

**Acts 13: 6-12; “The Straight Ways of the Lord”, Sermon #54 in the series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on January 27th, 2019, in the Morning Worship Service.**

In this passage of Scripture, I would like to focus on the straight ways of the Lord in terms of the preaching of the gospel and His word; both then and now. In Hosea chapter 14 and verse 9 it says this – “Who is wise?” Let him understand these things.” “Who is prudent?” “Let him know them.” “For the ways of the Lord are right, and the righteous will walk in them.” This is what we want to be as Christians. We want to live a straightforward life in the sight of God. We want to be wise and know, as it says in Hosea 14: 8, that Christ is like a green cypress tree to us; that our fruit is found in Him. So here in this passage we find Paul and Barnabas and John Mark and Luke on the first missionary journey, and the Holy Spirit directs them to go to the Island of Cyprus, for here they will find people who need Christ, the very people who God was intending to save from their sins. What I want to bring to your attention at this hour is the truth that God goes before His preachers to establish the results that they will have as fruit in their ministry. This was not only true for Paul and Barnabas in that day, as apostles, but it is also true in our own day. God goes before His preachers to establish His way as being the straight way, and His hand will be with them, to help them to confront the forces of evil and to see as many as who would believe, be saved.

God went before Paul and Barnabas in these marvelous and powerful ways, making their way straight, so that they could preach and teach effectively, and see this man Sergius Paulus brought to faith in Christ. God went before them, 1st of all in His preparing and working in the heart of the Proconsul; this man named Sergius Paulus. 2nd – God went before Paul and was working in his heart in filling him with His Holy Spirit to be able to deal with this false prophet Elymas. And 3rd – God went before Paul and Barnabas in that Sergius Paulus was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. All of this good working of God did established the truth of His word in that part of the island of Cyprus, and so Christ’s cause and kingdom would go forward from there, having gained a foothold in that area. I pray that together we might see how God can providentially bring this same kind of thing to pass here in Tama-Toledo, and to that end we should pray for God’s powerful working.

1st of all – God went before Paul and Barnabas in His preparing and working in the heart of the Proconsul; this man named Sergius Paulus. (verses 6 and 7)

As their custom was, when they arrived in Salamis, Paul and Barnabas preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. After they preached the gospel there, they went along the southern coast of Cyprus and they eventually came to the other end of the island; to Paphos on the western coast. Here they found, it says in verse 6, a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus or Elymas, a man who hanging around and trying to advise the proconsul. He is called here, an intelligent man. A proconsul was a governor or deputy consul of a Roman colony. “In the Roman Republic, a military command, or imperium, could be exercised constitutionally only by a consul.” “There were two consuls at a time, each elected to a one-year term.” “They could not normally serve two terms in a row.” “If a military campaign was in progress at the end of a consul’s term, the consul in command might be appointed as proconsul by the Senate when his term expired.” “This custom allowed for continuity of command despite the high turnover of consuls.” “In the Roman Empire, proconsul was a title held by a civil governor and did not imply military command.

Concerning the city of Paphos, Thomas Coke in his commentary on these verses says – “The city of Paphos was seated on the western extremity of the island of Cyprus, and it was famous among the Heathens for the temple and obscene worship of the Paphian Venus.” (Paphian

means illicit love or wanton; it means that this city was notorious for its worship of the false goddess Venus, and Cyprus was also well known for its being a center for the worship of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty.) “*In this place* resided this Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul, who was a man of good understanding.” “And he was well-disposed to receive the truth, and obey it; and as he had heard of the character of these two apostles, and, very probably, some imperfect rumor of the Christian religion, *and so* he sent for them, and desired that they would give him an account of the Christian doctrine.” “As he was the first of the idolatrous Gentiles, to whom the gospel was ever preached, Barnabas and Saul did not go to offer it to him; but he sent for them, as Cornelius, the first-fruits of the devout Gentiles, sent for St. Peter; requesting it as a favour, that he might hear them preach the gospel.”

From the spiritual perspective, the perspective we are taking in order to learn from this portion of Scripture, we need to understand that the Lord, when He intends to save a person, He must go before His servants and work in the heart of the person who will receive the message. He must go before His messengers who preach the gospel, so as to begin to do His work of spiritually making impressions upon the mind of the person whom He is intending to save. He must do this even with a person who is wise and prudent in a worldly way; that is, to shine a sure and certain light into their heart; to begin to illumine their darkness and soften their natural resistance to receiving spiritual things and truth, and thus prepare them for the reception of the gospel.

