



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World

Unstoppable: Sure Doesn't Feel Like It—Are
We Missing Something?

Acts 13:1–12 | Tim Badal | September 16, 2018



This morning we're picking back up our series we called "Unfinished," which we began in the spring semester as we were working our way through Acts 1–12. We called it Unfinished, because the work of the church is still going on today. As long as there are souls who don't know the saving work of Jesus Christ, our work is not done. But here in Acts 13, we're reminded of an indispensable truth for followers of Christ, which is that the work we do that is still unfinished is in fact also unstoppable.

So that's our theme for Acts 13–28 as we finish up this year with our study through this book New Testament book. We've come a long way already. In our study of Acts 1–12, we've seen the church go from eleven scared disciples, and at times faithless and disobedient, to a church that grew to tens of thousands of people. We've also seen the church go from being centered in Jerusalem to reaching out to Judea and Samaria. Today in Acts 13, we'll see it start reaching the uttermost parts of the world.

Acts 1–12 put the spotlight primarily on the ministry of Peter and John, whereas Acts 13 introduces us to a new apostle—the man who had been a persecutor of Christians, who then bowed the knee to Jesus on the road to Damascus. Saul of Tarsus, soon to be renamed Paul, is the main figure in the rest of Acts. We'll follow his missionary journeys, seeing how God used him to go not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Many times, it's assumed that the book of Acts is only about the acts of the apostles, but we should also be aware of two very prominent themes in the life of the early church. First, their continual opposition. After a short "honeymoon" period in chapters 13–14, for the rest of the book we'll see how the church was opposed again and again.

We can say with confidence that this mission that we're still a part of today is unstoppable. While at every point there seemed to be enemies against the church, through each challenge the church only built momentum and got stronger. Now, 2,000 years later, we are still preaching and proclaiming the same doctrine and truth, filled by the same Holy Spirit, because the ministry we're part of is unstoppable.

Here's why. The book of Acts is not really a book about the acts of the apostles—it's a book that tells of the acts of the Holy Spirit. He's the main character. He doesn't get a lot of press, because He always points to Jesus—which is what we should do as well. In fact, in these 28 chapters in Acts, the Holy Spirit is mentioned some 60 times. In the 12 verses we're looking at today, He is referenced three times. And when the Holy Spirit shows up, God is on the move to do great things. We need to desire not only to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, Whom we received when we accepted Jesus Christ as our Savior, but we need to be continually filled by Him so we can be part of this unstoppable work God is doing.

Let's look at Acts 13, where we'll learn about a church in Antioch, which is modern-day Syria, that seems to have been unstoppable. No one could get in the way of what they were doing. This morning we'll read verses 1–12.

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While 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 fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. ⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. ⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹ But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" ¹¹ And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. ¹² Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

I have to be honest with you—I think our title, "Unstoppable," is a great word. It means unbeatable. It means no one can get in one's way, but if they do, they're going to get knocked over. When we say Christianity and the gospel are unstoppable, it really makes sense. We believe it to be true and it's what we see in the church in Acts. Amidst opposition, the church was unstoppable.

Yet if we fast-forward to today in the 21st century, unstoppable isn't a word I would apply to the church. I don't mean specifically Village Bible Church, but I mean the Evangelical church in America. Unstoppable means nothing can stand in the way, but there seem to be a lot of things in our world today that keep the church from being the effective tool God designed it to be.

We read in Matthew 16:18 that Jesus said, "*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*" That's about as unstoppable as you can get. Even the devil in hell cannot prevail against the church. The church is going to do the work God wants it to do. But as I look at the terrain of Evangelicalism today, I don't see a lot of prevailing going on that results in our being victorious. Rather, it seems that the world, the devil, and sin are ruling the day.

I have to ask, if we as the body of Christ are supposed to be unstoppable, what are we missing? It seems the things that made the church in Acts unstoppable would also be present in our everyday life as well. Every study and statistic regarding the church today, however, seems to be saying the opposite.

I've been reading a book that has caused me to do some serious thinking about these things. It's called *The Great Evangelical Recession* by John Dickerson. He describes six factors that will crash the American church, telling us how to prepare for the arrival of these. As I'm reading this, I find myself agreeing with a lot of what he says, but there are also things I disagree with. Still, the book gives a clarion call, declaring that the Evangelical church in America is in real trouble.

