

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: Set Apart and Sent: The Mission to the Gentiles Begins

Acts 13:1–12

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson marks a turning point in the book of Acts and in Paul's life: the formal beginning of the mission to the Gentiles, around A.D. 46, launched from the church at Antioch. Note the historical details. Antioch was a diverse, vibrant congregation, and it was here that the Holy Spirit, during corporate worship and fasting, called out Barnabas and Saul for a specific work. The church laid hands on them and sent them, and they sailed to Cyprus. At Paphos the gospel reached the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus, but only after a direct confrontation with Elymas, a Jewish magician and false prophet. It is also here that Luke begins calling Saul by his Roman name, Paul, and places him in the lead, fitting for the apostle to the Gentiles.

Several doctrinal themes deserve attention. The mission of the church originates with God and is carried out through His people; it is born in worship and prayer, not mere human strategy. The gospel meets real spiritual opposition, often through counterfeit spirituality that seeks to keep people from the truth. And the power that saves is located in "the teaching of the Lord," the word of God, even though God confirmed that word in this founding era through miraculous signs. The heaviest doctrinal block (Question 9) handles the purpose of those signs and the important boundary that they were confirmatory and foundational, not a pattern Christians should expect to repeat today.

This lesson also aims at the formation of the student. Every believer belongs to a sending church and shares in its mission, whether by going, giving, praying, or serving. Press students to examine whether their service flows from genuine worship and dependence on God, and whether they have written anyone off as beyond the gospel's reach. Help them see that the same word that overcame a magician and converted a Roman official is the word entrusted to them. Send them home worshiping more deeply, sent more intentionally, and more confident in the saving power of God's word.

Question 1

Student Question:

In the middle of the church's worship, "the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (Acts 13:2). What does this reveal about the source and the goal of the church's mission, and about how God advances the gospel through His people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The mission begins with God, not with men. It was the Holy Spirit who called Barnabas and Saul, and the work was one to which He had already called them. The church did not invent the mission or volunteer its best men on a whim; it recognized and responded to God's initiative. This keeps mission from becoming mere human ambition; it is God's work, and the church is His instrument.

Notice the phrase "for me." The goal of the mission is God's own purpose and glory, the gathering of people from the nations into His church. Mission is not ultimately about expanding an organization; it is about God being known and worshiped where He was not, as the gospel goes out. The end of mission is the glory of God in the salvation of the lost.

Observe how God works: through His people. The Spirit called, but the church fasted, prayed, laid on hands, and sent. God could have evangelized the world by angels; instead He chose to do it through ordinary congregations setting apart and sending ordinary believers. This is the dignity and responsibility God gives the church.

Apply it to the local congregation. A healthy church is a sending church, attentive to God's call, willing to release its best for the work, and invested in the spread of the gospel beyond its own walls. Ask whether your students see themselves as part of such a body.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The mission of the church originates with God, not human ambition
- The goal of mission is God's glory in the salvation of the nations
- God advances the gospel through His people and His churches
- A healthy congregation is a sending church (Matthew 28:18–20)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the Spirit, not the church, initiated this mission?
- Why does God choose to spread the gospel through ordinary believers?
- How does your congregation participate in God's mission?

Question 2

Student Question:

God's mission is not a spectator sport; the whole church at Antioch was involved in sending. Are you actively part of God's mission, by going, giving, praying, or serving, or mostly watching from the sidelines? Name one specific way you could step further into the work this year.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves the truth of the church's mission into personal participation. The Antioch church did not merely applaud Barnabas and Saul; they prayed, fasted, and sent. Every believer

has a role, whether as a goer or as one who upholds the goers through prayer, giving, and support.

Help students locate themselves honestly. Some are active; many drift along as spectators, assuming mission is for the especially gifted or called. Gently challenge that assumption. The Great Commission was given to the whole church, and each member has gifts and means to contribute.

Press toward one concrete step. Rather than a vague resolve to care more about missions, have each student name one specific action for the coming year, supporting a worker, joining an outreach, praying daily for a lost friend, opening their home, so that participation becomes real and measurable.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Every believer shares in the church's mission, going or supporting
- The danger of treating mission as a spectator activity
- Stewardship of gifts and resources for the spread of the gospel
- Concrete, measurable participation rather than vague good intentions

Discussion Prompts

- Are you a participant in God's mission or a spectator?
- What gifts or resources could you offer to the work?
- What one step will you take this year to go further in?

