

I remember reading (several years ago) about (then) Secretary of Education... William Bennet. ... Bennet wrote about a contemporary wedding that he attended. ... Instead of the couple exchanging the traditional vows which declare... "*till death do us part...*" this couple pledged to remain together... "*as long as love shall last...*"

"I sent paper plates as my wedding gift..." Bennet concluded.

Although this incident took place several years ago... I don't think that the sense of commitment couples have today has improved much... do you...? And the expression used in those vows... "*as long as love shall last*"... seems very expressive of the kind of commitment that is growing more common today. "*I will remain in this marriage for as long as the feelings...* (which Hollywood says is love)... *lasts.*" ... A promise like that... is about as binding of a chord... as a wet spaghetti noodle.

This is not just true in our homes... and I wish I could say that it is only the case with non-believers. ... But among those who proclaim Christ... very often... it is good feelings and convenience that determines the strength of commitment. ... "*As long as You make my way smooth... Lord...*" ... "*As long as good feelings... and spiritual goose bumps last...*" ... "*As long as it is convenient... and as long as it is not too stressful...*"

If I asked you to evaluate your commitment to the Lord... you might be tempted to judge yourself by others. ... "*Compared to Harvey... over there... I'm not so bad...*" ... ("*In fact... I'm looking pretty good!*") ... Or you might be tempted give yourself some slack... because of a strong commitment you once demonstrated... but now it is someone's else's turn to step up to the plate. ... And I cannot help but think that there may be

some here... who have been beaten down... and are very discouraged...  
some who gave themselves to ministry... in a completely sacrificial way...  
and got kicked in the teeth as their reward. ... Lingered thoughts tell you...  
*“That is not the way ministry is supposed to be...”*

I believe that the Holy Spirit would have us evaluate our commitment to  
Him... as we study this morning’s passage. And if we remain open to His  
leading... *as we evaluate...* we will not default to our normal justifications.

Now... there is the danger of giving in to another temptation... as we look at  
the incredible commitment demonstrated by Paul and Barnabas in today’s  
passage. ... And that is to brush it off... telling ourselves... *“It is very  
interesting to see what Paul and Barnabas went through... But this kind of  
commitment is way above and beyond what God would ever want from  
me... I am not an apostle...!”*

While it is true that God has not called any of us to be a 1<sup>st</sup> Century  
Apostle... here is a line of questioning that we had better not ignore: *“Am I  
as committed to the Lord (right now)... as I know He wants me to be...?”  
How far am I willing to go for the Lord...?”* ... *“How much am I willing to  
endure...?”*

Let’s not waste the opportunity that our passage gives us today... to  
evaluate our own commitment. ... Join me... as I ask God to speak to our  
hearts...

**- PRAY -**

The purpose of our study today is not only to get us to evaluate our  
commitment to the Lord... but it is also to discover what made Paul and

Barnabas' so strong in theirs. ... (You see...) if we sense that God does want more commitment from us... then we will also want to discover how we can kick-start a progress of commitment in our life...? ... So... I will be pointing to five kick-starters... that we see in our passage from Acts... this morning.

Last week... as we concluded Acts chapter 13... we saw how Paul and Barnabas were booted out of Pisidian Antioch.

### **Acts 13:50-52**

Iconium was an ancient city that claimed to be older than Damascus (which most people thought was the oldest.) ... In the dim past it had a king named Nannacus, and the phrase "since the days of Nannacus" was proverbial for "from the beginning of time." There were no large Roman garrisons in Iconium, so it remained more Greek in attitude and was somewhat resistant to Roman authority. They were governed by an assembly of citizens called the *Demos*, which held itself aloof from the Roman representative.

Here the missionaries met with immediate success and immediate opposition. We see the success in verse one.

### **Acts 14:1**

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.

After their rejection by the Jews in Pisidian Antioch... one might have forgiven the missionaries had they chosen a different place than the

synagogue for their initial witness. However the strategy of 'to the Jew first' is apparently a prevailing conviction. ... So they went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. ... The Lord was clearly present... and empowering the missionaries... because they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.

What we see in this... is our *first* "kick-starter.' ... One of the elements that made their commitment strong was that they viewed the closing of one door... as the opening of another. ... The door at Pisidia Antioch ***slammed*** shut in their faces. ... A very unjust persecution was stirred up against them. ... (LISTEN!)... Violently closed doors... hardship... and persecution... is not evidence that your ministry is finished... even when it is completely unfair! ... All it means is that we are to look for an open door elsewhere.

**Kick-starter #1** – See the closing of one door as the opening of another. Do not ignore the exhortation Paul gives us in Philippians 2:12... because of a closed door.

**Philippians 2:12 (ESV)**

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,*

God saved each of us for various purposes that we are to be intense about discovering and fulfilling. ... He has worked into yours and my salvation special responsibilities that we are to continuously work out. ... A door that shuts on us is not to deter us from that.