Using the recession that took place ten years ago as a metaphor, Dickerson describes what he believes is about to happen in the church:

The problem with the great recession wasn't that nobody saw it coming; the problem was that the people who needed to listen, to put on the brakes, to adjust course, never got the message—or else they ignored it. The American church stands today in a similar position, on the precipice of a great evangelical recession. While we focus on a few large churches and dynamic national leaders, the church's overall numbers are shrinking.

Dickerson uses studies from places like Pew Research, Gallup, Barna—which is a Christian survey company—and a couple others. The numbers he finds are staggering. Churches are closing all the time. Fifteen hundred pastors a month, I believe, are walking away from the ministry. There's a great Evangelical recession that's taking place. Dickerson continues:

The primary fuel for church—donations—is drying up and disappearing. The political fervor that we have as congregations is dividing the movement from within. In addition to these internal crises, the outside host culture (i.e. American culture) is quickly turning antagonistic and hostile toward Evangelicals. The signposts are obvious, but many of the leaders who most need to see and plan for these trends are too busy to notice these broad cultural shifts. Others are too deceived by current success to believe it.

So there seems to be a dichotomy between the Antioch church we're studying today and the contemporary church. God used the church in Antioch to do great things, whereas the Evangelical church today appears to be dying. In fact, each of Dickerson's chapters are words that help define the current church in America. Here are some of those words. Chapter 1: Inflated. Chapter 2: Hated. Chapter 3: Divided. He says, "As a result of these strains, we are bleeding. We are sputtering. We are bankrupt." Now, you may agree or disagree with his assessment, but I will tell you as a pastor, I see a lot of this. I see it in the discouragement of fellow

pastors. We see it as churches come to us who are struggling to stay alive and who are asking if we can help them or even adopt them into our ministry.

As Dickerson says, the signposts are obvious. We are a church that seems to be more stoppable than we advertise—especially here in America. So how does a church like Village continue, as I believe we can, to transcend these cultural shifts? How do we continue to be an unstoppable church?

Here's what I see. We need to cease being the church in America and start acting like the church in Antioch. I'm going to give you four things the church in Antioch did that I think we need to be doing. These impact our relationship with the Lord, our relationship with one another, and our relationship with the world around us in such a way that enables our ministry and mission to be unstoppable for the cause of Christ.

An unstoppable church is excited about and open to the Spirit's leading.

The first thing we notice about the church in Antioch is that they were excited about and open to the Spirit's leading. Three times in our text we see how the Holy Spirit is involved in this church and its mission. Chapter 13 begins with the people coming to church on Sunday morning, as they did every week. *"Now there were in the church in Antioch prophets and teachers..."* It goes on to give the names of some of these leaders. Verse two, *"While they were worshipping the Lord..."* Just as we are here today, the church at Antioch assembled for the purpose of worshipping and being taught the Word. Prayer and fasting were also taking place. But there were some specific things about this church that I believe positioned them well to be the unstoppable church they were called by God to be.

They loved worshipping Jesus as Lord.

You might ask, "Where is that in the text?" It doesn't explicitly say they loved Jesus, but I believe their very presence testifies that these people had gathered to worship Him. They fasted and prayed, which tells me they loved Jesus more than just as a great teacher, but as their Lord.

If you're here today simply because you think it's your duty, you won't last long in the church. Coming here isn't worth it. If you're not here because you delight in a relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, there are many other things you can be doing with your time. Your lawn could be mowed. The car could be washed. You could go golfing. Football season is beginning. There are a lot of opportunities to do other things. You could hang out with friends and family. If you are here simply out of duty, just so you can check something off a list, it's going to be hard for you to stay very long. It's just not worth it.

But the church at Antioch loved to gather together to worship, praise and pray. They're listening to their leaders. Why? Because they had fallen in love with this Jesus. We need to realize that a lot of their enthusiasm came because of who their leaders were. Notice it was not just one individual, but five men are named. They didn't have the Lone Ranger approach to ministry. As we've seen in the New Testament, the churches were to be led by a group of men. Each of these five men represented diverse educations, vocations, and experiences.

Paul had been a persecutor of the faith. Barnabas seems to be an altogether great guy. Many scholars believe Simeon was the man who carried the cross for Jesus. Manaen was a friend of Herod the Tetrarch, the ruler who beheaded John the Baptist. But what united these men wasn't these differences—it's the same thing that should draw us together: they were all changed by the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ.

You see, Christ is responsible for the unity in the church. He brings the unity of spirit in the bond of peace. Each of these men had been given roles as prophets and teachers; that means their gifts were speaking gifts. They were able to teach God's Word and humbly share what the will of the Lord was.

