MARKS OF A FAITHFUL SERVANT

Acts 14:8-28

By

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June 24, 2001

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I don’t know whether Jesus will speak English when I stand before Him someday, or whether He will give me the ability to understand Hebrew or Aramaic, or whatever language is spoken in heaven. But if He is speaking English, I will be watching His lips and hoping that I see them forming a “W.” I want to hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master” (Matt. 25:21). It would be absolutely tragic to hear, “I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23)!

The apostle Paul wrote, “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:1-2, New KJV). We who know Christ should view ourselves as His servants and our aim should be to be faithful in that role. Our text shows the faithfulness of Paul and Barnabas in some great victories and in some difficult trials as they complete the first missionary journey. Their experiences are recorded so that we can follow their example:

We should learn from and imitate Paul and Barnabas as faithful servants of Christ, no matter what the cost.

The faithfulness of the apostles is contrasted with the fickleness of this pagan crowd. God used Paul to heal a man who had been lame from birth, and the crowd was ready to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas as gods. Shortly after, some Jews from Antioch and Iconium who hated Paul’s message easily persuaded the same crowd to stone Paul as an imposter. They dragged the unconscious apostle out of the city and threw him on the trash heap as dead. Some think that Paul actually died, but Luke’s words indicate that he was not dead, but supposed to be dead (14:19). Some think that Paul may have had his out-of-body experience of being caught up into the third heaven at this time (2 Cor. 12:1-7), but the chronology doesn’t fit.

But even though Paul was not dead, he was seriously wounded. He later reminds the Galatians (these very churches) that
he bore on his body the brand-marks of Jesus (Gal. 6:17), probably referring to scars that he suffered from this harrowing incident. God miraculously raised him up and gave him the strength to begin the 60-mile journey to Derbe the next day. Through it all, Paul kept on faithfully serving the Lord Jesus and preaching the gospel. We could probably come up with a dozen or more marks of faithfulness, but I will limit myself to seven:

1. **A faithful servant points people to the living God, not to himself.**

Lystra was a small town about 20 miles south-southwest of Iconium. Since there was no synagogue, Paul probably preached the gospel in the open marketplace. During one of his messages, he noticed a lame man, and the Lord gave Paul the insight that this man had the faith to be healed. Sometimes in the Bible, God healed people apart from any faith on their part. At other times, He healed in response to their faith. So Paul loudly commanded this man who was lame from birth to stand upright. When he leaped to his feet and began to walk, the crowd was amazed.

They began to speak in their native Lycaonian language (which neither Paul nor Barnabas understood), excitedly telling one another, “The gods have become like men and have come down to us.” They called Barnabas, who was older than Paul and the more quiet, stately man, “Zeus” (Jupiter); and they called Paul “Hermes” (Mercury), who was the orator god.

They were basing their identification on a legend that the Roman poet Ovid wrote about. According to Ovid’s story, Zeus and Hermes had once visited a valley near Lystra. They went from door to door, but no one invited them in. Finally they came to a cottage where a poor couple took them in, fed them, and gave them a bed for the night, not knowing that they were gods. Because of their kind hospitality, the two gods turned this poor couple’s cottage into a golden-roofed temple, but they destroyed the selfish people who had refused to take them in (see James Boice, Acts [Zondervan], p. 255). The people of Lystra didn’t want to make the same mistake again! So they ran to the local temple of Zeus, told the priest what had happened, and he quickly brought oxen to sacrifice to these two powerful visitors.
At some point, someone, perhaps Timothy, who was one of the converts from Lystra, told Paul and Barnabas what was happening. The apostles were horrified! They tore their robes as they ran into the midst of the crowd and with great difficulty restrained them. Luke reports the gist of what either Paul or Barnabas shouted out to the crowd (14:15-17). It would seem that they did not get to finish the sermon, since it does not give the gospel. The impression I get is that Paul was moving toward the gospel, but he got interrupted as the crowd noisily and, probably, angrily dispersed. They had been hoping that this was the rare experience of the centuries that would put their city on the map forever. People would flock from miles around to the place where the gods came down to earth as men. Think of what it would do for the local economy! So when these mysterious visitors insisted that they were mere mortals, not gods, the people were really bummed out!

Paul began by telling them that Barnabas and he were men of the same nature as they had. He preached the gospel to them so that they would turn from the worship of vain idols to the living God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them. When he spoke to the Jews, Paul could argue from Scripture, since they already believed it. But with these uneducated pagans, he began with creation, appealing to their sense that a living God, the Creator, stood behind all that they saw in the world.

In verse 16, Paul anticipates an objection from his audience: “We have served what you call ‘vain idols’ for centuries, and life has not been so bad. Why should we now turn from them to this God that you call ‘the living God’?” Paul explains that in the generations gone by, God permitted the nations to go their own ways. In His patience, God did not destroy them in their sin. Although God did not give them His written revelation, as He did with the Jews, yet He did not leave Himself without a witness. He did good towards them, giving them rain and fruitful seasons, satisfying their hearts with food and gladness.

