**“To the Jew First”**

Acts 13:13-48 (read v. 13-17, 26-33, 44-48)

One of our key verses for ministry here at Oakwood is Romans 1:16

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” Romans 1:16

Like the Apostle Paul we are convinced that the gospel changes lives. Our mission as a church is to “join God in His work of transforming people and communities THROUGH THE GOSPEL of Jesus Christ.” The good news of the finished work of Christ transforms individual hearts and lives - and as people are transformed, communities are transformed.

But there is another important phrase in Romans 1:16.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, **to the Jew first** and also to the Greek.” Romans 1:16

This is not a throwaway clause. Romans 1:16 sets the ***theme for the entire book***. In fact, if you think about it, it explains the **progression of the ENTIRE BIBLE**.

* How was the Bible given? To the Jew first.
* To whom were the prophets sent? To the Jews.
* To whom did Jesus go? The Jews.
* To whom did the apostles go? To the Jew FIRST.

Why?

Because that’s how God did it. Is it that simple? Yep. We can agonize over the implications of it, but the fact is right there. Today we will unpack this in:

**“To the Jew First”**

* One Truth
* Two Applications
* Three Practices

These are deep theological waters but this is our road map and it will help us understand and apply what is happening in Acts 13 to our lives today. First - the one truth.

**One Truth**:

* **God Chooses who will be saved**

“The God of this people Israel ***chose our fathers*** and made the people great…” Acts 13:17

If you read the whole Bible through this is an obvious statement - but the implications are significant so let’s be sure we hear what Paul is saying and doing here. Yes, obviously, ***God CHOSE the forefathers of Israel***.

Of all the people on earth God chose the **LEAST likely candidate** to build a nation. Abram and Sarai were 75 and 65 with no children. By that time in history God could have chosen Egypt, any of the tribes in Canaan, even the Philistines. He could have chosen a nation that was already large and powerful. But He didn’t. He chose the weakest, most insignificant couple on earth.

Why? To make a point. It’s not about Abram and Sarai. It’s not about the Jews at all. ***It’s about the God who chose them***. Fast forward 450 years.

**One Truth**:

* **God Chooses who will be saved**

“God... made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt and with uplifted arm he led them out of it.” Acts 13:17-18

God chose Abram and Sarai. From them, as He promised, ***God built a great nation***. By the time Moses led them out of Egypt 450 years later they were over 1 million people.

So from NOTHING - an infertile elderly couple - God built a nation a million strong. And then through the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea God led them out of the strongest Empire of that day. The plagues were specific demonstrations of God’s supremacy over the primary gods of Egypt.

What’s the point? It’s not about Abraham. It’s not about Moses. **It’s all about GOD**. ***God chooses who will be saved BECAUSE HE IS GOD***. He has the right to choose. He has the right to do whatever He wants. HE IS GOD. We struggle with this clear and simple principle because we are so American and honestly, each of us think **WE** know better than God.

Who is HE to choose one person to be saved and not another?
Who is HE to choose one nation and not another?

Uh… **He’s GOD**. That’s the whole point. The God who made all of this - with a snap of His fingers - doesn’t it follow that He has the right as Creator to do whatever He wants with His creation?

**If you want to understand the CHOICES God makes you must begin to understand the GOD who makes those choices.**

“Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen.” Acts 13:16

Here is how Paul opens his message in this synagogue. “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen.” Then he launches into the story of Israel - the story of God choosing and God acting, God saving. ***It’s the story of God - for those who FEAR GOD.***

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all knowledge. **If you don’t fear God you don’t yet understand anything.** God is the beginning of all things. To attempt to understand this world and your life apart from God is like trying to jump without using your legs or trying to think without using your brain.

If you do fear God then you are well on your way to understanding EVERYTHING. Because God is God and we are not. I am not God. You are not God. Do our choices matter? Yes, absolutely. But the choice that will set the direction for your life and eternity is whether you will choose to fear God.

To fear God is to see that He is almighty and we are weak. He is all-knowing and we are so ignorant. He is perfectly righteous and we are contaminated with selfishness and sin. God is God. We are not.

The truth before us in our passage today is simple. **God chooses who will be saved**. The reason believers have wrestled with this truth through the ages is because it can feel UNFAIR to our very finite human minds. Why does God get to choose?

***Well, if God doesn’t choose, then who should choose?*** The devil? Would that be better? Who else? You? A committee? The United Nations?

Ah, you say - **each individual**! THAT would be fair! That would be SO AMERICAN! Each one gets an equal vote! I choose my own destiny! You choose yours. Equal. Fair.

Now, I can’t get into the whole 2,000 year debate on the sovereignty of God and human free will - but here is a sentence to bend our minds a little.