This particular Sunday, during their time of worship and prayer, the Lord spoke. We don't know exactly how the Lord spoke to them, but the pattern in the New Testament suggests that there was a word of exhortation from one of the leaders. He would have told the church, *"Thus says the Lord, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul...'"* It might have involved the use of tongues, where someone spoke in tongues and another interpreted, through which the word of God was communicated to the group. We don't know how it happened, but we're told that the word came in such a way that it was clear to these men that the Lord had indeed spoken. The church agreed with this word, then in unity they fasted and prayed as they made this instruction part of their life.

They were willing to change their lifestyles.

What they were being asked to give wasn't just lip service—it was a lifestyle change. Can I be honest and say, "It's easy to worship"? We had an awesome worship time this morning, didn't we? It's easy to join in the singing. It doesn't cost us anything. We can sing and raise our hands and clap—but it doesn't really require us to change our lives.

We can also pray, either corporately or in small groups or in couples or privately—and that's not that hard either. It doesn't require much preparation and participation is pretty easy. We can check everything off our lists: "I prayed today. I worshiped today." It's not hard to listen to the teaching of God's Word, or at least hopefully not too hard.

But the item that's brought up twice in this passage that had a greater impact on their lifestyle is these people fasted. Fasting means giving up things in our lives that we need—food and water—for a season, because the things of God are of greater importance to us than these personal needs. These people did this before God spoke to them, then again after they heard His word. They gave up what would have brought them satisfaction, so they could clearly hear from Him.

Fasting is a lost art in the church. It's something we rarely do, quite frankly, because comfortable Christianity is the name of the game in America. Spectatorism is the name of the game in the church here today. I come, I consume, then I leave and critique and evaluate. Fasting puts our skin in the game. It speaks of how important these things are to us.

The church in Antioch clearly said, "It's important that we do what God wants, even if it means we have to say no to ourselves in the process." They were being led by their leaders, worshiping and fasting as a lifestyle, not just lip service, because they had fallen in love with Jesus.

An unstoppable church is entrusted with great opportunities.

What happens when these things are in place—when you're led by great leaders and when your worship is more than lip service? God will give you great opportunities. In Acts 13:2, the Holy Spirit told them, "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*"

We then read in verse four, "*So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.*" These two men left what is modern-day Syria on the coast of the Mediterranean, headed west across the sea to the Island of Cyprus. They began their ministry on this beautiful island, a real place you could visit today.

The same God who called Barnabas and Saul is calling us today.

We might be thinking, "That was nice for God to do that back then, but He's not telling me to do something like that, so I'll just wait." No, the Lord is calling us, through the teaching of His Word and through church leaders, to step out in service and ministry. Of course, it's easy for us to find excuses as to why we can't serve.

I was recently talking with another pastor, who said the greatest disappointment in his ministry is not fighting the devil, it's not temptation, it's not disunity in the church—it's the disengagement of his people. He said he found himself begging the people to do the very thing God commands them to do, which is to use their gifts in service of His Kingdom. He said he was growing tired of begging them almost to the point of giving up.

Notice a few things about what happened when God called Barnabas and Saul. First, **it wasn't calendar friendly**. They weren't given any time frame or time limit. They weren't instructed to serve for a week, or for this season of the school year. In fact, there was no description given about the ministry at all. They didn't know where they were to go, how long they would be there, or who they would be serving.

Yet they went without any bellyaching, not even stopping to check their schedules. We don't hear them saying, "You know, January isn't a good time for me—that's when the playoffs are vital." There's none of that. Yet many of us have made our calendars our gods. We tell God we want to hear from Him, but we've put our to-do lists in front of any ministry involvement. The gospel has become secondary in our lives. If everything else takes precedence over God's call, we will never become the unstoppable force He desires us to be. But God never promised to give us details—how long we would be serving, where we would be serving, or even what we would be doing. Sometimes He simply says, "Go, do the work. I'll explain it as you go." Paul and Barnabas had no idea what God was calling them to do; all they knew is that God had said, "Go" and they responded, "Yes."

Second, **following God's call takes courage.** They would be facing an unknown future. If we're honest, most of the time when we're called to serve in the church, we're not in much danger of being imprisoned for our work. We aren't usually afraid of dying. But Paul and Barnabas were saying yes to God in a context where both were likely to happen. They had friends who had been imprisoned, who had lost their property, and some who had even been killed for their faith.

In fact, Paul was one of the guys who was part of that persecution. Yet now he is saying to God, "It doesn't fit my calendar, but that's okay, Lord. You transcend my calendar. And You transcend any evil or any worry I have. I'm going to say yes, because I know You're with me."