Paul’s line of reasoning here is similar (although simpler and more abbreviated) to his comments in Romans 1:18-32 and his sermon to the Athenians (Acts 18:22-31). Through creation, every person should know that there is an almighty Creator and we are accountable to Him. Men invent myths, like the ancient Greek
mythology and the modern myth of evolution, to dodge their accountability to the Creator. As he puts it in Romans 1:18, they “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”

The testimony of creation is sufficient to condemn people for their rebellion against God, but it is not sufficient to save them. To be saved, people need to hear the gospel, which tells of God’s provision of a Savior, Jesus Christ, who offers forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who will put their trust in Him. If he had been allowed to continue, I believe that Paul would have urged his audience to repent of their idolatry and would have told them of the Savior who died and rose from the dead (see Acts 18:30-31), but he got cut off when they angrily dispersed.

His words in verse 16 raise the thorny questions: “Will God judge the heathen who have never heard the gospel? Why did God let all of these nations go for centuries without hearing the gospel?” Without digressing for too long, consider the following. First, God does not owe mercy to any nation or human being. We all have rebelled against God’s rightful rule and we all deserve His judgment. He is perfectly just in letting the nations go their own ways without giving them the revelation of the gospel, since they all have suppressed in unrighteousness the truth of creation.

Second, God in His inscrutable wisdom knows how people would have responded if they had had the revelation that others have had, and He will judge each person according to His wise justice. In Matthew 11:20-24, Jesus reproached the cities where He had performed miracles, but they did not repent. He tells them that it will be more tolerable for places like Tyre, Sidon, and even wicked Sodom in the day of judgment than for them, because if they had seen His miracles, those people would have repented. The mind-boggling thing is that these cities did not receive this revelation, and they perished in their sins. But God knows how they would have responded if they had received such revelation, and He will judge them accordingly!

When I am sharing the gospel and people raise this objection, I try to bring it back to this bottom line: “You now have heard about God’s sending Jesus Christ as the Savior who gave Himself on the cross as the sacrifice for sinners. How are you going to re-
spond? If you do not repent of your sins and trust in Christ, God will judge you according to the light that He has shown you!”

To come back to the point, Paul and Barnabas could have heard that these people were about to offer sacrifices to them and thought, “Well, it’s about time that we got some respect. What will a little mistake like that hurt for a while? Maybe we can use it later to tell them about Christ, since they will then respect us.” If that temptation flitted through their minds, they immediately cut it off. As faithful servants, their spontaneous response was to point people away from themselves and toward the living God, to whom we all must one day give an account.

2. **A faithful servant courageously keeps on proclaiming the gospel in spite of persecution.**

Paul and Barnabas had been forced to flee from Antioch and Iconium. But when they came into the region of Lycaonia, they continued to preach the gospel (14:7). Even after getting stoned, Paul didn’t give up. I would have thought that a short vacation would have been in order about then! But he got up, walked to the next city, and preached the gospel there (14:21). On the way back through Perga, where for some reason (perhaps the controversy over Mark’s departure, 13:13) they had not been able to preach on the outward journey, they spoke the word when they went back through there (14:25). Their persistence in preaching the gospel in spite of intense opposition was nothing short of amazing!

Most of us have never known any persecution that compares to what Paul and Barnabas went through. But you will catch criticism if you attempt to serve the Lord. How you respond will be a test of whether you are a faithful servant of Christ or not. If you’re prone to get hurt and quit, you need to learn the lesson of courageous persistence from these two servants of the Lord.

3. **A faithful servant strengthens and encourages other disciples, especially regarding the role of trials in the Christian life.**

The journey out to Derbe was more evangelistic in nature; the journey back through the same cities was more pastoral in focus. Probably the apostles knew that if they preached openly again in these cities where they recently had been driven out, they would be
killed and their missionary labors would come to an end. Besides, they now had groups of converts in each city, and these new believers could carry on the work of evangelizing their own cities if they got grounded in the faith. So Paul and Barnabas concentrated on “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God’” (14:22).

One of Satan’s most effective tools that he uses to cripple new believers is to send trials. That’s why Peter warns (1 Pet. 5:8-10),

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

The fact that Jesus Christ is King does not mean that His people will be free from severe trials. Sometimes He permits the enemy to afflict us to teach us to put on the full armor of God and stand firm. Through trials we learn to trust God more fully and not lean on the arm of the flesh. Trials strip us of worldly attitudes that have attached themselves to us like barnacles to the hull of a ship. But whatever the lesson, no disciple of Christ will be exempt from trials. It is important for you to learn to submit to God’s mighty hand in them, and then He can use you to strengthen and encourage newer believers, so that they will continue in the faith in the face of trials.

4. A faithful servant helps churches to be organized under godly leadership.

On the return journey, Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting” (14:23). As the body of Christ, the church is a living organism. It is the very life of Christ flowing through the members of His body that gives vitality and direction to the church. All of the members, but especially the leaders, need to walk in daily reality with the living Lord,
abiding in Him. If we don’t, the church can turn into a dead organization rather than a living organism.

