

Acts 13:4-12

Outward Church: Open or Closed Heart?

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I used to work the opening shift at Indian Village in Estes Park, Colorado. I'd get down to the store by 9am, unlock the front doors, turn on the lights, uncover the register and jewelry cabinets, and turn on the neon red and blue "open" sign. We used to just have a cardboard sign that we would flip from closed to open, but we upgraded to an LED sign. That sign stayed bright all day and it was one of the things that attracted people to our store in the evening. They could see we were open and would come in.

There were some great things about having an open sign. Customers, sales, money. The money I earned there helped me buy a car, pay for gas, and even buy a ring for Monica. Being open really helped. But there were a lot of negatives to being open as well. Being open created dirty floors, noisy customers, empty shelves, and messy t-shirts. Over the ten summers I worked there I estimate I folded at least 50,000 t-shirts, if not a lot more. I'll have to ask the Lord when I get to heaven.

Being open is good, but it's messy. You don't know what will happen when you open yourself up. It's much safer to close yourself off. So here's my question for you today....

Do you have an open or closed heart to Jesus?

Is your heart open to Jesus or closed to him? Is the door of your heart lit-up with a bright red and blue LED "open" sign? Or is a cardboard "closed" sign hanging in the window? I imagine most of us assume our hearts are open, but how do we really know? How can you tell? There's no LED implant over our hearts that blinks "open," at least not yet.

Paul and Barnabas have headed off on the early church's first recorded missionary journey. They've left Antioch north of Jerusalem. They travel 15 miles to the coastal city of Seleucia, and then they sail another 75 miles to Salamis on the Island of Cyprus. Modern day Cyprus is gorgeous. I think if we said, "Hey, we're doing a missions trip to Cyprus, everyone would sign up."

Acts 13:4-6a (ESV)

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...

As soon as Paul and Barnabas arrive in Salamis, they go to the Jewish synagogue. We'll see this pattern throughout Acts. Although Paul was uniquely gifted to preach to the Gentiles, he believed the gospel was first for the Jew. Paul puts into practice what he preaches in Romans 9-11; Christ first for the Jews, and also the Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas make their way across Cyprus. From tip to tip Cyprus is 140 miles long and at its greatest width it's 60 miles wide. Here John Mark assists them in their travels. Maybe he carried food, scrolls, supplies, or took care of their animals. What we do know is John is going to leave them a short time later. Here the author of Acts, the good doctor Luke, is setting up the narrative. John is still with them.

Do you know which early Christian from the New Testament is from Cyprus? Barnabas is from Cyprus; “Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas...” (Acts 4:36a). This is Barnabas’s home turf. So they probably stopped at friends’ and relatives’ houses all across the island. This goes to show that you don’t have to travel to the other side of the world to be a missionary. Sometime God calls you to the place you call home to be a missionary. Today’s question is also for you. If Jesus called you to your neighborhood to be a missionary, would you answer? I believe he already has. That doesn’t mean it will be easy. They face opposition:

Acts 13:6-8 (ESV)

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.

Here in the story we find two people, one of which you even might identify with. We meet Sergius Paulus, a local government official called a proconsul. He represented the interests of the consul, typically a military leader, but only for a year term. He is called “a man of intelligence” and he wants to hear Barnabas and Paul (still being identified as “Saul” in the text) preach about Jesus from the Scriptures. So if you are someone who is open to hearing the word of God, you might be like Sergius Paulus.

On the other hand, you could also be like the magician Elymas, who was a Jewish false prophet also called “Bar-Jesus,” which means “Son of Jesus.” Bar-Jesus is not named after Jesus. Jesus was a common name at that time. Jesus is just the Greek form of Joshua. Elymas is not open to hearing about Jesus’ death and resurrection. It appears that he’s not merely closed to the message, but actually opposed to it as he tries to hinder Sergius Paulus from hearing the gospel.

Let’s take a closer look at both Sergius and Elymas. Even though we are sitting here or tuning in online, we don’t want to just assume we’re like Sergius and not Elymas. So what are the signs of being like Elymas? Elymas had a closed heart and sought power and control.

Closed Heart - Seeks power and control.

Elymas is a false prophet and a magician, a sorcerer. That means he’s willing to say whatever he thinks, and call it God’s will. Not only that, he practices the dark arts. He is a shaman. He tries to use “incantations, rituals, and formulas” to channel supernatural powers for his purposes. People probably went to him when they wanted the spirits to bless them, or wanted to know what to do with their lives, or maybe even wanted to talk to the dead. Sergius kept a guy like him around to try and help divine major decisions or cast a spell to influence outcomes. Elymas saddles up to power and seeks to control as much as possible.

If any of you are caught up in any of the dark arts I just mentioned, even if you only have a crystal, or a dreamcatcher, or a ouija board, or regularly check your astrology forecast, please get rid of those things. Don’t swim in those waters anymore. Messing around with them is like going for a swim in the waters outside of a power plant after it melted down. The water’s not safe.

But maybe you don’t look for power or control in those areas. Maybe you look for power and control through how much money you earn, or through how much education you have (hey, I’m working on my doctorate), or whose elected to office, or simply with wanting everyone to do things your way. The more we seek power and control over life, the less room we leave for God. We close ourselves up and really, there’s not much left for him to do.

I just finished reading Francis Chan's book, *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit*, for a second time. It's a terrible book. It really is. Chan writes about how we have to give up power and control if we really want to experience the Holy Spirit. I don't recommend reading this book because it will be too painful, too convicting. Please stay away from this book, but let me read a small snippet, the story of two people who sought to let go of power and control to follow the Spirit. Francis Chan shares:

Jen works in our church office, and she's one of the people I think of when I hear the term Spirit-filled. She doesn't have a list of accomplishments to amaze you. It is more about who she is than what she's done. I think you know the type—the person who convicts you just by how she lives her life and interacts with people.

