

“SET APART FOR ME BARNABAS AND SAUL”

Acts 13:1–12

Key Verse: 13:2

“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”

What does Christian life look like to you? Wearing a cross necklace? Going to church sometimes? Listening to praise music? Being free to do whatever you want? Or being stuck in one place, always doing what others need? Today we see how the ministry of Paul the missionary begins. And in these few verses we can learn what Christian life is like. It’s free and not free, kind of stuck but not stuck at all. It’s personal faith, but lived out in community. And sometimes, it means launching out into the great unknown. We want to learn from today’s passage three key aspects of Christian life: united, listening, and obedient. They’re really foundational. But what do they mean? How can we live this way? And why should we? May God speak to us through his words.

I. United

Look at verse 1. We might call these men “the Antioch Five Guys.” They’re all “prophets and teachers.” Prophecy and teaching are not human abilities; they’re spiritual gifts given by God’s grace through the Holy Spirit (Rom.12:6–7; 1 Cor.12:4–11). The Bible says prophecy and teaching are “the higher gifts” (1Cor.12:28–31). So these “prophets and teachers” are leaders in the church. They’re not just one or two; they’re a *team*. And, they’re diverse. Simeon's other name, Niger, means “Black,” so he seems to be an African. Manaen grew up with royalty, so he’s likely an aristocratic guy. Barnabas has been in Christ a long time; he’s older now, and still generous and gracious. Saul is younger, and very intense. We don’t know much about Lucius. Humanly the five are so different, but through faith in Jesus they’ve become a team. They’re using their spiritual gifts to minister to this church, united. Why do we need unity? Some honestly think it’s not necessary. But unity was important for the church from the beginning. After listing the names of Jesus’ diverse apostles, it says, “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (1:13–14). Through their unity in prayer, God sent the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes and works only when believers are united.

Now in the Antioch church, unity is again the key. Real unity among their leaders made their church strong enough to serve God's greater purpose.

How could these "Five Guys," so diverse yet highly gifted, be united? Frankly, in our old nature we have selfish ambition and conceit. Some try to be a "one-man show" and have chronic problems coworking. But as we become more deeply united with Christ and participate in the Spirit, we grow in his humility. We count others as more significant than ourselves. We learn, like Jesus our Lord, to empty ourselves, take the form of a servant, and become obedient even to the point of death (Phil.2:1–8). We become "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph.4:3). After experiencing some conflicts, we can become skeptical about unity. Even a couple married for many years can still find it hard to truly be one. So how does this team do it?

Look at verse 1 again. Two of the guys are instrumental: Barnabas at the beginning of the list, and Saul at the end. These two met some years ago. After Saul's dramatic conversion, going from a persecutor to a chosen instrument of Jesus, he went to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples. But because he'd persecuted many, they were all afraid of him; no one believed he was a disciple. But Barnabas, a trusted guy, brought Saul to the apostles and testified that his conversion was real. Because of Barnabas, people began to trust Saul (9:26–28). Later, when news came about the Gentiles in Antioch turning to Jesus, the apostles sent them Barnabas, who could see the grace of God in them (11:20–24a). Barnabas is described as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (11:24a). Because Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit, he had the character of Jesus: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Gal.5:22–23). His name being first on the list suggests that the others grew under his leadership.

Saul, too, was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (9:17b). He used to be filled with murderous threats; he was going around everywhere to put believers in prison (9:1–2). But after encountering the Risen Christ, he received his one-sided grace and truly changed. He immediately started trying to help people believe in Jesus. But at that point he was still too controversial. Soon he had to be sent to his hometown, Tarsus. So how did Saul get to Antioch? When Barnabas first arrived, he realized all these new Gentile believers needed solid Bible teaching so that they could be grounded and grow in Christ. Then Barnabas remembered Saul

and his gifted Bible teaching back in Jerusalem. He was convinced that God had prepared Saul for this. With his clear testimony of grace and all his Bible knowledge, Saul was the perfect prophet and teacher to help these new non-Jewish believers. So Barnabas personally went to Tarsus, got Saul and brought him back to Antioch. For a whole year the two of them met with the church and taught a great many people (11:25–26a). It was through their diligent Bible teaching ministry that these other gifted leaders were raised.