But at the same time, we need to remember that every organism is highly organized; if it’s not, it won’t survive for very long. Churches need adequate organization so that the life is preserved. The apostles were traveling evangelists who established new churches through their preaching. Elders were long-term residents who were responsible to give oversight to the local churches.

Three terms are used somewhat interchangeably to describe these leaders. “Elder” looks at the spiritual maturity of the man. Their maturity will be in relation to a particular local church. These elders that Paul and Barnabas appointed were fairly new in their Christian experience, but they were the most spiritually mature men in those churches. Usually there is a correlation between physical age and spiritual maturity. Elders should normally be old enough to have the wisdom that comes from years of living.

“Overseer” looks at the work itself. Elders are to have oversight of the flock, to make sure that people are growing in godliness and that the church is doctrinally sound. The third term, “pastor,” looks at the job from the analogy of a shepherd. Some of the elders should devote themselves to the ministry of the Word, and to that end Paul directs that they be financially supported (1 Tim. 5:17-18).

The word “appointed” (Acts 14:23) in Greek meant “to approve by a show of hands in a congregational meeting” (Simon Kistemaker, Acts [Baker], p. 525). Although Paul and Barnabas appointed these men, and that only after fasting and prayer, and no doubt based on the spiritual qualifications that Paul later enumerated (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), they probably did so in conjunction with the participation of the local members.

We seek to follow the biblical guidelines in the selection of elders. We screen men to make sure that they are in line with the biblical qualifications. We also invite congregational input, so that if anyone knows a reason why a man should not be an elder, they can bring that to our attention. The congregation ratifies the elders each year at our annual meeting. One of the biggest mistakes that
churches make is to put men into leadership who are not spiritually qualified, mature men of God.

5. **A faithful servant is accountable to those who sent him into ministry.**

   Paul and Barnabas sailed back to Antioch, gathered the church that had sent them out, and reported all the things that God had done with them (14:26-27). It must have been thrilling to hear their stories, as they told how God opened a door of faith to the Gentiles! No doubt the church in Antioch had been praying during the year or more that these men had been gone. They didn’t have email or probably even snail mail to let them know the progress of the work as it unfolded. But eventually the men reported back and the church rejoiced to hear what God had done.

   Faithful servants welcome accountability, because they know that ultimately they will answer to the Lord who knows everything that they have done. Besides, it is great to know that a sending church is praying for you and your work. The church has a responsibility to pray for and support missionaries, and the missionaries have a responsibility to the church to let them know what God is doing through them in the work. I hope that you come out whenever we have missionaries giving reports of their work (usually on Sunday nights). In that way, your interest in missions will grow, and you will have a part in extending God’s kingdom worldwide.

6. **A faithful servant gives the glory to God for what He does through him.**

   This is somewhat similar to my first point, that a faithful servant points people to the living God, not to himself. But that was especially with reference to unbelievers. This point is in the context of Paul and Barnabas’ reporting to the church. They did not report on all the things that they had done and how they had the brilliant insight of taking the message to the Gentiles. Rather, they reported on “all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27).

   Faithful servants make sure that all the credit goes to the Lord. If He does not work, there will be no fruit. In some places Paul and Barnabas did not see as much response as in other places. But whatever the response, they were depending on the Lord, and
when He worked mightily, they gave Him the glory. It was only by His grace (14:26) that they had gone out, and it was by His grace that they had accomplished anything.

7. **A faithful servant knows when to recharge his spiritual batteries.**

I trust that I’m not reading too much into the text here, but Luke notes that Paul and Barnabas “spent a long time with the disciples” (14:28). It was probably a year to a year and a half before Paul left on the second journey, although this included the visit to Jerusalem for the council. We can be sure that they were actively serving at the home church during this time, but I think they were also getting recharged for the next term of service. After a time of worshiping and fellowshipping together with their old friends in Antioch, they were ready to go back into the battle again.

You can’t give out more than you take in or you will run dry. I need time off each week and every year to recharge. I need adequate time to read and think and pray, or I begin to feel drained. Each of us is wired differently, but you need to know yourself and watch yourself so that you don’t burn out. Schedule time each week and each year for renewal in body and soul.

**Conclusion**

Andrew Murray, the well-known devotional writer, had a brother who labored all his life in an African country with no visible fruit. He did not see any converts. But shortly after his death, revival broke out there and many were converted. He had broken the hard ground by his years of labor, but others saw the visible fruit. Being faithful, not necessarily being outwardly successful, is the important thing.

Paul and Barnabas are given to us as examples of faithful servants. May we imitate them so that someday we will hear our Savior welcome us into heaven with the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”
Discussion Questions

1. Paul often urged others to follow his example (1 Cor. 11:1). Does this contradict the principle of pointing people to God, not to himself? If not, is there a danger here?

2. Why didn’t God spare Paul from being stoned (Barnabas didn’t get stoned)? What does this teach us about God’s protection as we serve Him?

3. What is the difference between true and false humility? Is it wrong for the Lord’s servant to say “thank you” when someone tells him how his ministry has helped him?

4. What are some warning signs of burnout? In light of the many needs in the world, is it wrong to take time off from ministry?