**God chooses who will be saved and this choice perfectly considers the individual choices of every person.**

How is this possible? For you and me - it isn’t. But for God - it happened in the very moment of creation. Ephesians one says, “He chose us in Him before the creation of the world.” Call this election. Call it predestination. Call it foreknowledge. Call it whatever you want.

The truth is that GOD is the One who chooses. And that leads us to our two applications. So what? God chooses - so:

**Two Applications:**

1. Praise God for His **Mercy** to save any of us

“When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord.” Acts 13:48

Here is the outcome of this chapter - joyful worship! The whole chapter is Paul’s recounting of the great work of salvation God started with Israel and completed in Jesus. He brings this message - significantly - to the synagogue, where many Jews and god-fearing Gentiles hear and respond.

When the non-believers get contentious, the missionaries leave the synagogue and preach to the Gentiles, and the Good News spreads like wildfire all over the region.

**God’s sovereignty in election** - in choosing who will be saved - ***should move our hearts to worship***. It should fill us with joy. Because each of us - hearing that God CHOSE US - should be moved deep in our souls with how unworthy we are of that choice.

And we absolutely are - **utterly unworthy**. God did not choose you because you were so amazing and wonderful. He chose you because HE is so amazing and wonderful. Every one of us is equally terrible - equally covered in our own pride, selfishness and sin - equally guilty and deserving of nothing but God’s righteous judgment and eternal condemnation.

Think again of Abram and Sarai. God chose them precisely because they were so undeserving - so unworthy. They had nothing whatsoever to commend themselves to God. If God had **conducted interviews** and sat couples down to say, “Why should I choose YOU to become the grandparents of my holy people and the ancestors of my Son, the Savior of the world?” They would have sat there, looked at each other, hemmed and hawed and said, “Well, we’re willing to relocate - if that helps…?” “Ok, you’re in!”

God chose **Abram** because Abram was so unworthy.
God chose **Moses** to become the greatest speaker of truth because Moses was a terrible public speaker.

God chose **Paul** to become the boldest missionary because Paul was the most obnoxious enemy of the church.

And **God chose YOU** because you were so terribly lost in your own sin that He knew YOU would make a brilliant trophy for His mercy and grace.

Don’t think for a single second that God chose you for all of your strengths and abilities and wonderful character qualities. Guess who gave all of those to you in the first place? Who gave you your parents, your education, your BRAIN…?

Let’s start to get the picture. This life is not about us. It’s all about God. The fact that He chose us should be one of the greatest motivations to worship. God is so merciful! So patient! So gracious!

**Two Applications:**

1. Praise God for His **Mercy** to save any of us

“For about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness.” Acts 13:18

The story of **Abraham, Isaac and Jacob** is not a story that makes you say, “Wow - those were some amazing men! They really changed the world through their godly character, wise choices and courageous leadership!” Every step of the way all three of the forefathers of Israel made ***bad choices, committed egregious sins, did terrible harm*** to their families. And STILL - God stuck with His choice.

Even after the drama of the Exodus - 10 mind-blowing plagues and the Red Sea cut in half - ***the nation of Israel IMMEDIATELY started to complain*** about little things like food and water. They refused to follow simple instructions and that whole generation had to die as a result. Then they fussed and complained for 40 years until all of the adults died and the next generation got a turn. **God “put up with them.”**

And it’s the same with us. God puts up with us. Do you deserve the love of God? Do you deserve His mercy and patience? None of us do. Praise God for His mercy!

**The mystery of God’s sovereign choice is not that He condemns some people but that He saves ANYONE!**

God would be perfectly righteous to condemn every single person.

Have you seen the TV show, **The Good Place**? Kristen Bell, Princess Anna; the guy from Cheers. It’s the story of four humans who die and find themselves in “the good place.” But Kristen Bell’s character - you learn in the first episode - ***was NOT a good person***. She immediately knows there has been a mistake and she doesn’t belong there.

Her job on earth was to sell fake medicine to old people. She explains to her three human friends, “But I was the top salesman seven years in a row!” To which her moral philosophy professor friend says, “You realize that’s WORSE, right?”

I know this is a spoiler, but if you’ve gone this long without seeing this show then it’s on you. Through the first season you come to realize that it’s not just Kristen Bell who doesn’t belong there - it’s all four of the main characters; they are all bad people. And what you find out later in the series is that ***all humans are bad people***.

It’s fascinating to me that a mainstream sitcom would take this position. But it shows that deep down ***everyone knows that there is a perfect standard and none of us meet it***. We all fall short of God’s glorious perfection. As Eleanor expresses it, “There is this small voice in my head that tells me what I’m doing is wrong.”