I first met Thomas because he was a chef and co-owner of an extremely nice and expensive steak house in town. He sent a gift certificate to my wife and me so we could enjoy a meal that most pastors can't afford. While we were there, Thomas shared with me how great the restaurant was doing. It had far exceeded expectations. In another three years he would receive back not only his initial investment but a huge bonus on top of that. The only problem was that God was calling him away from the restaurant then, not in three years.

Thomas surprised his partners by giving up the money in order to pursue the ministry God was calling him to. Thomas left the fancy restaurant and took a position at the local rescue mission. He now cooks for the homeless, recovering addicts, and others who are seeking to rebuild their lives. He uses his training in the culinary arts to teach the homeless how to cook. He then helps them find jobs as cooks at local restaurants.

Thomas and Jen are a young couple in our church body; they are a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led couple. They believe God will soon call them overseas, but until that day comes, they seek daily to follow as the Spirit leads. And they are doing it. - *Forgotten God* by Francis Chan.

If you're interesting in reading this book, we have a copy in our church library downstairs. So what will you do? Will you close your heart and unintentionally (or maybe even intentionally) close yourself to God? Or will you open your heart to the Spirit and whatever he wants for you? Even if you have a closed heart, there's still hope for you. The Holy Spirit can soften your heart, but it might get uncomfortable.

Acts 13:9-11 (ESV)

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.

Full of the Holy Spirit, Paul calls Elymas out for his rebellion against God. He calls him out for his closed and opposed heart to Jesus. This man has given his heart to the devil, and is nearly gone. But even here, there is an offer of grace. Do you see what Paul does? He calls down a curse on Elymas that blinds him. His loss of sight might actually be the one thing that helps him see.

Remember Paul's conversion? Remember what happened to him? He was on the road to Damascus when Jesus appeared to him, blinding him for three days (Acts 9:8-9). During those three days of blindness Paul got right with the Lord. This is an opportunity for Elymas to get right with the Lord. To be blind, and recognize he doesn't have any real power or control over his life or world.

Does God have to blind you for you to be able to see? What does God need to blind you to so that you can see? Is there something you're too focused on or care about too much? A family member? A friend? A

difficult issue or relationship? What if that thing is taking your eyes off of what God wants you to see? Ask God to open the eyes of your heart to see what he wants you to see. God can turn people like Elymas into people like Sergius, who have an open heart.

Open Heart - Wants to know Jesus and see his power.

Sergius Paulus takes a posture of learning, of listening, of wanting to hear Barnabas and Paul's preaching.

Acts 13:12 (ESV)

Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Two things absolutely amaze Sergius: the miracle and the teaching. Who wouldn't be amazed by a miracle where the most powerful man you know, a man you've seen do magic and supernatural deeds, is no match for the newcomers in town? If he wasn't sitting straight up paying attention, he is now. But that's not the only thing that gets him in the end.

Remember how he asked to hear "the word of God?" (Acts 13:7) Remember how Elymas tried to keep him from "the faith?" Now he gets to hear them teach and preach. They tell him what the Scriptures say, and how the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ Jesus. They teach him the same things I want you to know today.

I want you to know that Jesus lived an innocent life, died a terrible death on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins, but rose again from the grave in victory over sin and death, and is now seated on heaven's throne ruling and reigning over the universe. If you confess your sins, and believe in him, which means trusting him with your whole life, he'll forgive you, transform your life, and welcome you into an eternal church family.

Do you have an open heart? Do you want to know Jesus and see his power? Jesus wants to reveal himself to you through the pages of the Bible and the Holy Spirit opening up your heart. This whole transformation is only possible because the Holy Spirit sent them on this missions journey (Acts 13:4) and because Paul, full of the Holy Spirit, rebukes Elymas. Sometimes the Spirit moves us to say hard things, but those hard things can actually open up hearts to God's Spirit. Here's a hard thing. We are all broken by sin and going to hell unless God saves us by his grace. If you don't yet have his grace, ask the Holy Spirit to fill your heart and give you faith in Christ Jesus.

But maybe you're a longtime believer. Has your heart grown cold? Have you lost your passion for Jesus? Maybe you've got wrapped up in seeking power and control over your life. I know I do. Really, what we all need, is to know Jesus and witness his power. You can pray too, asking the Lord to open your heart again.

Where are we as a church body? Do you think we're open or closed to the Spirit's work and Jesus' leading? If we're closed, it'll show by our trying to seek power and control over each other, and our community, just focusing on holding on and collecting more people instead of following Christ. If we have open hearts, God might reveal Jesus to us, and show us a little of his power. If we truly seek Jesus, if we ask him to lead this church, what might happen? If we pray, really pray and seek him, how might the Spirit surprise us?

The Holy Spirit can transform a closed heart into an open heart through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If God can raise Jesus from the dead, he can raise your heart and my heart from the dead. He can take a stony heart and make it soft to the gospel. Is your heart open or closed? It feels safer to keep it closed; but in the end even though being open is more risky, it leads to Jesus and eternal life. Let's pray.

2 Corinthians 13:14 (ESV)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references. You can also listen on [Apple podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What is a closed heart?
2. What is an open heart?
3. What type of heart is yours?
4. How can Jesus transform your heart?

Sources

Arnold, Clinton E.. *Acts* (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary) (p. 118). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition. *Distances traveled and magician explained.

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