The Apostles found another open door... and when they walked through it... they found immediate success. ... But they also found immediate opposition.

### **Acts 14:2-4**

When their enemies stirred up hatred against them... what did Paul and Barnabas do? ... They stayed around for a long time and continued to speak boldly. ... They had just been run out of Pisidian Antioch... but they were not about to run at the first sign of trouble.

God even granted the Apostles the ability to confirm the truth that they taught by performing signs and wonders. ... Have you ever thought... *“Lord it would make my job so much easier to convince my friend... or unbelieving family member... of Your truth... if an undeniable modern-day miracle were to happen in their midst...?”* ... *“Show them Who You really are... Lord...! OK...?”*

We may wish we could perform a miraculous act that would convince everyone once and for all that Jesus is the Lord. ... But we see here that even if we could perform a miracle... it wouldn't convince everyone. ... God gave these men power to do great wonders as confirmation of the message of grace... but people were still divided.

Don't spend your time and energy wishing for miracles. ... Commit yourself to ministry by walking through His open doors... and leave the convincing to the Holy Spirit. ... But we should also realize this (and we will see it again as another “kick-starter.” I will just mention it now... but we'll come back to it.) ... When Christ is proclaimed... it will divide people. ... Christ's ministry

brought a “*division*” upon the earth. He is the great divider of man for eternity.

### **Acts 14:5-7**

Here is our first “kick-starter” again: See the closing of one door as the opening of another. Paul and Barnabas did this... having been booted NOW... out of two cities... back to back. SLAM...! SLAM...!

Notice... two things... ... First... God’s protection. *“They were aware of it.”* However the plot was revealed... you can be sure that God was in it. ... He can arrange providence and control people... so that the best laid plans of men... will be revealed all over the world... if God so desires. ... **Second...** notice the human part in the protection. *“They were aware of it - and fled”.* God does not work miracles when not necessary. ... He may have worked some miraculous way to reveal the plot to the believers... but the fleeing part is man's part. ... Divine intervention does not eliminate human responsibility.

Paul and Barnabas were brave... but not foolish...! ... They were “*Born again*”... but not “*born yesterday*”...! ... God protects His children... but at the same time... He wants us to use good ol’ common sense... and recognize a closed door. Paul and Barnabas were using theirs... when they departed.

On our way out... perhaps you and I would have been saying... “*God... this isn’t fair...! Your servants... God... who make great sacrifices for You... need to be given immunity to such problems...! ... Danger... abuse... hardship like this... are completely out of line...! So... I am just going to sit*

*down and wait for you to get Your act together... God...! ... Maybe I'll get going again... if You start doing what I think You should...!"*

Isn't it true... that sometimes we develop an attitude that God somehow owes us an easier life... if we show a strong commitment to Him...? The more committed we are... the more we expect immunity to problems and difficulty.

The entire book of Acts declares over and over to us that this simply is not true. ... As a matter of fact... later in this same chapter we will have a verse that directly contradicts this line of thought.

But if we are going to progress in our commitment... we need to see the closing of one door as the opening of another. Even a violently closed door... (slammed rather unfairly in our face)... is not our license to sit down and pout.

The next stop in the road for the missionaries is at **Lystra**... some twenty miles to the south of Iconium... and a distinctly rural setting. ... Perhaps a social snob from one of the metropolitan cities in Galatia would have thought of it as an under-educated "hick-town." It was 'less developed'... than the more civilized cultures of the surrounding area. ... Religiously... this area could be described... as 'heathen'... and far more pagan than the nearby Roman and Greek cultures.

There is no reference to a synagogue (which implies strongly that none existed.) ... So the missionary team engaged in street evangelism... interfacing with a population which had no previous contact with the God of Israel. ...

### **Acts 14:8-10**

Paul looked intently at the crippled man... allowing him to use his apostolic gift... to see the inner state of the man. This is how he realized that the man had faith enough to be made whole. Paul called out loudly (and many people heard) “Stand up on your feet!” ... It was the one thing this man had been unable to do his entire life. ... But the man leaped up and walked... just as the similar case with Peter – back in Acts 3:8.

### **Acts 14:11-13**

These wild Lycaonians had an ancient legend that has been preserved for us... because it was recorded by the Roman historian Ovid. ... The Lycaonians believed that Zeus and Hermes had once come to their city disguised as mortals seeking lodging. ... Though they asked a thousand homes... no one would take them in. ... Finally... at a humble cottage of straw and reeds... a poor elderly couple named Philemon and Baucis... freely welcomed them and lavished upon them with what meager means they had. ... In appreciation... the gods transformed the cottage into a temple... making the couple priest and priestess. ... And as for the inhospitable townspeople... their homes were destroyed by a massive flood. ... These poor Lycaonians were determined not to make the same mistake again.