The application here is to:

1. Praise God for His **Mercy** to save any of us

“And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” Acts 13:52

When the Gentiles heard that forgiveness and eternal life were available to them, they rejoiced and praised the Lord. This is **the greatest source of joy** - to experience the infinite mercy and grace of the Lord Jesus; to know that you are totally forgiven, totally accepted - reconciled, righteous and redeemed! This is utterly underserved - nothing any of us could ever earn. It is entirely a gift of God’s grace - purchased by the blood of Jesus!

Here is the second application:

1. Don’t stress about **Results**

“As many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” Acts 13:48

God chooses who will be saved. ***We preach to everyone*** without distinction. We share the good news with everyone we possibly can. We don’t pick and choose who WE think might respond, who WE think is worthy of hearing this message. We preach to everyone - ***God chooses some***. The results are up to Him. Paul says it this way in 1 Corinthians

1. Don’t stress about **Results**

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” 1 Cor. 3:6-7

Notice the **division of labor**: Christians plant and water; God gives the growth. We scatter the gospel seed. We work to water that seed with love and good deeds. But only God can change a heart. Only God can take that mustard seed of faith and have it grow to transform a life.

Some have said that a high view of the sovereign power of God works against evangelism. I think it’s just the opposite. **Knowing that God is in control** - that it is HIS choice that matters in the end, ***gives me great confidence and urgency to preach*** to as many as possible - because I know that God is working in the hearts of some. He is going before us to draw people to Himself. We just have to find them!

***The pressure is not on YOU*** to be so winsome, so compelling, so amazing in how you love and serve and explain the message that YOU convince people. Yes, we want to be loving and sensitive and improve how we communicate. But in the end, the results are up to God and that takes the pressure off of us.

Even if we mess up - even if we miss an opportunity or say something that comes across confusing or insensitive we can trust God to work all things together in the life of that person.

One truth - God chooses who will be saved.

Two applications - praise God for His mercy to save any of us and don’t stress about results.

Now, three practices.

**Three Practices:**

1. Begin with those **closest** to you

“Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen.” Acts 13:16

***Paul was a Jew.*** Most of the early Christians were Jews. It was both a command from Jesus to start with the Jews and a practical strategy. Paul was a Pharisee - a recognized teacher of the Jewish Law. He had a free pass to speak in any synagogue. So that is where they always started. That was their natural social network.

***What is YOURS?*** Who are the people closest to you who do not know Jesus?

Right now, **start a list** of people close to you who, as far as you know, are not followers of Jesus. Family members; old friends from school; current and past co-workers; current and past neighbors. The Holy Spirit will bring specific people to mind. As He does, add them to your prayer list.

From your list, ask the Lord to lead you to 2-3 to start with. Ask for wisdom to connect with these people - to lovingly develop your relationship and pray for an opening to discuss spiritual things. It doesn’t have to be a full gospel presentation right away. But pray about a way to bring up your faith and ask about their faith.

The book God Space encourages us to prepare **Spiritual Appetizers**. How has God been working in your life recently? How has He shown Himself powerful, faithful, loving and present? Maybe comforting you through the loss of a loved one. Maybe providing for your financial needs. Maybe giving you wisdom to handle a problem. Maybe helping you admit how you had damaged a relationship, asking forgiveness.

Personal stories - short, clear, compelling ones - are so powerful!

One year ago things were pretty tight for us financially. Our taxes had gone up surprisingly, some other expenses hit at once. We weren’t sure how to work it out. We went up to Chicago for Thanksgiving and I sent a short email to my old small group of guys from the church up there - just asking them to pray for us in this regard. When we got up there, these five guys had me come to their Bible study and they handed me an envelope - a fat one. They had raised some money to ***pay off the remaining $1500 on our van***, plus some other cash on top of that!

We told them afterwards, it felt like that closing scene in ***It’s a Wonderful Life*** - how the town came together to bless that family in their time of need.

That’s a spiritual appetizer. That’s **a God story** that we can share in one minute or so. No one can argue with a story like that. It’s our story. It’s an expression of God’s love for us, provided through His people.

First practice - start with the people closest to you. Second:

**Three Practices:**

1. Share with **as many as possible**

“So the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have made you a light to for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” Acts 13:47

We begin with the people in our immediate circles of influence, but we don’t stop there. Our mission is to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ - the light of His love and grace - to the ends of the earth.

This is not the Great Suggestion. It is the Great Commission. Our work is not done until every person on earth has had the opportunity to hear about Jesus. And there are still upwards of **2 BILLION people who have never heard** - they don’t have a single verse of the Bible in their language; no missionary has ever gotten to them.

