

Acts 12:24-25 But the word of God spread and multiplied. ²⁵ After they had completed their relief mission, Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem, taking along John who was called Mark.

13:1 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, a close friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² As 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." ³ Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off.

Background: We last saw Barnabas and Paul being commissioned by the Church in Antioch to take a generous relief offering to the Church in Judea.

Meanwhile, the Apostle James (brother of John) and Peter have been arrested by Herod Agrippa I. An otherwise competent, politically savvy, Torah observant King—A nationalist and Zionist ruler who presided over Judea with Israel's best interests at heart. But this King, as we saw over the last two weeks, has set himself against King Jesus. Having killed James, and intending the same for Peter—God intervenes sending an angel to rescue Peter, he is reunited with a praying church—surprised that their own prayers were answered. And now Herod is dead.

The story circles back to Barnabas and Paul. Now headed back after their relief mission to Antioch.

We see in this story that the Spirit of God has used lots of means in accomplishing the mission. He's used festivals, heavenly signs and wonders, visions, dreams, persecution—now he speaks directly to the group of leaders in Antioch. This will launch the church and the book of Acts into a bold new and promising direction—the evangelization of Greece and Rome in the ministry of Paul the Apostle.

Transition: There are several foundational principles present in these five verses we need to pay attention to today. Let's take a few moments and unpack them.

1. Generosity is part of the Church's mission. Acts 12:24 "But the word of God spread and multiplied. ²⁵ After they had completed their relief mission, Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, taking along John who was called Mark." The word for "relief mission" is a translation of the Greek word for "deacon" *diakonia*; *diakonos* meaning: "service rendered"; or "an act of worshipful service." The term is used in Acts 6:4 "we devote ourselves to prayer and the service of the Word."

Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus who gather to worship God in Spirit and in Truth; who grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ; Who go back out into the world proclaiming the good news—making disciples. The key to understanding Gospel generosity is in that mission statement. Let me take a few minutes to explain this...

- **Practicing generosity is one of the ways we worship and inspires worship.**

Illus. A beautiful story of this appears in John 12. Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead and Lazarus' sister took a pint of Nard—an expensive oil that was used as an aromatic perfume—equivalent to 300 Denarii, or a year's wages (about \$6000). They're reclining at the dinner table and Mary pours this entire bottle on Jesus's feet and wipes the dust and grime from his feet.

Judas, the Grinch, Iscariot protests: "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the proceeds given to the poor?" He did not say this because he cared about the poor—but because he had been embezzling money from the ministry till. Just look at the contrast: Mary "wastes" 300 denarii on Jesus, anointing him with this expensive vile of oil, and Judas betrayed Jesus for 150 Denarii (what the silver coins equaled to). John portrays this extravagant act of giving, an otherwise wasteful gift with no practical benefit—as an act of honor, worship. We are called to make disciples who gather to worship the one true God. And acts of lavish generosity in honor of Jesus are never wasted. **And extravagant, heartfelt gift given to the glory and honor of Christ is never wasteful.**

The Corinthian Christians likewise had expressed extreme generosity to the Judean churches under persecution. Paul starts 2 Cor ch. 9 out by saying how he's been bragging to the Macedonian churches about their excessive generosity, and the Macedonians have been inspired to match that—to support struggling churches in Greece. He says, **2 Cor 9:11-13 NIV** "You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹² This service (*diakonia*) that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service (*diakonias*) by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your **generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.**" What is he saying? Not only is your extreme generosity to the Macedonian churches an *act of worshipful service to God*—but it inspired *their worship, praise and thanksgiving!*