It makes sense... therefore... how quickly the people of Lystra associated the two gods... with Paul and Barnabas. ... Seeing such a phenomenal event — a crippled man healed by the shout of Paul... a crippled who they all knew had never walked — stirred the imagination of the Lycaonians.



Barnabas evidently had a more noble presence... so they called him Zeus... the chief god. ... Since Paul was the spokesman... they naturally called him Hermes... the messenger of the gods. ... .. Poor Paul and Barnabas did not know what was going on... because when the people became excited they began to speak Lycaonian. ...The devil was having a banner day! ... What had started out with such promise was about to be ruined.

When the priest came with sacrificial oxen with garlands on their horns... Paul and Barnabas were horrified. ... Now they understood what was happening!

Satan was giving them his best shot — manipulation at its worst! The Lycaonians' misplaced praise kept Paul and Barnabas from presenting the full truth. ... These people wanted to know this new God only on their own terms. ... Paul and Barnabas never got to explain the Incarnation because the people were determined to keep them within the boundaries of their religious presumptions. ...Today too Christ is often made such a captive of men's presuppositions (what they think he ought to be or what they want him to be)... that they do not really understand him.

Pastor and Bible commentary writer... Lloyd Ogilvie has a lot for us to consider about this concept:

*When Jesus was born there was no room at the inn. But today we not only have room at our inn, but a penthouse suite away from reality. Jesus is a V.I.P. to be honored but not believed or followed. In America, he is a custom but not the true Christ; a captured hero of a casual civil religion, but not Lord of our lives.*

*This is idolatry. We cut Christ down to our size and squeeze him into the straitjacket of one of our little gods. That way he is safe and always at a distance.*

*When Jesus came triumphantly into Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey on Palm Sunday 2,000 years ago, the people were delirious with praise, singing their loud hosannas. But when he spoke of His coming death... they began to cool. The cross did not fit their preconceptions of the Messiah. Finally they shouted, "Away with him. Crucify him!"*

*It is the same today. Almost everyone will receive Him as the greatest man who ever lived. ... Just leave it there and everything will be fine. Enlightened circles are comfortable with calling Him the supreme psychologist of history. ... He is safe as the most important person of all time. ... The safe... sweet Jesus... meek and mild — sentimental... impotent... distant — is no threat. ... The world will do anything for a Christ who is limited by our own perspectives. ... What it will not do is allow Him to put forth His own claims. ... The world will not receive Him as Lord! ... We all sometimes wear blinders as we read the Bible... seeing what we think supports our preconceived system and missing those things that do not fit. ... It is only with God's help that such a serious error can be avoided or changed.*

What a temptation this could have been for Paul and Barnabas... and Satan knew it. ... It would have been so easy for the apostles to rationalize... "*Boy! What an opportunity we have been given here... Let's just accommodate these poor savages for a bit... and then... once we have their solid attention... we will point them to God. This sure beats stoning!*" ... It is to their eternal credit that they did not receive worship by men for even a split second.

It is never our place to receive worship. Worship is reserved for God alone!  
**Exodus 20:5** - *I the LORD your God am a jealous God...*

Peter... you may remember... had a similar opportunity that he too rejected... when Cornelius bowed and offered worship in Acts chapter 10. ... But Herod actually received worship from the crowd... at the end of Acts 12... He immediately fell ill and died a painful death of being eaten by worms.

This all leads us to a fair question. ... Do we sometimes want (a little too much)... recognition and adulation from others... for committing ourselves to God's work of ministry...? ... I am not saying that we should never show our appreciation and thankfulness to those who serve the Lord in a committed way around us. ... But in terms of our own desire for it... are we showing proper restraint...? ... Do we ever feel jealous... when others get recognition... for lesser commitment... than what we have given...?

Here is another “kick-starter.” ... Stay more focused on God's honor – than your own. ... We need to be more concerned about our character... than about our honor. ... The honors of this world will test our character... won't it...?

And there is... actually... yet another “kick-starter” that we see here. ... So far we have looked at two. #1) See the closing of one door as the opening of another... #2) Stay more focused on God's honor than your own (being more concerned for your character than your accolades.) ... And here is a third.

The emotions of a crowd can be a very convincing motivation. ... It is not difficult to imagine how easy it would have been for Paul and Barnabas to be swept up by all the passion and excitement. ... But “Bandwagon Mentality” is often a great tool of Satan. ... Majority opinion (even if it is

vehement) does not make an issue right! (Consider what is now said to be the majority opinion about human sexuality...)