Third, **following God's call will be costly.** It will be costly in two ways. In the first place, it would prove to be costly for Paul and Barnabas themselves. They had to leave their homes and jobs in Antioch; they had to leave their friends, leaving the places where they were already serving God. They were giving these things up to go to an unknown place, where they had no family or friends, to do a new work for God.

This is where it is good for us to remember our missionaries, who have given up the wonderful things we have here in America. They're no longer able to spend time with their friends or families, and often they've gone to places where they're the only Americans, or the only ones who speak English, or the only Christians. Their callings are costly.

In the next couple weeks, we'll be welcoming Ben and Missy Hatton back to our church here. As a young husband and wife, they made the decision to take their young family away from what was comfortable to go to the island of New Guinea. They went to a people group that doesn't speak their language, where they didn't understand each other's customs, with the intention of spending their lives there. Not two weeks or two months or two years—but their whole lives. They planned to put their little family on a plane, land in the bush of New Guinea, build a home, and do life there, because they had fallen in love with this people group that didn't know Jesus. I hope you get an opportunity to hear their stories. Things we take for granted, they have walked away from.

For example, if any medical issues come up—something we could easily get treated—they have to call in an airplane, which usually takes one to two days, to come to take them out. If one of them breaks a leg, there are no paved roads to travel on. If their kids get the flu, it's not easy to get treatment as their child could be dying. How many of us hate those days when the kids have the flu? We're so thankful we can take our children to the doctor.

It is costly to do ministry. It's just them, along with two other couples. For us, if we don't like our church, if we don't like the songs or the preaching, we just find a different church. But if these couples don't get along with each other, there's no one else to turn to. Brothers and sisters, we have got it so easy and our missionaries have shown us the cost of doing ministry. This place doesn't hold a candle to some of the work our missionaries are doing around the world.

But it's also costly for a church as well. The church at Antioch was giving up their two best leaders and teachers, Paul and Barnabas. Scholars believe Paul and Barnabas were the most popular and gifted leaders in that church. This often happens, even when there is a group of leaders. Because of giftings and personalities, leaders sometimes develop followings. But these two popular leaders were leaving.

Notice that no one in the Antioch church said, "Well, if they're going, I'm going with them. I have to sit under their teaching. I want to be a part of what they're doing." No, they said, "We'll keep doing our work here, and with joy in our hearts, we're going to send them out." It definitely cost them.

This is why I believe Village Bible Church is an unstoppable church, empowered by the Holy Spirit. A little less than a year ago, we gave up one of our best leaders, when Steve and Stephanie were released to serve at the Plano campus. It was hard. There were people who said Sugar Grove would never be the same without them. And they were right—just don't tell Steve and Stephanie I said that. Well, you can tell Stephanie—just don't tell Steve.

Yet this church affirmed their going with open hearts and with hands laid on them. We knew we would lose some of our momentum here, but we also knew it was best to reach the broader communities—places like Somonauk, Plano, and Sandwich. We sent one of our best, which was costly to the ministry here, so that greater ministry could take place. This is us doing New Testament work, for which you should be commended.

Even though it's costly, we need to recognize that great good comes as a result. Paul and Barnabas were going around to different cities, preaching in the synagogues. The most prominent man in the region, whose name was Sergius Paulus, heard what they were saying and asked to hear more. That would be like our governor hearing about our preaching and showing up to learn more about Jesus.

An unstoppable church expects opposition along the way.

In the middle of that great opportunity came opposition. One of the things we are ready to say is, “Lord, I will serve You if You’ll open every door.” But in this case, standing in the hallway outside the door God had opened for Paul and Barnabas were the enemies of Christ. Sometimes we too may be called, not to the road of least resistance, but to the road with great resistance. Paul even says in 1 Corinthians 16:9, *“A wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.”*

Sometimes we’ll encounter obstacles and enemies in our ministries, so we might conclude that the Lord doesn’t want us to go there. No, He may want you there for that very reason. Paul and Barnabas continued to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ; Sergius Paulus responded by wanting to hear more. Then one of his companions, a magician named Bar-Jesus (Elymas), opposed Paul and Barnabas. This magician was also a Jewish false prophet who somehow connected himself to the name Jesus by calling himself Bar-Jesus, which means son of Jesus. He had been ministering in some way to Sergius Paulus, so he was very much opposed to the preaching of Paul and Barnabas.

