

**Introduction:**

- A. In the last several months we've been praying that the Lord would help us be a much more effective in outreach. Last Sunday evening, we voted on one approach to this gospel responsibility but not enough of our members that night were convinced we had quite the right approach so we must rethink this. This may surprise you because the idea we proposed began as my idea. But I believe God used that to help us move forward a step. And I believe **we are on the cusp of the greatest outreach Village Church has had in 40 years. I believe strongly that God is pleased with our desire as a church to find his will and that if we persevere in seeking him he will delight to lead us.**

When I planned this sermon series weeks ago I had no idea how significant this Sunday's passage would be to our church's situation today. I chose it then because it is a missionary text and we are emphasizing VCL's history of involvement in missions. **But God's agenda for us right now is how we can be a missionary church right here where we live.** How can we, together, preach the gospel?

- B. *Illus.*: Before we look at this passage let me tell you a story that has been very much on my mind the last three weeks. I had stopped by Dr. John Woodbridge's office at TEDS. He is a church history professor. I told him how important the book he co-authored on the great revivals, *A God-Sized Vision*, was to me and how we'd started our *First, Prayer* services in part because I'd learned long ago that prayer always precedes revivals.

He told me that since the book came out he'd asked some people at the Billy Graham Evangelistic Assn. what they felt their most effective crusade had ever been. They told him that it was the 1959 crusade in Sydney, Australia. In preparation for that crusade, as was their custom, the crusade leadership sought to build a prayer base among the churches.

Living in Sydney was a very elderly man who had actually worked with the great Chicago evangelist, D. L. Moody, who had died some 60 years before. They asked that man to give leadership to the prayer leading up to the crusade even though he was very frail with age. (He actually died during the crusade). Rather than focusing on prayer for Billy Graham or for converts, as you would expect, **he insisted that the first thing they pray about was unbelief.** As Dr. Woodbridge wrote to me a day later, *“The gentleman was concerned about **believers whose faith was quite constrained by ‘unbelief.’** Once, the Australians dealt with that issue in their prayer meetings, then they were ready to pray for the Sydney 1959 Crusade of Dr. Graham. Dr. Graham indicated that Sydney was the most prayed for city he had ever experienced or preached in.”*

I keep thinking about that story. How could you say that churches who organized and invited Billy Graham to do an evangelistic crusade in their city needed to pray, before anything else, about their own unbelief? It just keeps nagging at me. Then I came to this sermon.

- C. Unbelief among Christians is easily disguised because we clearly and earnestly believe in Jesus Christ as Lord. We pray and believe God answers. We believe our sins are forgiven and that we are entrusted with sharing the gospel. We believe the Bible and all it teaches. So how could that old saint suggest we need to pray about our unbelief?
- D. Turn to Acts 13. This is about the church in Antioch where believers were first called Christians. This thriving new church sent Barnabas and Saul (Paul) to deliver a gift to the impoverished believers in Jerusalem. Now those two have just returned. **Acts 12:25-13:5....**
- E. Here is a church who were passionate about the gospel but didn't know what they should do about it. They were *not* hamstrung by unbelief but they were unclear about direction. Here at Village Church our Elders are clear that we need to be more effective in outreach here where we

live; that as a congregation we need to preach the gospel more effectively, individually and as together. **Their story raises three questions for me and for Village Church, questions that probe for our unbelief and help us find direction.**

**I. DO WE URGENTLY DESIRE TO EVANGELIZE?**

A. You can just sense the gospel urgency in this church, can't you? **Ch. 11** says that when believers first reached Antioch and *told them the good news about the Lord Jesus, "The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."* Then *"for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people."* That was an exciting time of faith.

By contrast, unbelief among Christians is sometimes disguised as gospel passivity. We *believe* the gospel. We *want* to see people, especially people we love, come to Christ, but we can't seem to muster much energy for it.

B. I don't think the opposite of this gospel passivity in some kind of evangelistic aggression; getting in people's faces. I'm not really talking about outward activities at all nor about being *radical* and *on fire*. But remember how in Rev. 3 Jesus warned the church in Laodicea, *"you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold."* I think that's how we are about evangelism. What do you think? I am ashamed to say I think that's how I am. **One form of unbelief is being lukewarm about the spread of the gospel.**

C. That is why we pray about our unbelief! We can't just ramp up our enthusiasm. We don't need a gospel pep rally. I need the Holy Spirit to ignite within me *his* passion for evangelism. We want to be like Jesus. That's why the old man had the churches pray about their unbelief.

**Vv.1-2...** This very diverse group of leaders were gifted and experienced in hearing God speak by Scripture and the Spirit. **They were not only the church's key speakers, they were the church's best listeners—to God.** Their particular significance in

this story is not their long experience and wise counsel but **their gifts of hearing God speak by his Word and Spirit.**

It isn't clear in v.2 whether just these five were worshipping and fasting or if it was the whole church. Most writers think he means the whole church.

I assume that these Christians had been thinking and talking about spreading the gospel. What good church doesn't! It would be the natural product of their teaching from Scripture, talking about Jesus, and the excitement over Barnabas and Saul's return from their mission. Those believers wanted to do something. They just didn't know what. That is exactly where we are.

