardest yes is the one we keep saying after the excitement has faded and the cost has become obvious.

It's one thing to say, "Lord, use my life." It is another thing to keep saying yes when obedience becomes inconvenient—when following Christ costs us time, comfort, security, relationships, or the future we had imagined.

That is why Paul tells us in Romans 12 not simply to offer a sacrifice, but to **present our bodies as living sacrifices**. Living sacrifices remain on the altar. Every day brings another opportunity to place our lives back into God's hands and say once again, "Not my will, but Yours be done."

Paul knew exactly what that kind of life looked like. Throughout his missionary journeys he endured imprisonment, beatings, rejection, shipwrecks, hunger, and constant uncertainty. Yet he never viewed those hardships as evidence that God had abandoned him. Instead, he could write with confidence,

⁸We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." (2 Cor 4: 8-10)

Paul wasn't writing those words from the comfort of an easy life. He wrote them as someone who had lived the cost of saying yes to God's mission over and over again. Every city brought new uncertainty. Every journey carried new risks. Every act of obedience required him to place his life back into God's hands once again.

That is what living as a sacrifice looks like. It isn't one dramatic moment of surrender. **It is a lifetime of daily faithfulness.** It is waking up each morning and saying once again, "Lord, my life is Yours. Wherever You lead, whatever You ask, I will continue to follow."

For most of us, that sacrifice won't look like leaving on a missionary journey or standing before hostile crowds. More often, it will be found in the ordinary moments of everyday life. It is choosing faithfulness when compromise would be easier. It is choosing generosity when we would rather hold on. It is choosing forgiveness when resentment feels justified. It is choosing to serve when no one notices. It is choosing obedience when we don't yet understand where God is leading.

The church at Antioch understood that kind of sacrifice. They released two of their very best leaders because they believed God's mission was more important than their own comfort. Jesus lived that kind of sacrifice as He continued saying yes to the Father's will all the way to the cross. Paul lived that kind of sacrifice as he continued saying yes through every hardship and every trial.

The question for us is not whether God is asking us to make the same sacrifices they made. The question is whether we are willing to make the sacrifices He is asking of us.

Because every generation of disciples is invited to answer the same question: ***Will I continue saying yes, even after I understand what that yes will cost?***

That is the kind of sacrifice God's mission has always required. And as Acts reminds us, it is also the kind of sacrifice through which God continues to change the world. Of course, that doesn't mean the road suddenly becomes easy. In fact, faithful obedience often invites resistance. Which is why God's mission requires one more thing from those who follow Christ: ongoing perseverance.

III. God's Mission Requires Ongoing Perseverance

It probably isn't a coincidence that almost immediately after Barnabas and Saul are sent, they encounter opposition. As soon as they begin the work God has called them to do, they meet Elymas. There is resistance. There is conflict. There is an attempt to distract them from the mission God has given them.

Acts reminds us that faithful obedience does not guarantee an easy road. In fact, sometimes the very presence of opposition is evidence that we are faithfully walking where God has called us to be.

The temptation in those moments is to become discouraged, to lose heart, or to begin questioning whether we heard God correctly in the first place. We begin to wonder if all the sacrifice was really worth it. We start measuring God's faithfulness by our circumstances instead of measuring our circumstances by God's faithfulness.

Yet throughout the New Testament, we find the opposite encouragement. God's people are called to remain faithful—not only when the path is easy, but especially when it is difficult.

Jesus once said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." That image is a powerful one.

A farmer doesn't plow one row and then stop because the field is still empty. He doesn't abandon the work because he can't yet see the harvest. He keeps moving forward, one row after another, trusting that today's faithfulness will one day produce tomorrow's fruit.

The same is true in the kingdom of God. Once our hand is on the plow, it stays there. We remain faithful to Jesus. We remain faithful to the mission. We remain faithful to one another. We keep serving. We keep praying. We keep loving. We keep telling the story of Jesus.

Not because every day produces the results we hoped for, but because our calling has never been to control the harvest. Our calling is to faithfully tend the field God has entrusted to us. We plant. We water. We keep showing up in love. And the harvest has always belonged to Him.

Paul understood that better than anyone. There were churches that flourished, and churches that struggled. There were cities that welcomed the gospel, and cities that drove him out. There were victories he celebrated and disappointments he carried. Yet through it all, he remained steadfast because he knew the mission belonged to Christ, not to him. That is why he could write these words to the Corinthians:

"Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." (1 Cor 15:58)

What a wonderful promise. Paul doesn't promise that every effort will produce immediate results. He doesn't promise that every sermon will change a life or that every invitation will be accepted. He simply promises that nothing done faithfully for Christ is ever wasted. God sees it all. God uses it all. Even when we cannot yet see the fruit, He is still at work.

The church at Antioch listened. They sacrificed. Then they persevered. And that is still what God's mission requires of His Church today.

Conclusion

As we come to the end of this passage, it's worth remembering where we started. The Holy Spirit did not empower the Church simply so that it could become a healthy community. He empowered the Church so that it could become a sent community. Everything we've seen throughout these first thirteen chapters of Acts has been preparing the Church for this moment. The Spirit has been forming a people who are ready to join God in His mission.

And that mission still requires the very same things today. **It requires ongoing listening.** God is still speaking, and we are called to be people who not only hear His voice, but recognize it through the heart of God revealed in Jesus Christ and respond with willing hearts.

It requires ongoing sacrifice. Following Jesus has always meant placing our lives on the altar again and again. Love continues to say yes, even when the cost becomes clearer over time.

And it requires ongoing perseverance. We keep our hand on the plow. We remain faithful to Christ and faithful to His mission, trusting that our labor in the Lord is never in vain because the harvest ultimately belongs to Him.

As I think about St. John's, I believe these are exactly the kinds of people God is continuing to shape us into. Not a church that is simply trying to survive, and not a church clinging fearfully to what has been, but a church listening for the Spirit's voice, willing to surrender whatever God asks, and committed to remaining faithful wherever He leads. Our future may require courage. It may require wisdom. It may require sacrifice.

But God's mission has never depended on our strength alone. The same Spirit who empowered the church in Acts is still able to empower His Church today.

So before we ask what God may be asking from us, we remember what God has already given to us: His presence, His Spirit, His promise, and His mission. We are not being sent alone.

Invitation

This morning, I want to leave you with one simple question. **What is the Holy Spirit saying to you?**

Perhaps He's inviting you to begin listening more intentionally. Maybe life has become so busy that you've been hearing a lot of noise but very little of God's voice.

Perhaps He's asking you to place something back into His hands. A fear. A plan. A relationship. A dream. A comfort you've been holding onto. Remember, sacrifice is never about losing something for God. It's about trusting that what God can do with our surrendered lives is greater than anything we could accomplish by holding on.

Or perhaps today your need is simply perseverance. You're tired. You've been faithful, but you're wondering if your labor is making any difference. Hear Paul's words again: **"Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."**

Wherever you find yourself this morning, the invitation is the same. Listen for the voice of the Spirit. Respond with a willing heart. And continue faithfully in the mission Christ has entrusted to His Church.

May we be a people who keep listening, keep sacrificing, and keep persevering, until the day the Lord of the harvest calls us home.

Let us pray...