Question 3

Student Question:

The sending happened "while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting," and they fasted and prayed again before laying on hands (Acts 13:2–3). Why does Luke tie the birth of this mission so closely to worship, fasting, and prayer, and what does that teach about the foundation of all genuine service to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Luke is careful to set the call in the context of worship. The church was not brainstorming; it was seeking God. Mission was born in the soil of worship and prayer. This order matters: communion with God comes first, and service flows out of it. When we reverse the order, activity can crowd out the very relationship that gives it life.

Fasting signals earnestness and dependence. By setting aside food to seek God, the Antioch believers were saying that hearing from Him mattered more than their own comfort. Genuine

ministry is marked by this kind of dependence; it does not lean on human cleverness but waits on God and asks for His direction and power.

Teach that worship and prayer are not preliminaries to be rushed through but the engine of fruitful service. Jesus said, “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The most strategic thing a church or a Christian can do is to worship deeply and pray earnestly, trusting God to direct and empower the work.

Apply it to the student’s pattern. Service that is not fed by worship eventually dries up into duty or burns out in self-reliance. Encourage students to root their serving in a real walk with God, so that what they do for Him flows from time spent with Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Communion with God as the foundation of all genuine service
- Worship and prayer as the engine of mission, not mere preliminaries
- Fasting as an expression of earnestness and dependence on God
- Fruitfulness flows from abiding in Christ (John 15:5)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does service need to flow out of worship rather than the reverse?
- What does fasting express about our dependence on God?
- How does abiding in Christ change the way we serve?

Question 4

Student Question:

Real ministry flows out of a life of worship and dependence on God, not mere activity. Honestly assess your own worship and prayer life. Is your serving fed by a steady walk with God, or are you running on empty? What one habit would most strengthen the roots beneath your service?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks students to look beneath their activity to its source. It is possible to be busy in good works while spiritually depleted, serving out of habit, guilt, or pride rather than out of a living relationship with God. The Antioch pattern invites a healthier rhythm.

Help students diagnose honestly. Signs of running on empty include resentment, exhaustion, comparison, and a loss of joy in serving. These are often symptoms of roots that have grown shallow. The remedy is not to do less good but to deepen the walk with God that sustains it.

Move toward one strengthening habit. Rather than overhauling everything, encourage each student to name a single practice, a daily time in the word, a regular hour of prayer, a return to

genuine worship on the Lord's Day, that would most strengthen the roots beneath their service this season.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between Spirit-fed service and empty activity
- Symptoms of depletion: resentment, burnout, joylessness
- The renewal of service through a deepened walk with God
- Sustainable ministry rooted in worship and the word

Discussion Prompts

- Is your serving fed by your walk with God or draining it?
- What are the warning signs that you are running on empty?
- What one habit would most strengthen your roots?

Question 5

Student Question:

When the gospel reached Sergius Paulus, it was met by Elymas the magician, whom Paul called "son of the devil . . . enemy of all righteousness," bent on "making crooked the straight paths of the Lord" (Acts 13:10). What does this confrontation teach about the spiritual opposition the gospel faces and the tactics used to keep people from the truth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The gospel never advances unopposed. As soon as a searching man wants to hear the word of God, a counterfeit appears to keep him from it. Elymas represents the spiritual opposition that surrounds the gospel, and Paul names its true source: this is the work of the devil, the enemy of all righteousness.

Notice the tactic: "making crooked the straight paths of the Lord." The opposition does not always attack openly; often it works by distortion, confusion, and counterfeit spirituality, bending what is straight, blurring what is clear, offering a substitute that keeps people from the real thing. Elymas had the proconsul's ear and used it to obscure the truth.

Teach students that behind human opposition to the gospel stands a real spiritual adversary (Ephesians 6:12). This is not an excuse for paranoia, but a call to sobriety and prayer. The battle for a soul is not merely intellectual; it is spiritual, and it is fought with truth, prayer, and dependence on God.