Look again at this church and you tell me: **what did that church do that we haven't done?** V.2: "*They were worshipping the Lord and fasting.*" That's intense! So the question is:

## II. ARE WE INTENT ON SEEKING THE LORD'S DIRECTION?

- A. This doesn't describe a typical Sunday service in Antioch. I don't know how long they fasted but it was longer than the time between breakfast and lunch! These Christians were intent on tuning in to the Lord's direction about outreach.
- B. "Worshipping the Lord and fasting" positioned the Christians to hear God's direction. **For us, "worshipping the Lord and fasting" seems like such an indirect way of coming to a decision.** We're comfortable in the world of executive decisions or democratic decision-making, of research and gathering opinions and ideas, but this is not familiar ground. In fact, wouldn't you agree that for us, this approach to decision-making is unsettling? Kind of over-the-top? Like maybe it was cultural or something?
- C. I'm sticking my neck out here, but I believe this is what we need to do as a church because, for all our praying, thinking, and talking, we still don't know how God wants Village Church to extend the gospel. These two spiritual activities help a church tune in to the will of God.
  - 1. "*Worshipping the Lord.*" To us, the word *worshipping* means singing. The word here literally means *ministering* or *servicing* as priests did in the temple. Those Christians were functioning as priests in God's

temple. Think what the Old Testament priests did and then bring that into Christian experience. They centered themselves again in Christ's death for sins, resurrection for life, and ascension to reign over all. They lifted the fragrant incense of prayer and song. They attended to the lamplight of Scripture and enjoyed the fellowship of the Lord as friends at his table. They shut themselves away from the world's distractions and purified their hearts. **Such things attune Christians to hear God; to sense his direction clearly.** Do you think we could do that?

2. *"Fasting."* Here's where we get nervous! (*"You know, I get headaches if I don't eat."* *"Can we do fruit juices?"*) Let's just think about it! Sometimes fasting is a response of abject repentance but that doesn't seem to be the case here. I think they **fasted in order to focus**. Fasting didn't make them holier. God doesn't think hungry people are better Christians. Fasting made them better listeners. Meals were a distraction and they were intent on God. Meals took time they wanted to give to prayer and worship. I'm not authority on fasting but one thing I've experienced is that, even though you're distracted somewhat by hunger, **fasting often gives a person a unique mental focus and clarity.** I remember reading the book of Romans at the end of a day of fasting and I was surprised how the message just popped in a kind of spiritual high def. Plus, I think God loves it when we say, in effect, *"I'm so hungry for you, Lord, that I'll put away every other morsel and meal."*

- D. I assume those Christians had to get up early for work like we do. I assume that when they didn't eat they got just as hungry as us. I assume they had to deal with kids. I suppose some had to come and go and not everyone could participate. But let me just put it plainly: We have never been this intense or intentional about seeking the Lord since I've been your pastor. I don't know if there have been times in the past when we should have, but I think now is

the time for us to be this intent on seeking the Lord's direction.

**Unbelief sometimes is disguised as self-reliance.** *We can figure this out. Send us your ideas. Give us another month and we'll have a proposal.* We have been trying to listen to the Lord over the last several months. We've prayed and sought the Lord, and God often uses discussions and meetings and idea-gathering. But I think the Lord is graciously drawing us to seek him together like this.

**Vv.2-4....** Maybe there was a lull and one of those prophets said, "I believe I have a word from the Lord." Maybe Barnabas said, "Saul and I have felt God's call to travel north," and it just seemed right to them all. Maybe they went home and this came clear a week later. I know this: **The Holy Spirit never has trouble making himself clear to people who are eager to hear him.**

That church gladly sent out their two best guys—their incomparable encourager and Christianity's all-time best theologian and evangelist. They sent them out for the sake of the lost. I don't think that will be the outcome here at VCL right now. I think God is leading us to do something here that we're not doing. So here's our question:

### **III. WILL WE SACRIFICE OUR BEST TO EXTEND THE GOSPEL?**

- A. I don't know what this would mean for us. I was puzzled by our vote the other night because our proposal didn't cost us anything we hadn't planned to spend. Now I wonder if, in some sense, that was one problem. I don't know whether it will be money, people, effort, or what, but if it is from the Lord it will cost us!
- B. I do think that once God makes the sacrifice clear we will be excited about it. When the church there in Antioch sent out those two precious brothers I don't think anyone wished they had left well enough alone. I think the church was energized by their sacrifice, and I think we will be too, whether the sacrifice is money or people or effort. I'm excited about what lies ahead for us!

- C. Unbelief is sometimes disguised as self-centeredness; selfishness. Churches, including ours, have an inclination towards self-indulgence and comfortableness. It is dangerously easy to forget what Jesus said, “*whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”
- D. Did you notice how **v.3** says the church “sent them off” and **v.4** says they were “sent on their way by the Holy Spirit”? We want what *we* do and what the *Holy Spirit* does to be one and the same thing.

## Conclusion

Before they did anything else, that veteran crusader in Sydney, Australia, had the churches pray about their unbelief. I think it was because our disguised unbelief makes us (1) **lukewarm about the gospel**, (2) **self-reliant** instead of intent on seeking the Lord’s direction, and (3) **self-centered** instead of sacrificial in spreading the good news of Jesus. We don’t combat unbelief by trying harder or making better plans. We combat unbelief *first* by prayer.

I’m very excited that we are right on the threshold of God being as clear to us as he was to those believers in Antioch. **Wouldn’t it be great to have such Spirit-given clarity that together we’d all be willing to sacrifice to see people come to Jesus in the way God has uniquely prepared for Village Church?** I will ask the Elders to get back to you soon on how we together might worship the Lord and fast in order to hear the Holy Spirit’s direction. I envision a special day and time in the next few weeks for us to do that.

Next week we’ll look at Paul & Barnabas’s return in **Acts 14:26-27**, “*they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.*” **I want a piece of that! How about you?**