The vigorous majority opinion when Moses returned after meeting with God on Mt. Sinai... was to worship the Golden Calf. ... Vigorous majority opinion did not make that right! ... The dominant preponderance of the narratives in Scripture... show the servant of God in direct opposition with the majority. Only on rare occasion do we see “the majority” on the correct side of the issue. Moses often contended with the people... so did each and every prophet of God. Jesus worked completely separate from public opinion. (LISTEN! Majority opinion – even a VIGOROUS majority opinion – does not mean the matter is right.) ... If a person is to progress in their commitment to the Lord – they must understand that.

Our nation’s culture... that relies on public opinion polls to determine right from wrong... operates from the incorrect assumption that majority opinion is always right. It isn’t...! Scripture shows us that... over and over! The Bible even gives us a lot of evidence that this is not true among God’s people. The majority got it wrong FAR more frequently than they ever got it right!

So... here is kick-starter #3) ... which we see in the behavior of Paul and Barnabas... Do not make too much of majority opinion. Beware of “Bandwagon Mentality.” It may... but often is not... God’s leading. ... And it sure is easy to get swept away by it.

Paul tried to correct the majority opinion. He tried to drive their attention to the Living Creator God... instead of the dead statue god. ... He mentioned rain... because Zeus was the god of rain. They believed that Zeus brought

them rain. He also mentioned fruitful seasons... because Hermes was the god of merchandise and the dispenser of food.

### **Acts 14:14-20**

What supreme bravery! ... What a witness! ... This had more effect than a thousand sermons. ... Paul... caked with blood and dirt... must have been quite a spectacle.

Paul was thought to be dead. ... But he not only was not dead... he was able to get up on his own... and walk back into Lystra. ... Obviously a Divine miracle occurred here. The missionary work continued. ... The next stop was Derbe about 30-40 miles east of Lystra (a trip that he took the very next day.) ... This was obviously a Divine miracle... shortly after being stoned so badly that everyone thought he was dead... Paul was able to walk to Derbe.

### **Acts 14:21-23**

Kick-starter #4) is easy to recognize. Did you happen to notice what they were teaching... in order to encourage the disciples...? ... This is what they taught to increase commitment... *“Through many tribulation we must enter the Kingdom of God...”*

They were merely repeating what Jesus taught on many occasions. Here is just one example...

### **Matthew 10:22 (ESV)**

*and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*

Every believer is forewarned to expect trials... hardship... tribulation... as a certainty. ... Paul and Barnabas knew what we often forget. ... We are weakened and easily become discouraged... **when we do not keep this in mind...!**

So here is **kick-starter #4)** – Be forewarned that trials are normal for the Christian life.

You know... it is significant for us to acknowledge the close proximity that this missionary team was... at this point... to their home church... back in Antioch of Syria. ... Comfort of home was only a few days worth of leisure travel... eastward... along the safe highway... known as the Via Sebaste.

But despite its attraction they refuse this easier option. ... Instead they turn deliberately westwards and so... *retracing their steps*... **they returned to Lystra** - (yes, Lystra!)... **Iconium... and (Pisidian) Antioch**. ... What accounts for this inevitably risky choice? ... It was simply what Paul would refer to later as his greatest element of suffering for the gospel - 'the pressure of my concern for the churches' (2 Cor. 11:28). He worried about their welfare... so he went back to check on them... and to strengthen their faith.

Strengthening and making true disciples of believers are much more difficult than leading them to Christ.... Leading people to Christ involves a one-time decision... but strengthening and making disciples involves... many decisions... many days and months and sometimes years... the same people over and over... varied personalities... different levels of spiritual growth... different levels of commitment... different emotions... different ages... opposing thoughts and ideas.

Paul and Barnabas... were not into winning converts... but into making disciples. ... Their interest was not to make exciting missionary prayer letters that told of the number of converts they made. ... It was in building congregations of God's people where there could be growth into God-honoring character... and mutual care. ... Paul was never under the illusion that he was the only an evangelist to the Gentile world.

So here is our fifth kick-starter – Minister in order to build disciples – not simply to win converts. ... If Paul and Barnabas' greatest concern was to win as many converts as they could – going home on the Via Sebaste would have been their next move. But it wasn't. They took the long and extremely risky long route... because strengthening the disciples was their vital concern.

### **Acts 14:24-28**

They had been gone at least a year... (probably somewhere between 1 ½ to 2 years)... and it must have been exciting for them and for the church when they arrived back home. They had... by the grace of God... fulfilled the work God had given them to do... They remained committed... and now they joyfully reported the blessings to the church family.

They stayed in their home church for quite a while. But it was during this time that a major storm of controversy began to brew. ... (Which we will come to the next time.)

Today... our passage has demonstrated (not only) what commitment looks like... but it has provided us with great insight for how to kick-start our own.

Has God been calling you to a greater commitment...?

I close this morning with one of my favorite quotes from C.S. Lewis:

*If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next ... Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither.*

—C. S. Lewis