

# The Gospel for the Up and Out

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Acts 13:1-12

One of the things that fascinates me about Hollywood, and there's very little that does, is the way religion is booming in Tinsel Town. Granted, not much of it is of the conventional variety. The starlets and heartthrobs of popular culture seem to gravitate toward the exotic and the bizarre in matters of faith. But at least Hollywood's fascination with religion betrays the fact that being rich and famous does not quell the deepest yearnings of the human spirit.

Tom Cruise once spent a year in a Catholic seminary. More recently, he demanded a tent staffed with ministers of Scientology while filming "War of the Worlds." Scientology is a religion founded by science fiction writer, I. Ron Hubbard, that majors on self-help, extra-terrestrials, and past-life regression. After attacking Brooke Shields for her use of medication in battling post-partum depression, Cruise more recently made headlines for insisting that wife Katie Holmes give birth silently, in keeping with Scientology's dictates.

Meanwhile, Madonna has fueled fascination with kabbala, a fringe movement of medieval Jewish mysticism. Now celebrities like Madonna, Mick Jagger, and Brittany Spears have transformed kabbala into a new age elixir that promises protection against evil spirits. The red string Madonna wears around her wrist is said to be a kabbalistic shield against the evil eye. By contrast, Richard Gere prefers Buddhist prayer beads, while allegedly Christian hip hop star, Kanye West, designed his own line of religiously-themed jewelry before spending \$350,000 to have the Sistine Chapel re-created in his home.

What is it about the rich and famous that makes them such easy marks for spiritual flimflam artists? I'm not sure I know the answer but I know this: the phenomenon is not new. On Paul's first missionary journey, he came upon a distinguished Roman aristocrat named Sergius Paulus who was being manipulated by a spiritual shyster. The Bible takes care to note that Sergius Paulus was an *intelligent* man, perhaps realizing he doesn't appear too bright with the spiritual con artist, Elymas, at his side. The first century, like the 21st century, was a superstitious age. And it was not uncommon for men of high standing to keep private wizards, magicians, and spiritual advisors on their payroll. I suppose it was the Hollywood equivalent of keeping all your bases covered, religiously speaking.

But, despite being the highest-ranking Roman official in Cyprus, despite being a man of significant means and social standing, Paulus recognized a spiritual void in his life. When he heard about two missionaries from Antioch, Paul and Barnabas, preaching their way across his island, his curiosity was piqued. So he summoned these two to the palace because, says the Scripture, he wanted to “hear the word of God.”

Here we encounter one of the startling facts about the early Christian movement. Not only were missionaries like Paul and Barnabas effective in reaching the down and outs, they were also remarkably effective in reaching the up and outs. By the “up and outs” I mean folks who were not poor, uneducated, and under-privileged, but rather, the learned, the wealthy, and the powerful. From the beginning, Christianity not only appealed to slaves, and women, and other marginal members of ancient society, Christianity also appealed to the upper crust who had the best life could offer, yet suffered from a terrible emptiness of meaning and hope.

Paul Tournier, a famous Swiss physician and dedicated Christian, authored many books on faith and psychiatry. After writing his first book, he returned to his medical school to visit a revered professor. During one afternoon, Tournier read his new book to this beloved mentor. When he finished reading, he looked up to find tears in the old man's eyes.

“Oh, Paul,” said the professor, “that's a wonderful book. Everyone of us Christians should read that.” Tournier was taken aback.

“I didn't know you were a Christian, professor. When did you become one?”

“Just now,” replied his esteemed teacher, “as you read your book.”

Like his namesake, Paul Tournier, the Apostle Paul also had a gift for reaching the up and outs. He didn't consider them too high and mighty to be touched and transformed by the gospel. Instead, he understood such folks need the good news of Jesus as much as anybody else, maybe *more* than anybody else. Being smart and sophisticated, wealthy and wise, does not remove one's need for the life-changing love of God, showered upon a broken world in Jesus Christ.

Shortly after his conversion, Paul was told he would be God's instrument in reaching “Gentiles and kings.” In Paphos, the capitol of Cyprus, we see those words proven true: he wins a member of the Roman “royalty” to Christ. What was it about him and what might be true of us that positions one to reach the shakers and movers of society?

Well, for one thing, Paul had a world-class education. He was raised in Tarsus, a city that rivaled Athens and Alexandria in culture and learning. For his day, Paul was a thoroughly modern man, conversant in the philosophical currents of his age. His native language was Greek, the language of the literate classes, which in time became the

language of the New Testament. Paul was a city boy born and bred, thoroughly cosmopolitan in outlook. It is no accident that as his missionary strategy unfolded, first in Cyprus and then elsewhere, he focused on urban centers. Top all that off with the best possible theological education, gleaned while training as a rabbi in Jerusalem, and you have just created a custom-designed dynamo for reaching the first century world with the gospel.

Now it may be a bit self-serving, but I don't believe it's a stretch to say Paul belonged to what would later be called the "Mercer tradition". By the Mercer tradition, I mean the determination to love God with the mind as well as the heart that first animated the ministry of Jesse Mercer and later, the university he founded. Jesse Mercer was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist preacher, mostly self-educated, who believed in what he called a "pious intelligence," *i.e.*, an intelligence honed and crafted by making education the "hand-maiden" of religion. In fact, Jesse Mercer did not believe a compelling faith could flourish without education. Apparently, neither did Paul, as this brilliant and ever feisty apostle later wrote to the Corinthians, "Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults."