And Barnabas and Saul were open to others joining them. They even welcomed them as their equals in the teaching ministry. How did the others step up to share this responsibility? It doesn't exactly say. But as Barnabas and Saul shared God's word, the Holy Spirit began working in these other men. Barnabas and Saul could discern the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit was giving Niger, Manaen and Lucius. No doubt they invited them to teach along with them. In Christ, all five guys came to have the same mind, the same love; they were in full accord and of one mind (Phil.2:2). They shared the same shepherd's heart for these new believers. They had the same goal, to build them up in Christ. They were all inspired by the Holy Spirit. They were all sharing God's word. This is what made them a united team. In the Spirit they could actually trust each other and support each other. But unity didn't happen with their effort; it was the unity of the Spirit (Eph.4:3). In the Spirit, their differences turned out to make the most beautiful harmony. Earlier, the Holy Spirit worked in seven young men to join the apostles in serving the church (6:3). Now in Antioch, there's a team of "Five Guys" growing as leaders because again, the Holy Spirit himself is raising them. We need to remember it's the Holy Spirit who fills and raises new leaders, if we let him. And it's the Holy Spirit who unites us in Christ as a real team. Are we on "Team Jesus" with some other people, even one? May God open our eyes and hearts to see it.

II. Listening (2)

What are "the Antioch Five" doing? Look at verse 2a. They're not just talking, eating, or enjoying a common interest. They're "worshipping the Lord and fasting." Their being together is rooted in worship of Jesus. They're "worshipping" *and* "fasting." Wait, what? Why? Sometimes we fast when we're repenting. Sometimes it's just to seek God. Here, the team is fasting *together*. They're humbly trying to listen to God *together*. And what happens? Read verse 2. This must be such a shock. They're a team, but honestly they've been depending on

Barnabas and Saul. Without those two, they might think everything will collapse. And yet, setting apart Barnabas and Saul is not anybody's idea. The Holy Spirit is the One with this direction. The Holy Spirit gives us direction? Yes. How can we know something is the Holy Spirit's direction? We have to be *listening*.

Sadly, we can develop a bad habit of thinking we know all there is to know. We find out what works and stick with that. We operate with so many assumptions. Soon we find we're not good at listening. Even in Christian life, we just live based on a bunch of past experience and head knowledge and keep on repeating it. We get so fixed, we can't really hear God, even if he were screaming at us. But listening to God is a crucial part of Christian life. We need to keep listening, first and foremost, to Jesus, through his words. We need to listen to those full of the Holy Spirit, and sometimes, just to our fellow human beings. Here, in community, these Five Guys need to listen to the Holy Spirit himself. He doesn't say what they want to hear, but they need to listen to Him anyway.

In Acts, the Holy Spirit is mentioned so many times. The Holy Spirit is the One who's been directing the believers until now. At the beginning, the Risen Jesus promised to baptize believers with the Holy Spirit (1:5). He said with the power of the Holy Spirit, even his weak disciples would become his witnesses to the end of the earth (1:8). The Holy Spirit worked in Peter to drive out his fear, give him spiritual insight, and make him a bold leader and gospel messenger. The Holy Spirit empowered them all to boldly speak the word of God (4:31). But the Holy Spirit was not just for the first believers. Anyone who repents of sin, believes in Jesus and experiences the forgiveness of sins receives the Holy Spirit (2:38–39). Samaritans who believed in Jesus received the Holy Spirit (8:15–17). Gentiles who believed in Jesus received the Holy Spirit (10:44–47; 11:15–16). Whoever we are, we need to learn to keep in step with the Spirit (Gal.5:25).