Many missions agencies and church networks are laboring together to FINISH THE TASK. It is very possible now to get the gospel to the remaining unreached people groups. IF WE WORK TOGETHER. All of us can pray. All of us can give. Some of us can go.

The practice for each of us is to ***share with everyone we possibly can***.

This is why we are taking a full year in the book of Acts. As we see the power of the gospel to change lives in Acts, may it fill us with confidence that that same power can work through us! The same Holy Spirit is active today. The same Risen Christ can wash away sins and set the captives free from their sins. We have the same mission, the same calling. “The Lord has commanded us!”

I was at Walgreens a couple of weeks ago and the guy in front of me was buying a large bottle of vodka. The checkout clerk asked us both how we were doing and we asked her the same. I mentioned coming from church a few minutes ago and they both reacted positively to that casual comment.

The cashier said she used to go to church and was thinking she ought to find one. The vodka guy said his son was a pastor up north in Florida, but (referencing his purchase) he said, “I don’t practice what he preaches.”

We had just made up those business cards for church, so I gave each of them an Oakwood card and encouraged them to check us out.

The whole interaction took maybe two minutes. It wasn’t weird or offensive. Sometimes when you casually mention church or prayer or faith people ignore it or brush it off. But sometimes they show an interest. Our job is to share with everyone we can! And that leads into our final practice.

**Three Practices:**

1. Focus on those who **Respond**

“It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside… we are turning to the Gentiles.” Acts 13:46

There was a Biblical and practical necessity to start with the Jews. God ordained it that way in history. Jesus commanded the disciples to start with the Jews. Paul had the practical inroad to the synagogues.

But when many of the Jews became hostile to the gospel, ***the missionaries turned to a more receptive audience.*** They turned to **GENTILES** - the unwashed masses of tree and moon-worshiping pagans; the barbarian pork-eating, idol-purchasing superstitious, unclean Greeks. This was a shocking change of direction. No one saw this coming, least of all Pharisees like Paul.

For 2,000 years the Jews were God’s chosen, holy people. The Law was given to the Jews. The prophets went almost entirely to the Jews. Jesus Himself went first and foremost to the Jews. This was “necessary” in the preordained plan of God. But when the Jews rejected the message - “thrusting it aside” - Paul and his team adjusted their ministry to the Gentiles. Look at how Paul interprets their rejection:

**Three Practices:**

1. Focus on those who **Respond**

“Since you thrust it aside and ***judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life***, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.” Acts 13:46

We started today recognizing the truth that GOD alone chooses who will be saved. It is His sovereign choice, made before any of us were even born. And yet, as we saw earlier, **God chooses who will be saved and this choice perfectly considers the individual choices of every person.**

By rejecting the gospel, the Jews were “judging themselves unworthy.” Their freely chosen individual decisions confirmed God’s sovereign choice from eternity past. There is a great deal of mystery in how this works - but suffice it to bring us back to humility, the fear of God and praise for His mercy that any of us are saved.

**Three Practices:**

1. Focus on those who **Respond**

“But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium.” Acts 13:51

When persecution broke out among the leaders of the city, the missionary team decided it was time to move on. And this became **Paul’s standard pattern**.

* **Start in the synagogue** - “to the Jew first.”
* Take those who believe from among the Jews and move on to preach the gospel to **as many people as possible** in the area.
* **Focus on those who respond**. Shake the dust of your sandals off against groups and cities that reject the gospel.
* Then **move on** to the next village or city.

So what does this mean for YOU? You’ve started your list of the people in your life. You’ve circled the first few to start with. The goal for the next few months is to pray for and pursue an opportunity to share with as many as possible on that list - and any others the Lord brings your way.

And as you share, **watch for those who respond**. Look for the ones the Lord is already working on. Look for those sensing a need for God - feeling conviction for their sins - looking for peace, looking for hope.

**Think like a farmer** - scatter seed everywhere, but concentrate your attention on the good soil where the crop is coming up. Don’t spend all of your time in the rocky soil, the thorny soil and the shallow soil. If people are resistant to spiritual things, keep praying for them but move on to more fertile soil.

**Think like a fisherman** - cast your line as much as you can. But if the fish aren’t biting in one area, move to another one. If morning isn’t working, try evening. Adjust your bait. Adjust your approach.

Our goal is to reach as many as possible with the gospel. Time is short. We need to be loving and sensitive but also bold and assertive. Reach out in love to everyone - but deliberately concentrate on those who show spiritual interest. The Lord is at work! He is calling people to Himself. Jesus is being lifted up and He will draw people to Himself.

Let’s join God in this work! The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few!.

Let’s pray.