God must go before his preachers to spiritually prepare the minds of the listeners to dispose them to desire to hear the word. This is something that you who know the Lord and who want to see people converted to Christ, must learn to pray for; for the softening of the heart hearts of those who you would see come to Christ, so that they will want to listen to the word of God. “He who is of God,” that is, the one who is born of God, “hears the words of God.” “He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God,” Jesus says in John 8: 47. We shall see this up close when I come to the next point. But this man, Sergius Paulus was, it says here, an intelligent man. He was “*sunetos*” (συνετος) it says in the Greek. He was a wise and intelligent man of the world. He was a prudent man. He was capable of thinking things over and weighing the value of them. He liked the accumulation of useful and profound knowledge, and this is probably why the false prophet Bar-Jesus was there with him. Sergius Paulus may have thought for quite some time that Elymas had something wise to teach him. But, thankfully, he was also by nature a prudent man.

Prudence, we learn from the Dictionary, is the ability to govern and discipline yourself by the use of reason. 2nd, it is being wise or shrewd in the management of your personal or business affairs. 3rd – It is being skillful in using good judgment in the use of resources. And 4th – It is being cautious or watchful as to danger or risk. Sergius Paulus appears to have had all of these good qualities. Albrecht Bengel in his commentary says this – “Elymas was with Sergius Paulus, or was wont to be frequently with him.” “The *Proconsul* had either admitted *him*, of his own will, or he had borne with him by a kind of necessity.” “Yet it was an act of prudence, not to be held fast by his impositions, but to seek the truth.” “The prudence, which acts with sobriety, watchfulness, and moderation, is a memorable virtue...” that is in a man in that position. “Prudence did not make Sergius positively disposed to faith, but *it did make him* less indisposed towards it.” (end of quote) Even though this was so, I want you to understand that this was a good thing, that Sergius Paulus requested Paul and Barnabas to come and preach to him the word of God. It was a sign of true native intelligence to want to hear the Bible preached to you. It is a great indication that common grace is working in your heart. And God was leading him towards salvation.

Common grace is that grace which is given to men by God, not only to restrain them from being as sinful as they possibly can be, but it is also that grace which God gives to some to make

them wise in the natural sense of desiring to inquire into the truth of good things and good people, and sound doctrine and teaching. This kind of common grace makes a person wise in the sense that they are, in general, searching for the meaning of life. A person can have this kind of grace and not ever be saved, but when they do have this common grace, they should do all that they can to improve upon it. For God does take notice of all of what we do with our opportunities to avail ourselves of the preaching of His word, and He will often then take steps, to bring that person to the place where they can hear a clear presentation of the gospel message. Let me remind you that the Bible clearly teaches that salvation is not of yourself. It is the gift of God lest any should boast. But salvation usually does not take place until, and unless, you come to actively seek for the truth; seeking to find it for yourself, in accordance with God's saving purposes.

Common grace and Saving grace are designed by God to work right alongside each other, and only the Lord Himself can see clearly what He will do in terms of having mercy upon a person and saving them. For salvation is not of him who wills or him who runs, but of God who shows mercy, it says in Romans chapter 9, verse 16. The person who is receiving common grace is fully accountable for the light of truth which is shown to them; to act upon it, by believing and receiving the Lord Jesus as their only Savior from sin. We should understand that according to God's eternal purpose He had already determined to save this man, but when He came to do so, He began the work by drawing His attention to the truth of His word. The person who truly desires to be saved must have a desire to hear the word of God right from the first, for this is something that will lead them to consider the truth about their need of Christ.

It says here in our text in verse 7 that "he desired to hear the word of God". The Bible says in Romans 3, verse 10 – "There is none righteous, no not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God." Well, if this is so, how did this man Sergius Paulus come to the place where he desired to hear Paul and Barnabas? It was because the Lord was drawing his attention to be curious about what Paul and Barnabas would say about knowing God and the meaning of life. "No one can come to Me," says the Lord Jesus in John 6: 44, "unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise Him up at the last day." And so, since the Father was drawing this particular man to the place where he could receive the truth; this intelligent man, this man who had received so much common grace, would now improve upon all that he had. He would not only invite the apostles to come to him, but by doing so, he showed that he truly did want to hear them. He really did want to hear a word from God Himself if they could bring it to him.