The Holy Spirit is not just spiritual power; he's a person. He's God the Spirit, one of the three Persons of the Trinity. As God the Spirit, he's sovereign. So the Holy Spirit says here, "Set apart for me..." The Holy Spirit reveals God's calling. The Holy Spirit shows us the work God has for us to do. This is why we need to be listening. The Holy Spirit speaks to us personally, but he also speaks to us as a community. In the Book of Revelation it repeatedly says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7,11,17,29;

3:6,13,22). Sometimes the Spirit comforts and encourages; sometimes, he's challenging us as a church, or even rebuking us.

What does it mean that the Holy Spirit "says" something? It may seem scary to be hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit. But we don't need to be afraid; the Holy Spirit will never tell us anything contrary to God's word. He's the Spirit of truth who helps us remember the words of Jesus and guides us into all the truth (John 14:26; 16:13). Here, he tells this team of leaders something. Most likely it's not an audible voice from heaven; probably one of them speaks these words through the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we're not sure it's really the Holy Spirit who's speaking. So the Bible tells us to "test the spirits" to see if they are from God (1 John 4:1–6). We all have a tendency to resist the Holy Spirit (7:51), so we really need to learn how to listen. God wants to do something great through this Antioch church. How tragic if they're not listening. Are we making space daily to stop assuming, stop telling God things, and just open up to him and start listening?

III. Obeying (3–12)

Sometimes it *seems* like we're listening, but really we've zoned out. Or we hear and just say, "Interesting." But what do these "Five Guys" do? Read verse 3. They fast and pray more, to make sure it's the Spirit's voice. Then they *obey*. Real listening and obedience overlap. If we're really listening to the Spirit, we'll obey Him. When they confirm the Spirit's direction through prayer and fasting, the guys lay their hands on Barnabas and Saul and send them off. Wow. They don't know when they'll see them again. They could have sent Lucius instead, or done this in some more reasonable, safe way. But this is really radical, obedient faith. They're sending off their two best workers. They're sure this is from God, so they're ready to do it. God is asking this healthy church to take the next step and become a missionary-sending church. Sending missionaries has always been hard, not easy. If we're waiting for perfection, it'll never happen. Honestly, we're often trying to hold onto people for our own purpose. We try to live based on our own plans. But God our Father has a calling for each of us. He has work for us to do. His vision is still to raise people as Jesus' witnesses and send us out to the end of the earth. All we need do is obey him, and God will take care of the rest. The American missionary mobilizer Luther Wishard famously said, *"I am willing to go anywhere, at any time, to do anything for Jesus."* So many American college students responded to his challenge and went to some of the toughest places in

the world. Because of their obedience, today there's a great fruit of the gospel in the Global South. Luther Wishard was also famous for praying, "Lord, do it again." Let's pray God may stir the college students of this generation to listen to his Spirit and obey his call to go out as permanent missionaries to wherever his Spirit leads them. Are we serious about listening to God's call? Do we have a clue about the work he's prepared for us to do? Have we ever seriously considered obeying the world mission command of our Lord Jesus?

In verses 4–12 we see the first place God led them. It was to the island of Cyprus, the home country of Barnabas. They had John Mark with them as their helper (11:25b; 12:5b). Soon they got to the western town of Paphos, where they encountered a certain magician. At the same time, the government official Sergius Paulus summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. But the magician thought he'd lose his job if his boss started listening to the apostles. So he opposed God's servants and tried to turn the official from the faith. Read verse 9. Here's where Saul becomes Paul, the clear spiritual leader of the team. God does a miracle through him and makes the magician blind for a time, and the official comes to faith in Jesus. We learn two things here: 1) spreading the gospel is spiritual warfare, an invasion of enemy territory; 2) the Holy Spirit can still work with such power if we would just obey him.

Today we learned what Christian life looks like. First, it's unity in the Spirit to serve his church. Then, it's really listening to the Spirit, even if it takes fasting. Finally, it's about obeying the Spirit, with radical faith. Read verse 2 again. May God help us become one in the Spirit, do our best to listen to the Spirit, and have the faith to obey him. May God help each of us live out his calling and do his work in our generation.