Apply it with discernment. Counterfeit spiritualities still abound, anything that offers meaning, power, or guidance apart from Christ and seeks to turn people from His straight paths. Help

students recognize that clarity about the gospel is itself a defense; the straight path is best protected by being clearly taught.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel faces real spiritual opposition (Ephesians 6:12)
- The devil's tactics of distortion, counterfeit, and confusion
- Counterfeit spirituality as a tool to keep people from the truth
- Clarity about the gospel as a defense against deception

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that opposition to the gospel is ultimately spiritual?
- How does the enemy 'make crooked' the straight paths of the Lord?
- What counterfeits compete with the gospel for people's attention today?

Question 6

Student Question:

Elymas worked to keep a searching man from hearing the word. Where do you see counterfeit beliefs, distractions, or influences today trying to turn people away from the straight paths of the Lord? In what ways might you, even unintentionally, be making it harder rather than easier for someone near you to come to faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the confrontation inward. The first half invites students to identify the modern Elymases, the ideologies, entertainments, and counterfeit spiritualities that distract people from the gospel. Naming them sharpens discernment without breeding fear.

The second half is more searching: could we ourselves be an obstacle? A harsh word, an inconsistent life, a graceless manner, or simple neglect can make the straight path harder for someone to find. Help students consider, humbly, whether anything in their conduct hinders rather than helps those they hope to reach.

Move toward becoming a help rather than a hindrance. Encourage each student to name one person near them who is searching or wavering, and one concrete way they could make the path clearer, by a kinder word, a more consistent life, a willingness to talk honestly about Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Discernment of modern counterfeits and distractions from the gospel
- The sobering possibility of being an obstacle to someone's faith (Matthew 18:6)
- The witness of a consistent life that makes the path clearer
- Personal responsibility to help rather than hinder seekers

Discussion Prompts

- What modern influences pull people away from the straight path?
- Could anything in your life be hindering someone from faith?
- How could you make the path to Christ clearer for someone near you?

Question 7

Student Question:

Despite the opposition, “the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord” (Acts 13:12). What does the conversion of this thoughtful Roman official reveal about the reach and power of the gospel, and about who can be saved through it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Sergius Paulus was a man of intelligence, power, and position, surrounded by false counsel, and yet he believed. The gospel reached across every barrier, ethnic, cultural, social, to lay hold of a Roman proconsul. This is a preview of the whole Gentile mission: the gospel is for all people, not one nation or class.

Notice what astonished him: “the teaching of the Lord.” The sign got his attention, but it was the teaching, the truth about Jesus, that he believed. The power of the gospel is the power of its truth, the message of the crucified and risen Lord, which is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

Teach students that no one is beyond the reach of the gospel because of intelligence, status, or hostility. The educated and powerful are often assumed to be unreachable, but the gospel has always converted such people, from Sergius Paulus to countless skeptics since. The same word that reached him can reach anyone.

Apply it to expectation and prayer. If we believe the gospel can reach anyone, we will pray boldly and witness hopefully, even to those who seem least likely. Conversely, writing people off reveals a small view of the gospel’s power. Sergius Paulus rebukes our low expectations.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel reaches across every barrier of ethnicity, class, and status
- The power of the gospel is the power of its truth (Romans 1:16)
- No one is beyond the gospel’s reach because of intelligence or position
- A foretaste of the universal mission to the Gentiles

Discussion Prompts

- What barriers did the gospel cross to reach Sergius Paulus?

- Why is it significant that he was astonished at the teaching, not just the sign?
- Whom do we tend to assume are beyond the gospel's reach?

Question 8

Student Question:

Sergius Paulus was powerful, educated, and surrounded by false counsel, yet the gospel reached him. Is there someone you have quietly written off as too important, too skeptical, or too far gone to believe? How does this account challenge the way you pray for and witness to such people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question exposes the quiet unbelief in our own hearts about the gospel's power. We often pray and witness selectively, hopeful about the obviously open but resigned about the powerful, the hostile, or the hardened. Sergius Paulus, and Saul himself, refute that resignation.

Help students name a specific person they have written off. Bringing the name into the light is the first step toward renewed prayer. Often our prayerlessness for someone is rooted in secret doubt that God could ever reach them.