Let us not think, as we hear of these things, that somehow this intelligent man, this prudent man, humanly speaking, thought that he was able to save himself by his own free will; that all of this desire that he had, came to him because he was wise enough to choose to hear for himself apart from God's working and His powerful grace. Yes, it is true that he was a free agent, and he certainly did have the ability to choose freely what he wanted to hear. He most definitely was making wise decisions, and he would choose to believe when he heard the gospel, but all of this desire to hear, and all his spiritual ability to hear, and all of the power that he exercised to choose to believe in the truth; all of this, the Bible teaches us, was from God. He would have never been saved without the Holy Spirit going before him; working with him, and upon him, and in him, to bring him to that point where he would believe. Salvation is not of man, but it is according to the will of God. Let us, therefore, not despise the thought of prevenient grace, or the grace that goes before salvation, for it is real part of a person's being savingly brought to the place where they will believe when they hear the word of God preached.

2nd – God went before the apostle Paul and was working in his heart in filling him with His Holy Spirit to know to deal with Elymas. (verses 8-11)

Verse 8 says – “But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.” “Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, ‘O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?’ “And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time.” And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.” I want to remind you here, also, of what it says in verse 6, that Elymas was a sorcerer, he was a false prophet, and he was also a Jew as well. It seems pretty incredible, does it not, that he could be all of these things? And yet we have persons in our own day who disguise themselves ministers of truth, as those who put forth the idea that they are appointed by God to give help and advice to people in the churches or in our state, who are really those who are undermining the truth of God and His authority, and are seeking to control people around them for their own gain. They are really representatives of the Devil.

This man Elymas was just such a man, but I am saying that we have people like this in our own day as well, who claim to have the spiritual authority as this man thought he did; to turn the proconsul away from listening to the apostles, and to oppose the apostles when they were trying to present the gospel to this man who truly wanted to learn the truth. Listen to Matthew Henry – “He, that is Elymas, made it his business to withstand Barnabas and Saul, as the magicians of Egypt, in Pharaoh’s court, withstood Moses and Aaron, He set up himself to be a messenger from heaven, and denied that they were. And thus he sought to turn away the deputy from the faith (Acts 13: 8), to keep him from receiving the gospel, which he saw him inclined to do. Note, Satan is in a special manner busy with great men and men of power, to keep them from being religious; because he knows that their example, whether good or bad, will have an influence upon many. And those who are in any way instrumental to prejudice people against the truths and ways of Christ are doing the devil’s work.”

In other words, this man Elymas was perverting the straight ways of the Lord. The Lord’s way of doing things is always the straight way of doing things; the truth of God and Christ and the Bible has nothing to hide. It is all straightforward and it needs no tactics or gimmicks to sustain it or to promote it. The way of wicked men who seek to turn other people from the true faith, and oppose God’s true ministers, are crooked in their hearts and in the way that they think. They will oppose everything that is good and right and true. Listen to 2nd Timothy chapter 2, verses 1-8 – “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power.” “And from such people turn away!” “For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” “Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith; but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs also was.”

Why, when we hear these words, it is almost as if Paul was writing this concerning Elymas and this situation with the Proconsul. He was certainly writing it for everyone in every generation of this church age to consider and remember. For we are in the last days during this whole church age. But I want you to pay attention particularly to the words of verse 9 once again – “Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, ‘O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?’ Paul said these words, it says, being filled

with the Holy Spirit. O how we need to see the importance of a minister's being able to speak in the power of the Spirit to the false prophets of our time as well!

To be filled with the Holy Spirit does not mean that the minister is to be silent when men like Elymas are seeking to oppose or withstand them while they preach the truth of the word of God. No, a Biblically ordained and Spirit-appointed man has every right to declare the truth according to the authority which God has given to him, to address the opposers of the gospel and the truth of the word of God. When he does so, he is representing Christ and His Church; both the Universal Church in terms of the truth of the word of God, and the local church, in terms of the doctrines and holy practices of our most holy faith. And what the minister is seeking to do is to faithfully represent God's truth, speaking boldly and in a self-controlled way, confronting those wicked persons who would seduce people away from the truth, or oppose its being spoken at all.