While this was actually a real-life scenario in that story, I think what’s more important is that we see the correlation between Bar-Jesus and what the world and the devil are still trying to do to people who want to come to Jesus. There were two things they did.

The opposition seeks to dissuade or distract people from turning to Jesus.

This man Bar-Jesus was doing everything in his power to turn the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, away. The word used in verse eight implies he tried to distract him. Isn’t that what the world tries to do with us? It realizes that if it can keep people distracted with TV and other media, drawing them to pursue the good life here, then those people will never take time to think about what an eternity without God looks like.

What those in the world aren’t thinking about is the reality that there will be a day of judgment for everyone. Jesus said in Luke 17:26–27, *“Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.”* But everyone is distracted from these thoughts.

So Elymas told the proconsul, “You don’t have to listen to them. Hey, let’s eat some food. Let’s invite these people in to do some performing for us.” He did whatever he could think of to dissuade this man who was seeking to hear more about Christ. But it didn’t work.

The opposition seeks to discredit Christians who are preaching the gospel.

So Elymas went another step further, just as the world and the devil still do to Christians who are bold in their faith. We see in verse ten that the Spirit through Paul says that Elymas was *“full of all deceit and villainy.”* Essentially, he was trying to convince Sergius Paulus that he had no reason to listen to Barnabas and Paul because they were worthless charlatans.

But Paul stood firm and spoke with conviction to Bar-Jesus: *“Will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?”* We need to realize that there is a force behind the world system that seeks to make the straight path of the gospel crooked. The spirits influencing Elymas are alive and active in our workplaces, in our schools and in our neighborhoods. They’re telling people not to worry about eternity and not to pay attention to Jesus.

When you tell people, “You must bow the knee to Jesus and be saved,” how do they respond? With hatred. You’re raining on their parade. You’re telling them to worry about things they don’t want to worry about. As a result, they’ll call you every name in the book, including bigots and haters. Brothers and sisters, we are coming to a time in our country when it may be difficult for you to be hired for a job or to find a place to live, because people are beginning to hate Christians. Hopefully the reason we’re hated is that we stand firm for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

An unstoppable church experiences great outcomes.

What happens in the rest of the story? Bar-Jesus was brought low. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul blinded him. That wasn’t very seeker-sensitive, was it? He called him a son of the devil. That’s not a way to get people to come back to your church.

Here’s the amazing thing. You might have thought Elymas Bar-Jesus—who heard the gospel and saw the power of the Holy Spirit in Paul and Barnabas, who himself was actually blinded merely through Paul’s spoken word—that would have made him believe. But we don’t have any record that he ever came to Christ.

This tells us how sinful sin really is and how rebellious rebellion against God really is. It tells us that Elymas went groping about for someone to lead him. Instead of reaching out to Jesus, he wanted nothing to do with Him. Brothers and sisters, we live in a world where you could do a miracle right in front of people and they would rather not believe. “No thanks—I still don’t buy it.” What’s amazing is the outcome in this story. Good prevailed over evil and the gospel prevailed over darkness. Verse 12 says, *“Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.”*

Let me ask you this question: who is your Sergius Paulus? Whether you know it or not, that person may be longing for you to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with them. Are you praying for them? Are you fasting for them? Are you asking God to bind every evil sphere of darkness around them? Have you ever thought that the person you are being called to share the gospel with might have someone near them telling them not to buy what you’re saying? Do we really believe the gospel is the great hope of the world? If we do, then are we praying and fasting for the Sergius Pauluses in our lives, that God would bind the work of the devil so they might see His power clearly?

Sergius Paulus believed. I want you to know that there’s a Sergius Paulus in your workplace, in your school, or in your neighborhood who needs to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ—but they need a bold and courageous witness who is willing to speak the unstoppable truth that Jesus Christ came to save sinners. By grace and mercy, He extends forgiveness and love to all who will believe, inviting people into the family of God.

Brothers and sisters, we have the power of the Holy Spirit to change lives. But will we be like the church in America that is comfortable with being entertained and are comfortable with the status quo. Or will we be like the church in Antioch, an unstoppable movement that saw Sergius Pauluses of all kinds come to the saving knowledge of Jesus. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit and we yield to His leading, obstacles and opposition will come, but great outcomes like salvation of souls will take place. And brothers and sisters, it should take place this week. We need to pray and fast; we need to ask the Lord to open up doors, even when the gates of hell seek to destroy those opportunities every step of the way. Because here’s the great thing: greater is He that is in us than He that is in the world (1 John 4:4).

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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