Move toward bold, hopeful action. Encourage students to begin praying again, by name, for someone they had given up on, and to look for one way to witness, whether by a word, an invitation, or a consistent life. The gospel that converted a proconsul and a persecutor is equal to the people on our hearts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The quiet unbelief that writes people off as unreachable
- Renewed, hopeful prayer for the hardened and the powerful
- Witness shaped by confidence in the gospel's power
- Remembering that the apostle himself was once an enemy

Discussion Prompts

- Whom have you quietly decided is beyond reach?
- What does your prayer life reveal about your view of the gospel's power?
- How will you pray for and witness to that person this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

At this decisive moment, Paul, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” pronounced temporary blindness on Elymas, and the proconsul believed when he saw it and heard the teaching of the Lord (Acts 13:9–12). What was the purpose of such a miraculous sign in confirming the gospel as the mission to the Gentiles began, why is the saving power located in “the teaching of the Lord” and not in the marvel itself, and why does this confirmatory role of miracles not mean Christians should expect to perform such signs today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it requires careful, balanced teaching. Begin by affirming the miracle plainly: Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, really did pronounce blindness on Elymas, and it really happened. We do not explain away the supernatural acts of the apostles. The question is what such signs were for.

Establish the purpose of apostolic miracles: they confirmed the message and the messenger. The New Testament repeatedly describes signs as God’s testimony to the truth of the word being preached. The gospel was “attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles” (Hebrews 2:3–4). Paul calls such works “the signs of a true apostle” (2 Corinthians 12:12). At Paphos, the sign authenticated Paul as God’s spokesman at the very threshold of the Gentile mission, when the message was new and unverified.

Locate the saving power rightly. Luke is careful: the proconsul believed when he saw what occurred and “was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.” The sign opened his ears, but it was the teaching he believed. Then, as now, faith comes by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17). The marvel was the confirmation; the message was the means of salvation. This guards us from a faith built on spectacle rather than truth.

Now draw the boundary with care. Miraculous signs belonged to the foundational era of the church, when God was confirming His not-yet-completed revelation through the apostles. A foundation is laid once (Ephesians 2:20). As the New Testament was completed, the church gained the finished, confirmed word of God, and the confirmatory signs that accompanied its delivery served their purpose. Paul taught that such gifts would cease when “the perfect” came and the partial passed away (1 Corinthians 13:8–10). We should therefore not expect to reproduce apostolic miracles today, nor build our faith or our claims on them.

Apply it both to confidence and to discernment. We do not need new signs; we have the confirmed and complete word, which is “profitable . . . that the man of God may be complete” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). This protects students from being swept up by modern claims of sign gifts, and it directs their faith to where God has placed saving power: the teaching of the Lord, heard, believed, and obeyed. The God who worked through Paul still works powerfully today, through His word and providence, to save and to keep His people.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Apostolic miracles served to confirm the message and the messenger (Hebrews 2:3–4)
- Signs as the marks of a true apostle in the founding era (2 Corinthians 12:12)
- Saving power located in the teaching of the Lord, received by faith (Romans 10:17)
- Miraculous gifts belonged to the foundational, confirmatory era and have served their purpose (1 Corinthians 13:8–10; Ephesians 2:20)
- The completed New Testament as the sufficient, confirmed word of God (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- A guard against building faith on spectacle or on modern claims of sign gifts

Discussion Prompts

- What was the purpose of the miraculous signs that accompanied the apostles?
- Why does Luke locate the proconsul's faith in the teaching, not the marvel?
- Why should we not expect to reproduce apostolic miracles today?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the launch of this mission, the worshiping church, the Spirit's call, the sending, the clash with the counterfeit, and the believing proconsul. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this account to form you, whether to deepen the worship beneath your service, to step into His mission, or to trust the gospel's power with someone you had given up on.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson's threads: mission born in worship, the church as sender, the reality of opposition, and the saving power of the word. Ask students to name one concrete way the account has touched them rather than offering a general response.

Offer the three doors. Some need to deepen the worship and prayer beneath their serving. Some need to step actively into the church's mission. Some need to renew their confidence in the gospel's power for a particular person they had written off.

Close with encouragement. The mission that reshaped the world began with a small congregation worshiping its Lord and willing to be sent. The same Spirit, the same gospel, and the same God are at work in your students' lives. Send them out worshiping, sent, and confident in the word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship and prayer as the foundation of fruitful service
- Active participation in the mission of the church
- Confidence in the saving power of the gospel for anyone
- Spiritual formation through beholding God's mission advance

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this account speaks most to you right now?
- What one step toward worship, mission, or bold witness will you take?
- Who is the person you most need to start praying for again?