As Paul says here, they are enemies of all righteousness, and there are times when they should be addressed as such. But this confrontation, this passage is telling us must be showing forth to the opposers the straight ways of the Lord. And therefore, in doing so, it must be done by the power of the Spirit, if it is to be doing the work of God at all. It must not be done in an argumentative way, but in a way of simple and straightforward declaration; even as Paul did here at this time. By way of application, I do not believe that this work can be done in the way that God wants it done when it is undertaken by self-appointed street preachers who do not have the commission of God to do this work. Some stand on the streets lifting up their voices against sin, but rather, it should be undertaken by pastors and churchmen who may be appointed by them, who truly have the Spirit-appointed authority to issue the rebuke.

No, the minister who would address such persons who are filled with all deceit and fraud and who are sons of the devil needs not self-appointed, but local church pastoral authority, the authority of the word, declared in the power of the Holy Spirit in relation to issuing a rebuke which He will own to a God-honoring result. Those who are deceived like Elymas should be addressed by the authority of the word coupled with the God-appointed authority of the church in the person of the pastor. Those who are opposing the truth of the word and the gospel must be answered according to their folly according to the wisdom which the Spirit will supply. Thankfully, in the case of Paul, whose life and actions we are now studying, God had already directly given him this apostolic power to perform this miracle, so that the judgmental curse that was brought upon this man was done by God Himself using Paul's words to him. God did this as an example to others like Elymas who would think about opposing and interfering with the preaching of the gospel. In verse 11, he addressed him directly and he told him that the hand of the Lord was upon him, and that he would experience being blind; not seeing the sun for a time. And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand."

In our own day, ministers do not have this kind of apostolic power to bring a judgment upon a false teacher in this drastic way because there have not been apostles using the sign gifts and miracles which were so evident during the apostolic age of the church. And even beyond that, you will also notice, that this was the only time in the apostle Paul's ministry that he did such a thing; the Spirit leading and directing him in it. The apostle does give instructions in Titus chapter 1, about what a discerning godly minister should do in relation to men who are false prophets. He says in verse 9 that a bishop, or a pastor, must be sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict." For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain." "One of them, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.'" "This testimony is true." "Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be

sound in the faith, not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth.”

This was how this man Elymas was in his heart and actions, and the Holy Spirit led the apostle Paul to confront him as an example to all such who would try to pervert the straight ways of the Lord. Let us see that it does take wisdom and grace from the Holy Spirit to be able to reprove such people sharply or answer a fool according to his folly. But the Spirit does give such grace and wisdom and insight to be able to do this, even in our days, so as to establish the truth and bring the wicked to shame and conviction if His power is at work to establish such good results. The Lord, the Holy Spirit will go before his godly ministers to establish this.

3rd – God went before Paul and Barnabas in that Sergius Paulus was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. (verse 12)

“Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.” Truly the teaching of the Lord is astonishing because of the Holy Spirit’s power to illumine the mind, to open the eyes, and to convince of the truth. What convinced Sergius Paulus to believe in Christ was his seeing the demonstration of the power of God which was brought down upon this man Elymas, proving that Elymas was a false prophet and that Paul was the Lord’s true prophet, bringing him the truth, which he could verify by his own eyes. The was a miracle of God and it was out of the ordinary course of how the Lord usually did his work even then. But this was something that was given the apostle Paul by God Himself so that he would see tangible results in his ministry.

Listen to what he says in Romans 15: 14 – “Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.” “Nevertheless, brethren, I have written more boldly to you on some points, as reminding you, because of the grace given to me by God, that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” “Therefore I have reason to glory in Christ Jesus in the things which pertain to God.” “For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient – in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.”

It takes grace given to you in order that you might be a minister of Jesus Christ to anyone, let alone to the whole Gentile world. But that was the kind of grace that Paul was given. You and I should rightly be astonished at the teaching of the Lord. For the Lord attends His word with the power that He purposes to give it, but also based upon the faithfulness of each of the people in the local church who as Paul says, are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another. How do we, the people who attend this church, come to the place where we will be the same as them? It will be when we will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through us. It will be when we have better and more lofty views of how greatly the grace of God and His power support us in our ministry, individually and collectively, and we will give the glory to Him. It will be when we will make it our aim to preach and share the gospel in the power of the Spirit to as many as the Lord will providentially bring us into contact with. May we fully preach the gospel of Christ and trust, that if we are faithful to His word, and sensitive to the leading of His Spirit, He will give us many opportunities, because it is our desire to walk in His straight ways.