- **Practicing generosity grows us up spiritually.** Well, if we want to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus, we must practice the generosity of the gospel of grace. **Voluntary, cheerful, lavish giving cures me of selfishness and idolatry.** My desire for things cannot have a grip on me when I am apt to give things away. **When I am prone to share I am inoculated from viral self-indulgence prevalent in our culture.** 2 Cor 9:10 “Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your resources and will **enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.**” Here, Paul is saying that their generosity in this situation resulted in an increase of righteousness.
Justification is the legal and forensic declaration that you stand in the right in God's court of Law. Not based on your own righteousness of my own through compliance to the Law—but based on the righteousness of Christ imputed to me. He who knew no sin became sin (a sin offering) so that we might become the righteousness of God. Positionally, you are as righteous as you are ever going to be before God. Functionally however, we enter a life of sanctification—which is being set apart day-by-day—conforming our lives to the character and pattern of Christ.
Practicing Generosity loosens the grip that my stuff can have on me. And by that, God can increase the harvest of my righteousness—growing in the righteousness of Christ.
 - **Practicing generosity helps us make inroads into our culture and community.** When individuals give to the work of God's Kingdom and his gospel that is an act of worship. When individuals give generously to Jesus for his glory that is one of the ways God grows us up in the faith. But it's also a way we make inroads into the hearts and minds of those we're trying to reach. When people see the generosity and the hospitality of the Gospel they are more apt to taking it seriously. That it really makes a change in the lives of the people who claim it.
Acts 2:44-47 “Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. ⁴⁵ They sold their possessions and property and **distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need.** ⁴⁶ Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. **Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.**
What a refreshing alternative to the materialism and self-worship that has bound our culture and community.
- Acts 12:24** “But the word of God spread and multiplied. ²⁵ After they had completed their relief mission, Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem” **The Generosity of the Gospel is part of our mission.**

2. God builds the church through diversity in leadership.

² As 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.” ³ Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off. We learn from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians that one of the primary ways in which God builds up his church—this holy temple consisting of Jew and Gentile—is through a variety of leadership gifts.

Eph 4:11-13 And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness. In this passage, Paul is referring to the variety of leadership gifts within the church and the variety of members and different functions of the individuals who comprise the church.

However, in the Acts 13 passage, he is also intentionally including the ethnic and social diversity within the group.

Who are these leaders in Antioch?

Barnabas, we’ve learned, was a bilingual Jewish Levite—a leader who could speak Greek and Hebrew/Aramaic fluently.

Simeon, a very common Jewish name in Judea, Palestine, and North Africa; also called *Niger* from the Latin meaning “the black”—this would be equivalent to calling someone today “African American; Jamaican American” designating an ethnic origin.

Lucius—another very common name in the ancient world, *Cyrene, modern day Libya*, (he may have been Arabic in descent) was a prosperous Roman state. Whatever his actual ethnic origin, he is Roman.

Manaen, a close friend of Herod Antipas from childhood (whom we meet in the Gospel in John the Baptist’s narrative)—this designation as the friend of Herod likely refers to his freedman status (he was a slave). With Luke’s emphasis on the Gospel pushing further into the Gentile world, there is no question in my mind that he intends to highlight here the ethnic and social diversity of the Church’s leadership. This is the direction in which Christianity is moving.

Antioch is led by a racially and socially diverse group of leaders who are instrumental in building up the body of Christ through instruction and prophetic direction.

God speaks to this diverse group of leaders through corporate worship and fasting—the spiritual practices of devotion.

3. Corporate worship and fasting can be a means of spiritual preparation for a new direction.

Acts 13:2-3 As 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.”³ Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off.

The term “worshiping” is *leitourge’o*, from which we get the word “liturgy.” It was most often associated in the OT with the temple sacrificial system. This literal sacrificial system involving the slaughter of animals has been fulfilled in Christ entirely, and now the notion of worship as a sacrificial offering of thanksgiving and praise (1 Chr 6:32; 16:4; 2 Chr 31:2); In the NT, these physical sacrifices completely fulfilled in Christ become spiritual sacrifices and they include:

- **our bodies as holy instruments to God (Rom 12:1)**
- sacrifices of **praise (Heb 13:15)**
- and the **sacrifice of immature impulses replaced by mature and godly living (1 Pet 2:1-5).**

Fasting literally means “to go hungry.” It is a word that describes a designated period of time that a person goes without food in order to seek God.

We’re not told in Scripture what fasting does (in terms of the mechanics)—we don’t know exactly how it works. But here’s what we surmise fasting and prayer does in and for the individual.

- **Fasting (and Worship/Prayer) can help us to eliminate distractions.** The issue of becoming distracted by the pressing concerns, the pressures and problems that come in and out of our lives was so important that Jesus gave one of his most enduring parables—the Sower (Matt 13)—about this. Of all the types of “ground” (which in the parable represent hearts) the farmer (Jesus) scattered the seeds (proclaimed Good News of the Kingdom)—one of the enemies of the gospel’s productivity was distraction. The message is enthusiastically received with a willing heart but cannot grow because the cares and worries and distractions of life choke out its potential.