That's one of the things I really like about our church: it's a place and a people where one can ask hard questions about life and faith and God, without being shamed into silence. And it is a place and a people where a world-class education is seen as a help, and not a hindrance, to proclaiming the gospel.

As a boy, I fell under the spell of a pastor who often proclaimed his personal credo: "I want to love God with all the powers of my redeemed mind." Under his influence, I grew up thinking that part of my Christian vocation was "to love God with all the powers of my redeemed mind!" I still believe that today.

There is simply no doubt Paul's educational background was a major factor in his reaching so many people of power and privilege. From the proconsul's court in Cyprus to Athens' Mars Hill, he could match wits with the best minds of his day.

There was another secret to Paul's effectiveness in reaching up and out of his day and that was his uncompromising commitment to and clarity about the gospel. To him, the gospel was not just one good religious option among many. To him, the gospel was God's decisive act of self-giving love, the epicenter of the world's salvation.

We see this clarity and passion at work in Paul's interaction with the proconsul's private spiritual advisor, Elymas. The advisor's given name was bar-Jesus, but Acts calls him Elymas, meaning the sorcerer. Elymas was just the sort of wizard or fortune teller that men of high standing in Roman society were apt to have in their employ. In a world populated by all sorts of evil spirits and unknown forces, one just couldn't be too careful. But when the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, began to respond to the liberating news of the gospel that, because of Jesus Christ, there was nothing left to fear, Elymas

grew alarmed. If Sergius Paulus became a Christian, that would be the end of the gravy train for him, so he set about opposing and undermining Paul's witness at every turn.

Now at this point, Paul did not respond with the post-modern sensibility so typical of our age, that "all roads lead to the top of the mountain." Instead, thoroughly fed up, Paul looked at Elymas "intently" and "filled with the Holy Spirit," Acts tells us, he saw this charlatan for what he was: a self-serving con artist trying to turn an earnest spiritual seeker from the gospel. At that, Paul exploded in indignation, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" In Paul's eyes, Elymas was not just misguided. He was actively twisting and distorting the word of God.

Then to add injury to insult, Paul pronounced judgment on the shyster. "And now listen: the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun." "

The text says, "Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand." For all of his high-sounding spiritual counsel, Elymas is found guilty of Jesus' damning indictment: he exemplifies "the blind leading the blind."

Now this is a part of Paul we are not so apt to relish. We identify with his valuing the life of the mind, but his action toward Elymas seems so primitive, so hostile, so downright ...un-Christian. How could he be so educated and urbane on the one hand, and so intolerant on the other? Maybe because he saw the gospel as essential to the fully human life, while we tend to see it as a nice religious option if you happen to be born into a Christian family. Truth be told, Paul had a bottom line in matters of the spirit many of us lack. Living as we do in a culture where the highest of all virtues is "live and let live," we are reluctant to be so emphatic as he.

That is not all bad, I would hasten to add. Tolerance is essential in a thriving democracy. None of us would want to live in a fundamentalist Islamic regime, or fundamentalist Christian regime for that matter, where tolerance was demeaned or imperiled. But tolerance as respecting those who are different from ourselves is one thing. Tolerance as the dumbing down of differences to say differences don't exist or don't matter is quite another. Understood in that way, the Bible doesn't teach tolerance; the Bible teaches love. We are not simply called to tolerate those different from ourselves. We are called to love them. And loving them means telling them about Jesus.

That's what Paul understood so clearly, and we are prone to forget. The gospel really is a "gift too good to keep." No, we don't have to share it with Paul's kind of bravado. But we need to share it with Paul's kind of clarity and passion!

Some years ago, I heard Mike Ashburn, then Area Director for Young Life in Virginia, relate a moving boyhood experience. It seems Mike and his brother found a baby bird and nursed it to health with an eyedropper. Soon, the tiny bird grew large and strong enough to require a cage. But the bird was so tame, Mike could carry it outdoors perched on his finger.

Eventually, however, Mike's mom grew weary of the mess the bird was making. She delivered an ultimatum: within one week, the bird had to go. Mike and his brother were alarmed, for their feathered friend couldn't fly. So they set about trying to coax it into flight, running about the yard, flapping their arms, all in a vain effort to get the bird airborne. Always, it just sat passively and watched. Even if thrown into the air, it just plopped to the ground. Mike was feeling pretty glum as the last day of his mother's ultimatum approached.

But on day six, as he and his brother were taking the bird to its cage, it suddenly took off flying in the house. The two boys whooped and hollered as the bird shot back and forth down the hall. They quickly decided to shoo the bird out the door to freedom, so one held the front door open as the other tried to direct the bird outside.

But the bird didn't understand. He kept trying to fly through the giant picture window that stood beside the door. Again and again the bird slammed against the great wall of glass, despite the boys' frantic efforts to set it free. Finally, there was one last crash against the window, before the bird tumbled onto the sofa. When the boys picked it up, they were heartbroken: their beloved pet was dead.

There are a lot of people in our world today who can't find the door. They keep slamming into one false hope after another, only to be disappointed and wounded, time and time again. Many of them, probably most, are not derelicts or drug addicts. They're our neighbors and friends, co-workers and class mates. They are probably well-educated, maybe affluent. But the one thing they don't have is someone who cares enough about them to tell them about Jesus, and to draw them into the fellowship of Jesus' people, the church.

Jesus said, "I am the door. Whoever enters by me will be saved. . . . The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. But I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly." Truth be told, there are a lot of spiritual thieves, charlatans, and con artists loose in the world, but you and I know Jesus is the door that leads to life abundant and life eternal. Maybe it's high time we confronted that unalterable fact with Paul's kind of clarity and courage.

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