Fasting coupled with worship and prayer is a way to focus the mind and heart on God—the one who supplies us richly with all we need for his work—it's a way of tuning out the noise and the barrage of information that drowns out our spiritual sensitivity to the Spirit.

- **Fasting and prayer helps us to build up a resistance to sinful impulses. In addition to eliminating distractions.**
 - **Resistance in the sense of strengthening a weak immune system—we experience limited exposure to the very things we need to resist and to prevail against.**

Illus. When our kids were little they would play outside all day and dig around in the dirt in the backyard, Hayden would find worms and dig up rocks in my yard. And come in from outside just filthy, dirt on their faces, in their teeth under their fingernails. My first instinct was to just hose them down and scrub the filth and dirt off them. Because I held the false belief that exposure to dirt was harmful.

Jack Gilbert, Ph.D. who studies microbial ecosystems at the University of Chicago and author of *Dirt is Good: The Advantage of Germs for Your Child's Developing Immune System*, his research focusses on early exposure to limited levels of bacteria and microbes in dirt can boost the immune system while also triggering serotonin which is our “relaxation” anti-stress chemical in the brain. Early and repeated exposure to dirt in children led to increased levels of resistance of parasites, viruses and harmful bacteria in later years. A well-exercised immune system needs to be given the chance to resist moderate levels of bacteria.

By contrast I had a friend named Beverly who was raised in a bleached home who grew up with a horrendous immune system.

Prayer and fasting can help us to build up a strong resistance against those predictable enticements of the flesh.

I don't want anything that God wants for me from the hand of the devil.

○ **Resistance in the sense of physical conditioning—helping to get us spiritually ripped and ready for action.**

Everything Satan tempted Jesus with in the desert (Matt 4; Lk 3) was a legitimate God-given desire.

Illus. A few years ago I joined Planet Fitness. I noticed when I first joined that every Monday there would be a huge table with piles of bagels, cream cheese, butter, and boxes of Pizza stacked on the table. Eventually I asked someone who worked there “What’s the deal with the bagels and Pizza?” “Oh that” she said, “It’s Pizza Monday.” I said, “But isn’t that the reason why we’re all here?” **This is what Satan does. You see, in the Valley of the Shadow of Death God** has prepared a table for us—a table of reassurance, hope. Satan also prepares a table for us—temptation; deception.

Nothing wrong with food—I didn’t come to the Gym to eat pizza and bagels. I came there because I have eaten too much pizza and bagels.

When does a legitimate desire become sinful—when we demand it out of God’s timing; when we receive it from any other hand than the Lord’s.

Everything Satan would have delivered to Jesus in Matt 4 would have been not according to God’s calendar and not from the hand of the Lord.

Jesus was there to condition himself—to build up a resistance and demonstrate his mastery over the primal appetites of the flesh. And the Devil is right there to tempt him with the very things God has called him to temporarily forego.

The leadership team at Antioch is intentionally denying themselves, in an environment of worship and fasting—bringing sacrifices of praise and presenting their bodies as living, holy sacrifices—and they hear from the Spirit.

Application:

1. Let’s pray and seek the Spirit’s direction for opportunities for Gospel generosity. Let’s tell people the good news and let’s show them the generosity of the Gospel. It’s how we worship; it’s how we grow in the faith; and it’s one of the ways we make inroads into our community and culture.

2. Let’s continue to embrace the idea of diversity in leadership—this is the way the Gospel is moving. God’s desire is for the Gospel of Jesus to make inroads into our culture and to represent the social and ethnic diversity of the Kingdom of God—this is modelled

by the leadership of the Church. **We must follow the Spirit's leading; and we're only as Good as our pool of possibilities.** We would never want to manufacture diversity for diversity's sake.

3. Let's devote ourselves personally and corporately to worship and fasting as we seek the Lord's direction. Do you have an impending decision coming up—make that decision in an atmosphere of worship and devotion. Setting yourself apart to hear the Spirit and condition yourself in godliness.